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# Laus Sonet ista Deo

## Ritualisering van het Verhaal van Jezus' Intocht in Jeruzalem op Palmzondag in de Vroege Middeleeuwen in het Westen

[*Laus Sonet ista Deo. Ritualizing the Story of Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the Early Middle Ages in the West*]

Ger van der Werf

This thesis found its origin in my fascination with the hymn *Gloria laus*. The hymn, which consists of thirty-nine elegiac distichs, was composed by Theodulf (ca.750–821), Bishop of Orléans, a personal adviser of Charlemagne, and the most brilliant poet of his epoch. As a Visigoth Theodulf was educated in the Old Spanish tradition. He wrote the hymn in 819 or 820, when he was living in exile in the French city of Angers. The first six verses have been sung on Palm Sunday from the Middle Ages until the present day. The other verses give a theological exegesis of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and describe the procession on Palm Sunday in Angers.

Careful study revealed that the hymn is an essential element in the development of the ritual on Palm Sunday. Therefore the analysis of the hymn required a broader plan of study, namely, the development of the ritualizing of the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the morning of Palm Sunday in the early Middle Ages in the West. At the end of this development, by the end of the tenth century, the palm ritual consisted of the following elements: it started with the blessing of the palms during Terce; this was followed by a procession interrupted by a station of the cross; finally, mass was celebrated. This ritual remained by and large unchanged until 1955.

### 1 Research questions and methods

The study is guided by three research questions: how was Jesus' entry into Jerusalem ritualized over the course of time; which (theological) interpretations were given to the ritualizing of the entry; and what is the ritual's social-historical meaning?

My research builds on the work of Hermann Gräf, who in his 1959 thesis provided an inventory of the prayers and antiphons that were used in the palm ritual, from the fourth century in Jerusalem, where the ritual is first attested, until the middle of the twentieth century. Gräf also described the various stages of the ritual.

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\* The thesis was defended on October 5, 2018 at Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands. Supervisor: prof. dr. G.A.M. Rouwhorst, co-supervisor: dr. A.J.M. van Tongeren. E-mail: [gthvanderwerf@hotmail.com](mailto:gthvanderwerf@hotmail.com).

My study differs from Gräf's work in two respects. First, I did not restrict myself to the description of the sources, but also analyzed the liturgical and literary contents of the texts with respect to their construction, their meaning, and their main subject matters, employing the method of close reading. Having completed this analysis, I compared the texts from the different sources and different periods using historical-critical analysis. The second aspect in which my study is different from Gräf's is my limiting the scope of my study to the development of the ritual in the West. I lay out my research on the palm ritual in five chapters: 1. The Merovingian Period; 2. The Old Spanish Tradition; 3. The Hymn *Gloria laus*; 4. The Carolingian Period; and 5. The so-called *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum* (the PRG).

The oldest known description of a palm ritual in Jerusalem is given in the accounts of Egeria's travels through the Holy Land at the end of the fourth century. In the West, Isidore of Seville (570–636) was the first to mention the day: he called it *dies palmarum*, the day of palms. Isidore did not, however, refer to a palm ritual, and it is difficult to securely date the first reference to the ritual in the West. The few Old Spanish manuscripts that remain contain references to older traditions. Gräf guessed that the ritual was brought from Jerusalem to the south of Gaul. Férotin, who described a great number of Old Spanish manuscripts, assumed that the ritual came to Spain before it was introduced in Gaul.

In any case, in Rome there was no Palm Sunday commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before 1024. The ritual that was introduced that year, presumably at the initiative of the German emperor, remained the norm until the second Vatican Council adopted the reform of the liturgy of the Holy Week in 1955. For this reason, the analysis of the PRG forms the last chapter of my research.

## 2 Results: The ritualizing of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

The generally accepted assumption is that the liturgy of the Holy Week was developed in Jerusalem, following the chronology of the Gospel of John, in the course of the fourth century. Already in the time of Egeria, the palm ritual marks the start of the Holy Week, although she does not mention the blessing of the palms. In her time, the procession started in the afternoon. The Georgian lectionary, which reflects the observances of Jerusalem from the fifth till the eighth century, describes a ritual that started in the morning, with the blessing of the palm at the third hour followed by the procession. The celebration of the mass immediately followed after the procession.

In Gaul, up until the middle of the eighth century liturgical books only refer to the commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the prayers assigned for the of the mass on Palm Sunday. There is no reference to other special rituals of commemoration, such as a procession. The *Missal of Bobbio*, composed around 700, does contain, however, a prayer for the blessing of the palms: in the West, this is the oldest known record of this type of prayer.

The Old Spanish tradition, however, did know a palm ritual that commemorated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. All the liturgical books that are preserved give an identical description of the course of events during the ritual. The ritual starts with the blessing and distribution of the palms during Terce

in a stational church, after which the faithful go in procession to the main church, where the mass is celebrated. It is curious to note that not all of the prayers used to bless the palms actually contain a formula of blessing. Prayers meant to bless the palms pronounce a blessing. It was during the Carolingian period, that Theodulf wrote his hymn *Gloria laus*. However, the text of this hymn and the structure of the palm ritual that he describes prove that he was educated in Visigothic Spain.

In the early Carolingian period, c.800, some sacramentaries produced in the Frankish realms contain prayers for the blessing of the palms without any reference to a procession. Scholars and theologians around Charlemagne (c.747–814) and later Louis the Pious (778–840) discuss liturgical observances, also for the Palm Sunday. The *Pontifical of Poitiers*, written between 880 and 890, at the end of the Carolingian period, gives an order of the divine service for a palm ritual merging the blessing of the palms and a procession, meant for use in a cloister.

From the end of the tenth century, manuscripts are preserved that contain the PRG. In all these manuscripts, the PRG gives three orders for the palm ritual. All three orders start with the blessing and the distribution of the palms during Terce in a stational church, followed by a procession that ends in the main church, where the mass is celebrated. In the first and third order, the procession comes to a halt before a station of the cross.

The main features of the ritual in the Old Spanish tradition, in the late Carolingian period, and in the PRG are the same as those found in Jerusalem according to the Georgian Lectionary. However the theological themes in the occidental traditions show considerable differences.

### 3 Results: Theological issues in the Palm ritual

In the Gallican liturgy for the Palm Sunday the prayers in the mass tell the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem according to the Gospel of John: the crowds were curious to see Lazarus because he was raised by Jesus. The prayer tells the story as part of the story of Jesus' meal in Bethany, where Maria anointed Jesus' feet. In the prayers, the faithful are seen as brothers and heirs of Jesus.

The *Missal of Bobbio* gives the same prayers for the mass as in other Gallican liturgical books. In the prayer for the blessing of the palms, Jesus' entry is commemorated, according to the Gospel of Matthew; this is followed by the benediction pronounced over the palms and the olive oil. The blessed palms and olive oil are regarded as a safeguarding against the tricks of the Evil One.

Isidore gives an allegoric exegesis of Jesus, sitting on an ass on his way to Jerusalem. He tells us that Palm Sunday is the day that the catechumens are taught the Creed. However, he makes no reference to a palm ritual.

In the Old Spanish palm ritual, the joy of singing the praise of the Lord, the *sacrificium laudis*, is the central theme in nearly every prayer. The ritual commemorates the hymns of praise to Jesus by the crowds, and looks forward to the resurrection when the faithful with the palm of victory in their hands will sing together with the celestial choir, because the scriptures are fulfilled and the sins are

forgiven. Three types of branches are described: palms, olive trees and willows. This is an allusion to Lev. 23:39-43, where God orders the Israelites to build tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles, however, is not mentioned. It is worth noting that in none of the Old Spanish prayers and antiphons is the title ‘King’ used for Christ. That title seems to be avoided deliberately.

Three descriptions of processions on Palm Sunday are handed down from the early Carolingian period. None of these refers to a blessing of the palms. A stational procession, without any feature that specifically refers to the commemoration of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, is attested in Metz in the middle of the eighth century. Around 800, Angilbert (c.745–814), abbot of St.Riquier, describes a procession in his abbey on Palm Sunday in which monks and laity carry branches of palms with them. At the end of the procession they say a prayer before an image of Christ’s nativity. This practice parallels the description of the procession found in the Old Spanish liturgical books.

Theodulf of Orléans gives a theological exegesis of the procession in the first part of *Gloria laus*. According to the hymn, Christ made the passage through death, so now we can set out with songs of praise for the city of God, of which the city of Angers is a symbol. The Hebrews, accompanying Christ when he entered into Jerusalem, set the example for us. Just as in the Old Spanish books, the hymn gives an outline of the procession as a song of praise, which is sung by the people together with all the local saints, and the whole creation. And just as in the Old Spanish tradition, Theodulf mentions palms, olive trees, and willows, without referring explicitly to the Feast of Tabernacles. The second part of the hymn describes how the faithful assemble in St Michael’s Church, and from there proceed with the bishop in their midst to the cathedral, where the bishop gives the blessing. *Gloria laus* is explicitly intended to bind together the inhabitants of Angers around the bishop as representative of Christ.

In prayers dating from the early Carolingian period, stories in the Old Testament in which olive oil occurs were connected with the palm blessing, and, in some instances, with the branches that were carried during Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. In one of the prayers, the actual entry itself is not mentioned at all. In some palm blessings, the branches refer to the olive branch in the beak of the dove, which indicated to Noah that the flood had come to an end. These palm blessings borrow their texts from Roman prayers used for the consecration of the chrism on Maundy Thursday. The text of one prayer in the mass is strongly related to the themes of the Gallican prayers on Palm Sunday. As in the *Missal of Bobbio* the blessed branches and olive oil are considered protection against the power of the Evil One.

In the description of the liturgy of Palm Sunday written by Amalarius of Metz (ca.775–ca.850), the Passion of Christ is the principal theme. In his diocese in Francia the faithful walk with palms in their hands through the churches on Palm Sunday. In 790, Paulus Diaconus (720–799) compiled a volume of homilies at the request of Charlemagne, in which he provided two homilies for Palm Sunday: one of Augustine (354–430), the theme of which is the Passion of the Lord; and a second by the Venerable Bede (672–735) in which the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is discussed according to Mt 21:1-16. In

the Supplement that Benedict of Aniane (745–821) appended to the Hadrianum, the Roman sacramentary that Pope Hadrian I (r. 772–795) sent to Charlemagne in 784, two benedictions are inserted: one focuses on the Passion of Christ, the other mentions the palm of the victory but makes no reference to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This diversity suggests that in the early Carolingian period it was not yet self-evident to commemorate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The *Pontificale of Poitiers* was composed at the end of the Carolingian period, immediately after the death of Charles the Bald (823–877). This book contains an order of a monastic service for the palm ritual, in which the blessing of the palms and the procession are integrated.

In the same way, the three orders in the PRG integrate the blessing and the procession. The orders contain twenty-one prayers (ten of which are blessings of the palms) and eighteen antiphons. None of the prayers is directly adopted from the early Carolingian period. At the same time, however, none of them deals with a (theological) theme that is not found in earlier periods.

The PRG contains prayers that have an unmistakable Gallican character. One of the prayers borrows from Bede's homily for Palm Sunday. Another prayer occurring in the Gellone Sacramentary from Septimania (i.e., the southeast of France) is identical to a prayer that is found in one of the Old Spanish books (a mutual influence is likely). The majority of the prayers do not, however, refer to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The prayers that have Noah and the dove as a theme borrow their texts from the Roman prayers for Maundy Thursday, just as in the Carolingian period. The blessed branches and olive oil are taken home to expel the Evil One and as a source of salvation for the body and the soul. The Passion is mentioned in some of the prayers and blessings, but none of them thematizes the Passion as a unique theme.

In the PRG, the procession is structured by the antiphons and the hymns which appear in a more or less comparable sequence in all three orders. It begins with antiphons that tell the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Most texts and melodies of the Gregorian chorales are related to the (Old) Roman repertoire. But the Roman liturgy did not commemorate the entry ritually. According to musicologists, the storytelling antiphons are borrowed from the Gallican repertoire (though that repertoire is lost). In the first and third order of service various groups – laity and clergy, the schola, students and children – sing the first six verses of *Gloria laus* and other songs of praise around the crucified Christ. In the last part of the procession, before the mass is celebrated in the main church, the theme of the antiphons is the resurrection of the faithful and their going up to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In the first order another hymn for Palm Sunday, *Magnum salutis gaudium*, is sung on the way to the cathedral. Until now the text of this hymn has been considered as originating in the Ambrosian, that is the Milanese liturgy. The themes in this hymn, however, are related to the prayers of the Gallican tradition for Palm Sunday. The second order of the PRG is different from both the first and the third. The prayer for the blessing of the branches lacks the apotropaic character found in the other

two orders, and the adoration of the cross is absent. This order seems to be more akin to Theodulf's theological vision on the palm ritual than the others.

## 4 Results: Historical considerations

The palm ritual came into existence in Jerusalem in the fourth and fifth centuries. From there it was introduced into Spain, as late as the end of the seventh century: Isidore makes no allusion to a palm ritual, and he does not mention the central theme of the Old Spanish liturgy of the palm ritual, the *sacrificium laudis*. In Gaul, the blessing of the palms and the procession show a separate development. The blessing of the palms and the olive oil is an old tradition, already known in the *Missal of Bobbio*. The first descriptions of a procession on Palm Sunday, with the specific objects belonging to it, were provided by Angilbert and Theodulf in the early ninth century. Both descriptions contain elements that can also be found in the Old Spanish tradition. Their descriptions have influenced the palm ritual in the Carolingian empire by introducing the procession, not merely as a stational procession as in the older times (for example in Metz), but also as a procession that shows the specific characteristics of the commemoration of Palm Sunday.

The form of the ritual in the PRG, where my research period ended, greatly resembles the form practiced in Jerusalem in the fifth century. However, the theological reflections show great differences and changing views in the course of that period. In the PRG the ritual is an amalgam of older elements: the Gallican theme of the meal in Bethany, the Old Spanish theme of the *sacrificium laudis*, and the apotropaic character of the blessing of the palms, all combined in the PRG. Despite its heterogeneous character the palm ritual has remained almost unchanged until 1955.

## 5 Conclusion

The method I have chosen for my research reveals that time and again new interpretations were given to the palm ritual, and new themes are introduced, sometimes without any connection with the commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. One of these themes is the song of praise, Glory, laud and honor, the starting point of this study.