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CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
“THE MULTIPLE
MEANINGS OF ‘HOSANNA’”

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Palmer Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

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XXI

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF “HOSANNA”

The exclamatory “Hosanna!” has multiple meanings. It is first of all the polite imperative הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, as found in Psa 118:25, אָנָּה יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא אָנָּה יְהוָה הַצְּלִיחָה נָא “O Yahweh, *please save!* O Yahweh, *please send prosperity!*” The initial *ho* of *hosanna* marks it as a *Hiph^cil* imperative of ישׁע “to save” and the *anna* ending of *hosanna* reflects the polite particle of entreaty, נָא “please,” frequently attached to imperatives. The *sa* syllable in the middle of *hosanna* is a contraction of the original syllables שִׁיעָה (*šî^câ*), with the *î* being the thematic vowel of the *Hiph^cil* and the *â* vowel being the *furtive pataḥ*, augmented by a paragogic ה, to facilitate the articulation of the ע. When הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא was transliterated into Greek, the ה was reflected by a smooth or rough breathing mark, the שׁ (*sh*) became a σ (*s*) and the ע was ignored, resulting in the Ὡσαννα found in the Gospels—which was subsequently transliterated as *hosanna* in English instead of the more accurate *hoshianna* (for *hōšî^cannā*³) of the Hebrew.¹

The synonymous parallelism of ישׁע “to save” and צלח “to prosper” in Psa 118:25 makes it quite clear that “Hosanna” was focused on temporal, socio-economic, and socio-political benefits rather than on eternal benefits, such as victory over death or one’s going to heaven. The Arabic cognate وسع (*wasac^ca/wassac^c*) “(God) made one’s means of subsistence ample and abundant” adds support for this understanding of

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“Hosanna.” The Arabic expressions *اللَّهُمَّ سَعِّ عَلَيْنَا* (*allahuma ša‘alayna*), “O my God, pour thy favors upon us,” and *اللَّهُمَّ أَوْسِعْنَا رَحْمَتَكَ* (*allahuma ‘awsi‘na rahmataka*), “O God, make thy mercy sufficient for us,” parallel the Hebrew הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. Noteworthy also is the related noun *سعة* (*sa‘at*) which has the following meanings: “richness, wealthiness, competence, capacity, power, ability, plentifulness, and easiness of life” (Lane 1893: 3052–3053; Hava 1915: 869).

The “Hosanna!” in Matt 21:9 in the Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew may well mean “Please save!” The text reads, in part, הוֹשִׁיעֵנָא מוֹשִׁיעַ הָעוֹלָם . . . הוֹשִׁיעֵנָא מוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ, which Howard (1995: 102–103) translated “Hosanna, savior of the world . . . hosanna, our savior.” Of interest is the repeated use of the participle מוֹשִׁיעַ “savior” along with the repeated polite imperative הוֹשִׁיעֵנָא (= הוֹשִׁיעֵנָא), which, when coupled with מוֹשִׁיעַ, should certainly be read as the plea “please save!” The הָעוֹלָם “the world” would be better read as *scriptio defectiva* for the plural הָעוֹלָיִם “the poor,” with the noun עוֹל being the cognate of the Arabic *عال/عيل* (*‘ayl* or *‘al*) “he was, or became, poor,” *عائل* (*‘a‘il*) “poor, needy,” and *عيلة* (*‘aylat*) “poverty” (Lane 1874: 2212–2213).² There is even the good chance that the Ὡσαννά ἐν τοῖς ὑψίστοις “Hosanna in the highest” (Matt 21:9) may have come from the plea הוֹשִׁיעֵנָא אֶת יַעֲפִים “Please save the weary,” in which case there was a confusion of יַעֲף stem I “to be weary” and יַעֲף stem II “to be high, elevated.” (Compare the Arabic *يفع* [*yafa‘*] “hill” and *وغف* [*wag‘afa*] “to show weariness.” [cited in BDB 419].)³

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However, the Ὡσαννά / *Hosanna* in the Gospels (Matt 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9–10; and John 12:13) is clearly presented as an expression of praise rather than a pitiful plea for help. When the chief priests and the scribes heard the children shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant and asked Jesus, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus understood the children’s “Hosanna” to be a word of praise, for he answered his critics with a quotation from Psa 8:2, “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise’?”

How and when the polite but pitiful plea הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא became transformed into an expression of exuberant praise has been a mystery. Lohse (1974: 682) commented

The common use of הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא (*sic*) shows that it had become a liturgical formula. The prayer for help has also become an expression of praise. This sense must have been acquired already in pre-chr. Judaism, for when the temple was still standing, i.e., prior to 70 A.D., hosanna was shouted out repeatedly as a fixed formula in the procession round the altar of burnt offering. As Tabernacles itself became a feast of praise instead of petition, the hosanna shared this movement and the cry for help became a shout of jubilation.

The traditional interpretation is well reflected in Jastrow’s lexicon (1903: 341) where הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא is equated with הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא and it, in turn, is equated with הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא “Help, I pray.” This *hosanna* is

the name of parts of, or of the entire, festive wreath (*Lulab*) carried in procession on the Feast of Booths . . . especially the separate branches of the willow carried in procession on the last day of Succoth, whence הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, יוֹם הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, the seventh day of the Feast of Booths (now called הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא

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רָבָה). [Jastrow’s abbreviations in this definition have been expanded by the writer.]

However, the הוֹשִׁיעֵנָּא of the Feast of Booths (Succoth) is more likely to be the cognate of Arabic وشيع (*wašī^c*) than the cognate of وسع (*wasi^c*) “to enrich, to empower,” discussed above. Although standard lexicons cite only ישע “to save,” a second ישע, the cognate of وشع (*waša^ca*) “to mix things,” needs to be added. The festival of Succoth, based upon Lev 23:40, requires the mixing of a piece of quality fruit with branches from palm, willow, and myrtle trees. Although the instruction הוֹשִׁיעֵנָּא אֶת־עֲנָפֵי עֵצִים “please mix the branches of the trees” is not in the text of Leviticus, it would be a very fitting, though abbreviated, targumic paraphrase. Moreover, the Arabic cognate وشع (*wš^c*) (= ישע or possibly ישע)⁴ is also the lexeme used for: (1) وشع (*waš^c*) “the Egyptian willow,” (2) وشيع (*wašī^c*) “a layer of palm leaves used on a roof,” and (3) “the distinctive tent of a chief” (Hava 1915: 871–872).⁵ In light of these definitions of وشع (*wš^c*)—which are a perfect match for the הוֹשִׁיעֵנָּא of Succoth—nothing is gained by insisting that وسع (*wasa^c/wassa^c*) is the actual cognate of הוֹשִׁיעֵנָּא or that the הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא “please save!” is its proper derivation.

Just as it is difficult to account for the transformation of the pitiful plea הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא “Please save!” into the joyful and exuberant Ὡσαννά / *Hosanna* of the Gospels, it is equally difficult to derive the jubilant Ὡσαννά / *Hosanna* from the ישע/ישע having to do with the mixing of palm, myrtle and willow branches, or having to do with booths, roofs, or tents.

The Ὠσαννά / *Hosanna* of the Gospels may well be the transliteration of the Aramaic noun ܘܫܢܢܐ / ܘܫܢܐ which was from the root ܘܫܢܐ, having an affixed ܢ analogous to the nouns ܩܢܝܢ “acquisition” and ܩܪܒܢ “offering” (GKC 85ⁿ). If so, the noun obviously functioned as an exclamatory interjection meaning “Hail!” or “Rejoice!” or “Cheer!” It would be the cognate of Arabic هاش / هاش (hašš/hâšš) “he was, or became, cheerful, or joyful; one who rejoices or is glad,” as in the expression أنا به هاش بش (ʿanâ bihi hašš bašš) “I am cheerful, brisk, lively, or sprightly in behaviour toward him, . . . joyful, happy” (Lane 1893: 2894–2895; Wehr 1979: 1206; Hava 1915: 828).⁶ The “lively and sprightly” behavior suggested by ܘܫܢܐ is mentioned in Matt 21:10, “all the city was stirred.”

Moreover, if the Aramaic ܘܫܢܐ retained nuances attested for the Arabic هاش (hašš), the waving of palm branches and the scattering of their leaves—as mentioned in Matt 21:8, Mark 11:8, and John 12:13—would fit the non-verbal activities associated with Ὠσαννά / *Hosanna*. The cognate هاش (hašša) was used for wood or sticks which could be easily broken,” and the scattering their leaves with a staff, or stick,” as in the expression هاش الهشيم (hašša ʿalhašîm) “he broke into pieces the dry herbage/stalks” (Lane 1893: 2894; Wehr 1979: 1206).

This association of Ὠσαννά / *Hosanna* with dry herbage and stalks accounts perfectly for Mark’s statement that some of the people “spread brushwood which they had cut in the fields.” Mann (1986: 435) noted that Mark was the only one who mentioned σπιβάδας, which he translated as “brushwood” (which is cited in Liddell and Scott [1966: 1645] as

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bed of straw, rushes or leaves, whether strewn loose, or stuffed into a mattress . . . *straw strewn at a sacrifice.*” Mann conjectured, “This is certainly from an eyewitness account and an example of Mark’s independence on this occasion from his principal source in Matthew.” But to the contrary, Mark’s reference to *στῖβάδας* simply provides evidence of Mark’s knowledge of the Hebrew/Aramaic **שֶׁתֶּ** (or the augmented **שֶׁתֶּן**) “straw, sticks” and associated *Ὠσαννά* with that word. He need not have been an eyewitness to have made the association of **שֶׁתֶּ** or **שֶׁתֶּן** with **הֶשֶׁנָּה**.

Thus, the exclamatory Aramaic **הֶשֶׁנָּה** “Hurrah! Hooray! Cheers!” and the Hebrew polite imperative **הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּה** “Help please!” became blended—with the **הֶ** of **הֶשֶׁנָּה** being transformed into the **הוֹ** of **הוֹשִׁיעָה** and the **שֶׁ** of **הוֹשִׁיעָה** being transformed into the **שֶׁ** of **הֶשֶׁנָּה**. The blended *Ὠσαννά* could have carried either meaning of “petition” or of “acclamation.”

Thus, Pope (1992) was partially on target when he argued

It was Christian misapprehension of a well-known Hebrew term that has confused even scholars to this day. The difference between acclamation and a stark cry, “Help, please!” is too great to be glossed over. How could such misapprehension occur? Why did not the gospel writers look to the Gk of Ps 118:25 and some thirty other passages where the Hebrew imperative is duly rendered by the Gk imperative *soson*, “save”? The crux of the problem lies in the nonsensical cries “*hosanna* to the son of David” and “*hosanna* in the highest” which indicates that the cry was not understood because of the Semitic particle *l-* before the addresses “Son of David” and “highest.”

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But, in addition to the recognition of the vocative ל in Biblical Hebrew there must also be the recognition that Ὡσαννά *Hosanna* can be the transliteration of (1) הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, (2) הוֹשַׁעְנָא, or (3) הַשְּׂנֵא. The Arabic cognates of these different words provide the answer to Pope’s question, “How could such misapprehension [of interpreting a plea and an acclamation] occur?” The pronunciation of the first two was quite similar and they could be easily confused with each other. The first two words could not be accurately transliterated in Greek, which lacks in speech and spelling the *sh* sound of the ש. The third word, הַשְּׂנֵא “Cheers!” should have been transliterated as Ἀσσανα but it was merged with the Ὡσαννα.

Some of Jesus’ followers begged, “Save us, O Son of David!” and others acclaimed, “Hail to the Son of David!” But both phrases ended up as Ὡσαννά—which became *Hosanna* in English, and it has been understood to date as *one* word meaning *both* “to plead for salvation” *and* “to shout in acclamation.” Now we know better. There were really three words:

- the הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא (*hōšāʿnāʾ* / *hoshana*) used for the “mixing/ mingling” required for Succoth,
- the הַשְּׂנֵא (*hassānāʾ* / *hassana*) in the *acclamation* of Palm Sunday,
- the הוֹשַׁעְנָא (*hōšāʿannāʾ* / *hoshianna*) in the *petition* of Palm Sunday.

NOTES

1. It was transliterated in Arabic as هوشعنا (*hūša‘nā*) and in Syriac as ܘܫܥܢܐ (*‘ūšana’*). Noteworthy is the use of يسوع (*yasū‘*) for Jesus compared with the *Qur’anic* عيسى (*‘isāy*) for ܝܫܘܥ in which there has been the transposition of the ܝ and the ܥ (i.e., the ܝ and the ܥ).

2. The ambiguous ܘܥܠ-ܥܢܝ ܝܗܒ-ܠܗ in Job 24:9, translated variously as

- “and take a pledge of the poor” (KJV, NKJ, ASV),
 - “the infant of the poor is seized for a debt” (NIV, NIB),
 - “the child of the poor is exacted as security” (NJB),
 - “the suckling of the poor they seized” (Pope 1965: 158–160)
- may well contain the noun ܥܠ / ܥܘܠ “poor,” with the ܥܢܝ “poor” being a clarifying gloss. See Driver and Gray (1921: Part 1: 207 and Part 2: 167) for a summary of the interpretations of this verse.

3. Compare Pope (1992, “Hosanna” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, CD Version) who interpreted the acclamation as follows:

The title “Highest” is used many times of God in both the OT and the NT. Accordingly, thanks to ancient W Semitic usage of vocative *l-*, we can finally explain how the cries *hōšā‘nna lē-ben dawīd* and *hōšā‘nna lē-‘elyon*, “Save/help, please, O Son of David!” and “Save/help, please, O Highest!” came to be misunderstood.

4. Ordinarily the Arabic ش (*š*) would be a ܫ in Hebrew, but there are a number of cognates where a ܫ matches the Arabic ش (*š*), including: (1) ܫܒܝܒ “flame” and شَب (šabba) “to kindle a fire, to blaze, to flame” and شَبَّة (šabbat) “a blazing, flaming fire”; (2) ܫܘܩܗ “desire, longing” and شَوْق (šawq) “desire, yearning,

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longing of the soul” and ذوشوقی (*dû šawqin*) “an admiring lover”; and (3) חֲשָׂרָה “collection” and حشَر (*hašara*) “to collect.”

5. Note also Castell’s (1669: 998) many definitions for وشع (*wšʿ*): “*Miscuit, . . . ornavit, . . . IV Floruit arbor, olusve . . . Flores olerum . . . Stratum textile ex palmæ foliis & caudicis fibris, similibusve rebus siccis, quod injicitur supremis domûs tignis, lignisve. . . Umbraculum, . . . Truncus arboris,*” i.e., “He mixed/mingled, . . . he adorned/decorated, . . . IV Tree, vegetation blossomed . . . Blossom of vegetables . . . Woven cover from palm leaves and wooden fibers like a dry thing which is put on the top of house beams, timbers . . . Shelter/shade . . . tree trunk.”

6. Castell (1669: 830, 890) defined (1) هَش (*hašša*) as “*Fuste decussit de arbore . . . Agilis, lætus, ac lubens fuit . . . Facilis, comis, benignus humanus fuit . . . Alacrem, lætum, lubentem reddidit . . . VIII Lubentem, comem, & benignum, se præbuit . . .* and (2) هاش (*hâša*) as “*Commisti fuerunt inter sese, et tumultuati homines . . . Turba hominum,*” i.e., “A stick broken off from a tree . . . Rousing, happy and also to be cheerful . . . Courteous, gracious, to be affable, kind . . . he responded with excitement, cheer, happiness, . . . VIII he showed himself to be cheerful, gracious, and kind”; and (2) “they were confused/mixed up among themselves, and an uproar of people . . . disturbance/crowd of people.