

The liturgical use of “the Hymn of the Maskil” from the Dead Sea Scrolls

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Abstract

This paper discusses the hymn found in one of the most important of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dubbed “Community Rules” or 1QS. We identify it as belonging to a genre designated as *Hodayot* or Thanksgiving Hymns. Its original *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting) is difficult to resolve and its function is much debated, but we propose that it was adapted and liturgically used in community worship. Specifically, it was most likely sung at the annual ceremony when new members were initiated into the community and existing members renewed their commitment. The ceremony is described in 1QS, hence the hymn’s inclusion in the “Community Rules”. The hymn reveals a highly ritualized religious life which was not merely internally spiritualized, but physically performed. It is through hymns like this and the ceremonies with which they were associated that the Qumran community was able to construct and bolster its unique identity.

Key words

Dead Sea Scrolls, Qumran, 1QS, *Hodayot*, Hymn of the Maskil, ritual, identity

Introduction

With the offering of lips I shall bless him / according to the precept engraved forever; /at the beginning of the years /and at the end of their seasons /when their ordained order is fulfilled. / On each day decreed by Him, from one to the other - / the season of sowing to the season of grass, / the season of years to their Sabbath years / and at the beginning of their period of seven years till the year of Jubilee / ... (1QS 10:6-8)

This is part of a hymn found in the final columns of a manuscript among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in caves at Khirbet Qumran near the Dead Sea in the Judean Desert. These scrolls are dated between the 2nd century BCE and 70 CE, and are believed by a large majority of scholars to be associated with a sectarian group that once resided at Qumran. From the scrolls we learn that the Qumran community, who called themselves the *yahad* – with the meaning of “being one” or “togetherness”, was mainly a priestly sect leading a celibate communal life in frugality, separated from the Jerusalem Temple and mainstream society due to their much stricter purity laws and observance of religious days according to a different calendar. The manuscript at the end of which this hymn appears is entitled “Community Rules” (1QS). It describes the annual initiation and renewal ceremony for entry into the community as well as the code of discipline by which the community was to live.

We gain at least two strong impressions from this hymn: the centrality of ritual in the life of the *yahad* and the predominant use of songs, prayers and poems, like this hymn, as a way of worship – or the “offering of lips” in their own terminology. Indeed, among all the scrolls found at Qumran, there are well over two hundred hymns and prayers ([Chazon, 1994](#),

p. 265),¹ in addition to copies of at least 126 of the 150 psalms in the Psalter of the Hebrew Bible ([Flint, 1997](#), p. 48). Many scholars believe that, having voluntarily separated themselves from the Jerusalem Temple, the sectarians developed a systematic pattern of prayers and liturgies as a substitute to temple sacrifices. This is manifested by the Qumran notion of “offering of the lips” (see the quoted hymn above), that is, using prayer as an alternative or even preferred instrument for sin atonement and service to God.² Other scholars, however, maintain that the sectarians were not aiming at replacing temple sacrifice; rather, they were reconfiguring components of their religious life, reinterpreting the law and its requirements while anticipating returning to the Temple at the end of time ([Arnold, 2005](#), pp. 509-529; [Kugler, 2000](#), pp. 90-112). Despite the debate, there is no doubt that separation from the Temple prompted further development of institutionalized patterns of prayer and praise which had probably existed before Qumran. What is significant here is how prayers and hymns played a crucial role together with rituals at Qumran, and how it sheds light on our understanding of practices of Judaism as a whole during this period. The study of Qumran prayers and hymns naturally assumes a focus on their functions, i.e. their actual use in rituals.

It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to discuss the function of the hymn found in the last two columns (10-11) of 1QS. Because it appears in a section of the manuscript that is subtitled “to the Instructor” (or the *Maskil*, 1QS 9:21), we shall refer to it as the

¹ The figure, of course, may somehow vary, depending on how the prayers and hymns are counted. Many only survived in badly damaged fragments. Divisions between hymns in the same scrolls may be judged differently by different scholars. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the scrolls consist of a large amount of such material.

² Textual evidence is found in 1QS Columns 3-6, “Community Rules”: “They shall atone for guilty rebellion and for sins of unfaithfulness, that they may obtain loving-kindness for the Land without the flesh of holocausts and the fat of sacrifice. And prayer rightly offered shall be as an acceptable fragrance of righteousness, and perfection of way as a delectable free-will offering (Vermes 2004:112).” For the view of substitution of temple sacrifice with prayers, see, for example, Chazon, 2004; [Baumgarten, 1953](#), pp. 141-159; [Talmon, 1989](#), pp. 200-243; [Schiffman, 1987](#), pp. 34-35.

“Hymn of the *Maskil*”. The hymn is not unique among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Similar formulae, vocabulary and language patterns mean that it belongs to the genre of “Thanksgiving Hymns”, of which several scrolls were found at Qumran. Many of these manuscripts are fragmentary, but the largest scroll, although also badly damaged, contains twenty or so hymns ([Vermes, 2004](#), pp. 249-303).³ Most of these hymns begin with a distinctive formula, “*Odekha adona*” (I thank thee, o Lord), and have thus been designated as “Thanksgiving Hymns”, or the *Hodayot*. Therefore, in the discussion on the Hymn of the *Maskil*, we will refer often to the *Hodayot* as a genre. We argue that the Hymn of the *Maskil*, like the *Hodayot*, was a song used for public rituals at Qumran. Further, it was very likely to have been recited at the initiation and renewal ceremony described in 1QS – hence its inclusion in that document.

A problem with *Sitz-im-Leben*, or Life-Setting

Aside from the *Hodayot*, scholars have reached almost unanimous consensus that prayer and petitionary texts – both in prose and poetry - found at Qumran have a liturgical function as their *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting). Their conclusion is based on the distinctive liturgical features found in these texts, the most important of which can be summarized as follows:

1. A title assigning it to a specific time or day, e.g. “[pray on] the Fourth day” and “Hymns on the Sabbath” (4Q504);
2. Directives to pray, e.g. “When the sun goes forth to shine on the earth they shall bless and recite and say” (4Q503);

³ The fragmentary nature of the scroll means it is difficult to always know when one psalm ends and another begins, thus the vagueness about the total number of psalms.

3. Antiphonal refrains which appear between stanzas , e.g. “Blessed is God and blessed is His name forever” (11Qps^a which is Ps 145);
4. Closing responses such as the response found at the closing of weekday blessings (4Q504-506) and festival prayers (4Q507-509), “Amen, Amen”; and
5. Sustained use of first personal plural pronoun “we” ([Chazon, 2000](#), pp. 273-274).

It is apparent that the *Hodayot*, including the Hymn of the *Maskil*, do not meet these criteria.

The debate over the original setting of the *Hodayot* revolves around liturgical versus non-liturgical use. It seems that many scholars are inclined to believe they were used for didactic or devotional purposes for individuals rather than in public worship, although other scholars admit the possibility that some of them could have been written for a cultic function ([Bardtke, 1956](#), pp.220-233; Chazon, 2000, p. 218; [Flusser, 1984](#), p. 551; [Nitzan, 1994](#), p. 323; [Schiffman, 1994](#), p. 301; [Schuller, 2003](#)). On the other hand, argument supporting the liturgical function of the *Hodayot* has also been put forward. For example, [Svend Holm-Nielsen](#) (1960, pp. 347-348) claims that the community’s cultic personnel developed a set of hymns – the *Hodayot* – for the purpose of communal worship. He even proposes a connection with the initiation and covenant renewal ceremony described in 1QS 1-2, based on similar use of language and themes. The Hymn of the *Maskil*, with which this paper is concerned, has striking parallels with the description of the initiation and covenant renewal ceremony in 1QS 1-2 in terms of 1) its themes of knowledge, confession of sin, justice of God’s judgment and ordained times; 2) structure; and 3) vocabulary ([Weise, 1961](#), pp. 64-68; [Falk, 1998](#), pp. 110-111). There have been suggestions based on these similarities that the hymn in 1QS was used in the covenant ceremony ([Murphy-O’Connor, 1969](#), p. 545; Weise, 1961, pp. 70-73). However, opponents point out that it could be a poetic summary of the

community rules, and that similarities do not stand for evidence supporting its actual use in the ceremony (Falk, 1998, pp. 110-111).

While we believe that the Hymn of the *Maskil* was used at the covenant ceremony described in 1QS, we do not think the similarities between 1QS 1-2 and the hymn (1QS 10-11) are a strong indicator for its actual use. 1QS contains all the essential themes and terminology that are hallmarks of this sectarian community – themes and terminology that have been used as a yardstick to determine whether a text is of sectarian origin or not. Similarity of themes and vocabulary is an indicator of origin, but it does not necessarily point to the poem's actual use. Likewise, the structure of the hymn, which parallels the description of the ceremony, may explain why it was included in the document describing the procedure, but it is not a sufficient argument for its actual use at the ceremony. More evidence is needed.

What is the hymn's original *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting) then? Textual evidence within the hymn does not easily suggest that the purpose was to fulfill a liturgical order like the other prayers and petitions found at Qumran. There is no clear indication that it was written for a particular time, occasion or event, nor was it written in the first person plural "we". The question we should ask, however, is not "for which specific setting was it originally written", but rather, "could it have been adopted and actually used as part of Qumran liturgy". Examples of twice-used or thrice-used hymns abound. Many psalms in the Hebrew Bible were used and are still used today by both Jews and Christians as part of their liturgy, despite the fact that the original *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting) of many of the psalms has long become obscure. Many psalms used in liturgy are in fact in the first personal singular pronoun "I", but express the sentiment of the congregation. (More will be said about this

below.) Clearly, psalms or hymns are a different text type from other liturgical orders like prayers and petitions. They do not fulfill the criteria which are distilled from the latter, but have a place in liturgy nonetheless.

A case for liturgical use

Liturgy is composite by nature, a miscellany of genres from prayers to hymns, from readings of the sacred text to blessings uttered by the priest and more. As we have argued above, a text for liturgical use can be of different text types and in different voices, and can be adopted for use at public rituals despite its original setting. In other words, the common criteria for the identification of liturgical texts used by scholars should not exclude a text from being considered for liturgical use. In order to determine the hymn's actual use, more evidence should be gathered from the wider context of religious practice of the *yahad* as well as the textual setting and redactional purpose of 1QS, in which the Hymn of the *Maskil* is located.

1. Ritual density and ritualisation of life of the yahad

That the community at Qumran lived a highly ritualized existence has been commented on by many. [Kugler](#) (2002, p. 152), for example, surveys ritual practices reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls by applying the system developed by [Catherine Bell](#) (1997)⁴ and finds every category of ritual to be present. The evidence of ritual density is so overwhelming that Kugler concludes that "ritual at Qumran was hegemonic, making every aspect of their

⁴ In this system rituals are categorised into six types: rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, feasting and fasting rites and political rites.

experience religious". Indeed, 1QS alone offers us sufficient evidence of a ritually-intense existence for members of the *yahad*.

The community lived a life in worship that was completely synchronized with the cosmological order created by God – as indicated by their preoccupation with "time". In the preamble of the Hymn of the *Maskil* (1QS 9:12-21), the word *et* (time)⁵ appears ten times and repeated one time in its plural form. The Hymn lists times that are liturgically important: daily cycles of morning and evening, annual cycles including the first days of the months, days of Sabbath, festivals, days of equinoxes and solstices marking the beginning of the four seasons, and sabbatical cycles including the year of Jubilee (1QS 10:1-8). In other words, their existence was measured in units of time, from parts of day, days, weeks, months, years to larger units, and marked with rituals of prayer and praise. Not only did they measure their time in a ritualized way, their daily activities and actions were also presented as a sequence of ritual practices: from stretching out hands and feet to coming in and going out, from sitting down and rising to lying in bed, from consuming food to feeling distressed (10:13-17), praise and thanksgiving were offered to God. Opposite terms are paired: "as the day and night enters", "as evening and morning depart" (10:10), "when I go out and come in", "sit and rise and when laid on my couch" (10:13-14). This usage, termed "merismus", refers not only to the specific end points but totality – every point in between ([Newsom, 2004](#), p. 185).

If every time and human action was ritualized with formal prayer and praise, it would be difficult to limit the *Hodayot* only to educational and meditational purposes for individuals.

⁵ The Hebrew word "*et*" refers to pre-ordained time for something specific, as cited in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, "To every thing there is a season, and a time (*et*) to every purpose under the heaven; ...".

2. The absence of individual identity at Qumran

Not only was every aspect of life in the *yahad* public and ritualized, there is an absolute lack of individual identity in the entire Dead Sea Scrolls, to the extent that not a single personal name is mentioned – not even that of the founder and spiritual leader of the sect, the Teacher of Righteousness. Instead, it is the collective identity of the *yahad* that ritual practice and religious discourse at Qumran aimed to construct and bolster.

Again textual evidence in 1QS demonstrates that the community is acutely conscious about its corporate identity. Its self-designation is the *yahad*, which not only emphasizes unity, but also singles them out from everyone else as the true Israel in perfect obedience to the Law. The word *yahad* occurs sixty times in 1QS alone ([Arnold, 2006](#), p. 33). When not used as a noun, it is used as an adverb to instruct the members to take every action *in unison*: “they shall eat *in unity (yahad)*, ... say benedictions *in unity*, and give counsel *in unity*” (6:2-3); “the Many shall spend the third part of every night of the year *in unity*, reading the Book, studying judgment, and saying benedictions *in unity*” (6:7-8). To become a member of the *yahad*, one must go through the covenant ceremony (1-2), bringing “their knowledge, strength and wealth into the *yahad* of God (1:11-12).” Notice that it is not only material assets that must be relinquished to communal possession, but also their intellectual property: their knowledge, counsel and judgment.⁶ One may well add one more thing that is clearly implied, though not stated: they must give up their individual identity and take up the collective one of the *yahad*.

How do we reconcile the strongly individualistic “I” and the apparently highly personal experience and sentiment expressed in the Hymn? Through the works of French

⁶ Newsom (2004:73-75) has extensive discussion on knowledge as a commodity required by the community.

linguist Emile Benveniste and literary and film critic Kaja Silverman, Newsom (2004, pp. 198-201) reveals that the pronoun "I" is an empty marker that can only be filled in concrete instances of discourse.⁷ In literary texts such as poems, narratives and films, the "I" can be thought of as the author or implied author, or as the central character, or as the reader or listener who is invited to identify with the central character. The *Hodayot* are just a type of such literary texts. The "I" in the hymns could be thought of as the original author, the Righteous Teacher or the *Maskil*, but the "I" could also be any community member who was reciting or singing the hymn, and the "I" could certainly be a persona taken over by any member who hearing it identified with the shared values, ethos and emotions that these hymns embodied. This is exactly how liturgical texts work. As Newsom puts it, "such a speech act strategically obscures who the speaking subject is. It is precisely this ambiguity about whose words these are that makes such a first person singular prayer, creed, or pledge so powerful an instrument in the formation of subjectivity".

The "I" in the Hymn of the *Maskil*, therefore, refers to the collective identity of the *yahad*. The *Maskil* playing the role as an instructor and master of ceremony (1QS 3:13, 9:12) represents the epitome of sectarian identity – one that every member aspires to become. The *Maskil's* liturgical function within the community means a hymn written for the *Maskil* is a hymn to be performed at communal rituals. In its performance communal identity in the *yahad* is asserted and renewed.

3. Redational intention of 1QS and the function of the Hymn of the Maskil

So far we have established the likelihood of the Hymn of the *Maskil* being used for liturgical purposes, but why was it made part of 1QS? Apart from its verbal echoes to columns 1-2

⁷ E. Benveniste (1971). *Problems in General Linguistics*. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami. K. Silverman (1983). *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

which describes the covenant ritual, the redactional history of 1QS and the redactor's intention to include the hymn in the final composition may indicate its actual use at the very ceremony described in the document.

The fact that 1QS is a composite text is borne out by a number of other copies of the rule which contain parts of it, some with variations in content. These variations reflect the evolution of the *yahad* both in its theological understanding and structural development ([Charlesworth et al., 1994](#), p. 3). Columns 5-9 are identified as the earliest stage, whereas both 1-4 and 10-11 (the Hymn) belong to a later stage of development ([Metso, 1997](#); [Murphy-O'Connor, 1969](#); [Weise, 1961](#)). Murphy-O'Connor sees the later stage as an exhortation to a community whose zeal and spirit had been lost from view. The members are here reminded of their former commitment by reference to the liturgy of the annual renewal of covenant (1-2) and the hymn that formed part of this ceremony (10-11). In Metso's theory, the compiler supplemented the earliest columns 5-9 with 8:15b-9:11, then 9:26-11:22 (the Hymn), and finally 1-4. The variations mentioned above between 1QS and other copies of the rule tend to cluster in columns 5, 8 and 9 ([Charlesworth et al., 1994](#), p. 3), which also indicates 5-9 as the oldest stage in the textual history of 1QS.

What was the intention of the compiler(s) in putting these various materials together to form one document? Past research has focused at getting back to the more primitive forms of 1QS's text and in so doing has preferenced the older version as indicative of the origins and development of the sectarian community. However, if one approaches its study from the perspective of liturgy and performance criticism something of a gestalt is needed in how the document should be viewed. If the text is considered as composition in performance, then priority ought to be given to its introduction and conclusion as these

contextualize the performance. So viewed the text is not an older version of the community rule which has been supplemented over time, but a liturgical performance that has embraced and adapted that rule to its own ends. In other words, the text of 1QS needs to be read from its ends inwards and not from the inside outwards. It was the liturgy of the annual covenant renewal (1-2) that was the later compiler's top priority. He added to it the fundamental teaching of Qumran theology (3-4), rules for life in the community, rules for punishment and rules for the *Maskil* (5-9), and finally the Hymn of the *Maskil* (10-11). Our hypothesis is that the other materials – including the final Hymn, were read at the ceremony as staged components within a liturgical framework.

Conclusion

The present generation has the tendency to think of faith, religion and prayer as personal, cerebral, cognitive, and an inner experience of the individual believer with the divine. The conception and the practice of religious life could not be more different for the Qumran sectarians. They submitted their individual identity to take on the communal identity of the *yahad*, and led a completely ritualized existence, in which the community was equated with the Holy Temple of God and prayers and praises were offered as sacrifices for the atonement of the people and their land. It was in this ritualistic context that the *Hodayot* and the Hymn of the *Maskil* were composed and used. Out of the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly ceremonies at Qumran, the annual covenant renewal liturgy in particular played a central role in building and consolidating the sectarian identity. The original *Sitz-im-Leben* (life-setting) of the Hymn of the *Maskil* is difficult to resolve. It could have been written with liturgical purposes in mind, or it could have been composed for other settings. However, it

was most probably adopted and used as part of public worship⁸ at Qumran. Its verbal parallels with the description of the annual covenant renewal ceremony, the textual context of 1QS in which it is found, as well as the textual history and redactional intention indicate a strong possibility that the Hymn of the *Maskil* was performed at the very ceremony described in the same document.

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⁸ This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that it was for personal use too. All liturgical texts have the potential of being used both publicly and privately.

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