

BEARING TESTIMONY IN HEBREW: A COMPARISON OF ANCIENT ISRAELITE TEMPLE RITUALS WITH MODERN LATTER-DAY SAINT FAST AND TESTIMONY MEETINGS

Ryan Conrad Davis

Comparison is at the heart of understanding the world. In fact, the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, has shown that meaning is created through difference.¹ It is only when one recognizes difference that meaning emerges. Or, as Lehi put it, “it must needs be, that there is an opposition,” or an opposite, “in all things”; if something does not have an opposite, or something to contrast with, then “all things must needs be a compound in one.”² Thus, in order to fully appreciate one thing, one must see another thing that the first is not. This principle is perhaps most simply demonstrated when one goes abroad and then returns home. Home has not changed, but the traveler often sees it with new eyes. This is the basic idea of the hero’s journey, but it is also the premise of comparative scholarship. In going to the past, one hopes to not only experience a different world but that the past world will change how one sees his or her own. This article metaphorically visits a thanksgiving offering in ancient Israel and uses this opportunity to see modern Latter-day Saint testimony meetings in a new way. Both of these rituals include public declarations about God before a covenant community, and both include ritual meals that strengthen relationships with God and other members of the covenant community. The hope this article presents is that as one sees the similarities and differences between these two ancient

and modern rituals, he or she can more fully appreciate modern fast and testimony meeting as well as ancient temple worship.

Understanding Israel's own cultural context will help to better explain the thanksgiving offering. In the ancient Near East, people interacted with their gods in a relationship cycle that could be divided into three parts.³ First, there was the "cry for help." A person would call to the gods when he or she needed help. Then, there was the god's act of deliverance. Lastly, there was the act of blessing or thanksgiving in return. This relationship cycle appears in many ancient inscriptions found among Israel's biblical neighbors. For example, the Zakkur stele tells of an Aramean king named Zakkur, who was besieged by an enemy alliance.⁴ Zakkur cries out to the god Baal-Shamayn. The stele tells of how Baal-Shamayn answered Zakkur through prophets, who told him to "fear not," and it tells of how Zakkur was delivered from his enemies. The stele itself is the blessing or thanksgiving offered to the god Baal-Shamayn for his act of deliverance. Just as praise worked to enhance the prestige of kings and rulers, the praise of the delivered would enhance the prestige of the gods.

This same practice and relationship cycle is also found in ancient Israel. For example, 1 Samuel 7 tells the story of Samuel asking Jehovah for help against the Philistines. Jehovah answers by giving Israel victory, and then Samuel sets up a monument called "Eben-ezer," or "Stone of Help."⁵ Just like Zakkur's stele that praised and brought glory to Baal-Shamayn, Samuel's monument was meant to immortalize and remember Jehovah's act of deliverance in Israel's battle with the Philistines.

Although each part of this relationship cycle could (and did) take place outside of the temple in ancient Israel, many of the temple rituals of ancient Israel revolved around this cyclical pattern of interacting and relating with Jehovah. The last part of this relationship cycle was carried out and enacted in the temple through the thanksgiving offering. This ritual was carried out in the temple after someone had cried to Jehovah for help and he had answered the prayer.

The one who had experienced Jehovah's help or deliverance came to the temple intending to render to Jehovah a blessing, both in word and in deed. The two main elements of this ritual included

a psalm of thanksgiving and a celebratory sacrifice or meal.⁶ Now that the context is set, one can compare the thanksgiving psalm to Latter-day Saint testimonies.

What is known about the actual thanksgiving offered in the temple is based on the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms itself is a carefully curated collection of prayers and poems, many of which were sung and performed in the temple. The headings of the psalms themselves indicate that the Levites were involved in their performance.⁷ Among the psalms are examples of thanksgiving psalms. These psalms follow the same format as the Zakkur stele:⁸ they tell of the trouble that the worshipper was in and how Jehovah answered the prayer; they offer thanks and blessing to Jehovah for what he had done and encouragement for others to trust in Jehovah.⁹ In this sense, thanksgiving in the Old Testament was always about relationships.

Thanksgiving was not a private practice. It took place in the temple before the covenant community. When one went to the temple, regardless of the reason, one might be confronted with thanksgiving, encouraging all who come into the temple to trust Jehovah and his faithfulness in answering prayers. Talking about a similar practice in Mesopotamian prayers, Tzvi Abusch once said that “the thanksgiving expressed in relational terms . . . is a statement of personal allegiance that is intended to draw others to the service of god.”¹⁰ Thus, the expressions of thanksgiving in the Jerusalem temple served for the individual to both declare Jehovah as his or her God and to encourage others to trust Jehovah as well. This focus on a relationship with Jehovah worked toward achieving the goal of Jehovah’s covenant relationship with Israel as a whole. Jehovah’s relationship with Israel was meant to bless the entire world, and they could only do this by showing the world what could be accomplished when Israel and Jehovah worked together.¹¹

The covenant with Israel was centered on a relationship. Both to Abraham and to Israel, Jehovah covenanted that he would be a God to them, and they would be his people.¹² This covenant was binding and exclusive; Jehovah was a jealous God. Once an individual began to worship him, he demanded complete fidelity, and he promised the same in return.¹³ All those who worshipped Jehovah would have to come through Israel—in other words, all the nations

of the earth would be blessed by Israel.¹⁴ Although this broader national covenant served as a backdrop, the thanksgiving offering was focused on individuals and families. Because the individual had trusted and relied on Jehovah and Jehovah had delivered them, that person could now claim Jehovah as “his or her God.”¹⁵

This public declaration of one’s relationship with Jehovah has broad similarities to Latter-day Saint testimonies born in fast and testimony meeting. Testimonies are themselves public declarations about God within a covenant community.

However, unlike thanksgiving psalms, testimonies are often centered on facts and truths.¹⁶ Assertions are common, such as “I know that God lives,” “I know that the church is true,” or “I know the Book of Mormon is true.” These statements in some ways fulfill the same purpose as the thanksgiving psalms: they allow worshippers of God to publicly identify themselves and to encourage others to have faith and to obtain their own testimonies of truth. Testimony, similar to the thanksgiving psalms, is considered to be one of the primary ways members of the Church turn others toward God and Jesus Christ.¹⁷ Even though testimonies and thanksgiving psalms serve similar purposes, they do so in different ways, and much of this has to do with their differing cultural contexts.

The thanksgiving psalms were focused on a relationship with Jehovah, whereas here, the emphasis is on knowing truths or facts. Truth as a category was certainly operative in the Old Testament, but truth is often better translated as “faithfulness.”¹⁸ In the Old Testament, Jehovah was a true God because he kept promises. The importance of “truth” for Latter-day Saints undoubtedly has many causes. One of these causes is the Enlightenment, with its emphasis that truth was something that was out there to be discovered by human reason, and that truth was positive and always to be embraced.

One of the truths that has become of paramount importance to those who live a life of faith is the existence of God, hence the testimony “I know that God lives.” In modern culture, the mere existence of God is no longer taken as a given; the search for truth during the Enlightenment also created another way of looking at the world, a way that did not need to include God. In ancient Israel, on the other hand, atheism was never an issue. Of course gods

existed; their world was filled with temples and gods. The relevant question for the Israelites and the cultures around them was not whether gods exist but rather which god, if worshipped, will come through for me? In this sense, faith was not in the existence of gods but in their faithfulness in helping individuals who trusted in their care.

The Latter-day Saint search for truth, however, at a much deeper level mirrors the emphasis on relationships that is found in the Old Testament. When Latter-day Saints testify of truths they have found, this testimony comes after a very similar relationship cycle: they asked God for help, received their answers, and now proclaim those answers. The difference is that for the Old Testament Saints, this was not a fact learned so much as a relationship gained.

Something else that is distinctive about testimony meeting is that a testimony of God and the Book of Mormon could be borne even before one knows. President Packer often said that “a testimony is found in the bearing of it.”¹⁹ In this way, declaring these truths could be an act of faith in the same way that the father of a sick child in the New Testament could say, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”²⁰ However, the thanksgiving psalm could not be performed by someone who had not experienced Jehovah’s saving power; it was only someone who had been lifted out of trouble that could proclaim with experience that Jehovah was his or her God and faithful to his covenants. Latter-day Saint testimonies in this regard seem to pull from the beginning of the relationship cycle, the “cry for help.” In this part of the cycle, it was common for Israelites to assert that Jehovah was their God, that he would hear their prayers and would save them. This was done on faith and without a certain knowledge. In this way, despite the common statement that a testimony-bearer “knows,” one is actually declaring a faith that looks forward to future confirmation and future deliverance. In this way, one hopes to be delivered out of the afflictions and trials of doubt and uncertainty by declaring what he or she hopes to experience.

The thanksgiving ritual consisted of both the thanksgiving psalm and the sacrificial meal, just as fast and testimony meeting consists of both testimonies and the sacrament.

Not only would those in the temple hear a thanksgiving psalm of the delivered but a sacrifice was brought by the delivered individual. This sacrifice was to be eaten with other members of the covenant community.²¹ Deuteronomy says that sacrifices were to be brought to the temple before Jehovah with a group consisting of “ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates.”²² This celebratory group may have been even more inclusive, possibly including the poor and vulnerable members of society.²³ The people who shared the meal were a subset of God’s people who had a personal relationship with the individual whom God had saved.

This was not an everyday meal but rather a meal that was eaten “before the Lord” in his presence.²⁴ Jehovah participated in the meal, since the fat was placed on the altar and the remainder of the animal was eaten by the saved individual together with his or her friends and family. Because it was eaten in Jehovah’s presence, those who came to the meal had to be ritually pure: they had to make sure they had prepared. Failure to do so would lead the infracting individual to be “cut off from his people.”²⁵ This meal commemorated what God had done for an individual, but it also served to bind together the community that surrounded the individual in addition to binding each worshipper to Jehovah. Meals in most cultures form relationships of varying degrees of formality. This was an assumed part of sacrifices and the rituals that accompanied them. When Israel was in the wilderness, the people were condemned for being “bound to [the god] Baal-Peor” because they attended his sacrifices and ate meals with his community.²⁶ Although the Israelites in the community were essentially “born in the covenant” (to use a modern Latter-day Saint term), to participate in the thanksgiving meal was to reaffirm their own relationship with Jehovah, and it reaffirmed their status among his covenant people by eating a meal among them.

Similar to the thanksgiving offering and its accompanying meal, fast and testimony meeting also includes a communal meal eaten among members of a covenant community that commemorates an act of deliverance. Those taking part in this meal are also expected to spiritually prepare to participate. If we are not properly prepared, the Book of Mormon says that those who partake

eat and drink damnation to their souls.²⁷ Those that participate in the meal are members of a ward, or Saints who live together in a covenant community. The meal, which is called the sacrament, is a commemoration of a singular act of deliverance. This act of deliverance, the death of Jesus Christ, brings the community together. Unlike the thanksgiving offering, which commemorates an individual or family level act of deliverance, the sacrament functions more to commemorate the deliverance of an entire people on the scale of the Exodus. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus institutes the sacrament during the Passover, itself a commemoration of this deliverance. Jesus also refers to his sacrifice as a new covenant, evoking Jeremiah looking forward to an event that would rival and exceed Israel's Exodus out of Egypt.²⁸ Yet Christ's act of deliverance was more than remembered, it is an act of deliverance that keeps on delivering. The Saints come together to remember what Jesus has done for them, but participating in the meal itself allows the deliverance to take place. Thus, Latter-day Saints, in acknowledging this great act of deliverance, both commemorate how this act has delivered them individually and how it will continue to deliver them every week.

The sacrament is a meal that formally renews a relationship with Jesus Christ. Those who eat and drink "witness" that they are willing to keep his commandments, take his name upon them, and always remember him.²⁹ In scriptural language, taking God's name means to belong to God and to be his people. Those taking part in the meal are witnessing that they are in a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul drew on the imagery of ritual meals in the temple when he talked about the sacrament in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul taught that the sacrament unites us and brings fellowship with Christ, whereas eating sacrifices offered to other gods brings fellowship with devils.³⁰ As noted by Paul, the sacramental meal is shared and eaten together as a covenant community.³¹ The covenant includes an obligation not only to God but to each other. Alma taught that this covenant community agrees "to bear one another's burdens . . . to mourn with those who mourn . . . and comfort those who stand in need of comfort."³² Therefore, as Latter-day Saints eat and drink the ritual meal of the sacrament,

they are promising to bear the burdens of those sitting in the pews right next to them.

The promise that comes with this covenant is that those who partake of the sacrament will always have “his Spirit” to be with them.³³ So, in a real way, properly participating in this meal is a promise that, not only during the meal itself but always afterward, we will stand in the presence of God. The Old Testament ritual was done in the temple, Jehovah’s earthly residence, but the sacramental meal eaten in church comes with a promise that he will continue to dwell with his people regardless of where they reside.

Time, unfortunately, prevents a more thorough exploration; but the hope is that it has become clear that as Latter-day Saints participate in fast and testimony meetings, they also participate in many aspects of the ancient Israelite temple ritual of the thanksgiving offering. Comparing modern meetings to ancient offerings fosters an appreciation that both involved proclaiming allegiance to God in front of a covenant community, with the larger goal of bringing more people to the covenant. Both involve a meal that commemorates an act of deliverance, a meal that not only renews a relationship with God but also strengthens communal ties. The differences help orient scholars just as much as the similarities. The thanksgiving offering was performed as part of a relationship cycle, one that required thanks for deliverance. This relationship and the cycle that strengthens it were front and center during the thanksgiving psalm; in testimony meeting, more emphasis is placed on truth and facts that God has revealed. This latter revelation may very well have been the result of a similar relationship cycle, but it is the knowledge gained that is highlighted rather than the process. The meal itself in the thanksgiving offering was an occasional commemoration of an act of deliverance on the level of a single individual or a family, whereas the sacrament was an act of deliverance on a larger scale that is commemorated weekly. Both meals bring people into the presence of the Lord and recommit individuals and communities to sustain an ongoing and saving relationship with God.

I, for one, have personally benefited from better understanding the emphasis that ancient Israelite culture has placed on having a relationship with Deity. It has helped me better participate in

testimony meeting, and it has helped me feel a greater kinship with the Saints of ancient Israel.

Notes

1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). For an introduction to some philosophical and theoretical issues that were touched on by Saussure's work, see Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).
2. 2 Nephi 2:11.
3. For a nice discussion of this relationship cycle and how this frames the ritual practice of the broader Mediterranean world, see Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, *Before the God in This Place for Good Remembrance: A Comparative Analysis of the Aramaic Votive Inscriptions from Mount Gerizim* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).
4. For a translation and brief commentary, see Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Machinist, *Writings from the Ancient World* 12 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 203–7.
5. 1 Samuel 7:9–12.
6. For an excellent overview of thanksgiving prayers and their context, see Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 178–204.
7. The first section of many psalms often begins with the phrase מְנַחֵם, which the KJV translates as “To the chief Musician” (e.g., Psalm 4). The term translated as “chief Musician” might also be translated as “over-seer,” and related terms are used in Chronicles and Ezra to talk about Levites appointed over duties in the temple (e.g., Ezra 3:8).
8. Jonas C. Greenfield, “The Zakir Inscription and the Danklied,” in *Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology*, ed. Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone, and Avital Pinnick (Brill, 2001), 75–92.
9. For a nice introduction to the genres and patterns found in the Psalms, see W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter*, 2nd ed. (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).
10. Tzvi Abusch, “The Promise to Praise the God in Šuilla Prayers,” in *Biblical and Oriental Essays in Memory of William L. Moran*, ed. Augustinus Gianto (Rome: Pontificium Istituto Biblico, 2005), 9.
11. See Genesis 22:18; Exodus 19:6.
12. See Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7.
13. See Exodus 20:5–6.
14. See Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 42:6.

15. See Psalms 30:2, 12.
16. As President Oaks has said, “A testimony of the gospel is a personal witness borne to our souls by the Holy Ghost that certain facts of eternal significance are true and that we know them to be true” (“Testimony,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 26). Elder Ballard quotes from the “Guide to the Scriptures” under “Testify” that “to bear testimony is ‘to bear witness by the power of the Holy Ghost; to make a solemn declaration of truth based on personal knowledge or belief’” (“Pure Testimony,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2004).
17. As Elder Ballard notes, “Clear declaration of truth makes a difference in people’s lives. That is what changes hearts. That is what the Holy Ghost can confirm in the hearts of God’s children” (Ballard, “Pure Testimony”).
18. In Psalm 25:10, for example, כָּל-אֲרָחוֹת יְהוָה סֶד וָאֶמֶת לְנֶצֶךְ יְיָ בְּרִיתוֹ וְצַדִּיקֵי דַתּוֹ is translated in the KJV as “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies,” but we might also translate this as “All the paths of the Lord are loyalty and faithfulness toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees.”
19. “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1983.
20. Mark 9:24 King James Version (KJV).
21. See Psalm 116:17–19.
22. Deuteronomy 12:12 KJV.
23. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy where specific instruction is given about consuming the tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28–29), those invited include “the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates” (Deuteronomy 14:29 KJV).
24. Deuteronomy 12:12 KJV.
25. Leviticus 7:20 KJV.
26. Numbers 25:2–3; this translation is my own.
27. See 3 Nephi 18:29.
28. See Luke 22:20; Jeremiah 31:31–34; 14:14–15.
29. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 99.
30. See 1 Corinthians 10:16–21.
31. See 1 Corinthians 10:16–17.
32. Mosiah 18:9.
33. Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79.