Abstract
The content, location, and integration of each recorded and reported prayer text in the narrative of 1-2 Chronicles largely determines the forceful rhetorical functions of prayer within the narrative contexts and helps to establish early Jewish identity in the Second Temple period. The editors of the book adapt prayers to new settings and distinct needs of the faith community. Through the discourse of psalmic prayer (1 Chr 16:8-36; 16:41; 2 Chr 5:13; 6:40-42; 7:3; 7:6; and 20:21) in relationship to elements of ritual, ideas may become embodied and appropriated by the participants of these prayers.

Keywords: 1-2 Chronicles, 1 Chronicles 16:8-36, prayer, ritual, Psalm

Michael D. Matlock (PhD, Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion) is Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies, Old Testament, and Early Judaism at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.
Introduction

Through ritual theories, researchers have made key contributions to the study of religions and of human cultures. They call attention to behaviors rather than beliefs, and especially to repeated practices shaped by social custom and religious mandate. Within societies dominated by traditional forms of monarchy, ritual activities are central to cultural life. Hence, ritual can serve as a convenient example of the forces shaping all forms of social action.²

By comparison, the ancient Israelites were ruled by a king for many centuries going all the way back to the days of King Saul. By the late Persian period, when the monarchy was approximately two centuries removed, the ancient Yehudites’ historical and cultural memory was still dominated by an analysis of their prior kingship. The books of Chronicles preserve divine revelation, but also serve as important cultural artifacts from this period primarily by recounting and reinterpretting the divinely sanctioned Davidic kingship in ancient Israel. Through various methodological analyses of the ubiquitous ritual of prayer in these sacred books,³ the forces shaping social action can be more clearly observed. From the perspective of several consensus concepts in ritual theory, this exploration raises questions about how such practices of psalmic prayer should be interpreted and appropriated. Although this essay is largely a theoretical discussion, my aim is to pay tribute to Professor Oswalt’s unwavering desire to interpret and appropriate scripture in a manner that brings the people of God into closer relationship to the covenant God revealed in scripture.

I. Synopsis of a Previous Study of the Literary-Rhetorical Function of Prayers and Psalms in the Narrative of Chronicles

In a previous literary-rhetorical and ideological study, this author argued that the Chronicler’s shaping of prayers and psalms functions in large measure to demonstrate the inclusivity of prayer for a people without a king, but not without a cult.⁴ Direct and indirect prayer speech is a pervasive feature in the books of Chronicles. I observed eleven reported or indirect prayers (1 Chr 5.20; 21.26; 2 Chr 12.6; 13.14; 18:31; 20.26; 30.27; 31.8; 32.20; 32.24; 33.12-13) and nineteen recorded or direct prayers and psalms (twelve narrative prayers: 1 Chr 4.10; 14.10; 17.16-27; 21.8; 21.17; 29.10-20; 2 Chr 1.8-10; 6.3-11; 6.14-42; 14.10; 20.5-12; and 30.18-19; and seven psalmic prayers: 1 Chr 16.8-36; 16.41; 2 Chr 5.13; 6.40-42; 7:3; 7:6; and 20:21).

There are at least two larger historical frameworks located in Chronicles, namely the broader human history in the genealogical portion (1 Chr 1-9) and the specific monarchic history of Israel as a united then divided kingdom (1 Chr 10 – 2
Of the thirty prayers and psalms, only two appear in the larger human history; nevertheless, these two non-royal Sondergut prayers, Jabez’s prayer (1 Chr 4.10) and the prayer of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh (1 Chr 5.20), function programmatically to maintain the efficacy of prayer to assist in the substantial physical needs (land and protection) of the late Persian period Yehudite community.

Out of the monarchic history, twenty of the twenty-eight prayers and psalms come from the mouths of Israelite kings (united/divided kingdoms). Kings David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah are the supplicants of seventeen of these twenty. Through the literary feature of characterization, the Chronicler is able to present striking profiles of a kingly character’s moral and religious disposition to help the intended readers understand, evaluate, and react to these kings. In my previous research, I reaffirmed that royal figures are characterized by one of three manners: largely or totally negative representation, negative and positive portrayal, and largely or totally positive depiction.

Of the twenty royal prayers, fourteen prayers come from kings characterized in a largely positive manner and the other six prayers stem from kings characterized as a mixture of negative and positive features. No prayers arise from the kings who are portrayed in a primarily negative manner. Of the kings depicted with a mixture of negative and positive features, Manasseh’s reported prayer is part of a characterization that demonstrates remarkable repentance and the rare exception of a “bad-turned-good” king. Solomon’s four prayers, which include one psalm, are part of an idealized characterization of the king (as opposed to the realistic one in the Deuteronomistic History). Solomon is presented as a royal paragon in terms of morals, politics, and the cult. Moreover, Solomon’s prayers and psalm concerning the dedication of the temple are utilized for the pattern of anticipation and recollection for other royal prayers offered in the book of Chronicles.

In the final section of the research, I focused on the literary-rhetorical function of the Sondergut prayers and psalms. One very prominent feature of these prayers is that the royal supplicants exhibit piety in crisis and demonstrate a marked contrast between futile human weakness (from a king, no less) and the potency of divine strength. As for the seven Sondergut psalms in Chronicles, the Chronicler has added to the notion of speaking prayers by recounting the dramatic effect of singing prayers. Six of the seven psalms are prayed by non-royal figures. Regarding the rhetorical function of singing a prayer, I concluded that music almost always plays an important role in all mass movements, because it ties the people together and submerges the individual (cf. the disdain for the use of music in a mass movement...
from the biblical writer of Daniel 3. Prayer that is sung or chanted will sustain prayer much longer than prayer divorced from music.

One can observe a significant irony in the corpus of prayers regarding the situation of the late Persian Yehudite readers. While the royal prayers are dominant and catch the reader’s main focus on a first reading, it is the non-royal prayers and the bridge prayers (royal and non-royal together) that pave the way to a brighter, more contextually appropriate relationship with Yhwh. Moreover, the Chronicler introduces the seven psalmic prayers to broaden the application and necessity of prayer for the late Persian-period Yehudite community, which is dominated by the centrality of the cult without a king in order to restore hope and as a means to receive Yhwh’s favor.

II. Distinguishing Between Texts and Rituals

Here I compare and distinguish the nature of a literary-rhetorical lens for prayer texts and a type of ritual studies interpretive lens. Greenberg makes two salient points in his little treatise, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*. First, Greenburg makes the important case for studying prayer by social analogy to the manner of interhuman discourse and speech patterns. Prayer, which is a human-divine communication, functions much the same way human-human communication works. Thus, he denotes how inferiors speak to superiors in terms of address, confession, gratitude, forms, as well as patterns of interhuman speech and conventions expressing such things as greetings, leave-takings, politeness, hortatory addresses, traditional articulations in set situations, dependence, subjection, and obligation.

When it comes to understanding ritual although not unique to it, Wright argues a similar point in that theological constructs often arise out of “anthropo-metaphorical” contexts. Divine-human analogies such as redeemer, savior, father, and king all arise from human institutions, namely the economy, the military, the family, and the monarchy. One of the reasons rituals are performed is because of “analogy’s power to advance conceptualization,” making it possible to “conceive of, discuss, and develop hitherto unexpressed ideas.” Moreover, Wright states that analogies “give participants some control—at least psychological control—over something that is threatening or elusive. This alone may be sufficient reason to perform a rite, even if the desired outcome does not have a history or likelihood of being fulfilled.” Even though Wright’s comments are intended for the ritual of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, his suggestions are justly transferable to the ritual of prayer. Thus, I have altered his quote regarding biblical sacrifice involving analogy to the ritual of prayer: “just as a human lord is honored, praised, entreated, or
appeased through [speech], so the divine Lord is honored, praised, entreated, or appeased through [speech termed prayer].

Greenburg’s second salient point is that when understanding the nature and function of narrative prayer, there is a continuum of extemporaneous prayer on one side of the spectrum and ritual, prescribed prayer on the other side. Throughout the continuum, Greenberg argues that all levels of patterned prayer speech are composed with language, style and phraseology. Although Greenberg did not explicitly make this point, his insight into the spectrum of prayer undergirds a touchstone that Wuthnow, Bell, and other ritual theorists have brought to the fore. Ritual and non-ritual activity should not be viewed with a strict dichotomous lens.

Ritual is not a special dimension of social activity but rather a dimension of all social activity. Wuthnow concludes, “Ritual is not a type of social activity that can be set off from the rest of the world for special investigation. It is a dimension of all social activity. The study of ritual, therefore, is not distinguished by its concern with certain types of activity, but by the perspective it brings to bear on all activity, namely, emphasis on the symbolic or expressive dimension of behavior.”

Rappaport argues that ritual is on a continuum of formality found in all behavior and denotes “ritual” in the singular as referring to the formal aspect of all behavior, and “rituals” in the plural as indicating unchanging events completely dominated by formality.

One can find another area of commonality between the interpretation of texts and rituals in elements utilized for interpretation of either phenomena. Formal properties noted in both interpretations are repetition and other literary structural devices such as chiasms, syntax, order and sequence, geographical and temporal referents, action and objects of action, participants, and sound referents.

Thus, for example in the interpretation of texts, Freedman insists that one of the major emphases of recent literary investigation is the attempt “to discern clusters or families of related words or phrases that, by virtue of their frequency and particular use, tell us something about the author’s intentions, conscious or otherwise.” And regarding repetition in ritual, the formal repetitive character of ritual leads to continuity in which the major accent falls, as well as some discontinuity in which the minor accent falls.

Whereas the first three points indicate continuities between interpretation of texts and ritual, this last point denotes a distinction in that texts may reflect interests and meanings different from the rituals they describe. Gilders has cautioned that both the ritual and the text need an interpretation and thus the interpreter of ritual and text must,
...distinguish carefully between the “world of the text” and a living, historical context in which ritual activity takes place. The latter context is not immediately accessible to the reader of the Bible. Only after we have developed a clear picture of the world of the text can we attempt to reconstruct an image of the real world in which ritual actions might have been carried out.\textsuperscript{18}

It seems prudent thus to offer a working definition of ritual at this junction. Because Bell’s contours offer the most promise for my investigation, I define ritual as action that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does.\textsuperscript{19} Ritual is constructed out of widely accepted blocks of tradition and generates a sense of cultural continuity even when the juxtaposition of these blocks defines a unique ritual ethos.\textsuperscript{20} In terms of socialization, ritual practice results in a ritualized body or “cultivated disposition.”\textsuperscript{21}

III. Ritualization in the Psalmic Prayers in Chronicles

A. Interpreting Psalnic Prayer Texts

As noted above, there are seven poetic, psalnic prayers found in Chronicles (1 Chr 16:8-36; 16:41; 2 Chr 5:13; 6:40-42; 7:3; 7:6; and 20:21). Within the first and by far the lengthiest psalm, 1 Chr 16:8-36, King David asks Asaph, one of the prominent leaders of the temple singers and musician guilds, to lead the Israelites in singing and praying the psalm. This psalnic prayer is the only extensive poetry in Chronicles. The prayer includes the bracketed command to give thanks to Yhwh and the confession that Yhwh is good and his hesed is eternal; thus, it sets the rhetorical stage for the purpose of praying a psalm.

The psalm consists of portions of three psalms: Pss 105:1-15; 96:1-13; and 106:1, 47-48. Beyond any doubt, the Chronicler, with the benefit of these psalms, has created a totally new context of his own.\textsuperscript{22} The new psalm in 1 Chr 16:8-36 contains thirty-one imperatival forms (imperatives and jussives) addressing the reader.\textsuperscript{23} The three main units of the psalm are as follows: 1) defining what it means to praise the Lord and rationale (vv. 8-22); 2) a call to praise Yhwh over all the nations, and therefore over their gods and the whole earth (vv. 23-33); and 3) a summon to Yhwh’s people as a whole to join the Levites’ praise (vv. 34-36).

David’s appointed psalm that Asaph and his musical group are to sing and pray in worship contains a heightened importance for the worship of Yhwh. Asaph’s psalm is to be sung \textit{to the LORD} (v. 4) before the ark of God’s covenant, which has now been brought into the center of Israel’s life. These elements serve as the setting (vv. 4-6, 37) and provide the primary purpose of the psalm. The first
main unit of Asaph’s psalm gives definition to what it means to praise the Lord (vv. 8-13; cf. Ps 105:1-6), and the rationale to do so, namely because of his faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant (vv. 14-18; cf. Ps 105:7-11). It is a covenant of Yhwh’s unmerited favor and love that he demonstrates although undeserved by choosing and rescuing his people when they were unable to help themselves (vv. 19-22; cf. Ps 105:12-15).

The second unit of the psalm commands international and cosmic praise for Yhwh as God over all the nations and their gods, and indeed over the whole earth (vv. 23-33; cf. Ps 96:1-13). The final unit of Asaph’s psalm contains a summons for the entirety of God’s people to unite with the Levites’ praise (vv. 34-36; cf. Ps 106:1, 47-48). The imperative to give thanks to Yhwh, which commences the psalm, is repeated again in v. 34 forming an inclusio to strength the programmatic action. Within this climactic section of the psalm, the main reason to offer thanks is revealed: Yhwh’s unwavering love continues for a very long duration (kî lôlâm hâsadô). The Israelites are instructed to pray to their God of salvation by praying “save us” (hôšî‘ēnû) and “rescue us” (haṣṣîlēnû) from the nations so that they are in a better position to give thanks to Yhwh’s holy name (35).

The other six psalmic prayers in Chronicles all contain some version of 1 Chr 16:34, “Give thanks to Yhwh, for he is good; for his steadfast love is eternal.” Like this verse, each one of the six are offered by non-royal figures (singers, Levites, all Israel) and refer to the Lord in third person in the prayer, except for the psalmic prayer that Solomon prays at the end of his temple dedication prayer in which the Lord is addressed in second person (2 Chr 6:42). In a way, these other six prayers are riffing off of this long programmatic psalm, specifically 1 Chr 16:34.

Many interpreters have argued that the words in Exod 34:6-7 became Israel’s clearest and most ancient confession, and they may be regarded as a foundational theological statement of scripture, out of which everything else flows. Thus, 1 Chr 16:34 may be viewed as one of many articulations of this ancient confession. Miller avers that this expression is “as close as one can come to an ancient creed or to the Hebrew Bible answer to the catechism question: ‘What is God?’”

So, why does the Chronicler include the psalmic prayers, none of which are found in the Deuteronomistic History? If the non-psalmic prayers proclaim, “Yhwh, you are our God,” then the psalmic prayers proclaim the same but with the caveat that it is right to give thanks to Yhwh because he is good and his hessed endures forever. Moreover, to the rhetorical elements of speaking prayer, the Chronicler adds the dramatic effect of singing prayer. Whereas kings dominate in terms of those who offer prayers, non-royalty persons dominate in offering
psalms in Chronicles. More precisely, worship personnel containing priests and Levites chiefly offer psalm speech. This emphasis on psalmic prayer strengthens another main theme of the Chronicler, the reimposition of temple personnel and employment.

Interestingly, four of the seven occurrences appear in the section where Solomon dedicates the temple (2 Chr 5:2-7:11) and one of these four is the only psalm offered by royalty, namely Solomon (6:40-42). Unlike in Solomon’s dedicatory prayer in 1 Kings 8, the Chronicler reports that Solomon ends his long narrative prayer with a psalm. His ending song parallels a portion of one of the Songs of Ascent, Psalm 132. In this particular psalm, the proper resting place of the ark of the covenant, namely the temple, and the continuation of David’s royal line are paired in the petition. The Chronicler has captured these two themes well in three verses (vv. 8-10) from Ps 132 and thus bolstered his larger rhetorical plan to promote these two themes.

B. Interpreting Ritual Arising Out of Psalmic Prayer Texts

In some societies, particularly those dominated by traditional forms of kingship (such as ancient Israel), ritual activities appear central to cultural life. Hence, ritual can serve as a convenient example of the forces shaping all forms of social action. Thus, through the ritual of prayer, we seek to open a window into the thinking and praxis of some of the post-exilic Jewish communities. We want to unpack this “gift that lubricates the wheels of divine-human interaction.”

Watts notes that in antiquity, rituals do not seem to have required interpretation unless and until they were contested. An interpretation of ritual is always an interpretation of interpretations. A beloved, idealized king who is praying for God’s eternal favor for his people to be demonstrated, as well as Levites, temple singers and musicians, and all manner of Israelites who are making supplication to and thanking Yhwh because he is good and his ḡesed is eternal, seems to give the participants of the ritual a psychological control even if recent history seems otherwise or now less likely.

There certainly existed many contestations to this type of prayer ritual that focused upon thanking Yhwh through prayer, which is substantiated by Yhwh’s eternal covenant love. Many of the approximately seventy laments in the Psalter are protesting this type of prayer ritual (e.g. Ps 22:1; 77:11 “And I say, ‘It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’” NRSV). Certainly the lament text par excellence, the book of Lamentations sounds a loud voice of protest to this type of ritualization, but I hasten to add that the temple has reemerged by the late Persian period. And every one of the lament psalms except Psalm 88 concludes...
with a prayer of thanksgiving. At times, life was brutal and irrational. The ancient Yehudites had watched their world collapse and were pulled down into what seemed like a dark pit.

The ritualization also involved instrumental and vocal music. Music affects ritualization of prayer in numerous ways. Unfortunately, musical instruments mentioned in the Hebrew Bible are among the most perplexing phenomena of the past because insufficient “technical information about the specific nature of the employed instrument or the sound or melody that had to be produced” exists.  

Oft times, the study of music’s social context such as the sacred service may help to understand the ritualization involved. But, in the ritual of offering thanks for Yhwh’s goodness and eternal ḥesed, the details of the sacred service are sketchy for analysis. As noted in the rhetorical function of singing a prayer, music always plays an important role in all mass movements, because it ties the people together and submerges the individual. Prayer that is sung or chanted will sustain lasting prayer much longer than prayer without music. We might call this “praying through to praise” much like the canonical Psalter comes to a conclusion.

In terms of ritual legitimation, rather than affirming clear and dogmatic values to impress them directly into the minds of participants, ritual actually constructs an argument, a set of tensions. As the Yehudites living in the late Persian period grappled with the weighty issues such as the absence of the ark of the covenant, the absence of monarchy, and the lackluster temple, this prayer ritual constructed a set of tensions for reflection.

C. The Production of a Ritualized Body and Ideology

People do not simply acquire beliefs or attitudes imposed on them by others contrary to a relatively determined philosophical viewpoint. Rather, the ideology of the ritual found in the prayer speech “give thanks to Yhwh for he is good and his steadfast love is eternal” is the manipulation of bias with a clearly articulated disposition. In such cases, Bell says, “people have culturally basic ‘epistemic principles’ with which to evaluate and reflect upon ideas. When they agree, they do not passively follow or obey; they appropriate, negotiate, qualify.” The post-exilic Psalm 136, the so-called “Great Hallel” Psalm, gives the longest attestation of this psalmic prayer ritual. Clearly, part of the purpose of the twenty-six repetitions of the refrain is to allow a deepening evaluation and reflection upon this ritual action. McCann asserts, “the psalmist affirms that every aspect and moment of Israel’s story… is pervaded by and dependent upon God’s steadfast love.”

Ideology has less to do with a state of mind and more to do with a set of practices that prevent the potentially infinite meaning of various cultural elements
and relations in determinate ways. Following Bell, the implications are such that our understanding of the actor-subject-agent of the ritual who is both embedded in and generative of ideology is affected.\(^{38}\) The actor emerges as a divided, decentered, overly determined, but quite active subject. Bourdieu’s concept of how an agent develops through habitus may also help us conceptualize how the ideology of the ritual in this psalmic prayer may be operative in the reader. Bourdieu argues that an actor is constituted by structured and structuring dispositions.\(^{39}\) In other words, through repeated results from an organizing principle, a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination develops in a person.

There are also important parallel developments from cognitive science, such as McNamara’s research studies in self-development and religious experience from the vantage point of neuroscience.\(^{40}\) Simply stated, McNamara’s central contention is that the brain helps shape expression of both religion and Self (a person’s identity), arguing that the Self begins fragmentary and then decenters to achieve defragmentation and promote healing. In order to achieve the ideal Self, one must receive help from God. God’s assistance can produce a new and improved Self but it “is an arduous process that requires years of effort.”\(^{41}\) Furthermore, ritual, such as prayer, serves to decenter a person’s identity and yoke that person with the identity of God by bringing into focus God’s presence. A standardized or “canonical message” such as 1 Chr 16:34 delivered as ritual prayer speech encourages readers/listeners “to identify with those messages, to speak them and to internalize them” and “form a bond with the deity.”\(^{42}\) What does this mean for ancient Yehudites engaged in the ritualization of this brand of psalmic prayer? The ancient Yehudite engaged in this psalmic prayer ritual had an opportunity to move on the spectrum of fragmented personhood (Self) by embracing the realities of the prayer at various degrees of “defragmentation” and choose to move into a more intimate relationship with Yhwh, propelled by a deeper religious experience of his covenant love and goodness.

Finally, Bell reminds us that “it may well be the constraints of community as much as the interests of particular groups that hold ideas together for the sake of flexibly unformulated, but practically coherent, worldview, even when that worldview limits, ranks, marginalizes, or frustrates.”\(^{43}\) In terms of the ancient Yehudite engaged in this ritual psalmic prayer, we must acknowledge that the established order produced by the Yehudite scribal ranks who promoted the ritual in textual form also promoted a coherent worldview that the divine was benevolent to his covenant people. Certainly, this ritualization would have brought a certain level of frustration to the agent of the ritual due to the failure of the monarchy and the shortcoming of the larger cult.
Conclusion

I conclude not with a conclusion or summary, but rather with an observation. After this rather brief comparison of the difference between the interpretation of a prayer text and the interpretation of prayer ritual, I more clearly understand why Watts indicates his disapproval of some of Milgrom’s treatment of ritual texts in P on the one hand, and Douglas’s analysis on the other hand. Milgrom was a distinguished biblical scholar, and Douglas an accomplished anthropologist. But, both scholars were not consistent in critically observing the differences between texts and rituals. The collapse can be very subtle if a researcher is not keenly aware of the different methods that ought to be used to interpret text and ritual.

End Notes

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented in the Prayer in Antiquity Consultation at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, Atlanta, GA, 24 November 2015.


Ibid., 129.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 130.

11 Greenberg, Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel, 44–46.


19 See Bell, Ritual, 81.

20 See Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 195.


23 Beentjes, “‘Give Thanks to Yhwh. Truly He Is Good’: Psalms and Prayers in the Book of Chronicles,” 171. Imperatives are found in the following verses: 8 (3x), 9 (3x), 10, 11 (2x), 12, 15, 23 (2x), 24, 28 (2x), 29 (4x), 30, 34, and 35 (4x); jussives are located in vv. 10, 31 (2x), and 32 (2x).
24 See 1 Chr 14:12 for an initial international abandonment of false gods.


27 As noted by Ralph Klein (“Psalms in Chronicles,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 32.4 [2005]: 272), the Chronicler’s allotment and placement of Psalm 132 downplays the concept of dynastic rule by placing it last and elevates the importance of temple and people.

28 Bell, *Ritual*, 77.


30 Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, 34.


32 The late title of Psalm 77 links the lament psalmic prayer to Asaph.

33 Klingbeil, *Bridging the Gap*, 204.

34 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 195.

35 Ibid., 191 as opposed to when the manipulation of bias is a matter of an unarticulated disposition such as “Stand up straight!”

36 Ibid., 191.


41 Ibid., 254; according McNamara, the Self is an agent that in addition to developing narratives, causes certain actions and makes decisions.

42 Ibid., 220.

43 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 192.

Works Cited

Balentine, Samuel E.


Beentjes, Pancratius C.

Bell, Catherine M.

Bourdieu, Pierre

Freedman, William

Gilders, William K.

Greenberg, Moshe

Jonker, Louis C.

Klein, Ralph W.


Wright, David P.  

Wuthnow, Robert  