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Ascending into the Hill of the Lord: What the Psalms Can Tell Us About the Rituals of the First Temple

David J. Larsen

Abstract: *In this article, the author attempts to shed light on practics alluded to in the Psalms that may have formed part of the ritual system and theology of Solomon's original temple. He describes various aspects of the ritual system of pre-exilic Israel, including pilgrimage, questioning at the gates, epiphany, and royal rites. In the culmination of these rites, the king, who likely led the procession up to the temple, was enthorned on or beside the Lord's own throne and transformed or "reborn" as a Son of God, appearing before the people in glorious fashion as the representative of Yahweh.*

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See David J. Larsen, "Ascending into the Hill of the Lord: What the Psalms Can Tell Us About the Rituals of the First Temple," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 171–88. Further information at https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/ancient-temple-worship/.]

In her monograph on the Temple in Jerusalem, Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker remarked: "The easiest way to enter into the world of

the ancient temple is to read the Psalms and try to imagine the setting for which they were written."[1] The world of the First Temple is considered largely inaccessible, as there are very few texts from the pre-exilic period that are available to us. This is a frustrating situation for those who long for insights into the Golden Age of the Israelite monarchy and the mysteries of Solomon's original temple. In this chapter I will attempt to shed some light on practices alluded to in the Psalms that may have formed part of the ritual system and theology of that First Temple.

The specific focus of this study comes largely from my reading of an article by Dr. Silviu Bunta, published in the recent *festschrift* for Rachel Elior, *With Letters of Light*.[2] I offer a brief summary of Dr. Bunta's argument:

- He argues that 1 Enoch should not, as per the common view, be seen as the first example of an ascent to heaven in Jewish literature.
- He notes that Paul Joyce of Oxford University sees Ezekiel's temple vision (starting in Ezekiel 40) as a heavenly ascent narrative and then argues that the vision of God's *Kavod* in Ezekiel 1 should likewise be seen as an ascent to heaven because it is also a vision of the heavenly temple.
- In support of this conclusion, he asserts that the ancient Near East understanding did not differentiate between the "earthly" and "heavenly" temple — the earthly temple was the heavenly temple. The dwelling-place of the gods is often associated with the tops of mountains. That the early Israelites shared a similar conceptual view, he argues, is implied by many biblical references, most notably in the Psalms (see, e.g., Psalms 43:3; 46:4-5; 48:9; 50:2; 76:2; 132:13-140), to God dwelling on the holy mountain.
- He asserts that 1 Enoch 14 and Aramaic Levi seem to refer to the top of Mt. Hermon as the place to which they ascend during their visions.[3]
- Associated with this view is the idea that the sanctuary was to be equated with the holy mountain and thus with heaven. "When one enters a temple on earth," says Bunta, "one reaches the top of the sacred mountain and is described as 'entering heaven.'"[4] Worshippers in the earthly temple were thought to be in heaven, standing before God.[5]

- Finally, he sees the temple vision of God on his throne in Isaiah 6 (cf. 1 Kings 22) as evidence supporting his claim.[6] In essence, Isaiah ascending Mount Zion to the temple would be equivalent to his ascending into heaven (see 1 Enoch 93).

In light of this and other evidence, I believe Bunta is correct in suggesting that visions taking place in the Jerusalem Temple should be seen as essentially equivalent to visions of the heavenly temple and that the heavenly ascent motif occurred in settings such as Ezekiel 1 that were long prior to 1 Enoch.

Working from Bunta's general conclusions, I will take the next logical step: moving the origins of the heavenly ascent motif further back beyond Ezekiel into the pre-exilic cult of the Jerusalem Temple. I will argue that this type of theophanic experience — an ascent to heaven to see God — was a principal focus of the temple liturgy in monarchic times as depicted in some of the Psalms.

Later heavenly ascent narratives include, among others features, the following: a) the visionary being taken or led on a journey upwards through the various levels of heaven, b) passing through a series of gates guarded by angelic beings who require adherence to moral laws and answers to questions or passwords (e.g., the names of angels or the Godhead), c) standing before the Throne of God or seeing His Divine Face, and d) the initiation of the visionary into the heavenly order, including anointing, clothing, coronation, and enthronement.

The ritual system of the Jerusalem Temple in pre-exilic times paralleled the features of these later texts in important ways, which can be outlined as follows:

- Pilgrims travel to the Jerusalem Temple at least three times a year during the major pilgrimage festivals. The pilgrimage culminated in an ascent of the temple mount to the temple precincts. It seems that sometimes these processions were led by the king and accompanied by the Ark of the Covenant.
- The procession was subjected to questioning by the keepers of the temple gates, who required a test of moral worthiness for admission.
- The purpose of the pilgrimage was to experience the "epiphany" or "theophany" of Yahweh, to stand in the Lord's presence and to see His face.

- The king would have participated in further rituals, including washing, anointing, clothing, and enthronement.

We will now discuss details of each of these aspects of the ritual system — pilgrimage, questioning at the gates, epiphany, and royal rites — in turn.

At the three major pilgrimage festivals (*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Succot*), the Israelites were directed to "go up" to "appear before the Lord." In Exodus 34:23-24, we read:

> Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord GOD, the God of Israel. (see also Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16; Isaiah 1:11-13).

While the earliest references may not have necessarily envisioned a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they seem to imagine an ascent to an elevated sacred site. In later references, however, we do have pilgrims (and not just the men, see Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; 31:10–13) coming from all around the region to worship the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem. In the time of the prophet Zechariah, Israel (and, in fact, all nations) were expected to observe this temple pilgrimage, or they would receive no rain (Zechariah 14:16-19).

Isaiah 30:29 seems to allude to the same type of festal temple pilgrimage:

> You shall have a song as in the night when a holy festival is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel (NRSV).

A number of Psalms have a similar tone, and we can imagine that they could have been composed for or sung during the pilgrimage. Perhaps some of these were the type of song that Isaiah had in mind. Psalm 84, for example, describes a travelling group who is longing to be at the courts of the temple.

> How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God … Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They

> go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion (NRSV, cf. Psalm 65:1-4).

The LXX (Psalm 83:6; English 84:5) sees this procession as an ascension (using the verb *anabaino*). We should note that this pilgrimage party, singing "as they go through the valley of Baca," has the objective of reaching the temple and seeing the God of gods in Zion (NRSV translation, based on the LXX reading). The Psalm goes on to mention (in vv. 8-9) that the Lord's anointed, a reference to the king, is with this group, and they ask God for a blessing upon him.

Psalm 122 is another clear example:

> I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem — built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD. For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David (NRSV).

Psalm 122 is one of a body of psalms (Psalms 120-134) that are designated in their superscriptions as being *shir ha-mma'alot*, or a "song of ascents." These are also frequently designated as "pilgrim songs." Holladay explains that these should be seen as "a song sung when ascending (as a pilgrim) to Jerusalem", and that this group of psalms should be seen as a "songbook for pilgrimage."[7] While we don't know when all of the psalms in this set were composed, Holladay sees at least Psalm 122 (as well as Psalm 132) as pre-exilic.[8]

As the pilgrims reached Jerusalem, perhaps coming along what Isaiah calls the Way of Holiness (Isaiah 35:8; cf. Isaiah 62:10; Psalm 84:5),[9] they would have had to "ascend" to Jerusalem's mountainous perch and then climb the temple mount itself to get to the sanctuary. Psalm 24 asks: "Who shall ascend (*mi-ya'aleh*) the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?"

The Hebrew word *ālâ* appears to be used often as a paradisical term[10] in the Hebrew Bible for ascending in procession to sacred places, including going up to the promised land of Israel (i.e., from out of Egypt, e.g. Exodus 3:8, 17) and ascending the holy mountain (e.g., Exodus 19:20). The directive for the thrice-yearly pilgrimage commanded the Israelites to "go up" (*ālâ*) to the cultic site (Exodus 34:24, etc.).

Psalm 118:27 appears to depict a festal procession that has come up to the great altar of the temple as part of a ritual ceremony. Psalm

68 presents very clearly a liturgical procession that is going into the temple, delineating the order in which the tribes were to proceed, which is reminiscent of Psalm 122's pilgrimage procession.

Psalm 68:24-27 reads:

> 24 Your solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary —
>
> 25 the singers in front, the musicians last, between them girls playing tambourines:
>
> 26 "Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel's fountain!"
>
> 27 There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead, the princes of Judah in a body, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali (NRSV).

The vivid depictions of the great power of Yahweh that is celebrated on this occasion convey the idea that these processions were meant to be imagined as a commemoration of Yahweh's victory and were somehow imagined to be led by Yahweh himself. Verses 17-18 of this psalm further elucidate this picture:

> 17 With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.
>
> 18 You ascended the high mount, leading captives in your train and receiving gifts from people, even from those who rebel against the LORD God's abiding there (NRSV).

Psalm 47, a song full of ritual allusions, depicts the people clapping, shouting, and singing because "God has gone up (*ālâ*) with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet" (Psalm 47:5). It may be hard for us to imagine how God could have been seen as joining a festal procession, but the idea was common in the ancient Near East, where in the great festival processions of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, statues representing the gods were carried along the festal highways into the gods' respective temples.[11]

This recalls in the Hebrew Bible the imagery of the Ark of the Covenant, representing the Presence of the Lord, being carried ahead of the camp of Israel during the Exodus (Numbers 4:5-6; 10:33-36; etc.), into battle against Israel's enemies (1 Samuel 4; 14:8), in procession around the city of Jericho (Joshua 6:4-20), and being taken in procession up to Jerusalem by King David (2 Samuel 6).

We read in Numbers 10:35-36 that:

> Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, "Arise, O LORD, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you." And whenever it came to rest, he would say, "Return, O LORD of the ten thousand thousands of Israel."

Interestingly, Psalm 68 begins the way the Numbers passage begins, with: "Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him" (Psalm 68:1). The "ten thousand thousands of Israel" is reminiscent of the similar number of chariots that Psalm 68 describes as ascending with Yahweh up the high mountain and into the temple. It would appear that Psalm 68 describes or is meant to accompany a procession of the Ark up to the temple, using the imagery of the victorious march of Yahweh leading the host of Israel at the time of the Exodus.

Another "song of ascents," or "pilgrim song," is the pre-exilic royal Psalm 132, which has long been understood to have been composed to commemorate King David's finding of the Ark and its transfer to Jerusalem (see vv. 6-8; cf. 1 Samuel 6:13; 2 Samuel 6).[12] The procession that David led included "all of the house of Israel" following King David and the Ark up to the place of the sanctuary (compare the singing, dancing, shouting, and trumpet blasts of 2 Samuel 6:12-15 with the previously mentioned description of similar activities during the procession of Psalm 47).

A similar procession was performed at Solomon's dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:1), which took place at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles (1 Kings 8:2). The fact that the Chronicler (2 Chronicles 6:41) has Solomon quoting part of Psalm 132 in this context may indicate that he knew of a temple tradition in which Psalm 132 was sung to accompany a re-enactment of the procession of the Ark into the temple.

Whether the pilgrimage processions were accompanied by the Ark or not, there seems to be abundant evidence in the Psalms that the festival participants imagined themselves as joining Yahweh in his victorious march up to his holy dwelling-place on Mount Zion. As discussed previously, because the Israelites equated the top of the mountain and

more specifically the temple with heaven, the climb up the temple mount would have been imagined as an ascent to heaven.

We can conclude from this that a liturgical heavenly ascent was one of the principal features of the ritual system of the First Temple. Further details from the Psalms help confirm that this ritual ascent bore many more similarities to the literary accounts of heavenly ascent found in later texts.

Psalm 118 makes reference to passing through "the gates of righteousness" (v. 19), apparently in the context of a festal procession (*ḥag*, v. 27). The speaker pleads:

> 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.
>
> 20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

The prophet Ezekiel, as part of his vision of the future ideal temple, gives in Ezekiel 44:1-3, a description of the king entering through the vestibule of the same gate (the eastern gate) that Yahweh himself had gone through. Chapter 46:1-12 describes the king leading pilgrims through the temple gates on festal days. While these events are described for the future temple, they should likely be understood to represent previous traditions with which the prophet was familiar.[13]

I read Psalm 24 in light of the preceding considerations. The psalm starts out with a doxology praising the Lord for his Creation. This hymn parallels the similar one (which actually quotes Psalm 96) that the Chronicler tells us was sung at the occasion of the David's ark procession (1 Chronicles 16:23-33). Psalm 24:3–4 describes someone who desires to go up to the temple, and verse 6 can be seen to indicate that this is a group of people (NRSV has "company" and Donald W. Parry reads "circle") who are going up to the temple. Taking the situations presented in Psalms 118, 132, and the vision of Ezekiel into consideration, the life setting we can imagine here for Psalm 24 is a procession of pilgrims led by an individual (likely the king) who are accompanying Yahweh (perhaps represented by the Ark) up to the temple. We can picture the procession proceeding up the holy mountain until they reach the temple gates, where they are required to stop.

In verse 3, we hear the questions: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" At the gates, there were likely priests (see, e.g., 2 Kings 25:18; later, they were Levites, see, e.g., Ezekiel 44:11; 1 Chronicles 9:17-27) that were stationed there as gatekeepers.[14]

There appears to be a question and answer dialogue that takes place, plausibly between the processional party and the gatekeepers.[15]

In verses 3-5, the qualifications for entry to the temple precincts are established.[16] As Craig Broyles notes, the "qualifications are ethical, not sacral in nature."[17] We see in Psalm 118 that it is only "the righteous" who are permitted to pass through the gate (Psalm 118:20). While Psalm 24 appears to have an abbreviated list of requirements, Psalm 15 gives ten qualifications — reminiscent of the Decalogue given at Sinai — which can be similarly viewed as moral requirements for beginning an ascension of the holy mountain to stand in Yahweh's presence.

Entrance to the temple precincts involved the revelation of moral requirements in the form of covenants from God, the acceptance of these on the part of the worshippers, and confirmation to the gatekeepers that these requirements were being met. Verse 5 seems to be spoken by the gatekeepers or accompanying priest(s), declaring the blessings promised to those who fulfill the requirements. V. 6 appears to be an indication from the pilgrims that they do, indeed, comply with the requirements.

After having confirmed that the pilgrims are living the covenantal requirements, there is a call for the gates to be opened so that "the King of Glory may come in" (Psalm 24:7–9; cf. Psalm 118:19). It is interesting to note that Broyles interprets the use of the name Yahweh in response to the questions of Psalm 24:8 and 10 to signify that "the name of God [is] used as a 'password' through the gates."[18] Furthermore, he argues that the name "King of glory" is used here as a "new name" — he assumes this because the respondents in verses 8 and 10 appear to not know the name.[19]

If we take it to represent a similar context, Psalm 118 seems to indicate that the procession has been allowed to go through the gates, has received a blessing from the Lord, and now makes its way to the altar of the temple. Mowinckel saw the festal procession as indicated in verse 27 as approaching and perhaps circling, the altar.[20] As noted previously, Parry sees Psalm 24:6 as describing the processional group as a circle (reading *dur* instead of *dôr*). He notes that this could be a reference to a religious prayer circle in which the participants inquire of or pray to the Lord in hopes to see his face (Psalm 24:6, "seek to see the face of the God of Jacob," based on the LXX: *zetounton to prosopon tou theou Iakob*).[21]

The Psalms depict the purpose of the pilgrimage to the temple not simply to "appear before the Lord", but, as previously mentioned, Psalm 84:7 (as in RSV/NRSV, based on the LXX reading: *ophthesetai ho theos*) declares that the expectation is to be able to see the Lord. Some scholars

have argued that the injunction in Exodus 34:24 (etc.) to appear in the presence of the Lord may have originally read: "to see the face of the Lord." While the Masoretic Text has the *Niph'al* imperfect of the verb *ra'ah* ("to see"), meaning "you will be seen" or "you will appear," some argue that the original reading would have had a *Qal* imperfect, "you will see."[22] Holladay suggests that the text may have been "changed for theological reasons."[23]

The idea of going to the holy place to see the Lord, or that the Lord would make an appearance at a cultic site, is certainly not foreign to the Hebrew Bible. I have already mentioned the visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. There are many others worthy of mention. King Solomon, in 1 Kings 3, goes up to the high place of Gibeon to offer sacrifice, and the Lord appears to him in a dream. In 1 Samuel 3:21, we read: "The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh…." The prophet Malachi (Malachi 3), in language reminiscent of some of the Psalms, envisioned that "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" and asked: "But who can abide the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appeareth?"

The priestly instructions for sacrifice recorded in Leviticus 9:3-6 declare:

> 3 And say to the people of Israel, "Take a male goat for a sin offering; a calf and a lamb, yearlings without blemish, for a burnt offering … For today the LORD will appear to you." (cf. Exodus 20:24).

In the story of the children of Israel at Sinai, while most of the people of Israel are required (Exodus 19:12-13; cf. Psalm 24) to remain at a distance from the foot of the holy mountain, a number of individuals are chosen to ascend up the mountain together with Moses and Aaron.

We read in Exodus 24:9-11:

> 9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up (*wayya'al*),
>
> 10 and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.
>
> 11 God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

As an important aside, I would mention that James Tabor, among others, has noted that Exodus 24 bears a number of similarities to the heavenly ascent genre. He explains:

> …Moses (or alternatively Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders), ascend[s] the mountain, enter[s] the presence of God, the realm of the divine. He is given revelation in the form of heavenly tablets, then descends back to the mortal realm … [H]e becomes a semi-divine figure, eating and drinking in the divine presence and returning from the mountain with his face transformed like an immortal (Exodus 24:11; 34:29-30).[24]

We may also note that the Exodus and Sinai experiences are an important theme in the Psalter, as can be seen, for example, in Psalms 68, 81, 95, 99, 114, and others. Mowinckel and others saw the festal procession to the temple mount as a reliving of the journey through the wilderness to experience the theophany at Mount Sinai (compare, for example, Exodus 15 and Psalm 68).[25]

The principal paradigm of these texts is that God would appear in the described cultic situations. Klaus Seybold sees theophany as one of the key recurring features of the Psalms and explains that the theophany must have been a cultic event and that the relevant psalms reveal a "tradition of an event experienced and passed on in worship…" He argues that the "oldest of these texts (Psalm 18; 68; 97) record the pre-exilic existence of such liturgical traditions, as do the references [outside] the Psalter (such as Isaiah 6; Judges 5; Deuteronomy 33, etc.)."[26]

To cite just a few further examples of this theme, we can read in Psalm 17:15: "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your form (*t^emunateka*)." Psalm 11:7 has: "For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face."

Psalm 27:4 puts the vision of the Lord explicitly in the context of the temple: "One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple."

Seybold sees in Psalm 63, as in Psalm 18, evidence of an advent celebration in which the appearance of Yahweh was dramatically represented. "I have seen you in the sanctuary, and beheld your power and glory" (v. 2).[27] This psalm seems to place the king in the setting of the Holy of Holies of the temple, experiencing a Theophany of Yahweh.[28]

The language of so many of the Psalms, especially if we attempt to view them in a cultic setting, combined with the numerous other biblical expressions of the expectation of Theophany in connection with cultic ritual lead us to the conclusion that the principal goal of one or more of the pilgrimage festivals in pre-exilic times was to ascend to the temple so that one could experience the Theophany and "see the face of the Lord," however this was imagined or ultimately realized.

Another key feature of many later heavenly ascent narratives is that after the visionary has beheld the Deity on his throne, the visionary himself is enthroned either on the throne of God or on a similar throne beside God's. To cite a relevant example, later Jewish traditions understood Moses when he ascended Mount Sinai as having seen God on his throne and then having been himself enthroned in heaven and set to rule as God's vice-regent on Earth.[29]

In *Exagoge* of Ezekiel the Tragedian, starting in line 67, Moses is made to say:

> I had a vision of a great throne on the top of Mount Sinai and it reached till the folds of heaven. A noble man was sitting on it, with a crown and a large scepter in his left hand. He beckoned to me with his right hand, so I approached and stood before the throne. He gave me the scepter and instructed me to sit on the great throne. Then he gave me a royal crown and got up from the throne. I beheld the whole earth all around and saw beneath the earth and above the heavens.

This sequence was also arguably a part of the pre-exilic temple ritual. We read in 1 Chronicles 29: 23:

> Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him.

The idea that when the king was enthroned, he was being seated on the cherubim throne of Yahweh seems to be an early, pre-exilic concept. With that in mind, we can then get a broader perspective of the pre-exilic coronation rituals by looking at the relevant psalms

Psalm 2:6-7 reads:

> Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

We can interpret this passage to refer to God having taken the king up to the top of the temple mount, which would be equivalent to an ascent into heaven and having enthroned him there. The Lord gives a decree to the king, announcing him to be the son of God.

Psalm 110:1 has the Lord directing the king to sit at his right hand. Psalm 2:2 indicates that the king has previously been anointed. Just as the visionary in the ascent narratives is described as being washed, anointed, clothed, and invested with royal regalia as part of his heavenly experience, we learn from the Bible that the coronation of kings followed a similar pattern. The king was washed and purified, likely at the spring of Gihon (1 Kings 1:34). He was anointed on the head with a perfumed olive oil that was kept in a horn in the sanctuary (1 Kings 1:39; Psalm 89:20; Psalm 23:5). He was clothed in robes and also wore a priestly apron (ephod, see 1 Chronicles 15:27), sash (Isaiah 22:21; "girdle" in KJV), and diadem/headdress (see Ezekiel 21:26). Finally, the king was consecrated a priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4).

Just as Moses was understood in later Jewish writings to have been deified by his experience on Mt. Sinai, this may very well have been ritually true for the Israelite kings as well.

Margaret Barker describes a Second Temple Ritual in which the high priest, Simon, emerges from the temple and is treated as if he were Yahweh. She notes, citing ben Sira 50:17:

> When he emerged from the Holy of Holies he was like the morning star, like the sun shining on the temple; his very presence made the court of the temple glorious. When he had poured the libation, the trumpet sounded and "all the people together … fell to the ground upon their faces to worship (*proskunein*) their LORD …" (ben Sira 50:17). The most natural way to read this is that they were worshipping the high priest, or rather, Yahweh whom he represented.[30]

This Second Temple Ritual expression involving the high priest as the representative of Yahweh should likely be understood to be an example of post-exilic borrowing of pre-exilic royal rites — attributing, in the absence of the monarchy, to the high priest functions previously attached to the figure of the king. Turning again to the narrative of Solomon's coronation in 1 Chronicles 29, verse 20:

> And David said to all the congregation, Now bless the LORD your God. And all the congregation blessed the LORD God of

> their fathers, and bowed down their heads, and worshipped the LORD, and the king.

If the "throne of the Lord" that Solomon was enthroned on refers to the cherubim-throne in the Holy of Holies, then a situation very much like that described for Simon, where he emerged from the temple with the early morning light causing his glorious raiment to gleam brilliantly, likely ensued.[31] Zechariah 12:8 informs us that, ideally, the monarchs of the house of David were to be like the Angel of the Lord, representing God before the people. This is likely what was believed to have been the king's status after he was set on God's holy hill, enthroned at his right hand, and declared to be the Son of God. Ritually, he had ascended into heaven to stand before the throne of God and was enthroned there. After this experience, the king would have been seen as having been transformed into an angelic messenger, the representative of Yahweh.

Conclusion

To summarize my findings, we can see that:

- The origin of the heavenly ascent motif should be sought even earlier than Bunta supposed, namely in the context of the pre-exilic temple cult.
- The pilgrims were required to go up to the temple at ordained festal times.
- The pilgrimage culminated in a climb to the pinnacle of the holy mountain of God. Because the peak of the temple mount and temple structure represented heaven, the upward journey likely would have been imagined as a heavenly ascent.
- The procession to the temple would have involved passing through gates and being confronted by guardians who required adherence to moral laws and answers to questions or passwords.
- A key purpose for arriving at the temple was to experience the Divine Theophany, thus "appearing before the Lord" or perhaps even "seeing the face of the Lord."
- The king, who likely had led the procession up to the temple, was enthroned on or beside the Lord's own throne, was transformed or "reborn" as a Son of God, and appeared before the people in glorious fashion as the representative of Yahweh.

In light of these findings, it is my conclusion that the earliest roots of the Israelite tradition of heavenly ascent should not be sought in the book of 1 Enoch, as is commonly argued, nor even in the earlier book of Ezekiel, as Silviu Bunta suggests, but rather in the Psalms and in other early pre-exilic biblical texts. The ascent to heaven was not merely a literary invention based on a creative interpretation of prophetic texts but was a cultic drama made real for worshippers through the temple liturgy. I believe that the ascent to heaven to stand before the Throne of God and to see his Face was a key feature of early Israelite religion and one of the major paradigms of the pre-exilic royal cult of the First Temple.

Notes

1. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991), 146.
2. Silviu Bunta, "In Heaven or on Earth: A Misplaced Temple Question About Ezekiel's Visions," in *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elior*, ed. Daphna V. Arbel and Andrei A. Orlov, *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages 2* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 28-44.
3. Bunta, "In Heaven or on Earth," 31-33.
4. Bunta, "In Heaven or on Earth," 33.
5. Bunta, "In Heaven or on Earth," 34.
6. Bunta, "In Heaven or on Earth," 34-35.
7. William Lee Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 72.
8. Holladay, *The Psalms*, 44.
9. J. H. Eaton, *Festal Drama in Deutero-Isaiah* (London: SPCK, 1979), 15.
10. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*. 2 vols. *The Biblical Resource Series*, ed. Astrid B. Beck and David Noel Freedman. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), Vol. 1, 172.
11. See e.g., Hans Ulrich Steymans, "Traces of Liturgies in the Psalter: The Communal Laments, Psalms 79, 80, 83, 89 in Context," in *Psalms and Liturgy*, eds. Dirk J. Human and Cas J. A. Vos (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 168-234. Steymans discusses the processions of various gods, represented by their cultic statues, into their temples as part of the New Year Feasts of Asshur and Babylon. He makes comparisons between the sequence of hymns used for

these events and what he sees as a similar series of Psalms (Pss. 79, 80, 83, 89) in the Hebrew Psalter. He concludes that these five last psalms of the Asaph collection "represent a liturgical sequence of prayers for one single day of the New Year Festival in Jerusalem" (p. 226). For the idea that in Egypt similar processions of the statues of the gods, including the solar barque, were performed, see generally Georges Posener, *De la divinité du Pharaon* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale; Cahiers de la Société Asiatique XV, 1960), 47-48, 55, 59-61, 69, 71, 81-82; Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, *Vie et mort d'un pharaon: Tutankhamon* (Paris: Hachette, 1963), 185-190; Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 90-93; Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-88.

12. See, e.g., J. H. Eaton, *Psalms* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1967), 291. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 34. Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, Vol. 1, 129.
13. Compare also the procession described in Nehemiah 12:30-43 that goes through gates as it ascends up to the temple.
14. Mowinckel argues that the gatekeepers were priests that belonged to the "higher clergy," and that at least in pre-exilic times they ranked next to the chief priest (2 Kgs 25:18). Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, Vol. 1, 177.
15. Broyles, "Liturgies of Temple Entry," 252.
16. Compare with moral requirements delineated for "those who can go down to the vision of the Merkabah" in *Hekhalot Rabbati* 20:1; 13. See William J. Hamblin, "Temple Motifs in Jewish Mysticism" in *Temples of the Ancient World.* Donald W. Parry, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. and Provo, Ut.: FARMS, 1994), 448.
17. Broyles, "Liturgies of Temple Entry," 250.
18. Broyles, "Liturgies of Temple Entry," 252.
19. Broyles, "Liturgies of Temple Entry," 252.
20. Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, Vol. 1, 181.
21. Donald W. Parry, "Temple Worship and a Possible Reference to a Prayer Circle in Psalm 24." He notes that "On other occasions in the psalms the word *dor* is translated as circle: "for God is in the circle of the righteous" (Psalm 14:5); "I will make thy name to be remembered in all circles"(Psalm 45:17); and "the circle of the upright" (Psalm 112:2). Such passages may refer to a social circle, a wedding circle, or a ceremonial circle." From Clarke's Commentary: That seek thy face, O Jacob - It is most certain that "Elohey, O God" has been lost out of

the Hebrew text in most MSS., but it is preserved in two of Kennicott's MSS., and also in the Syriac, Vulgate, Septuagint, Ethiopic, Arabic, and Anglo-Saxon. "Who seek thy face, O God of Jacob."

22. William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Based Upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 328. See argument in Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 146.
23. Holladay and Köhler, *A Concise H.A.L.O.T.*, 328.
24. James D. Tabor, "Ascent to Heaven in Antiquity," accessed online at http://religiousstudies.uncc.edu/people/jtabor/heavenlyascent.html.
25. See, e.g., Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, Vol. 1, 173-74; Eaton, *Festal Drama*, 14.
26. Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1990), 133.
27. Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, 134.
28. See Craig C. Broyles, "The Psalms and Cult Symbolism: The Case of the Cherubim-Ark," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005). Commenting on Psalm 63, Broyles notes: "It is possible to read the phrase 'in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy' (v. 7b) as simply an imaginative metaphor for Yahweh's protection. But the earlier claim, 'so I have looked upon you in the sanctuary […]', locates the speaker in the temple. To interpret this remarkable claim of seeing God appropriately we must remember our context is not that of prophets and their visions but that of liturgies and temple symbolism. In poetic parallelism the second colon often specifies the first. In the parallel phrase the objects of 'beholding' are two terms that are clearly associated with and sometimes even denote the cherubim-ark (cf. 78:61). Thus, it is possible that this psalm was to be recited in direct vision of the cherubim-ark" (Broyles, "The Psalms and Cult Symbolism," 152-53).
29. This is the most likely interpretation of Moses' vision described in *The Exagoge of Ezekiel the Tragedian*.
30. See Philo, *De vita Mosis* 2.290-91; *De virt.* 73-75; Ezekiel the Tragedian, *Exagoge*, 668-82, as referenced in James Tabor, "Ascent to Heaven in Antiquity," accessed online at http://religiousstudies.uncc.edu/people/jtabor/heavenlyascent.html. See also, e.g., Meeks, Wayne A. "Moses as God and King." In *Religions in Antiquity: Essays*

in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, edited by Jacob Neusner. *Religions in Antiquity, Studies in the History of Religions* (*Supplements to Numen* 14; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354-71. My thanks to Jeff Bradshaw for this last reference.

31. Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, 77. Josephus describes a very similar event to that of Simon the high priest that occurred during the reign of Herod Agrippa, in which, at the new theater in Caesarea, during the celebratory games he instituted, Agrippa entered the theater at dawn, dressed in glorious silver robes. As he took a seat on his elevated throne, the early morning sunlight made his shining robes gleam while members of the audience acclaimed him as a god. Jules Morgenstern saw this event as happening at the time of a great festival and speculated that this must have been in imitation of the ancient royal rites. In light of this observation, Morgenstern reconstructs the ancient ritual involving the king at the Temple of Jerusalem:

> The ceremony in question was performed, it is stated clearly, just at sunrise. The king entered the theater just as the day was dawning. Unquestionably he took the seat regularly reserved for him alone. It must have been located at the western side of the theater and was no doubt elevated somewhat above the remainder of the seats in the edifice in such manner and to such height that the first rays of the rising sun upon this particular day might fall unobstructedly upon the king's person and be reflected brilliantly from the robe of silvered cloth which he was wearing, undoubtedly for this very purpose. The elevated royal seat resembled in various essential respects, and was no doubt even regarded as, a throne, and that too a throne of the character which the Bible very appropriately terms a *kisse' kabod*, "a throne of radiance", 2) a throne bathed in fiery light, the throne of Yahweh Himself. And as the people, assembled at that very early hour primarily to observe and even to an extent to participate in this very ceremony, beheld the king, seated upon his elevated throne and brilliantly radiating light from his very person, as it seemed, the light of the first rays of the rising sun upon this solstitial day, they hailed him as a god. Julian Morgenstern, "The King-God among the Western Semites and the Meaning of Epiphanes," *Vetus Testamentum* 10, no. 2 (1960): 156ff.

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