

Diogo Izidoro
Course OT642/742.OA Psalms (Online)
Professor R. Russell Mack, Ph.D.
Appropriation Essay
Due 9/25/22

Many scholars believe Psalm 29 was either patterned after a Ugaritic hymn to Baab or adopted and modified to worship YHWH. Students will write one reflective essay on the Christian appropriation of non-Christian materials using Israel's appropriation of Psalm 29 as a launching point. Some things you may wish to consider: is it appropriate for Christians to use non-Christian medium in worship? If so, how? Why? Under what circumstances? Some specific items you may wish to discuss include: melodies, song lyrics, Halloween celebrations, Christmas celebrations, Easter celebrations, poems, plays, musical instruments, styles of worship. You will want to support your views with evidence, examples, and sound reasoning.

Many scholars have noted that Psalm 29 uses patterns and terminology seemingly borrowed from Canaanite poetry. This close association of this Psalm with patterns used in a Canaanite hymn can raise the question of how appropriate it is for Christianity to borrow material from non-Christian works and apply it to Christian art forms. In this essay, I will make the case that it is not only appropriate, but also absolutely necessary that this would be the case. The fundamental question lies in understanding what the ultimate Christian mission is, what language is, and how language is used to accomplish the Christian mission. Once we understand what the message of Christianity is, and how we are to communicate that message, there should be no doubt that some level of appropriation would be used to accomplish that end.

First, we need to accept and understand the ultimate goal of Christianity. While it is difficult to fully expand on this here given space constraints, by looking at key passages it would be reasonable to conclude that Christianity is not an exclusive club, nor a niche group closed to outsiders. The essence of Christianity is emphasized first in the calling of Israel found in the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12:1-3. The last verse is the key verse to focus on, as Abraham and his family are blessed "so that all the families of the earth may be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

This calling of Israel to be a blessing to all the nations is fulfilled through the person of Jesus, who came to save the world and so that all may have eternal life through Him. This calling and commission is extended to Jesus' followers (John 3:16; Matthew 28:19-20), and we are called to join Him in what the Apostle Paul called the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). That is, we are to reconcile all lost people with their heavenly father. This is the ultimate goal of Christianity, to share the good news with everyone so that they may know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

In order to share the good news, we are bound by the limits of language. Language is not limited to grammar, vocabulary, and word associations, but incorporates all mediums used to communicate any message. Language incorporates cultural expressions, shared experiences, and the entirety of the social fabric and life setting of the individuals. This complete social context is what German scholars referred to as the *Sitz im Leben* (Barton, p. 32). In order to maximize communication and clearly express any message, it is imperative that the communicator of the message use the language most familiar to the recipient of the message. As a simple example, if we wanted to communicate with a remote tribe in the Amazon, using English would not be effective at all if they do not speak English. It would be necessary that we immerse ourselves in their tribe, understand their language and customs so as to maximize the effectiveness of the message being communicated.

Putting this all together for the issue at hand - in order to accomplish the Christian goal of communicating the good news, it is important that we utilize the tools of language so as to maximize the comprehension of the hearers of the message. The universal claim of the Christian faith (that it is for all people) requires a wide array of communication techniques in order to clearly articulate the faith to those that do not follow it. This means that we are to use not only the same language spoken by the recipients of the message (i.e. utilize English to speak to English-speaking persons, Spanish to speak to those that speak Spanish, etc.), but we are encouraged to maximize the toolset available in communication which incorporates the

entire social fabric of the listener. This strategy is not uncommon to the Christian faith, and it has been used since *the beginning*. In fact, many scholars have noted the association of the creation story of Genesis with other ancient Near Eastern literature, most notably the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish* (Dost, p. 55). Likewise, the Genesis flood narrative has many similarities with other flood stories of ancient Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria; the most well-known being *the Epic of Gilgamesh* (Longman & Walton, p. 53). Paul uses this same strategy in Acts 17, where he associates the Greek altar to an unknown God in the Areopagus with Jesus Himself, communicating the gospel message in a way that is culturally relevant to his listeners. These communication strategies allow the Christian faith to dialogue with other faiths and other cultural contexts so as to clearly present the essence of the faith in the language and style that the listeners would understand.

Turning to more contemporary examples, the influence that non-Christian music has had in Christian worship music further enhances this point. To resort to antiquated instruments and music styles would not accomplish the goal of communicating the essence of worship to today's audience. In fact, we know that God is the giver of life and that all creative skills find their origin in Him. I have often shared real moments of praise and worship with my church community through an abundance of different musical styles which would be considered *non-traditional* including Brazilian samba and bossa nova, rock and roll, and even hip hop. As long as the lyrics glorify God, and the intent is to worship Him, there should be no limit to using creative expression in order to speak the common language of those that do not know Him so that they may come to know Him. The main constraint that should be the parameter for judging on these matters is whether or not the message is compromised. As long as the core of the message is not compromised, we should encourage the use of all tools available to us so as to maximize the effectiveness of communication to those who need to hear the message.

Because of the universal claim of the gospel message - mainly, that God desires that all people may be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) - the church should use all facets of language and

communication in order to spread that message. If not, the message would be compromised because it is said and portrayed in a way that would not be comprehensible to its listeners. It is my firm belief that cultural appropriation of non-Christian means of communication is not only appropriate, it is absolutely necessary. As is suggested by Psalm 29, this practice has been commonplace throughout all of Christian history and represents the core of the Christian message - that all may be saved. To suggest otherwise exemplifies a form of Christian elitism which defeats the purpose of the core Christian message and fails to appreciate the fundamental backdrop of the faith.

Bibliography

Barton, John. *Reading The Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Claisse-Walford, Nancy L.; Jacobson, Rolf A.; Tanner, Beth LaNeel. *The Book of Psalms (New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT))*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

Dost, Christopher. *Jesus' Bible: a Concise History of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019.