16

Odes of Solomon

Merriam-Webster defines an ode as a lyric poem that expresses great feeling. The Bible includes quite a few of them, most of which are expressions of singular emotional impact attributed to a particular person in a particularly joyous situation - so we have such utterances as the Marian Magnificat, the “Nunc Dimittis” prayer of Simeon, and the Benedictus pf Zechariah, each of which speaks to a wonderful event in the evolution of Christianity, and there are many more odes, canticles, and songs scattered throughout both Testaments.

But I want to bring up an extra-canonical collection of poems known as the Odes of Solomon. This is a collection of 42 odes that, it is said with astounding certainty, constitute the earliest Christian hymn book. The 42 appear to have been written around 200 C.E., but translations of them into English didn’t commence until the late 1700s and again with more rigor in the early 20th century as more papyrus fragments were discovered in various stuffy places.

These odes were obviously not composed by Solomon himself. But who was the author? Or, more intriguingly, who were the authors? One reference I have insists that the originator was Jesus himself, and they back up that theory with provocative examinations of various lines and sections of the poems. Personally, I’m of the opinion that the Odes of Solomon were created by more than one person. Were some of them Essene, simply because many fragments were found in the Qumran caves? And as for the attribution to Solomon, I wonder if, once the odes were collected, there was an agreement to use his name as a promotional, a sort of stamp of trustworthiness approval to spur their quick and wide acceptance. I mean, what better way to ensure their acceptance and use than to identify the whole collection with the name of a favorite Jewish son famed for wisdom? Ah, but who knows about all that?

I’s surprising what a close reading of these Odes suggests or demonstrates. Some points are (1) that they are not gnostic as a whole, even though a few isolated lines and sections seem to be; (2) that in acknowledging the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit is described as female (one way in which gnosticism is in possible evidence); (3) that the 42 of them can be thought of as 3 groups of 14, representing 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the Babylonian exile, and 14 from the exile to Jesus. (Sniff not – remember the importance of numerology in Middle Eastern culture.) Also, there are parallels between thee Odes and parts of the Book of Proverbs, as well as allusions to the Gospel of John and suggestions of Revelation. Overall, we can say that Messianic Judaism, as it existed in the years immediately following the resurrection, is at the heart of these odes.

You can’t find much useful information on how these early hymns might have been used. They could have been anything from what we think of as devotionals for the meditative individual to outright ensemble songs with instrumental accompaniment. Maybe they were recitations, or a mixture of speaking and singing or chanting. Were they done differently every time, or the same every time? There was no such thing as sheet music back then, so think *that* over. Anyway, it’s all left to modern man’s famously hyperactive imagination, which stretches to very odd shapes when considering what the ancients might have done with *anything*, let alone religious poetry. And it brings up the associated question of how the Psalms of the Old Testament were performed. Well, what do we know about any of that?

I personally prefer the Charlesworth translation of the Odes. You can find that at the following link:

[The Odes of Solomon (earlychristianwritings.com)](https://earlychristianwritings.com/text/odes.html)

All 42 Odes have been translated except for number 2, which is lost. And I think the ellipsis at the beginning of Ode 3 indicates that a couple of lines are missing from that.

I invite your particular attention to number 19, which contains some especially strange concepts.

And while you’re in a Solomonic state of mind, check out the Psalms of Solomon, which you can readily access in translation at [Psalms of Solomon (earlyjewishwritings.com)](https://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/psalmssolomon.html). There are 14 of them (there’s the “14” again), and as a group they’re closely associated with the Odes.

-- Rod Moore --