

"Who Shall Ascend into the Mountain of the Lord?": Three Biblical Temple Entrance Hymns

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A number of the psalms in the biblical Psalter¹ pertain directly to the temple² and its worshipers. For instance, Psalms 29, 95, and 100 pertain to worshipers who praise the Lord as he sits enthroned in his temple; Psalm 30 is a hymn that was presumably sung at the dedication of Solomon's temple; Psalms 47, 93, and 96 through 99 are kingship and enthronement psalms that celebrate God's glory as king over all his creations; Psalms 48, 76, 87, and 122 are hymns that relate to Zion and her temple; Psalm 84 is a pilgrim's song, which was perhaps sung by temple visitors as soon as they "came within sight of the Holy City";³ Psalm 118 is a thanksgiving hymn with temple themes; Psalms 120 through 134 are ascension texts with themes pertaining to Zion and her temple, which may have been sung by pilgrims as they approached the temple; and Psalm 150, with its thirteen attestations of "praise," lists the musical instruments used by temple musicians, including the trumpet, lute, harp, strings, pipe, and cymbals. In all, perhaps a total of one-third of the biblical psalms have temple themes.

It is well known that during the days of the temple of Jerusalem temple priests were required to heed certain threshold laws, or gestures of approach, such as anointings, ablutions, vesting with sacred clothing, and sacrifices.⁴ What is less known, however, is the requirement placed on temple visitors to subscribe to strict moral qualities. Such is the concern of Psalms 15 and 24, hymns that set forth the moral qualities of those who wish to enter the temple. Both psalms are attributed to David.⁵

These two psalms share the same literary structure and have similar literary elements. Each has two questions dealing with who may enter the temple, followed by a response listing the moral qualities that individuals must have in order to enter, and both conclude with a blessing that is reserved for those who enter the temple having fulfilled the moral requirements. The structure, then, is as follows: (1) two questions, (2) a response to the questions, and (3) a blessing for those who enter the temple.

I first examine these two temple entrance psalms—Psalms 15 and 24—and then a poem in Isaiah 33:14–17. All three biblical temple entrance poems share the same structure and the same goal: that of inviting temple worshipers to be worthy to enter the temple, morally and ethically.

Psalm 15

Two Questions

The two questions of Psalm 15⁶ consist of synonymous inquiries directed toward temple worshipers concerning their qualifications for admission into the sanctuary.

Lord, who shall dwell in thy tent? Who shall reside⁷ on thy holy mountain? (Psalm 15:1)⁸

A number of parallel terms are found in this couplet. The relative pronoun *who* and the possessive pronoun *thy* are each repeated. The two verbs *dwell* and *reside* demonstrate the same idea, and the terms *tent* and *mountain* both refer to the temple. The tent refers to the sacred portable temple used by the Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is called the "tent of meeting" 130 times and the "tent" approximately 19 times.

The mountain has symbolic reference to the temple. In many biblical passages, “holy mountain” and “temple” are analogous structures,⁹ as both are imposing features on the landscape. Ezekiel 20:40 equates the expression *holy mountain* to the temple by stating that members of the house of Israel are required to worship God at the holy mountain with their “offerings,” “firstfruits,” “oblations,” and “holy [temple] things.” Isaiah also creates two similar expressions when he writes of the “house of the God of Jacob” and the “mountain of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:3). Psalm 68:16 speaks of “the hill which God desireth to dwell in; yea, the Lord will dwell in it for ever” (see also Psalms 43:3–4; 99:9). The tent also refers to the temple of Jerusalem.

Response

Who, then, may dwell in the Lord’s temple?

He who walks with integrity¹⁰ and works righteousness and speaks truth in his heart. Who has not tripped upon his tongue,¹¹ Who has not done evil to his neighbor, and has not lifted up a reproach against his relative. The reprobate, in his eyes, is despicable, but those who fear the Lord, he will honor. He has sworn to do no evil, and he will not falter. His money he has not given in interest, nor has he taken a bribe against the innocent. (Psalm 15:2–5)

Note the synonymous terms used here—the poet speaks of one’s moral posture in terms of walking, tripping, faltering, and being unmovable. The poet also speaks of integrity, righteousness, and truth; he mentions explicitly the heart, tongue, and eyes, and through implication refers to the feet (“walks,” “tripped”), hands (“lifted up”), and mouth (“speaks,” “sworn”). Such indicates that the whole person—the whole life—is involved in preparing for entrance into the temple.

Psalm 15:2 identifies three positive requirements: those who enter the temple must possess integrity, work righteousness, and speak truth. Verse 3 identifies three negative stipulations, each possessing the negation *not*. The three are similar in content, dealing with the temple participant’s relationship with humankind, and are more or less antithetical to the expressions in verse 2. To speak truth (v. 2) is the same as not “tripping upon the tongue” or speaking slanderous things about someone; one who works righteousness is one who neither does evil to a neighbor nor mocks his relative. Further, verse 2 refers to “walking” with integrity, a statement diametrically opposed to the idea of “tripping” over the tongue. The concept seems apparent—the righteous walk with integrity, but evil persons trip and fall. Compare Psalm 5:5, which affirms that “the foolish shall not stand in [the Lord’s] sight.”

The response comprises qualifications of those who are worthy and therefore permitted to enter the sacred domain (Psalm 15:2–5). The qualifications form a ten-part structure, consisting of three positive requirements followed by three negative conditions, then two additional positive requirements, and finally two more negative conditions.¹² In the summary below, the ten-part structure appears with the five positive requirements first and the five negative conditions following. The temple visitor

1. walks with integrity,
2. works righteousness,
3. speaks truth,
4. despises reprobates,
5. and has sworn to do no evil;
6. has not slandered (“trip on his tongue”),

7. has done no evil to his neighbor,
8. has not lifted up a reproach against his relative,
9. has not charged interest for his money,
0. and has not taken a bribe against the innocent.

The negative conditions point to the omission of sinful acts and the positive requirements refer to the commission of righteous acts. By way of comparison, both negative and positive requirements served an important role in the Mosaic law,¹³ and the sacrificial offerings were performed for both sins of omission and sins of commission.

The use of the number ten may be deliberate on the part of the author, for when used symbolically, ten denotes wholeness and completeness.¹⁴ The ten conditions listed in Psalm 15 do not represent all conditions of temple worthiness but are representative of the conditions that the individual must apply in order to enter the temple. “He who walks with integrity” (v. 2), for instance, points to all commandments.

The number ten may serve an additional purpose. Biblical scholar Craigie conjectures that temple candidates were required to name off, by counting with their ten fingers, the “moral conditions prerequisite to participation in worship.”¹⁵ Sigmund Mowinckel states with regard to the number ten that “this is certainly no mere accident”;¹⁶ he sees a relationship between Psalm 15 and the Ten Commandments—both are given in covenantal temple settings, both consist of the number ten, and both correspond to one item per finger.¹⁷

Blessing

He who does these things will not be moved forever. (Psalm 15:5)

The blessing, summarized in a single sentence, promises, “He who does these things [that is, abides by the five positive requirements and does not commit the five negative actions] will not be moved forever.” The expression *be moved forever* speaks of those who are permitted to reside in the Lord’s temple forever. Such was the promise outlined in Revelation 3:12, where the righteous are told that he “that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out” (see Psalm 73:15–20).

Psalm 24

Psalm 24 has a structure similar to that of Psalm 15; it also comprises two questions, a response, and blessings to the faithful. Psalm 24 adds two parts—a prologue that refers to earth’s creation (vv. 1–2) and a statement that pertains to the identification of God (vv. 7–10). The identification of God represents a separate stanza, as the term *selah* presumably marks the end of the previous stanza.

Mowinckel holds that Psalm 24 contains the *leges sacrae*, or “laws of the sanctuary,” those “special rules and special demands as to the qualifications of those to be admitted” into the temple.¹⁸

Two Questions

Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? And who shall rise up in his holy place? (Psalm 24:3)

The parallel elements in this structure are as follows: the interrogative *who* appears twice; the term *ascend* of line 1 parallels the phrase *rise up* of line 2; and *mountain of the Lord* corresponds with *his holy place*.

Response

The response to these two questions is brief:

He whose palms are innocent, and whose heart is pure, who has not lifted his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn what is false. (Psalm 24:4)

Following the two questions, a list of moral qualities, presented in four lines, identifies the person who may enter the sanctuary. The first two lines contain positive statements—he who has innocent palms and a pure heart; the second two lines include negatives—he who neither possesses vanity nor swears falsely.

Blessing

The blessing designed for those who enter the temple with innocent palms and a pure heart is also composed of four lines:

He shall lift up a blessing from the Lord. And righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is the circle (or “generation”) of them that inquire of thee, that seek thy face, O God of Jacob. Selah. (Psalm 24:5–6)¹⁹

Those who possess the moral qualities listed in verse 4 will receive a blessing from the Lord and righteousness from God. This blessing will include the privilege of beholding the face of God once the righteous individual enters God’s presence in heaven.

The Setting of Psalms 15 and 24

The context or setting of these two temple entrance hymns, Psalms 15 and 24, is unknown; it seems clear that they pertain to Solomon’s temple and perhaps to all of God’s temples that have been built in various dispensations of the gospel. Scholars have advanced several theories regarding the two hymns. The three most prominent theories are summarized below.

1. Biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel—followed by Sigmund Mowinckel, K. Galling, J. Begrich, and others—suggests that a priest posed the questions to temple visitors at the temple gate(s).²⁰ Or, similar to this proposal, Hans-Joachim Kraus suggests that the worshipers stood outside the gates of the temple and asked, “who is worthy to enter the temple?” Then, “from the inside a priestly speaker answers them with the declaration of the conditions of entrance.”²¹ This may have been the role of Eli, who was sitting by the temple post (1 Samuel 1:9) when he encountered Hannah. However, the temple entrance psalms themselves do not inform us as to such a dialogue between priest and temple visitor, and the other scriptures are also silent on this particular matter.
2. Moshe Weinfeld, who rejects the idea of a priest and temple visitor dialogue at the temple gates, has suggested that the temple entrance psalms correspond with similarly stated injunctions that were inscribed on the lintels and doorposts of Egyptian temples during the Hellenistic period. Such injunctions, writes Weinfeld, had their roots in the Eighteenth Dynasty or earlier,²² and he asks, “Could it be that in Israel, too, these were inscribed at the Temple entrances? We do not have any real evidence about the inscription of such exhortations on the temple gates in Israel. But this possibility should not be excluded.”²³ In connection with this interpretation, inscriptions have been found at Greek temples (such as the Temple of Zeus Kynthios) instructing temple visitors not to enter the temple if they are impure or unclean.²⁴

3. Perhaps Psalms 15 and 24 were hymns sung by worshipers in their congregations, by the Levitical choir who sang in the temple courtyard, or by a choir of priests and laymen who sang the different parts of the entrance hymn. Gunkel has proposed this theory.²⁵ Similarly, with regard to Psalm 24, Mitchell Dahood proposes that “the dialogue structure of the poem suggests that it was sung by alternating choirs.”²⁶

Isaiah 33:14–17

A third scriptural passage, Isaiah 33:14–17, has the same structure as Psalms 15 and 24—two parallel questions, a response, and a blessing.²⁷ This passage of Isaiah can also be identified as a temple entrance poem, but its wording points to the entrance of righteous individuals into the temple of heaven, or the celestial kingdom. Psalms 15 and 24 refer chiefly to the temple on earth.

The section begins with two parallel rhetorical questions asking who can dwell with God in his fire (Isaiah 33:14); these are followed by a response to the questions, detailing the attributes of one who is able to dwell with God (Isaiah 33:15). This in turn is succeeded by a description of the blessings of those who will be privileged to dwell with God (Isaiah 33:16–17).

Two Questions

Who among us will dwell with devouring fire? Who among us will dwell with everlasting burnings? (Isaiah 33:14)²⁸

The two questions are parallel. The first six words of line 1 are repeated in line 2: “Who among us will dwell with ...?” The expression *devouring fire* of line 1 corresponds with *everlasting burnings* of line 2. The two lines form a beautiful synonymous parallelism.

The phrases *devouring fire* and *everlasting burnings* refer to the dwelling place of God—the celestial kingdom. As Joseph Smith explained, “Some shall rise to the everlasting burnings of God; for God dwells in everlasting burnings.”²⁹ He also taught, “God Almighty Himself dwells in eternal fire; flesh and blood cannot go there, for all corruption is devoured by the fire. ‘Our God is a consuming fire.’ ... Immortality dwells in everlasting burnings.”³⁰

Response

Isaiah’s two rhetorical questions ask who will be able to abide the devouring fire of the Lord’s glory. He answers these questions in verse 15:

He who walks righteously, and speaks what is right, he who despises gain by extortion, who shakes his hands lest they hold a bribe, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil. (Isaiah 33:15)

Isaiah sets forth six statements to describe the qualities of one who will inherit and receive the glories of the celestial kingdom. The phrase *he who walks righteously* refers to one who moves forward in the Lord’s paths of righteousness and obedience; *speaks what is right* relates to one who speaks the truth, does not bear false witness against another, and so forth; *he who despises gain by extortion* speaks of one who refuses to gain power, wealth, or other worldly things by oppressing another; *who shakes his hands lest they hold a bribe* designates one who refuses to bribe or to be bribed, on any level of society, in any situation; and the phrases *who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed* and *shuts his eyes from looking upon evil* apply to one who does not participate in or condone evil actions

or works. Note that the entire person is involved in obtaining righteousness, as Isaiah in these verses sets forth five parts of one's body—legs ("walks"), mouth ("speaks"), hands, ears, and eyes.

Blessing

Then Isaiah sets forth six statements to describe the blessings of those who will inherit the celestial kingdom:

He will dwell on the heights, his place of defense will be fortresses of rocks, his bread will be given, his water will be sure. Your eyes will see the king in his beauty, they will see a land that is far off. (Isaiah 33:16–17)

The words *he will dwell* refer back to the parallel questions: "Who among us will dwell ...?" *On the heights* speaks of heaven, as does the final phrase of the blessing, *a land that is far off*. The words *bread* and *water*, sacramental in nature, pertain to the atonement of Christ; they also relate to heaven, whose inhabitants will be immortal and never want for water or bread, as they "will be sure." The phrase the *king in his beauty* speaks of the Lord in his glory and eternal nature.

Conclusion

Three biblical scriptural passages—Psalm 15, Psalm 24, and Isaiah 33:14–17—share the same structure, having two parallel questions, a response, and a statement regarding the blessings promised to the faithful. The three passages also share the same goal: that of inviting temple worshipers to be morally and ethically worthy to enter the temple. The first two passages are hymnic in nature and apply primarily to temples on earth, first to Solomon's temple and subsequently to all the Lord's temples whenever they have existed upon the earth. The third passage is prophetic in nature and pertains to the heavenly temple, or to heaven itself. Those temple worshipers who enter the earthly temples while possessing moral and ethical purity are those who will be able to dwell with God in his "devouring fire" and "everlasting burnings" (Isaiah 33:14).

Further, the three temple entrance hymns belong to the genre of literature called prophecy. Individuals who abide by the moral and ritualistic requirements identified in Psalms 15 and 24 and Isaiah 33:14–17 receive the promise of eventual entry into God's heavenly temple, or the celestial kingdom. In this manner, the three texts do not speak only to the local immediate generation of temple visitors, some of whom may have received the temple hymns from David and Isaiah, but the texts look forward to all generations of temple participants who serve God in his holy temples.

Notes

1. For a discussion regarding the origins of psalmody in ancient Israel, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), 25–27, who lists various hymns and songs that existed in Israel before those included in the book of Psalms. These very old hymns include the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–18), the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), and the Song of Hannah (1Samuel 2:1–10).

2. For a careful study of psalms that deal with the temple and worship in ancient Israel, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols., trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); and Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

3. Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 2* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1983), 46; see Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2:107.

4. See Donald W. Parry, "Ritual Anointing with Olive Oil in Ancient Israelite Religion," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 262–89.

5. A total of seventy-three psalms are attributed to David. Others were authored by Asaph or the sons of Korah. A number of psalms do not have attributions given; see Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 28–29.

6. Scholars are uncertain as to the date of Psalm 15; see Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 151. If we accept the psalm's attribution, it was authored by King David, which would indicate a date of approximately 1000–950 B.C. While the mention of the tent in verse 1 recalls the Mosaic tabernacle, this fact should not persuade the reader to date the psalm to the pre-Davidic era.

7. The verb here is the Hebrew *shākhēn*, which literally means "to tent" or "to tabernacle." According to G. Henton Davies, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 197, the word means "to tabernacle, dwell among," and according to Frank M. Cross, "The Tabernacle," *Biblical Archaeologist* 10/3 (September 1947): 66, "to tent" or "to encamp."

8. The translations of Psalms 15 and 24 and Isaiah 33:14–17 are my own.

9. On the subject of the mountain as a symbol for the temple, see Donald W. Parry, "Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:483–85.

10. No English word adequately expresses the Hebrew term *tāmîm*. The term signifies "wholeness," "completeness," or "integrity." The term *integrity* comes closest to the true meaning of the Hebrew term.

11. This is an idiomatic expression, the meaning of which speaks of a person who slanders a fellow being.

12. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 150.

13. The rabbis count 613 commandments in the five books of Moses—365 positive commandments and 248 negative commandments.

14. The number *ten* is used symbolically on a number of occasions in the scriptures; instances include the Ten Commandments, the law of tithing, the redemption money (Exodus 30:12–16), the ten plagues, and the parable of the ten virgins. See Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregal, 1967), 243–50.

15. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 151.

16. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1:158.

17. *Ibid.*, 179.

18. *Ibid.*, 177.

19. For a discussion of the readings in these two verses, see Donald W. Parry, "Temple Worship and a Possible Reference to a Prayer Circle in Psalm 24," *BYU Studies* 32/4 (1992): 57–62. For the reading "God of Jacob," see

Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I, 1-50* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 152.

20. Cited in Moshe Weinfeld, "Instructions for Temple Visitors in the Bible and in Ancient Egypt," in *Egyptological Studies*, ed. Sarah Israelit-Groll, Scripta Hierosolymitana 28 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982): 230-31.

21. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 227.

22. Weinfeld, "Instructions for Temple Visitors," 232.

23. *Ibid.*, 237.

24. *Ibid.*, 245 n. 13.

25. Hermann Gunkel, "Jesaia 33, eine prophetische Liturgie," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft* 42 (1924): 177-208.

26. Dahood, *Psalms I, 1-50*, 151 n. xxiv.

27. A verse-by-verse commentary of these passages in Isaiah is found in Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 302-4; and Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 2:349-53.

28. The translation of Isaiah 33:14-17 cited in this article is taken from Donald W. Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah: Combining Ancient Sources* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 139-40.

29. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 361.

30. *Ibid.*, 367.