



Reclaiming the Sermon on the Mount: On the composition of the prayer Ashrei.

Citation

Link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37367569>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Reclaiming the Sermon on the Mount:
On the composition of the prayer *Ashrei*.

James R. Russell
Harvard University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Plenary lecture for the international conference
“Real and imaginary: Interaction in time and space; formation of culture in diaspora”
4-7 September 2017
St. Petersburg State University, Russian Federation.

Dear Colleagues,

There is a well-known prayer that is of great importance in the Jewish liturgy. It consists of Psalm 145, to which several verses, also from the Psalms, varying from two to thirteen in number, were added as a kind of preamble, probably around the sixth or seventh century CE. These all begin with the Hebrew word *Ashrei*, meaning “happy is he who...” This word is now the name also of the prayer. The Psalm itself seems to have been very important in worship in the Second Temple period, possibly in the Temple of Jerusalem itself: the Qumran Cave 4 Psalm scroll contains a form of Psalm 145 with an antiphonal refrain. At the core of the Gospel according to Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the litany of Beatitudes— that is, verses beginning with the same expression as *ashrei*, but in Greek (*makarioi*) or Latin (*beati*). These Beatitudes are themselves rooted in the Psalms, which Jesus knew well. The Sermon deals with the Kingdom of Heaven and messianic salvation, and contains the concise Lord’s Prayer. That prayer includes the phrase “Give us this day our daily bread.” In the recitation of *Ashrei*, which similarly deals with God’s kingdom and seems enigmatically to allude to the messiah, one is required to focus attentively on a somewhat similar verse. Matthew has long been considered the most “Jewish” of the Gospels, and over the centuries many believed its original text was in Hebrew. A sectarian gospel in Hebrew that was probably similar to Matthew did exist and was cited down to the end of the first Christian millennium: the people who used it were Jews who accepted Jesus as their messiah but continued to observe the *mitzvot*— the commandments of the Torah. In medieval eschatological legends about the peoples living at the remote edge of the earth, there are Christians who are orthodox but out of the four Gospels have only Matthew, Jews descended from the Ten Lost Tribes who still speak Hebrew, the hordes of Gog and Magog, and various combinations of the above. A Renaissance Pope sought the elusive Hebrew Matthew for the Vatican library. Christians hoping to convert the Jews even undertook translations of Matthew into Hebrew themselves. There are few direct Jewish polemics against Christian doctrine, given the powerless of the Diaspora Jewish communities: it was unwise to provoke already hostile neighbors. But one argues that *Ashrei* arrived at its present form as a kind of response, structurally and thematically, to the Sermon on the Mount, and it seems to have escaped notice precisely by being placed in plain view. The prayer is an assertion of the adequacy, truth, and completeness of traditional Judaism, but not

an attack or refutation of Jesus' sermon. The encounter between Jews and Christians evolves, and with new ecumenical good will and the greater security Jews can now feel since the restoration of the nation's sovereignty in its ancestral land, perhaps in future we may achieve a nuanced understanding of Jesus, as Christians embrace their origin in Israel, and the nation of Israel reclaims for itself the Sermon on the Mount.

In his *Geography* (*Ashkharhats'oyts'*), the 13th-century Armenian scholar Vardan *vardapet* describes a people at the end of the world, in the vicinity of China (Chinumachin and Khitay), who are Christians, orthodox in their faith (*ughghap'arr havatov*), and who have kings and priests. They have only the first book of the Gospel, though— that of Matthew (*ew unin girk' miayn zMatt'eos glukh awetarann*). The realm is rich, temperate, and good. They sow but once and reap a harvest of grain lasting four years, since Paradise is nearby (*k'anzi mot e drakhtn*). And there is amber there, and flowers noble and sweet, a remedy for pains. And beyond this country is the land of the Kushans, and then that of the Chens, where— Vardan adds— the clan of the Mamikoneans came from. (The author of the *Geography* bears, after all, the name of the great warrior-saint of the 5th century, Vardan Mamikonean. As for the Ch'enk', called Tzani by the Byzantine sources, they were not a Central Asian people but a Caucasian one. Their name caused them to be confused with the Chinese.)

The story Vardan *vardapet* tells is an echo of the widespread legend of Prester John, the legendary king of an unknown Christian realm to the east, to whom is attributed a letter from the time of the fall of Edessa (modern Urfa, not to be confused with Odessa *Mama*, the colorful port on the Black Sea) in 1144. In his epistle, the eastern monarch says he cannot defeat the enemy alone and begs his western co-religionists to join with him in fighting the Saracens. One recalls that the Armenian patriarch St. Nerses Shnorhali, who lived near modern Aintab, heard a first-hand account of the battle from a close relative who had fought on its walls. St. Nerses wrote a lament for Edessa, the oldest Christian city-state, which was a Syriac-speaking polity with a very large Armenian population that was to endure down to 1915. The Armenians were very much on the front line of Christendom. Prester John may have been imaginary but the result of the letter bearing his signature, at least, was all too real, and, in retrospect, all too familiar: the plea fell on deaf ears and nobody came to the aid of the eastern Christians. The letter describes his realm, which is at the very limits of the earth, near the wall Alexander the Great had built to confine the barbarous hordes of Gog and Magog. Prester John mentions that once a year he visits Daniel, king of a powerful but friendly neighboring Jewish realm. The latter would be the realm of the Ten Lost Tribes of legend— their ancestors would have been the Israelites exiled in the 6th century BCE to Media and the Caspian region. Presumably they spread farther east.

The historical narratives of the conversion to Judaism of the Turkic Khazar khanate along the Volga, to the north of the Caspian, would have bolstered belief in the existence of such an otherwise unlikely kingdom— unlikely because the Jews

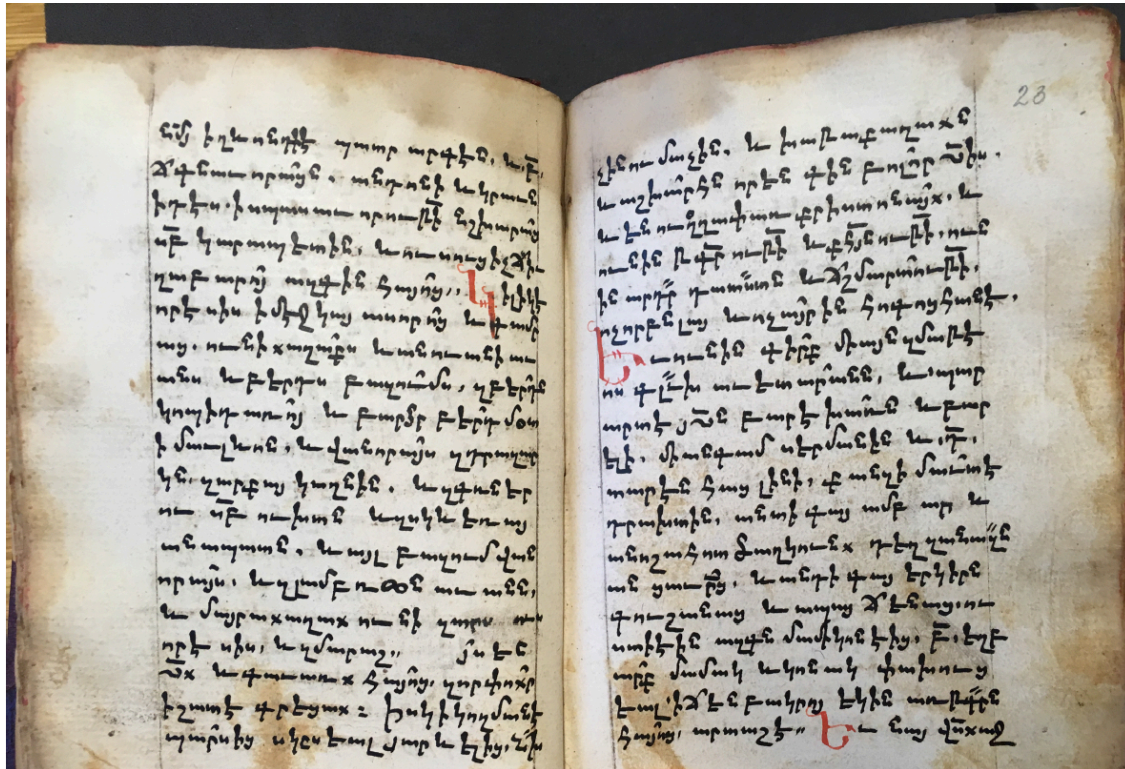
had not enjoyed sovereignty since before the birth of Christ. The philosophical polemic *Kuzari* of the poet Yehuda ha-Levi assured the Khazars of a permanent place in Hebrew literature and in the wistful imagination of the stateless and powerless Jewish Diaspora— an addition to the romantic narrative of the mysterious Eldad ha-Dani, the ninth-century emissary of a Jewish polity somewhere in south Arabia. One notes that names like Dani and Daniel run through these accounts; and the Antichrist is supposed to be a scion of the tribe of Dan. The letter fascinated Jews and there is a Hebrew version of the letter of Prester John as well. It reflects the influence of Genesis *Rabbati*, in its mention of the river Sambatyon, whose turbulent waters are still only on Shabbat: this is mythical geography as well. One may recall that Gog and Magog themselves emerged from the fevered visions of the prophet Ezekiel, and Jews had been fantasizing for centuries with everybody else about the denizens of the limits of the world in ways that reflected their own hopes and fears.

For the Jews, enduring as best they could under the oppressive rule of Esau and Ishmael, the idea that the descendants of the ten lost tribes had survived and were thriving somewhere, not just free but even powerful, was a fond and reassuring fantasy. Even with the State of Israel a reality for Jews in the Diaspora today, we can still perhaps appreciate the appeal such medieval reports would have had for the dispersed and the powerless. But for Christian popular culture in the west that same fantasy about powerful Jewish hordes looming over the horizon was not a consolation, but a frightening threat; and as such it found a place in eschatology— the ever-popular genre of speculation about what the events immediately preceding the end of the world will be like. For by the Crusader era, the imagery of theological anti-Semitism of the Christian church had reached baleful perfection. Christ's people were demonized as his killers, and were imagined as satanically horned, infectiously unclean, and spiritually malevolent. Feared and hated, they were confined in ghettos, burdened by the blood libel, and prey to massacring mobs. The reports of a powerful Jewish kingdom far to the east merged in Christian imagination with the malign hordes of Gog and Magog, and with apocalyptic myths about the Antichrist, who was to emerge, as we noted, from the lost Israelite tribe of Dan. Storytellers daubed these eastern Jews red— the color of lust and sin, of the sanguinary outcast— so it was believed that the *Rote Juden*, as German-speakers called them, were to burst upon Europe in the end times, avenging their victimized brethren by massacring the Christians.

Had not the Mongols already ravaged much of the known world, their sudden appearance explicable to the pious, for whom history has to have a meaning, only as a Divine scourge? Jews in Europe, the storytellers added, studied the Hebrew of Scripture so that the *Rote Juden*, for whom it was still the living language of everyday discourse, might recognize and spare them from the general slaughter when the time came, rather as the Angel of Death had passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt, seen the sign on their doorposts, and let their first-born live. In his *Girk' harts'mants'* ("Book of Questions") the Armenian theologian Grigor T'at'evats'i explains that there are three possible explanations of Gog and Magog. One is that

they are the Ten Lost Tribes, enclosed in the Caspian mountains. “And the Jews say they will emerge at the end of time (*i kataratsi*) and come to Jerusalem.” He does not mention what they are to do on the way there. For the Muslim historians Yaqut and al-Muqaddasi, the matter was simple: they identified the Khazars with Gog and Magog. And as for redness, was not king David, ancestor of the messiah, himself *admoni*, “ruddy”?

It is the detail of the Hebrew language of these Jewish denizens of the fastnesses of Asia that is of particular interest here. For the great Oxford scholar Frederick Conybeare, in his 1913 catalogue of the Armenian manuscripts in the British Museum, describes a text of Vardan’s *Geography* this way, mentioning the language: “In the East are mentioned churches which have only the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, yet are orthodox.” I first read that tantalizing line some forty years ago, when a pupil of the late professor of Armenian at Oxford, Charles Dowsett, and resolved to look at the manuscript someday. Someday became a lifetime, but last year I returned at last to the puzzle of those mysterious eastern readers of Matthew, for reasons that will presently become clear, and checked Haig Berberian’s 1960 critical edition of the text, the one cited above. But there is no reference there to the Hebrew language. London is too distant from my present home in the Central Valley of California for a quick study trip; but a colleague, Dr. Ursula Sims-Williams, very kindly photographed the text of Vardan’s *Geography* in the British Library manuscript for me. I hoped it might be a rare variant overlooked by Berberian, with an explicit reference to a Hebrew version of the Gospel according to Matthew. Such is the stuff of scholarly daydreams, a milder version of the Da Vinci Code.



But one was destined to be disappointed: this manuscript does not mention Hebrew, either, nor does it differ from Berberian's text otherwise. Why, then, did the meticulous, scrupulously honest Victorian don write what he did? Classicists aver that Homer sometimes nodded; and rare indeed is the scholar in whose writing there has not been a *lapsus calami*— a lapse of the pen.

I think Professor Conybeare erred because he had heard so often of a hypothetical Hebrew Matthew that his mind's eye added what his own eyes had not actually seen— a kind of *ghost* word, a word he expected, even believed, was there, had to be there, but wasn't. Matthew has always been considered the most Jewish of the Gospels, though it is most likely not the oldest. We do not know what the original language of the text was, but even though the scholarly consensus is that it was most likely Greek, in the context of the first century that does not make it necessarily less Jewish. For many Jews read the Torah in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, recited their most important prayers, including the credal formula of the *Shema'*, in Greek, and used Greek for the epitaphs over their graves. But proponents of the Gospel book's ostensibly Jewish character, and not only these, have argued over the centuries that the original of Matthew would have been in the original language of the Hebrew Bible as well. The fourth-century Syriac theologian and hymnographer St. Ephrem Syrus, no friend of Judaism, states flatly in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron* that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew and it was translated only later into Greek. That is not an altogether improbable scenario in the context of the time, either: Josephus, a younger contemporary of Jesus, perhaps wrote the first version of his history *The Jewish War* in his native Aramaic, only later

translating it into Greek, a language in which many Jews were fluent. As with Matthew, only the Greek version of the work of Josephus has survived. There may also be some support in the historical record, beyond mere surmise, for the supposition that there could have been a Hebrew or Aramaic version of a book related to Matthew, whether or not it was the original of the Gospel book.

Many of the early Church Fathers— Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Jerome— cite passages of another text, the lost Gospel of the Hebrews, that was used by early Christian groups such as the Ebionites and Nazoraeans, but did not become part of the canonical New Testament, even though another text apparently connected to these sectarians, the Epistle of James, did. The name of the first group comes from Hebrew *evyon*, meaning “poor”; the second, probably from the name of the city of Nazareth. These names resonate with the ideas and places of earliest Christianity. One recalls Jesus’ beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” As for Nazareth, His early childhood is associated with that Galilean town and with Bethlehem. The members of these sects were Jews by birth, with roots in the primordial Church of Jerusalem and in Christ’s homeland, the Land of Israel. Gentile proselytes tended to adhere to the Pauline church that was to gain power as it spread, thereby becoming enabled to define its own dogma as the standard of orthodoxy and to anathematize other forms of Christianity as heretical. Paul’s followers rejected the basic commandments of Jewish life: circumcision, dietary prohibitions, and the rules of Sabbath observance. But these other “Jewish Christians”, who saw themselves, perhaps rightly, as closer in practice to the central figure of their faith than those easygoing, recently pagan newcomers, whom they disdained, and continued to circumcise their children. They kept the dietary laws of *kashrut*, observed the stringent rules of the Sabbath, and maintained steadfast loyalty and devotion to Jerusalem, the city of the Great King and of His house, the Temple. They regarded Jesus Christ as a prophet or messiah, while preferring the doctrine of adoption to that of the virgin birth.

Most of the passages preserved of their Gospel that are cited in Patristic sources differ from what we know in the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament, but perhaps it was the differences, more than the commonalities, that interested the Church writers. The parts of the Gospel of the Hebrews that did *not* differ, and which are not quoted, most likely resembled or coincided with those parts of Matthew that do not severely deride Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple. The centerpiece of the Gospel of the Hebrews would have been, one thinks, a version of the Sermon on the Mount, probably more like the long version in Matthew than the shorter one in Luke. The same Patristic sources are unanimous in describing the Gospel of the Hebrews as written in Hebrew or Aramaic— St. Jerome, for instance, who knew Hebrew perfectly, lived in Israel, and was not given to exaggeration or dishonesty, describes one such copy in so matter-of-fact a fashion that it is plain he did not need to persuade his readers of the existence of a book they might have considered unlikely. There was no question or controversy as to the existence, the reality, of the text. References to the Gospel of the Hebrews continue down to the writings of the Bishop Nicephorus in ninth-century Byzantium; and the Jewish

Christians themselves, the users of that Gospel, might have endured at least till that time, and perhaps longer, farther to the east. The Israeli historian of Near Eastern religions, Prof. Shlomo Pines, argued that the anti-Christian polemic of the eighth-century Muslim Arab writer ‘Abd al-Jabbar from northern Iraq, written in Arabic, was not an original composition from within Islam, but was based upon a translation and revision of an anti-Pauline tract, probably written originally in Aramaic or its Syriac dialect by Ebionites or Nazoraeans. The reason for this is that the polemic excoriates the Pauline Christians specifically as renegades from the observance of the very *mitzvot*, the commandments of the Torah, which we have enumerated. These people would have been descendants of the communities of so-called Jewish Christians who fled into Transjordan from Judaea after the destruction of the Temple and the devastation of Jerusalem in 70 CE. If Prof. Pines was right, the Arabic text is a marker, as it were, on the road eastwards that the bearers of a Gospel in Aramaic or Hebrew took, perhaps indeed continuing farther— into Central Asia. Syriac was the Aramaic dialect of the region of Edessa, a city whose later history we have mentioned already. The *Odes of Solomon*, a text best preserved in its Syriac translation, has strong “Jewish Christian” overtones; and it is likely that such Jews, as well as gentile converts, formed the nucleus of the city’s Christian community in the reign of Abgar, the king who accepted baptism— according to pious legend, within Christ’s lifetime.

Interest in such a Hebrew Gospel of Matthew was always intense: imagine hearing Christ’s unvarnished words in His own mother tongue! The search for the lost book has had at least one good consequence: the greatest collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the Renaissance, according to Cecil Roth, was that of the Vatican. It was the oldest collection, too, on the continent; but “Pope Nicholas V’s quest for the lost original of the Gospel according to Matthew resulted in new additions to this collection.” Unfortunately the elusive book has not yet been found, but the library of the Holy See has grown. But what would such a text have looked like? The Sermon on the Mount, as we already noted, is the most important segment of the Gospel of Matthew, and the one that in its form and content resonates most strongly with Judaism. The Sermon notably contains the text of the Paternoster, or Lord’s Prayer— the heart of Christian prayer. But most of the sermon is a series of anecdotes or allegories— in Hebrew, *midrashim*, literally “teachings”, that illustrate ethical and spiritual points in a vivid and concise way. In the Greco-Roman world, students preparing for a career in the law courts or the government learned such anecdotes, called *chreiai*, as an essential part of their education. (When the student-disciples of St. Mesrop Mashtots’, the creator of the Armenian alphabet, set out to forge an independent Armenian literary corpus with the necessary tools of an educational system including manuals of the sciences and grammar, they included a translation of the textbook *Girk’ pitoyits’*, “The Web of Chries”.) Jews knew the genre— indeed, Jews were to be numbered amongst the pupils of the most famous professor of rhetoric of late antiquity, Libanius, in fourth-century Antioch. *Chreiai* were an effective tool not only for the lawyer, but for the preacher as well; and the Rabbis used such *chreiai* extensively in the Talmud. But in the Sermon on the Mount they come later: Jesus begins his sermon with a series of blessings rooted in the

Psalms of David. And it is this litany that is of special interest to the present discussion.

This series of blessings is called the Beatitudes, after the first word of each blessing in its Latin form, *Beati*, “Blessed (or, Happy) are they who...” In Greek the equivalent word is *makarioi*, so passages featuring the word are called “macarisms” (not to be confused with Passover macaroons). In Hebrew, the term in question is *ashrei*. The latter is important in the Hebrew Bible and its mention would have summoned instantly a host of richly important associations for Jesus’ listeners. *Devarim*, Deuteronomy (literally, “the repetition of the Teaching”, Hebrew *Mishneh Torah*), the last of the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), which are as it were the mind and prose of the Torah, closes with Moses’ valediction to his people, and his warnings and blessings. In the last of the latter, at the very end, Moses exclaims *Ashrekha Yisrael*, “Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, delivered by God— the shield of your help and sword of your pride. And your enemies shall shrink before you, and you shall trample their altars.” The five books of the Psalms, which in a way complement the Pentateuch as the emotion and poetry of the Hebrew Bible, with David as their dominating figure, open with the same word, *Ashrei*, “Happy is the man”— that is, he who has not walked, or stood still, or sat down, with the wicked.

The word *ashrei* seems a natural beginning for a litany— after all, happiness is supposed to be the natural state of man, or at least, if the American Declaration of Independence is to be believed, a state that we possess the natural and inalienable right to pursue, along with our life and liberty. And believers in God want to know what qualities are deemed worthy of His blessing. The Bible, and the Psalms in particular, abound in such macarisms (the word *ashrei* occurs 26 times in the Psalter, and 19 times in the rest of the Hebrew Bible); and in the texts from Cave 4 of Qumran we find a series of additional Beatitudes that do not appear in canonical literature: “Happy (*Ashrei*) are they who adhere to the ordinances (*chuqim*) of the Torah and search for her with clean hands; Happy is the man who attains wisdom.” Jesus employed a form of litany, then, with both deep roots in traditional scripture and wide exploitation in writings contemporary to him. As rhetoric this will be pleasantly familiar to a listener or reader, but to avoid boring him it will also have to introduce some new or interesting insight, to capture and hold his attention. Jesus does this by expanding upon revolutionary sentiments of the sort expressed in Ps. 37, where it is declared fully five times that the poor shall inherit the earth. Most of his statements in the Sermon originate at least in part in the Hebrew Bible. Each of Jesus’ Beatitudes is revolutionary in its own way, an inversion of the obvious and the expected.

There is a prominent Psalm in Jewish liturgy that came to be prefaced, like the Sermon on the Mount, by a list of beatitudes; and we shall presently consider why this was so. But let us first look at the Psalm itself. In the Psalm scroll from Cave 4 of Qumran, Psalm 145 (in the Hebrew Bible; in Christian numeration, it is 144) occupies a special place. The scroll seems to have been written specifically for liturgical use, and each verse of Ps. 145 is followed by a refrain, *Barukh Hashem u-*

varukh Shemo le-'olam va-'ed, "Blessed is the Lord and blessed is His Name forever and ever." This may in fact have been the way the Psalm was recited in the Temple itself; and Christian liturgy adopted this form of prayer as well. The Psalm is an alphabetic acrostic (there are nine such in the Psalter, some complete and some defective), and although the verse that should begin with the letter *nun* is missing from the Masoretic, or canonical, Hebrew text, in the Qumran manuscript all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are represented. The *nun*-verse there is not controversial in content and it resonates with other verses, lexically and thematically. It reads: *Ne'eman Elohim be-dvarav ve-chasid be-khol ma'asav*, "Faithful is God in His words and loving in all His deeds." The Septuagint translates the line faithfully, as does the Syriac; and A.F. Kirkpatrick in a note to his edition of the psalms published many years before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls noted that one Hebrew manuscript of the Psalms, which he does not identify, has the line as well. He cautiously suggests that the line was a retranslation from the Septuagint, but it corresponds so precisely in wording to the text from Qumran, which Kirkpatrick could not have seen, that it may reflect a different family of manuscripts than the Masoretic tradition.

It would seem the Masoretic text was defective and that is why there is no *nun* verse. But to the pious the canon of Scripture cannot be defective, so the tractate *Berakhot* of the Babylonian Talmud argues instead that a verse beginning with *nun* was intentionally omitted, since it would have caused the reader to think of another, disconcertingly dire verse from the Prophets beginning with the same letter: *Naflah lo tosif qum betulat Yisrael*, "Fallen is the maiden of Israel and she shall not arise again." The next verse of the Psalm, the one beginning with the letter *samekh*, indeed mentions falling, but it does so in a positive way. It declares: *Somekh Hashem le-khol ha-noflim ve-zoqef le-khol ha-kfufim*, "The Lord supports all the falling and straightens all who are bent down." Did the Rabbis perhaps extrapolate back from this verse to the one missing in the text before them, assuming it had been deliberately composed and then deliberately deleted? Did they see a sort of ghost line much as Conybeare did, when he apparently thought he had seen the word "Hebrew", back in the Armenian text with which we began?

Psalm 145, whatever the date of its composition, was probably first written down in Paleo-Hebrew, a form of the alphabet still used occasionally at Qumran (in the text of Ps. 145, the four-letter unpronounceable Name of the Lord, the Tetragrammaton, is written with it) and in the Second Temple period; but in the more common "Assyrian" script already dominant then and exclusive to Hebrew now, the letter *nun* has a "bent" initial shape and a "straight" final shape. The letter is associated for various reasons with the Messiah and the bent shape is thus imagined as the suffering savior, the man of many troubles; while he raises his back as the straight form at the end of time, when the Kingdom of Heaven is established in earth. Such association of meanings with the shapes of the letters may not be an anachronistic irrelevance, if one considers that a text, whatever reason it is composed for and whatever meaning it is intended to have, has new meanings and purposes imposed upon it by subsequent readers. Since we are considering Ps. 145

in the context of late antiquity and the medieval period, it is relevant to take into account how it was interpreted and what it meant to readers who used it liturgically.

And by happy coincidence, if one reads the three Hebrew letters before *nun* going upwards back toward the initial *alef*, A, one has *m-l-k*, spelling out Hebrew *melekh*, “king”. And indeed the author M, *mem*, verse takes happy advantage of this fortuitous situation and invokes kingship with emphasis: *Malkhutkha malkhut kol ‘alamim, u-memshaltekha be-khol dor va-dor* “Your Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and Your dominion is for all generations.” In the apocalyptic, messianic vision of the Book of Daniel (7.14), the Son of Man (Aramaic *bar enash*) comes riding on the clouds, and *Shaltana shaltan ‘alam di-la ye‘deh u-malkhuteh di-la titchabal*, “His dominion is a dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingdom will not be destroyed,” declares the Aramaic, clearly and intentionally echoing Ps. 145. Chapter 3.33 of Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar has freed the three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace and is offering a praise song to God, anticipates this verse almost literally. And to go farther back still, the *mem*-verse of Ps. 145 has a clear antecedent in Ugaritic. It echoes down the centuries, and across Scripture, and that makes it loud. It grabs the reader or reciter’s attention. All of this causes the royal and messianic missing *nun*— right after the king and just before the raising of the fallen— to feel very mysteriously present indeed, more indeed that if it were **not** a ghost. As William Hughes Mearns, an American poet of the late 19th century wrote, “Last night I saw upon the stair,/A little man who wasn't there,/He wasn't there again today/Oh, how I wish he'd go away...”

Those who used the Qumran scroll, whether they were local sectarians or Jews who made the scroll in Jerusalem, evidently gave Ps. 145 an important place in their prayers, given the carefully inscribed refrain to each line. It is the only Psalm with the superscription *Tehillah le-David*, “Praise (song) of David”, and that phrase gives its name to the entire Hebrew Psalter, *Tehillim* (the English, Russian, and Armenian names, all from Greek, mean “songs sung to the plucking of a harp”). It stands alone in the Psalter in another way: it is the only Psalm whose sole theme is prayer and praise itself. The tractate *Berakhot* insists that one who recites it thrice daily is guaranteed a place after death in Eden. It ends with the word *Halleluyah*, a unifying word of the final hymns of the psalter, so it anchors the core prayers— Ps. 145-150— of the part of morning synagogue worship called *Pesukei de-zimra*, “Verses of song”. *Ashrei* is at the beginning of the afternoon prayer, *Minchah*; it is the initial prayer of the *Selichot* service and the introduction to the *Ne’ilah* or Closing service of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. And Prof. Morton Smith noted that prayer in synagogues, and the recitation of Psalms in particular, replaced the sacrificial ritual practiced in the Temple. When the Temple was destroyed and sacrifice was no more, the importance of prayer correspondingly increased. And as for the Dead Sea text, we might recall that Jesus went to the Jordan river, just below the cliffs of Qumran and a little to the north, where His cousin John baptized Him. He knew the Psalms and relied upon them in His own teachings; and it is well within

the bounds of possibility that He saw the Qumran scroll or one very like it, with Psalm 145. But what has this to do with the Beatitudes?

It is this: the preceding Psalm, Hebrew 144, ends with this verse: *Ashrei ha-'am she-kakha lo, ashrei ha-'am she-Hashem Elohav*, "Happy is the nation for whom it is thus; happy is the nation whose God is the Lord." Two macarisms; and for at least a millennium Jews have recited Psalm 145 as a prayer encased between citations from other Psalms. It thus begins with a verse from Ps. 84, *Ashrei yoshvei veitekha, 'od yehallelukha selah* "Happy are they who dwell in Thy house; they shall yet praise You, Selah!" and is followed by the concluding macarisms of 144 cited, so there are three in all. The prefacing of the verse from Ps. 84 explains Ps. 144: What is the "thus" that makes the nation happy? It is that they dwell in God's house. God has only one house on earth, and that is His Holy Temple, on the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem. There is and can be no other. So the three macarisms affirm the Jerusalem Temple and the special relationship of the nation of Israel to the Land of Israel and to God. The verse for the letter P, *Pe*, reads, *Poteach et yadekha u-masbi'a le-khol chai ratson*, "You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing (with its) desire." Prayer books instruct the worshiper to focus intense concentration upon this verse; and the seven coils of the *Tefillin* (phylacteries) wound around the forearm are associated with its seven words.

The Psalm in this form as a prayer in the liturgy concludes with a verse from Ps. 115 that sounds almost antiphonal in context: *Ve-anachnu nevarekh Yah, me-'ata ve-'ad 'olam, Halleluyah*, "And we will bless the Lord, from now and unto eternity, Halleluyah!" The Psalm begins in the first person singular in the alef verse with the word *aromemkha*, "I will exalt You"; it swells to embrace all living things; and it ends with the first person plural, as a kind of congregational affirmation. This addition also links the Psalm as prayer to the succeeding and final hymns of the Psalter, 146-150, all with their Halleluyahs. So at the core of Jewish worship for over a millennium has stood a Psalm of overwhelming importance, the prayer of prayers, peculiarly King David's own, with a mysterious allusion to the Messiah and Kingdom of Heaven, introduced by Beatitudes. Today there are three; in the late 13th-century *'Etz Chayyim* of Rabbi Yaakov ben Yehuda Chazzan of London, there are fully thirteen *Ashrei* verses preceding Ps. 145— a longer litany of Beatitudes than in the Sermon on the Mount itself. In a manuscript of a prayer book from the Land of Israel recovered in the Cairo Geniza and published by Prof. Ezra Fleischer, there are nine *Ashrei* verses. Sa'adya Gaon in his prayer book has three.

So it would seem that Psalm 145, already of considerable liturgical importance since antiquity, was enhanced by the addition of a litany of beatitudes, probably around the sixth or seventh century. This was the period of the completion of the *Gemara*, the Talmud, and of extremely destructive wars between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires that enfeebled both superpowers, on the threshold of the birth of Islam. Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, the various Churches, and nascent Islam competed for the allegiance of the peoples of the Near East, for whom conversion from one religion to another was not unusual, particularly if a new or

other religion advertised itself as an improvement upon, or purification of, the precursor faith to which the prospective proselyte belonged. Thus Manichees wooed Zoroastrians, Christians, and Buddhists; Christians claimed to be the *verus Israel*, the true Israel; and Muslims insisted their prophetic message was the true and clear essence of the various revelations of earlier Peoples of the Book, whose teachings had become corrupted over time. So there are records of debates between the proponents of various views, with the one arguing on behalf of a religion not in power at a decided disadvantage. For Jews, the disadvantage was permanent and the outcome of such a debate could be lethal, both to the hapless Rabbi and to the community on whose behalf he was speaking. The polemics of the powerless in defense of their religion against alien rulers often had to be concealed in some way, lest they cause offense and invite reprisal. For Jews, the greatest threat was from Christianity, which claimed to have succeeded Judaism, and from *minim*, heretical sects— people whose beliefs and traditions were so dangerously close to those of the community of Israel as to be potentially alluring in a way that obviously different and incompatible religions (the Zoroastrianism of the Iranians, or Manichaeism) were not. So in Jewish liturgy one finds prayers that tacitly refute the idea of the Trinity, and criticize and reject the Christian appropriation of the Trisagion— the “thrice holy” prayer of the angelic liturgy. And a Christian with a copy of Matthew in his hand would represent such an allurements, challenge, or threat— perhaps the more so if the book he held were in Hebrew. Christians indeed began to translate Matthew into Hebrew, mainly from the 16th century on, for the purpose of converting Jews, and *makarioi* or *beati* is indeed rendered *ashrei* in them. But these texts, though illustrative of an old and unbroken policy, are too late to be otherwise relevant to our present purpose.

Islam adheres to an adoptionist Christology in which Jesus is not a divine being; Judaism has no Christology at all. The vastness of the Talmud has little to offer, save deprecations of Jesus as the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Pantera. But it is clear the rabbis knew the Sermon on the Mount: in tractate *Bekhorot* of the Babylonian Talmud, there is an anecdote about a journey by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya to Athens to meet the Greek Sages (presumably pagans). Asked to tell them a fictional story, he tells them a mule gave birth. Can a mule give birth? Asked the Sages. This is one of those fictional tales, he replied. Then they asked, When salt becomes unsavory, with what is it salted? With the afterbirth of a mule, he retorted, adding, Can salt become unsavory? As Prof. Peter Schäfer has recognized, salt here is a reference to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5.13; while the tale about the mule is an oblique reference to the virgin birth. But might a response to the core text of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, be hidden in plain sight?

Jesus in His Beatitudes blesses those who are somehow marginal, or outcasts, or at least unlikely candidates for happiness: the peacemakers, the meek, the poor, and mourners. He goes on to describe in allegory the Kingdom of Heaven and messianic redemption, and to prescribe a prayer— the Our Father— for all to say, asking that God give us our daily bread. Now consider *Ashrei*, the name given to the

liturgical expansion of Psalm 145. It opens with a litany of beatitudes declaring the nation of Israel, who dwell in the Lord's house at Jerusalem and whose God is the Lord alone, to be blessed. No divinized son, no other sacred place such as Rome or Mecca, is needed. The body of the Psalm evokes God's majesty, His Kingdom, and His promise of salvation, with a special focus on the verse where He opens His hand and feeds us. And this prayer of prayers swells from the single worshipper to all creation, ending with the community of Israel to whom the worshipper of the opening line belongs. It is all-embracing in another way, too: with the exception of the enigmatic *nun*-verse, perhaps intimating a messiah who has not yet arrived, its verses cover every letter of the alphabet. (One recalls the claim of Jesus that employs precisely the same idea. He is the Alpha and the Omega— the whole alphabet from start to finish.)

Through the Middle Ages, Christian censors combed the Talmud for hostile remarks, blacking them out or, at times, banning and burning the entire *Gemara*. Meanwhile, like the purloined letter of the detective tale, *Ashrei* perhaps hid a response to the Sermon on the Mount, maybe even a Hebrew version of it that the shapers of the prayer had once encountered— in plain sight. There are professions of faith in Judaism: martyrs have gone to their deaths proclaiming the Maimonidean credo *Ani ma'amin*, "I believe"; and the Aramaic prayer of the Torah service, *Ana 'avda de-qudsha brikh hu*, "I am a servant of the Holy One, blessed be He," overtly rejects reliance on a son of God (a phrase often explained somewhat euphemistically in the notes to prayer books as having to do with angels). But *Ashrei* is not combative or even defiant. One verse declares God will save those who trust in Him, but will destroy the wicked. It does not suggest the latter are necessarily of another faith, though— and one recalls that the 145th Psalm is, after all, part of the Christian Psalter as well. Might this prayer, so prominent and familiar and at the same time so intricate and intriguing, have the potential to be an engagement with the *midrashim* of the mild Jewish preacher on the shore of lake Kinneret, whose followers so often victimized the very people to whom He belonged, and sometimes hated and feared even the holy tongue of the Bible in which He prayed? Whether in the Diaspora or the homeland, facing realities or telling stories, people of faith in a world with fewer and fewer boundaries are discovering that there are neither monsters nor angels at the ends of the earth. We have only each other, here and now, face to face. Blessed are the peacemakers. And God is listening: Happy are they who dwell in His house.