SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG

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In six psalms the psalmist either claims to be singing a new song (40:3; 144:9) or exhorts others to do so (33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). The same exhortation is found also in Isa. 42:10 and a similar one at the beginning of the psalm of praise in Judith: ‘Raise to him a new psalm’ (16:1). The question I wish to try and answer in this paper is: In what sense are these psalms new?

I take it for granted that the psalms in which the summons or the promise to sing a new song comes are to be understood as the new songs themselves. Commentators have occasionally suggested that this is not so, but it seems to be a reasonable assumption to make. So: What is new about them?

One possibility is of course that they are new only in the sense that every psalm is new, even if it only recycles familiar ideas and expressions. Gunkel treated the expression as one which has lost its original force:

The original meaning of the formula was that, while old songs might do for ordinary use, for a wholly new occasion the poet would write a new one; but later it was used in all kinds of different ways.

Robert Culley regards it as one of more than a hundred formulaic expressions available to the ‘professional’ poets who composed psalms for other people to use, ‘pleasing versions of revered and respected traditional forms.’ Thus they would not produce ‘an original text according to our standards.’ However, before we acquiesce in this verdict, we should consider some other possibilities.

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There is nothing distinctive about the form of the psalms under consideration which either links them with each other or distinguishes them from other psalms. It has been noted that Psalm 33, although not an acrostic, has twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, a feature it shares with Psalms 38 and 103 and Lamentations 5. This may be coincidence; but some commentators think it may be a deliberate experiment in form, and claim to find ‘considerable regularity of the internal structure and balance,’ noting that ‘the repeated use of the same words, or word forms derived from the same root, throughout the psalm adds further to the overall sense of unity.’ The argument would be more convincing if the psalm were a true acrostic like its neighbour, Psalm 34, and of course it would only supply a reason for calling this particular psalm a ‘new song’. The other psalms under consideration have no outstanding features which might indicate an innovation in form; indeed there are doubts about the unity of Psalms 40 and 144.

Another possibility is that the psalms were composed to be sung to new tunes. Some of the terms used in the psalm titles in the first three books of the Psalter are probably best interpreted as the names of tunes. It may be that the psalms with these headings were composed to be sung to existing, familiar tunes, while for those without such headings new tunes were composed. The latter would be ‘new songs’ in the sense that they would sound new and fresh. The trouble is that there are many more psalms without the supposed names of tunes attached than are psalms described as ‘new songs’, and therefore this must remain one of the more unlikely explanations.

The newness might lie in the accompaniment. Psalm 33 certainly claims newness in this context.

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6 Viz., ‘according to the Sheminith’ (לעיל ים, Pss. 6; 12), ‘according to the Gittith’ (לעיל גית, Pss. 8; 81; 84), ‘according to Muth-Labben’ (לעיל מות-לבק, Ps. 9), ‘according to the Deer of the Dawn’ (לעיל צור אויר, Ps. 22), ‘according to Lilies’ (לעיל יעלה, Pss. 45; 69), ‘according to Alamoth’ (לעיל אלהמה, Ps. 46), ‘according to the Dove on Far-Off Terebinths’ (לעיל ציפורים, Ps. 56); ‘according to the Lily of the Covenant’ (לעיל נטília, Ps. 56), ‘according to Mahalath Leannoth’ (לעיל מנחות, Ps. 88).