

SH'MA AND HALLEL

The Bible says that after the Last Supper, “when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Garden of Gethsemane.” Have you wondered which hymn they sang? The practice of the Jews is to sing any song from the grouping of Psalms in the Bible called “the Hallel.” This includes Psalms 113 to 118. The word *hallel* means “praise,” as in the other word *hallelujah*, which means “praise Yahweh.”

A few years after this drama was begun in our church, a hymn was added based on Psalm 118:1: “O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, and His mercy endureth forever.” This line was set to a minor-key melody composed by Danny Whipple.

When I attempted to reconstruct the last worship service that Jesus conducted in the Upper Room, I was aware that every Jewish service includes another ceremony, the recital of the *Sh'ma*. This is the passage taken from Deuteronomy 6:4 that says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is a Unity.” In Hebrew this is “*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai eloheynu, Adonai echod.*”

Since a song was already being sung in the drama, I decided to add the *Sh'ma* using the same melody, and the amazing thing is that the Hebrew words fit the song exactly.

Now a word on pronunciation. Modern Hebrew is divided into two main branches, Ashkenazi and Sephardic. The Ashkenazi Jews come from Europe, mostly eastern Europe, and the Sephardic Jews come from North Africa and the Muslim lands. The State of Israel has decided that Sephardic Hebrew is closer to the pronunciation of ancient Hebrew, so they have made that the legal language. Israel is mostly made up of Ashkenazi Jews, and so this is a case of northerners all deciding to speak like southerners.

I first heard the *Sh'ma* in a synagogue composed of Ashkenazi Jews, so the pronunciation I heard used *Adonoi* instead of *Adonai* for the word “Lord” and *Omayn* instead of *Amen* at the end.

Jews sing their worship. A cantor with a beautiful voice makes the Scripture come alive. Also the rabbi will lead the congregation in dancing on special occasions. Music is in the Jewish soul. This is why they make such great singers and entertainers. By contrast, there is no singing in Islam. Muhammad said that music was not suitable for worship because it was used in taverns. This makes their religion all the poorer, in my opinion.

Anyway, this is the background of the singing of the *Sh'ma* in the drama you are about to witness. I hope this explanation will add to your understanding and enjoyment.