

# Psalm 104 in the Early Monarchy? Revisiting Author and Date

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## Abstract

Akhenaten used a centralised cult and monolatry to achieve political stability in Egypt. Hammurabi used Marduk as chief deity in Babylonia to centralise power and create political and religious stability in his kingdom. It is within this ancient Near Eastern tradition of using religion and one specific deity to achieve political stability that Psalm 104 finds its origins. The early Israelite monarchy found itself amidst uncertain political circumstances. The early kings used a centralised monarchy and monolatry to achieve economic and political stability. The early Israelite government also used other Egyptian influences including governing methods, policies and the use of Egyptian scribes. The monarchy used cultic staff to communicate theologically sanctioned politics. Contact between Egyptian scribes and this cultic staff influenced by Canaanite heritage probably led to the production of a culturally diverse Psalm 104.

**Keywords:** Aten; Baal; Psalm 104

## Introduction

It is the purpose of this article to approach Psalm 104 by means of historical-critical analysis. Ancient Near Eastern texts and iconography studied from historical, cultic and socio-cultural perspectives form the foundation of this analysis. New light is shed on a supposed psalmist and a hypothetical context is recreated which can be used as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the psalm as a product of a political, economic and a religiously saturated early monarchy.

There are a number of challenges facing the contemporary researcher studying Psalm 104. These challenges consist of understanding the religious and mythological themes present in Psalm 104. These themes clearly originate from Israel's *Umwelt*. Understanding Israel and her relation to her *Umwelt* and how Israel's ancient neighbours

influenced her and her *Vorstellungswelt*, both epistemologically and culturally, is the key to understanding Psalm 104 in context. Psalm 104 seems to be a cosmopolitan psalm with a plethora of references to Israel's *Umwelt*, both thematically and in more direct ways, for example, the obvious similarities to the Baal cycle and the great hymn to Aten.

For Christians, the Psalter is probably the most read book in the Old Testament (Burger 1987, 9) and Psalm 104 is one of the most popular psalms (Gerstenberger 2001, 221). The study of any psalm and the Psalter is thus always relevant. The relevance of this particular study lies in the historical-critical approach, which seems to have fallen out of favour in recent years (Howard 1999, 329), overshadowed by studies of the composition and structure of the Psalter as Hebrew poetry. The relevance of this historical-critical approach is to shed new light on Israel's *Vorstellungswelt* during the early monarchy and to enrich our understanding of how Israel was shaped by her *Umwelt* and ruling *Zeitgeist*.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Gattung* and Structure of Psalm 104: Introductory Remarks**

It is difficult and unrealistic to classify Psalm 104 layered by history, culture, and redaction into any given *Gattung*. A more humble and pragmatic approach will recognise the diversity of Psalm 104. It is therefore relevant to point to a number of *Gattungen* to which Psalm 104 could belong. The psalm is an individual hymn of praise (Jacobsen 2014, 769), but can also be described as a creation psalm (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, 60). The praises in the psalm may be described as descriptive praise (Seybold 1990, 114–15) and at the same time Psalm 104 contains wisdom themes (Vos 2005, 247), such as the certainty of a creation order and the rhythm of life within this creation order (O'Dowd 2008, 60).

The structure of Psalm 104 may be analysed in a simple or in a complicated way as Hossfeld and Zenger (2011, 45–46) proposed and which is the basis of this present study. Roughly speaking, verses 1–10 may be associated with Canaanite themes, especially those pertaining to the Baal cycle. Verses 11–19 proclaim Yahweh's enduring care supposedly to even the most insignificant of creatures. Verses 20–30 may be linked to the so-called great hymn to Aten and verses 31–35 may be seen as part of the typical hymn that tends to end with blessings, wishes, and a reaffirmation of promises (Futato 2008, 301). I now turn to the date and authorship of the psalm.

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## ***Sitz(e) im Leben* of Psalm 104: In Search of a Psalmist**

The authorship and date of Psalm 104 is the focus of this study. It is worth noting that no psalm can be attributed to any specific author or date and that dialogue about these academic questions leads only to a hypothesis based on educated assumptions. The purpose of this article is therefore to create such a hypothesis so as to contribute to the continuing discussion and academic research of the Psalter and more specifically Psalm 104. This hypothesis does not have the purpose of disproving previous academic investigation, but rather to show a different and creative perspective, in order to stimulate continued study of these questions.

The Babylonian exile seems to be the great divide with regard to dating most psalms. Most psalms in the last third of the Psalter are attributed to a post-exilic date. Yet there are academic opinions that exclude Psalm 104 from this general opinion (Day 1990, 40; Kraus 1988, 63, 65). The archaic language, Canaanite mythological references, obvious similarities to the hymn to Aten, and the tone and general theological ideas may be given as reasons for attributing an earlier date to the Psalm. The LXX and Qumran attribute an early date to Psalm 104 and at times even authorship to David (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, 60).

There are, of course, arguments against a pre-exilic date for Psalm 104. The psalm seems to be at home in a post-exilic time with regard to theological motifs, for example, those of Proverbs 8:20–31. There is no mention of the temple, a fact which could be a Deuteronomistic theological motif and a clear sign of a post-exilic date (Preuss 1991, 252). In addition, Yahweh is described as enthroned in heaven rather than in the earthly temple; this description and the cosmopolitan nature of Psalm 104 is usually associated with post-exilic texts (Gerstenberger 2001, 227).

It needs to be stated that the redaction of the entire Psalter – including, therefore, Psalm 104 – hides an exact date for most psalms. Various strata of editorial additions are present in the psalm (Vos 2005, 240) and to ascertain an exact date is in all likelihood impossible (Prinsloo 1991, 152). It is the opinion of Hossfeld and Zenger (2011, 46) that these so-called strata may be added to a base text. This base text seems to have pre-exilic characteristics and possibly dates from the monarchic period (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, 46). It is this base text which comes to mind in regard to the date and similarities of Psalm 104 with those of Canaanite and Egyptian texts.

The similarities between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1–2:4 are also used in an attempt to date the psalm. The order of creation and the vocabulary in both these texts seem to be similar (Day 1985, 51). Yet, the anthropomorphic depiction of Yahweh and mythological references in Psalm 104 and the absence of these traits in Genesis 1–2:4 portray this Genesis creation narrative as a theologically refined text compared to Psalm 104. This may well point to Psalm 104 having an earlier date than that of Genesis 1–2:4 (Allen 1983, 31; Goldingay 2008, 182). Psalms containing polemics may be politically driven and sanctioned by the Israelite monarchy (Allen 1983, 28, Anderson 1984, 13).

Psalm 104 contains Canaanite and Egyptian polemics which may point to a pre-exilic date.

This study suggests that Psalm 104 not only has its roots in a pre-exilic date, but originates, at least in part, from a time when the monarchy was not yet divided and was still settling itself amidst a tribally-orientated means of government in early Israel. An early date for Psalm 104 would not only explain the many Canaanite references but also the similarities with the hymn to Aten. Attributing a pre-exilic date to Psalm 104 is difficult, even more so a date from a time when Solomon was ruling Israel. What follows is, however, a justification for exactly such a hypothesis.

## **Egyptian Influences**

The above-mentioned hypothesis states that temple officials originally composed Psalm 104. These temple officials were closely linked to the court of Solomon. It was in the court of Solomon that these officials had contact with a great many emissaries and scribes that not only influenced their theology but also their *Vorstellungswelt*.

These temple officials were exposed to the so-called *Musterbücher*. The *Musterbücher* were wooden tablets used by Egyptian scribes to copy texts in tombs (Schipper 2014, 72), keeping record of religious texts by using many different ritualistic and cultic contexts (Schipper 2014, 72). The exposure of Israelite temple officials to *Musterbücher* was not strange in any way, as this was a popular way of training scribes and other officials in the ancient Near East (Collins 2004, 30). Israelite scribes and temple officials were trained in exactly this way (Carr 2010, 63). The copying of texts, especially Egyptian texts because of the early monarchy's fixation with Egyptian political relations (1 Kings 3:1, 9:16) and Egyptian governing methods, created Israelite temple officials who were familiar with Egyptian theological language. The copying of the hymn to Aten hypothetically became part of the syllabus of the Israelite officials. This may be the reason for similarities between Psalm 104 and the hymn to Aten in tone and general ideas (Longman 2008, 602).

David and Solomon used governing methods which court officials copied from their Egyptian neighbours (Carr 2010, 61). Israelite temple officials were schooled in the ways of Egypt, and Egyptian literature might unravel the mystery of how the many similarities to the hymn of Aten found its way into Psalm 104. It is thus possible that the hymn to Aten was part of this so-called *Musterbücher*. Solomon's reign (970–931) is only 350 years after Akhenaten and the hymn to Aten was found in the tomb of Ay. The transmission from Egyptian texts through *Musterbücher* in the early monarchy is more probable than a post-exilic date. Since the post-exilic era occurred almost 800 years later than the so-called heretic Akhenaten, including his great hymn to Aten, which was destroyed by his son Tutankhamun (1335–1326), this destruction was completed by the last pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Haremhab (1348–1320) (Day

2010, 212). For that reason, it is important to focus now on Canaanite influences regarding themes in Psalm 104.

## **Canaanite Influences**

Regarding Canaanite motives or themes in Psalm 104, knowledge of the origins of Israel is important. Geographically, Israel, a small country at the heart of the ancient Near East, was flanked by Egypt and Mesopotamia (Matthews 2007, 53). Israel's religion and *Vorstellungswelt* were thus formed by these much older cultures and by the Canaanite culture of Palestine itself.

The history of early "Israel" cannot easily be separated from that of Canaan (Smith 1990, 1). Similarities between Israel, Canaan, and Ugarit are clear regarding language, religion, and culture (Gerstenberger 1988, 6, 8). Construction techniques, sacrificial practices, and personal items such as amulets, jewellery, and pottery confirm these cultural similarities (Carr 2010, 41–43). These similarities may be contextualised in terms of "Israel's" origin, about which many hypotheses have been put forward, such as the "indigenous Israel hypothesis" that claims Israel's origin from within Canaan and its people (Collins 2004, 190). A second hypothesis is the "pastoral nomad hypothesis" which imagines Israel's origin as that of a nomadic people systematically settling in Canaan over a long period of time (Stager 1998, 94). There is also the "peasant's revolt hypothesis" which sees Israel's origin as that of an oppressed lower class, which, by means of revolution against their oppressors, emerged as an ethnic people (Stager 1998, 103). Lastly, there is the "conquest model" which describes Israel as a conquering military force seizing Canaan as its own.

A combination of the "indigenous Israel hypothesis" and "pastoral nomad hypothesis" may be a relevant start to theorise about Israel and her origins. This is founded in several socio-historical markers in Israel's growth as a coherent ethnic group. It has to be taken into account that, according to my hypothesis, Israel was not yet a coherent ethnic group during the time of the early monarchy (Human 2014, 43). The abovementioned markers in Israel's growth up to the establishment of the early monarchy are the syncretism between the beliefs in Yahweh and Baal regarding different associations, for example, that of a storm-god (Ps 104:4), a divine warrior (Ps 74:13–14) and a rider of the clouds (Ps 68:5). This syncretism is seen as early as the twelfth century B.C. (Green 2003, 258). Yahweh was likely once a tribal-god originating from south-east Palestine (Albertz 2009, 376). Assimilating different Baal and El attributes helped Yahweh grow in popularity (Herrmann 1999, 138). Yahweh was likely introduced to Canaan in about 1400 B.C. (Hess 1996, 153) as a subordinate of El and later became equal to El (Albertz 2009, 276) and with Israel's ascension as nation became their national deity.

These origins of Israel as stated above were thus a combination of "Israel" as nomads introducing Yahweh to Canaan in the early fourteenth century B.C. (pastoral nomad hypothesis). These nomads settled in the sparsely populated northern hills of Palestine

(Collins 2004, 186). Here, contact with Canaanite and Ugaritic religion and culture launched a process of syncretism between Yahweh, Baal, and El. Later, these nomads moved south to Canaanite city-states (Collins 2004, 186). Coupled with Canaanites moving north because of continued military pressure from the so-called “Sea-people” (Collins 2004, 190), intermarriage followed creating a settled tribal-orientated people. These people may still be regarded as Canaanites, but with the added prominent deity, Yahweh, who gradually grew to overshadow both Baal and El.

### ***Sitz(e) im Leben of the Early Monarchy***

It is against the above-mentioned cultural background that Israel’s monarchy emerged. Israel was by no means yet a single ethnic entity, and cultural and religious diversity prevailed in Solomon’s Israel (1 Kings 9:20–21). These differences, coupled with pressure from neighbouring tribes, created the fragile population from which the monarchy emerged. These external pressures were dealt with by the sword (2 Sam 8:1–17, 10:1–19, 12:26–31 and 21:15–22) and elaborate political arranged marriages and alliances (1 Kings 11:3). The early Israelite monarchy found itself amidst uncertain political circumstances. It is within this context that Solomon used a political strategy advised by his Egyptian-taught scribes and temple officials that Akhenaten used during his so-called “Aten-revolution”. To understand this political strategy, a superficial glimpse at the origins of Atenism and the rule of Akhenaten will suffice.

Akhenaten and his so-called “Aten-revolution” can only be understood in the religiously saturated political scene of New Kingdom Egypt (1570–1085 B.C.). It is within this context that the priests of Amun made headway in Egypt, by accumulating wealth and political power (Hart 1986, 41). It is from their main temple in Carnac that the priests of Amun gradually grew in power conflicting with that of the Pharaoh. It was Pharaoh Amenhotep III that first tried to restrain the priests of Amun (David 1982, 124). However unsuccessful these attempts of Amenhotep III were, they created a context for his son, Amenhotep IV, later renamed Akhenaten, to counter the priests of Amun in an extreme fashion. Akhenaten not only diverted funding away from the cult of Amun (David 1982, 158), loosening the priests’ grip on Egyptian economics and politics, but in Akhenaten’s fifth year as pharaoh he stepped up his strategy against his priestly opponents. Akhenaten removed the names of other gods from monuments and replaced them with that of Aten (Barret 1991, 48); monuments of Amun were defaced (Collins 2004, 44); the priestly order of Amun was dissolved (David 1982, 158); and certain priests were incarcerated (Collins 2004, 44). Among other acts, Akhenaten in symbolic fashion moved the capital of Egypt and cult of Aten from Thebes to Akhetaten (Tell el Amarna) (Day 2010, 211).

Technically the cult of Aten was not monotheistic (Hart 1986, 35), but a form of monolatry. Atenism was politically driven to consolidate political power in Egypt (Matthews and Benjamin 2006, 275). Akhenaten never created laws to illegalise the

worship of other gods (Assmann 2010, 37); the other gods were simply never spoken of again (Assmann 2010, 37), at least in any official manner.

Akhenaten used a centralised cult and monolatry to achieve political stability in Egypt. Hammurabi (1792–1750 B.C.) used Marduk as chief deity in Babylonia to centralise power and create political and religious stability in his kingdom (Lambert 1992, 526). It is within this ancient Near Eastern tradition of using religion and one specific deity to achieve political stability that Psalm 104 finds its origins. The Israelite monarchy used cultic officials to communicate politically sanctioned “theology” and contact between cultic officials and Egyptian scribes influenced by a Canaanite heritage and probably led to the production of a cosmopolitan and culturally diverse Psalm 104. The psalm was probably used in a cultic context to legitimise the Israelite king’s military action and kingship. This was done by ritual re-enactment on a cultic level connecting Yahweh’s mythic creation acts to those of the king’s present conflict. The monolatristic worship of Yahweh centralised the cult and seat of power within the Israelite monarchy. Internal pressures pertaining to ethnicity issues were dealt with by granting Israelites an identity as Yahweh-worshippers (rather than having the elaborate Canaanite pantheon) and external pressures were put into perspective by unifying Israel and her military forces in the form of a permanent force (1 Kings 4:26). The worship of Yahweh was thus monolatristic (Keel and Uehlinger 1992, 280), rather than monotheistic, but united Israel, granting the fledgling country an identity and a future.

A wide variety of Canaanite and other religions kept on existing in Israel and the centralisation of the Yahwistic cult only truly happened during the rule and reforms of Josiah (622 B.C.). This does not subtract from the relevance of this hypothesis as other religions and worship of other gods continued in both the kingdoms of Akhenaten and Hammurabi and yet they also used monolatristic religion to centralise power and create political stability during their rule, as did Solomon.

## Conclusion

The hypothesis has been outlined that the author and the date of Psalm 104 can be explained in terms of the delicate political and social times of the early monarchy, even if the author still remains unknown. The psalm’s possible *Sitz(e) im Leben* as that of Egyptian-taught temple officials attached to the court of king Solomon (970–931 BC.) can therefore be better understood. The author’s Canaanite heritage filters through and paints him as a deeply religious individual, firmly rooted in his Canaanite heritage. Exploring the *Sitz(e) im Kult* of Psalm 104 regarding this hypothesis should be explored by further research.

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