

Ancient Hebrew Meditative Recitation

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In this chapter, Terje Stordalen explores meditative practices in the classical Hebrew traditions, in particular the various forms of recitation associated with *hagah*, *šichah* and a few other terms. These terms refer to a large spectre of psychophysical activities stretching from reading or recitation, via memorization, reflection and understanding, to contemplation and meditation. This wide semantic field reflects a general tendency within the culture to perceive body and mind as a continuum, and to see physical speech as a representation of mental thought. Classical Hebrew meditative recitation foreshadows the strong focus on sacred revealed text in the meditative traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in contrast to Eastern traditions of meditation, which are not as strongly dominated by such a textual focus. A number of issues remain to be explored, such as the degree of individual effort involved in these practices, as well as the kinds of inner transformation that they seek to bring about. Stordalen also discusses a number of reasons why these practices are so often ignored in mainstream accounts of classical Hebrew religion.

No classical Hebrew meditation?

Readers of classical Hebrew literature occasionally come across terms that in historical dictionaries of the Hebrew language are listed with the sense 'meditate' or 'meditation' as part of their semantic range – notably terms like *hagah* or *šichah*.¹ These references are not very numerous, but some of them occur in theologically salient passages of the Hebrew Bible, such as Josh. 1.8 or Ps. 1.2.

Still, mainstream accounts in theology or religious studies of the history of meditation in Western culture do not include classical Hebrew material. For instance, the entry on Christian meditation in the authoritative (Protestant) *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* starts with the Latin practices and only briefly relates any Hebrew and Greek background (Nicol, 1992). Similarly, neither the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, nor the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* – both of which featured Jewish scholars in

but there would have to be some cluster of characteristics that serve to identify meditative states and distinguish them from other mental states. Given that mental states may be visible in written reflections of a given historical practice, scholars might argue that the mental stages named by the Hebrew terms *hagah* or *sichah* were not 'distinctly' meditative. It seems to me this is a position likely to have been taken not only by those who study the classical Hebrew material but also by those who discuss the phenomenon of meditation based on East Asian material. This position, however, needs to be critically reviewed.

The choice of this volume's editor to focus on meditative practices rather than mental states opens to engagement with a broader material, which seems to fit well with the four requirements for research sketched above. It might in time also challenge common assumptions about what might qualify as meditation. I would therefore approach the Hebrew material with an open mind about what counts as meditation, but also be aware that the relevance of the investigation towards a global history of meditation needs to be negotiated in view of the larger material. On this basis, let us review some earlier readings that challenge the view that meditation was not practised or not important in classical Hebrew religion.

Earlier interpretation

In contrast to the scholarly sources referred to above, popular Christian discourse does not hesitate to identify meditative practices in the Bible. A Google search for pages holding all three words of 'hagah', 'bible' and 'meditation' produces nearly 59,000 hits – and this harvests only English-speaking sites using conventional transcription of the Hebrew verb.⁵ For now, suffice it to say that while this material testifies to popular interest in meditation in the Bible, it does not and could not address the research requirements above, especially those in points 3 and 4. Let us move on, therefore, to scholarly discussions that elaborate the same interest within the obligations of historical philological scholarship.

Time and again Hebraists working with individual biblical verses and expressions have pointed to meditative practices as probable referents for a number of biblical words, expressions and statements.⁶ These scholars, however, were not aspiring to give a systematic discussion of classical Hebrew meditative practices. As a result, relevant finds remain scattered, without systematic interpretation, and apparently without leaving a lasting impression on general views of classical Hebrew religion.

A second group are the handful of works that explicitly address the phenomenon of meditation attempting to show that biblical Hebrew literature reflects meditative practices. Primary representatives for this group would be Franken, 1953 (with a focus on the Book of Psalms) and Kaplan, 1978 (with a focus on prophetic literature).⁷ This literature adequately addresses the issue of semantics. Kaplan, for instance, notes the semantic range of the root *hagah*, stretching from thought and reflection to inarticulate growling, murmuring and speech (pp. 111–18). However, he tends to regard the spectrum from classical to Medieval Jewish language, thought

editorial positions – have entries on meditation (or cogent lemmas). Also, the survey of meditation in the religious studies dictionary *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* does not discuss ancient Hebrew meditation. This apparent disregard for the classical Hebrew material needs to be explored within the framework of cultural histories of meditation, like the present one.

Potentially there seem to be four different reasons why references to meditation in classical Hebrew sources would have been left out of studies of meditative practices, and four corresponding requirements for current research.

1. One conceivable reason would be hermeneutical. Research on ancient religion is never completely detached from the current forms of that religion. If meditation, was not a major practice in the versions of Christianity or Judaism known to the people who researched classical Judaism, perhaps they did not see any significance in some scattered references to meditation. If this were the case, critical scholarship clearly should try to re-examine the relevant material, now also in view of the popular interest in meditation, which seems largely inspired by a new awareness of Eastern meditative traditions. That, of course, corresponds to the project of this volume.
2. A second conceivable reason relates to the history of the sources for ancient Hebrew religion. It is now commonly accepted that Jewish religion towards the beginning of the Common Era included a number of religious practices and beliefs that came to be regarded as unorthodox by the sages of later periods.² Certain sources and practices that were part of the religious texture of Second Temple Judaism would have disappeared during these later phases. If Jewish meditation were a part of practices that were forgotten or redefined, scholars attempting to recover early meditative practices are facing a very difficult source situation. So critical scholarship needs to work through whatever available material there is, relate it to its potential historical texture and remain aware of the reconstructive and hypothetical nature of such an enterprise.
3. A third conceivable reason for not noticing classical Hebrew references to meditation relates to the complexity of the concept 'meditation' in current everyday and scholarly speech. The semantic range of classical Hebrew terms like *hagah* or *sichah* included much more than what is today referred to as meditation (see below). Jens Braarvig has argued that the concept of meditation in contemporary scholarship is influenced by East Asian thought.³ We have, of course, little possibility to investigate empirically the practices named by *hagah* and *sichah* or the concepts evoked by such terms. It is very difficult to identify and verify potential classical Hebrew meditative practices: already the rendition of these terms in historical dictionaries may be biased. A critical investigation would have to pay serious attention to historical semantics, and to remain aware of its indebtedness to contemporary concepts and speech.
4. As a last possible reason for not considering meditative practices in classical Hebrew religion, some scholars would assume that there exists such a thing as meditative mental states – even though such states cannot be scientifically documented.⁴ These states would not need to be 'the same' in every tradition,

and religious practice as continuous. Midrashic, Kabbalistic and Hekhalot language and literature is used to describe practices also in the biblical world. Both Kaplan and especially Franken worked with fairly broad definitions of 'meditation', including for instance mystic and ecstatic techniques, or 'prophetic experience', dreams and visions. While these books contain interesting material and important insights, they do not address the range of research requirements mentioned above, especially not points 2 and 4.

Another notable study is that of Augustin, 1983. Working from a more restricted scope he reviewed the semantic range of *hagah* across biblical Hebrew literature and found that it denoted unarticulated uttering with the quality of lament as well as of praise, and that late biblical passages like Ps. 1.2 use the word to denote meditative recitation of what he took to be the whole (Hebrew) Bible. This is fairly close to views earlier taken also by Hans-Peter Müller (see note 6). Similar synthesis, shorter and semantically less integrated, occur in Negotia and Ringgren, 1978.⁸

Summing up, classical Hebrew literature reflects practices that modern readers understood as meditation. In Hebrew these are named in ways that associate them to some kind of oral performance. Biblical scholars seem not to have discussed the relation of such practices to meditation in other religious traditions, and also not what place such practices might have had in classical Hebrew culture and religion.

The present study

The task is first to revisit the historical semantics of certain terms and provide a provisional perception of the practices they named. Secondly we must explore literary and archaeological indications that could reflect such practices. Thirdly, if the survey indicates a presence of meditative practices in Judaism of the Second Temple period, we would need to ask what might have been the place of such practices in ancient Hebrew religion at large? This last question can for the moment only be touched upon, while the first two will be addressed more thoroughly.

The provisional definition of meditation assumed for the following is this: meditational practices and techniques that are habitual within a given culture, they are self-administered, they are characterised by some sense of mental focusing and often by monotonous gestures, and they aim on achieving what the meditating person might describe as inner transformation.

This definition is informed by the one provided by Halvor Eifring in the introductory chapter of this volume. As compared to his definition, mine puts more emphasis upon meditational practices being formulated and transmitted through the cultural historical record, which opens up a variety of trajectories. The definition allows for bodily constituents in the practice – without denying a mental component. I aim to discuss a wide material without closing the question of what should and what should

not in the end count as a meditative practice. Still, the provided definition means that for instance ecstatic techniques or prophetic dreams would not qualify.

The philological method is strictly historical, limited to classical Hebrew language, literature and religion.⁹ While I have a preference for semantic over etymological data, I recognize that given the limited linguistic base available for classical Hebrew, etymological evidence is also important. Since linguistic evidence is limited, the archaeological record is important too, but it is crucial to treat the literary and the archaeological records as distinct. The primary literary sources remain the biblical records, but one must also consider classical Hebrew literature like manuscripts from the Judean Desert, the Hebrew version of the Book of Sirach, etc. All such literature was the product of high literary competence in a world where not much more than five per cent would have been practically literate – and fewer would have had the propensity to write or read the kind of literature now available from the period. There is every reason to doubt that religious practices reflected in the literary corpus should have been representative for the entire population. Classical Hebrew religion probably housed religious practices that by accident, by habit, by religious censorship or otherwise are not plainly reflected in the available record.¹⁰ The current aim is therefore not to provide a final survey, but to establish the reasonability of further exploration into ancient Hebrew meditative practices.

Philological indications

Before reviewing the most important material, two general points need to be made.

1. Mental phenomena named through associated objects: A number of classical Hebrew terms refer in one segment of their semantic profile to meditative practices. Utterances employing these terms often combine a reference to some mental activity (reflection, consideration, perhaps meditation) with a reference either to its external prompt (a text, a story, the law, etc.) or its bodily expression (speech, lament, etc.). This is not coincidental: biblical Hebrew language generally refers to physical objects or external events to name mental or psychological phenomena. This is evident for instance in biblical language on human sentiments: psychological strength is named by referring to the heart, spirit is called wind or breath, etc.¹¹ Hence, one must expect that biblical language could refer simultaneously to meditative practices and to prompts or focalizations that were prominent in such practices.
2. Speech and thought: Several relevant terms span semantically from mental to oral practice, naming for instance both speech and reflection/meditation. Western languages tend to regard speech and thought as distinct. Modern dictionaries translating biblical Hebrew into Western parlance accordingly construct a number of distinct semantic domains for the Hebrew stems. However, the modern distinction between thought and speech may have been less obvious

to an ancient Hebrew audience. Indications of overlap between mental and physical phenomena in the cognitive domain go beyond mere semantics; they are also reflected in narratives about cultural practice. For instance, when Hannah presents her silent prayer in Shiloh, her lips nevertheless keep moving (1 Sam. 1.12f). Correspondingly, the early Jewish word for 'scripture' – *miqra'* – means 'the spoken (or: sung) text'. In many ancient cultures religiously charged reading meant reading out loud (Smith, 1993, pp. 7–9). So, one is in fact 'speaking' when 'reading', and from a modern Western point of view it is often difficult to decide upon a single translation.

Hagah – 'to murmur, recite, reflect'

Words most frequently translated with a sense of 'meditation' are from the root *hgh* I.¹² Etymologically the Hebrew root links to a Semitic stem *h-g-y*, which occurs also in Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Tigré and Ugaritic.¹³ In all these languages terms from this stem denote speaking, reading, counting, murmuring. In Aramaic, Syriac and Hebrew the stem also is listed with the sense 'to think, to reflect, to meditate'. A combination between reading and reflecting is found also in the related root *h-g-y* in Talmudic, Midrashic and Targumic Jewish texts (Jastrow, 1950, p. 330f). For this term, therefore, there may be an amount of continuity between classical and Mishnaic Hebrew language, but not necessarily between the practices denoted, of course.

The classical Hebrew root *hgh* I has a wide semantic range, even when limiting ourselves to instances where grammatical subjects of the verb are humans.¹⁴ The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, which has the widest textual basis, gives five senses: moan, groan, utter (speak), meditate, imagine (plot). Some of the biblical occurrences would unambiguously translate 'speech, recitation', see Josh. 1.8: 'This book of the law shall not be absent from your mouth, you will *hgh* it day and night'; Isa. 59.3: 'Your lips speak lies, your tongue *hgh* wickedness'. Similar expressions occur in literature from Qumran,¹⁵ as in 4Q436 fl. 1.7f: 'You have made my mouth like a burning sword, my tongue you have unbound to speak holy words, . . . and you put [on my lips] a chain lest they *hgh* the deeds of the man whose utterances are corrupt'.¹⁶

Other instances rather move in the direction of 'reflect, premeditate', such as Ps. 63.7 (ET 63.6): 'For I think of you when on my couch, and when in my watches I *hgh* you'. Again, corresponding usage is found in the Dead Sea corpus.¹⁷ In one instance the semantically and etymologically related word *hgyg* must be referring to *silent* mental activity, see Ps. 39.2–4 (ET 39.1–3): 'I said, "I will guard my ways and not sin with my tongue; guard my mouth with a muzzle as long as the wicked stands before me." I was silent, kept quiet, was still, but for no good; my pain grew worse, my heart was hot within me. While I [did] *hgyg*; the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.'

Reading would often include reflection, and reflection could inversely include recitation/murmuring/whispering. The combination occurs for instance in 4Q525 fl. 4 ii.18: 'And now, O discerning one, listen to me, and devote your heart to [the] w[or]ds of My mouth . . . obtain knowledge for your innermost part and with [your] bo[dy] *hgh* . . .'¹⁸ (The biblical record holds a few more words of this stem that we do not discuss here.)¹⁹

Other relevant words and stems

1. There has been considerable discussion concerning the assumed root *šich* II in classical Hebrew. This stem too combines mental and physical reference, with the mental component leaning towards 'reflection' or 'meditation'. The root names strong sentiments and their expression (praise, lament, etc.), but sometimes it seems to denote sentiments only, mostly in literature from the Persian age and later.²⁰
2. HALOT proposes that the noun *šich* II is connected to the root *šich* II. The noun means 'lament, grief, worry' or similar. In the Book of Sirach the term denotes sapiential discourse. Again, the connection between reflection and physical expression is at hand.
3. The word *šichah* in classical Hebrew means 'meditation, respectful afterthought' (HALOT). The three biblical examples of the word again bring out an overlap between reflection and recitation: Ps. 119.97: 'How I love your law: all day it is my *šichah*'; Ps. 119.99: 'I am more prudent than all my teachers, for your decrees are a *šichah* to me'; Job 15.4: 'But you are breaking down the fear [of the Lord]; reducing *šichah* before God.'
4. The verb *lahag* occurs once in classical Hebrew, and late at that (Qoh 12.12). In the much earlier language of Ugarit this verb appears in parallel with the common Semitic root *h-g-y* (above). In its biblical occurrence, the verb points to activity related to books, perhaps what we would translate 'study'.
5. The stem *p-s-g* in its only occurrence in Biblical Hebrew means something like 'make notation of, consider' (Ps. 48.14). The meaning of another verb that also occurs only once, *šawach*, is 'to walk, stroll, wander about' (HALOT). Etymologically, it may have been related to the root *šich* II above, and so did perhaps name 'reflective strolling' or similar.
6. A few other terms in classical Hebrew have been interpreted to reflect meditative activity. The most obvious are from the stem *damam* I 'be silent, dumb' but also 'be still'; and the stem *chashah* 'be still'. These occur in passages like Ps. 37.7; 39.3 (ET 39.2); 62.6 (ET 62.5). Franken (1953) made a lot out of this stem, but the philological data seems less conclusive than he implied.

Conclusion

Terms from the stems *hagah* I and *šichah* II are the main indicators of potentially meditative practices in classical Hebrew, with words from the stems *damam* I and *chashah* as additional indicators. All these are capable of referring simultaneously to mental activity and to prompts for or physical (often bodily) manifestations of that practice. Such use occurs predominantly in texts from the Persian age and later. All these terms have a wide semantic range, also denoting activities that would *not* qualify as meditative according to the provisional definitions of this article and of the book project. For now I am assuming this was due to semantic polyvalence, and when moving from a philological to a textual survey, I tried to select semantically relevant passages.²¹

Textual artefacts in classical Hebrew tradition

The philological findings indicate that meditative practices were prompted by or focused upon written or oral/aural texts. Also, from other sources it is clear that this culture did use textual artefacts at significant points in their religious life. A text is handled as an *artefact* when one treats the textual object – the scroll, the sounding recitation, etc. – in ways that convey a meta-textual message about one's view of the text: reverence, perception of power, etc.²²

Biblical literature witnesses such handling of written and oral/aural texts.²³ Most interesting for our purposes are oral/aural textual artefacts, and perhaps most striking to a modern reader is Num. 5.19–25 – a law on how to deal with the jealousy of an allegedly betrayed husband. The priest should utter a curse, write it down, wash the ink off in water contaminated with dust from the sanctuary and then administer the water for the wife to drink. If she survives, she was innocent. The power of the drink, apparently, comes from the curse *spoken* by the priest and then written. Another example is the Aaronitic benediction in Num. 6.24–7, indicating that it is the *pronunciation* of the holy name upon Israel that effectuates the blessing: 'When they raise my name over the Israelites, I shall bless them'. A number of references are made to presumably well-known texts being recited at significant junctures.²⁴ Although most or all of these reports are historically secondary, they testify to the probability in the world of the reader that aural texts would occur at significant occasions.

Reciting of holy texts is a pattern in Western Asian religion according to Wilfred Smith's study *What Is Scripture?*²⁵ The Hebrew designation *miqra'* and the Arabic *Qur'an* both relate to the Semitic root *q-r-'*, which confirms that reading the scripturalized canon out loud was a significant practice. This strengthens the plausibility for asking for textually focused meditative practices also in earlier times. We now pursue this possibility by moving to texts from the classical Hebrew era.

Literary traces of classical Hebrew meditative practices

Deuteronomic literature

The most explicit indications of usage of text artefacts (written, oral/aural and combinations) come from so-called Deuteronomic literature.²⁶ The theology that commands this literature has an orientation towards teaching and upholding the *Torah* (the body of advice and laws from the sacred tradition). Its literary and theological universe is oriented towards teaching and regulating the religious concepts and practices of the reader, and the portrayal of the use of textual artefacts suits this purpose well.

Deuteronomy 6:6–9 (NRSV):

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them

as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This passage concludes the *shema'* – sometimes referred to as the centre or the creed of classical Hebrew religion. The passage is one in a series of Deuteronomic references to such practices, see Exod. 13.9, 16; Deut. 11.18–20.

According to later Rabbinic sources (confirmed in one New Testament passage and in the *Letter of Aristaeas*) Jewish men did wear small leather boxes, *tefillin* or phylacteries, containing excerpts from holy texts on their forehead and their left arm. Archaeological material verify and clarify the habits reflected in the *shema'*. Two silver amulets apparently from late Persian age found in 1979 in Qetef Hinnom, Jerusalem, render shorter versions of the Aaronitic benediction (above),²⁷ a text that was at the time presumably a well-known oral/aural artefact and also a written entry in the Torah of Moses. The amulets were worn on the body for apotropaic purposes. Somewhat later evidence of more conventional phylacteries is also available. One phylacteric item from Qumran, first-century CE, did contain the Decalogue (Fagen, 1992; Milgrom, 1997). So, Jews during the classical Hebrew period probably *did* write excerpts of holy scriptures on doorposts and on items to be worn on the body.

The fact that the directions about textual artefacts in Deut. 6:6–9 were taken literally, render it plausible that its directions concerning oral/aural text artefacts also might have been understood literally. The mid-second-century BCE Nash Papyrus contains the text of the Decalogue and that of the *shema'*, in the order that is confirmed as the conventional reading order in the much later Talmud (*Tamr* 5.1). The text of the papyrus deviates in detail from the standard Masoretic text. Interestingly, it is the Nash Papyrus version of the Decalogue that is rendered in the Greek Septuagint (some 200 BCE). The implication is that the papyrus reflects ritual recitation that influenced the Septuagint rendition.²⁸ Deuteronomy 6 requires the Torah to be recited 'when at home and away, in the morning and in the evening'. This implies readings at regulated intervals, which also seems to be implied in our next Deuteronomic passage: 'This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth; you shall reflect (*hagah*) on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it' Joshua 1:8 (NRSV).

The statement describes one continuous movement starting with reciting the law, commences with murmuring and reflecting, and ends in acting according to what was read. Strikingly, this is the only passage in the Deuteronomic corpus that uses the verb *hagah*. It seems possible that the activity conventionally denoted by this verb was perhaps a little too open-ended for Deuteronomic theology. The purpose of this literature is not primarily to make people *reflect*, but rather to make them *remember* and to respect what is being remembered.²⁹ This is explicit in Joshua 1, where the purpose of recitation is to remember. The activity denoted by *hagah* in this case seems to be closely tied to the semantic content of the text.

Spiritual literature

The psalms of the Hebrew Bible represent a microcosm of piety and theology in the classical period. No single religious or theological trajectory was ever able to dominate

the collection. As a result the Psalter reflects various practices, some of which were perhaps never directly related. A fairly high number of passages in the Psalms reflect recitative and/or meditative practices centred upon textual artefacts (narratives, precepts, etc.): 1.2; 19.15; 35.28; 49.4; 63.6; 77.4.7.13; 104.34; 105.2; 119.15.23.27.48.78.97.99.148; 143.5; 145.5 and possibly also 5.2; 9.16; 37.30; 55.18; 71.24. Dating poems and strophes in the Psalter is immensely complicated. Still, most Hebraists would agree that the best part of the strophes listed above belong to fairly late stages in the compositional history of the collection, likely some time in the Hellenistic age.

A first group of utterances point to the recital of (reflection on; meditation over) the person of God and God's narrated deeds (Pss 77.13; 105.2; 143.5; 145.5). Similar utterances occur in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 10.16; 1QHa 14.14; 17.7; 1QHa 26.13; 4Q258 10.4; 4Q260 4.2; 4Q372 f3 line 4; 4Q381 f1 line 1; 4Q381 f31 line 2; 4Q403 f1 i.36; 4Q403 f1 i.37; 4Q405 f4&5 line 4, etc.). Typical of this mode is Ps. 105.2: 'Sing for him, praise him; [šich] all his wonders.' Another group seems to focus more directly on the persona of the deity (Pss 35.28; 63.6; 105.2; see 145.5 and further 4Q256 20.5; 4Q405 f4&5 line 4, etc.). Ps. 35.28 could serve as an example: 'My tongue shall [hagah] your righteousness, all day I shall praise you.' Reflection directed towards the divine persona could also be discouraging; Ps. 77.4; see 39.3 and Isa. 33.18; 38.14; 59.1.1; 1QHa 19.4f.24. Indeed both *hagah* and *šich/šichah* occur in contexts of lament, complaint and similar genres.³⁰

One single passage in the Psalter may reflect a practice where meditation has an entirely inwardly focus, more similar to what is known in Eastern meditation practices, but the sense of the verse is not clear (Ps. 77.7, ET 77.6). The problem lies partly in difficulties with identifying the best Hebrew text and partly in translating that text. The preceding verse refers to memories of days past, and one modern interpreter translates the two in this way: 'I reflect on the days of the past, of years long ago. At night I remember my songs; I ponder in my heart and my spirit seeks (an answer).'³¹ Understood in this way, even this passage has a narrative of the past as its meditative prompt.

In a late sapiential layer of the Psalms – a layer that exerted influence upon the final redaction of the collection – the Law (*torah*) becomes a prime object of citation, reflection and meditation. The term *torah* in classical Hebrew did not refer to the five books of Moses, as in later times. Rather, it referred to a body of priestly legal guidance and precepts, court rulings, etc. Occasionally, as in Psalm 119 below, one gets the impression that *torah* is an iconic reference for a religious orientation towards practising such precepts.

The first poem of the Book of Psalms serves as an extended colophon: a sapiential heading that strikes a motto for the collection at large.³² The poem praises the blessed man (*ashrey-ha-ish*) who is a paradigm for the user of the Psalms. This ideal figure shies the advice of sinners: 'in the *torah* of YHWH is his delight; day and night he murmurs (?) [*hagah*] over its precepts' (Ps. 1.2). Another version of this motto is found in Ps. 19.14. Around midway the poet bursts out in praise for the *torah* of YHWH (vv. 8ff). The praise rounds off in this way: 'Let the speech of my mouth be for favour, and also the murmuring/pondering (?) [*hagah*] of my heart before you, YHWH, my rock and my redeemer.' Both poems imply a movement from recitation of laws and

precepts to the reflection over what is recited. The latter could denote a silent, inwardly recitation (the [*hgh*] of my heart), implying a cultic location for that activity ('before you' often locates in the presence of some altar). The silent prayer of Hannah again comes to mind (1 Sam. 1.12).

Again, similar utterances occur in classical material outside the Tanak (1QHa 9.37; 4Q412 f1 line 6; 4Q417 f1 i.6, etc.). Perhaps the most pregnant example is Ben Sira 6.37, in Hebrew manuscript A: 'Reflect upon the fear for the Highest, recite (?) [*hagah*] his precepts at all times. He shall give you understanding in your heart, you will become wise like you desire.' The practice named *hagah* here seems to be recital and mental, and to effect lasting transformation. Similar expressions occur in Ben Sira 14.20 and 50.28.

The supreme poem on the Torah in the Hebrew Bible is Psalm 119. In a magnificent acrostic its 176 verses basically repeat the same message in ever-new fashions: 'Blessed (*ashrey*) are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the *torah* of YHWH. Blessed (*ashrey*) are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart.' (Ps. 119.1–2). This is an elaborated version of the blessed man motif in Ps. 1.2 (above). Throughout the poem there are references to reflective and meditative practices (verb: *šich*) directed towards the *torah*, such as v. 15: 'Over your precepts I shall ponder (?) [*šich*]; I shall focus upon your path'; v. 27: 'Make me understand the way of your precepts; let me reflect (?) [*šich*] over your wonders!'³³

In short, the spiritual sapiential trajectory reflected in Psalms 1, 19, and 119, knew recitative practices focusing upon the *torah*. These practices could include mental activity and were understood to effect personal transformation. It does seem adequate to label such recitation 'meditative'. It also seems possible that this practice reflected in late passages of the Psalter had an earlier start. Hypothetically, if one were to perform some sort of *hagah* in one's bed during the night, as mentioned in Ps. 63.7 (see 77.6; 119.48), a text like Ps. 119 would be very functional for the purpose, with its slow acrostic progression, its alliterations and monotonous focalizations upon the *torah*. It seems to me the practice transcoded into Psalm 119 could reflect a long-standing convention of recitative meditation.

The Qumran 'Book of Meditation'

Certain passages from the Dead Sea manuscripts contribute to embellishing this picture. Qumran literature refers to a *sefer ha-hagy*, a 'book of meditation/book of recitation'. Apparently the use of this book requires some amount of initiation; CD 10.6 briefly refers to 'men who are learned in *sefer ha-hagy*' as a requirement for being elected to a certain religious function.³⁴

In 4Q249a f1 line 5f it seems instruction in *sefer ha-hagy* would be something that all (or most) male members of the community should have. The curriculum followed the maturity of the pupil: '[he shall] be [instructed] in the B[ook of the Cove]n[ant] and he shall with his age, and he shall be taught' [the precepts of the Cove]n[ant] and he shall receive his education in their ordinances for ten]. Similar expressions occur in 4Q249e f1 i 3.4; 4Q270 f6 iv.17. In other passages the priest should be particularly qualified:

Let not [the priest who is expert in *sefer ha-hagy*] dep[art] where there are ten men of the community? (4Q265 f7 line 6). The case is similar in 4Q269 f10 l.5, and in 4Q267 f9 v.10-13.

The Community Rule, CD 14:7f, reveals that schooling in the practice of this book has to do with the pronunciation: '... learned in *sefer ha-hagy* and in all the regulations of the Law, to speak them (*le-devaram*) according to their rules. ...'. The terminology is similar in 4Q267 f9 v.10-13. In this setting, the translation 'Book of Recitation' seems better than 'Book of Meditation'.

It is not evident that all Qumran references to *sefer ha-hagy* relate to the same phenomenon. If they did, the most reasonable assumption would be that this was a collection of texts used for recitative ritual with a meditational character. Precisely this is the impression gained from IQS 10:³⁵

8 When weeks of years begin, Jubilee by Jubilee, while I live, on my tongue shall the statute be engraved with praise its fruit, even the gift of my lips.

9 With knowledge shall I sing out my music, only for the glory of God, my harp, my lyre for His holiness established; the flute of my lips will I lift, His law its tuning forth.

10 At break of day and darkling sky shall I enter the covenant of God, and when they depart I shall recite His laws; then shall I prescribe

11 my bounds, never to turn back.

...

14 when I sit down or rise up, when I spread my bed, then shall I rejoice in Him. I will bless him with the offering, the issue of my lips when in ranked array;

15 before I lift hand to mouth to savour the delightful bounty of the earth; when fear or terror break out, in habitation of dire straights or desolation,

16 Him shall I praise. Upon His miracles and deeds of power shall I meditate [sic]; upon His loving-kindness³⁶ I shall rely all the day.

The oral performance of piety, its connection to the *torah* and its repetition at salient points of the day (morning, evening) and the year (the jubilee) suggest ritual, meditative recitation. If, for a moment, we allow ourselves to take later Jewish practices as a prism to interpret this text, the passage from Qumran seems to suggest a connection to the Masoretic tradition concerning the liturgical chant of the holy text.³⁷

Concluding remarks

Meditative practices have not been important to historical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. Earlier scholars may have thought that meditative practices in later Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion were imports from the East. This now seems improbable, but questions and challenges remain when interpreting the above material within a project on the cultural histories of meditation.

A first challenge concerns semantics. The Hebrew terms *hagah*, *sichah*, *sich* are etymologically distinct, and yet they all denote phenomena of speech as well as of reflection. They clearly imply that ancient Hebrew people did not see speech and thought as distinct phenomena, but rather conceived them as points on a continuous spectrum. Textual and archaeological evidence considered above point in the same direction. This semantic spectrum stretched from what we would name reading or recitation, via memorization, reflection and understanding, to contemplation and meditation. I have chosen the designation 'meditative recitation' for this semantic field because the oral performative element seems to prevail and because this implication prevails in the name for the phenomenon provided by classical Hebrew language. There is still a challenge for modern scholars having to rely on Western semantics when understanding this material: if, in classical Hebrew individuals were citing when reading, murmuring when remembering, etc., what, precisely, were these practices like?

Another challenge concerns the social distribution of the practices that these terms named. It seems probable that the people who encoded the passages considered above did know practices of wearing and reciting excerpts from the holy tradition (written and oral/aural). The majority of surviving references describe a focus on the *torah* or aspects of it, but there are additional focal points such as the divine persona, narratives about divine act, the priestly benediction, etc. In any event, the profile of meditative practices recognized by these *literati* would not necessarily be representative. The Qumran texts reflect practices of reciting with an emphasis put upon correct oral performance, and with the presumption that this is an expert activity even within the designated Qumran community. This, I suggested, points in the direction of the much later liturgical Masoretic chant, which was also practised by religious experts. It is of course possible that items appearing as meditative prompts in elite practice were also recognized as significant or iconic to wider circles of classical Hebrew religion. It might be, therefore, that meditative practices in some form had a wider distribution as well. Perhaps passages in the Psalms could be taken to indicate something of the sort, but we cannot really know.

A third challenge applies to interpreting possible mental aspects of these practices. For instance, did '*inner transformation*' in fact occur? This challenge applies, I believe, in considerable amount also if we were to investigate contemporary meditative practices. In either case we would have to ask for the opinion of the involved practitioners. It seems fairly evident that several of the voices in the above material, like the one in Ben Sira 6.37, are convinced that lasting mental transformation would be the effect of doing *hagah*. Regrettably, we do not know the specific techniques for bringing about such transformation, nor are we able to say more in detail how that transformation was conceived.

A fourth challenge concerns the question of whether or not these practices were individual (or 'self-administered'), as is required by Eifring's definition (and mine). The available material seems to suggest that recitative meditation was practised individually and collectively. Some instances locate meditation rituals at daily intervals or at significant calendric points. Given that such temporal and spatial framings as well as the focal texts were communal, and the habit or practice probably was conventional,

authoritative commentary and a huge ecology of informal comments, adaptations and revisions (see Stordalen, 2012a, b), each of these religious traditions developed their respective scriptural heritage into an axis in their discourse on and as symbolizations of the respective faiths. By way of some concept of revelation, the scriptures became primary media for conveying the presence of the sacred in the mundane world – at least in official and elite symbolizations. Privileging the scriptures as primary media transmitting the transcendent also allocates considerable symbolical power to the groups responsible for transmitting and interpreting the scriptures. Hence, this construction would be part of a powerful, larger social symbolization. The recitative meditation studied above was mainly a practice inside expert groups (and the same is the case for many other Western Asian meditative practices studied in this volume). So it makes sense that elite religious trajectories should culture the general Semitic conflation of meditation and speech into specific traditions of recitative meditation, as is found already in the Deuteronomistic material. This could help explain why meditation in (elite) Western Asian literary reflections has a somewhat distinct profile as compared to those in the various Eastern traditions.

Abbreviations

ET = English tradition (when the verse count deviates from the Hebrew)
 HALOT = *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner, 2001)
 NRSV = The New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

an apprehension of classical Hebrew meditative recitation as fundamentally individual seems to be forced. Still, one must imagine that each individual had to engage freely in order to obtain mental transformation. So, perhaps it is still adequate to define this practice as fundamentally self-administered. But which 'individuals' would have access to and be expected to practise such meditation – in terms of gender, age, social status, etc.? And who controlled the religious and other interpretation of the significance of such practices? At this point very much remains to be done.

One huge challenge concerns the aim to locate meditational practices in the larger web of classical Hebrew religion. In the material above there seems first to be a Deuteronomistic trajectory. This religious trajectory had a strong cognitive and didactic profile, and its examples of meditative recitation suit that profile: it is more oriented towards remembering than reflecting. Precisely for this purpose one could imagine that recitation was a common practice for familiarizing children and illiterates to this religious strand. Simultaneously, this apprehension of the practice locates it in an instrumental rather than a definitional function within Deuteronomistic religion. Another trajectory seems to portray meditative recitation in connection to holy texts and motives. The clearest indications occur in late wisdom poems and in the Dead Sea Scrolls material. I suggested pairing such indications with so-called Torah piety in late classical Hebrew religion. Such piety ascribed massive religious significance to the body of divine instruction. It makes good sense that this religious trajectory would generate a practice of reciting and contemplating excerpts from the Torah (including its narrative entries). A poem like Ps. 119 could be taken to reflect that such meditative practices were in fact religiously fairly important, and indeed defining to this form of piety.

The ultimate challenge for a project on the cultural histories of meditation is of course to relate the classical Hebrew evidence to the larger history of Western and Eastern meditational practices. As is amply documented in this volume, Judaism, Christianity and Islam feature meditative practices throughout their histories, often using the respective religion's holy texts (written, oral, aural) as part of the meditative enterprise. This gives them a common characteristic as compared to many Eastern (South, Southeast and East Asian) practices of meditation. The classical Hebrew material above easily falls into these meditative patterns, probably as their earliest documentable phase. Is there a reason why these three religions should develop this particular sort of *recitative* and *text-oriented* meditative practices? It is, of course, not possible to go deeply into that issue here. Perhaps I might be forgiven for ending this survey on a more speculative note.³⁸ While all three Western Asian religions profess to be monotheistic, it is hard to see why monotheism as such should provide an answer to our question. It seems to me one should rather search for an answer in the combination of two other salient common characteristics. The first concerns the semantics considered above. All three 'Abrahamic' religions took a departure from – and, in the case of Christianity, retained a strong subtext reflecting – the Semitic semantics where meditative practices were associated to oral performance that often had semantic content. This fundamental orientation was cultured by the second common characteristic: all three religions developed what I would call strong scriptural canons. Through a network of canonical text, canonized, canonical and

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