



## PSALMS 113-118: QUALIFIED PRAISE?

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Psalms 113-118, the last six of those we are studying this week, appear as a group in the synagogue liturgy, where they are known as ‘Hallel’, usually translated as ‘praise’. Some worshippers view these as triumphalist and sing them to rather bombastic tunes. But careful analysis of the texts and their background brings a more nuanced and satisfying reading.

Most of what we know – or think we know – about how psalms were used in the Temple is derived from rabbinic texts redacted long after the sacrificial cult had ended, and conditioned by the way the psalms were employed in the early synagogue. But there is evidence of some degree of continuity, albeit of a limited kind.<sup>1</sup>

### Hallel

Hallel is first referred to in rabbinic literature in the context of the Passover Haggadah, the description of the Exodus recited at the ritual meal instituted in Temple times that is held round the family dinner table each Pesach eve. It was later included also in the morning services of the three pilgrimage festivals, as well as on Hanukah and New Moon.

The name ‘hallel’ is used also for other parts of the liturgy. Pss 145-150, the last six chapters of the book, were recommended by rabbinical writers as preliminaries to the morning service, so that the pious would ‘complete hallel each morning’. They may have meant the entire biblical book, but the opening words of Ps 145 are *Tehilah ledavid*, ‘praise of [or perhaps ‘for’] David’, so this may be a source of the term ‘Hallel’, and indeed of the Hebrew name of the book. Both Pss 113-118 and 145-150 happen to contain six chapters.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rabbinic texts argue that Pss 120-134 were read by Levites on the fifteen stairs that led from the public area to the Court of the Israelites (M Middot 2:5), seven others were used by Levites on different days of the week (M Tamid 7:4), Ps 100 was associated with thanksgiving offerings (BT Shevu’ot 15b), and Ps 105 was read with the twice-daily Tamid (continual) offering (*Seder Olam Rabbah* 14). All these found their way into the synagogue liturgy. So too did a possibly earlier custom of reading the entire book daily, weekly or over some other time period. The book’s division into 150 chapters perhaps relates to the Palestinian practice of reading the Torah in a triennial cycle of 150 weekly portions, and its five parts to those of the Torah, which points equally to a cyclic reading pattern. Besides such formal readings, some liturgical texts consist of collages of psalmic phrases or verses, and others of elements from several biblical books, ensuring that Psalms, although present, do not predominate.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 136, recited on Sabbath and festival mornings and in the Passover Haggadah, was known to talmudic writers as *Hallel hagadol*, ‘the great Hallel’ (BT Pesahim 118a), a name no longer used. The talmudic name of our own group, Pss 113-118, is *Hallel mitsri*, ‘Egyptian hallel’.

The root letters of the name Hallel, *h'll'*, that appear also in the word *Halleluyah*, rendered 'praise the Lord', and in the name *tehilim*, suggest that these psalms focus on 'praise' rather than the other modes of rabbinic prayer, usually defined as petition and thanks. In fact the texts contain all three genres. Our perception of Hallel is further complicated by the fact that the root has other associations: with 'lightness', 'halo' or 'shimmering', and thence with 'shouting', 'celebration' or 'song', and ultimately also with 'boasting' or 'bragging'.<sup>3</sup> More oddly, it came to mean 'to behave madly' or even maliciously,<sup>4</sup> perhaps as an extension of enthusiastic praise or boasting.<sup>5</sup> We will return to these definitions later, as we explore the Hallel texts further.

The precise composition of Hallel and the time of its recital on Pesach were disputed. Shammai in the first century applied the name to Ps 113 alone, while for Hillel it included 113 and 114.<sup>6</sup> These first two of the six psalms that now comprise Hallel were believed to have been recited by Moses and the Israelites at the Exodus or at the time of the first paschal sacrifice in Egypt,<sup>7</sup> and thereafter in the Temple.<sup>8</sup> All were subsequently recited by various prophets at times of divine rescue,<sup>9</sup> although Pesach was the primary occasion.

The remaining psalms in the group, Pss 115 to 118, were added subsequently to the Passover-eve liturgy, but only after the meal and the Grace that follows it. The addition was made perhaps because the existing liturgy seemed rather short. Praise was the central feature of the Pesach Haggadah, towards which the entire text recited before the meal was leading. It was decided to continue the series, whatever the texts' relevance. Talmudic writers sought to justify the choice, but identified theological principles that were rabbinic rather than biblical,<sup>10</sup> thereby undermining their argument. They stopped before Ps 119, the longest in the book, perhaps because Ps 118 was sufficiently climactic, as we shall see.

### Abbreviating Hallel – Why was it Shortened?

Those who added to Pss 115-118 to the original group of Pss 113-114 did so with reservations. The full span is read on the opening days of Pesach, as well as on Sukkot, Hanukah and Shavuot. But only a shortened version is used on the intermediate and concluding days of Pesach and on New Moons.

The shortening did not involve removing one or more of the psalms in their entirety, but omitting the first eleven verses of Pss 115 and 116. Seven verses remain of the first psalm and eight of the second. Since the omission is only occasional, the verses appear in smaller type in most prayer books. Did these verses not match the mood of the intermediate and last days of Pesach and New Moon, or were other factors involved? It has been argued that the parts now omitted may have been later additions, but since they are now part of the canon, their omission in synagogue under certain circumstances must be seen as a shortening.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 21:14, Ecclesiastes 2:2.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 1: 17, 10:13.

<sup>5</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1906) 237-9.

<sup>6</sup> Tosefta Pesahim 10:9, and see the discussion in Louis Finkelstein, 'The Origin of the Hallel', *Hebrew Union College Annual* XXII (1950-1) 324-6.

<sup>7</sup> BT Pesahim 117a.

<sup>8</sup> M Pesahim 5:7; BT Pesahim 116b.

<sup>9</sup> BT Pesahim 117a.

<sup>10</sup> BT Pesahim 118a.

<sup>11</sup> Finkelstein, 336-7.

Talmudic discussion on this strange abbreviation is suggestive. We read how Rav, after returning to Babylon from the Holy Land where he had studied, once heard Hallel being recited on the New Moon (or at least its first two chapters), although he felt it should not. He refrained from interrupting only when he heard parts being omitted,<sup>12</sup> but we are not told if the readers omitted them so that the whole of Hallel would not be read, or because these particular verses made them uncomfortable. Rav was clearly satisfied that Hallel was in this way made imperfect, and was not concerned by the subject-matter. Since a shortened Hallel is less sacred, another text reports, it is permissible to interrupt it to greet a friend, although not during a full reading.<sup>13</sup>

Another source argues that Hallel is shortened after the first two days of Pesach as a sign of mourning for events at the Red Sea.<sup>14</sup> This comment forms part of a longer debate: some texts record God silencing the angels in heaven who began joining the Israelite song of triumph, saying that ‘my creatures are in danger of dying in the sea’, meaning the Israelites. Others, basing themselves on the view that the Israelites were already safe, suggest that God’s instruction not to join in the song because ‘my creatures are drowning in the sea’ referred to the Egyptians.<sup>15</sup>

It seems not previously to have been suggested that the omission of 22 verses might be based on the associations of that number. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Those 22 letters were God’s instrument of creation, an idea familiar from the morning prayer that begins ‘Blessed be he who spoke and the world was’, and also from several rabbinic texts. For instance, God ‘looked into the Torah’ when creating the world as though checking his designs;<sup>16</sup> indeed, the alphabet was itself involved in creation;<sup>17</sup> and individual letters competed for the privilege of beginning the process.<sup>18</sup> One Talmudic passage argues that the fact that Adam was created alone demonstrates that each person represents a whole world.<sup>19</sup> Omitting 22 verses from Hallel symbolizes the ‘world’ that was unmade by the death of each individual, even if that person was an enemy.

For an example of a biblical text in which the number of words is significant see the way the seventh day of creation is described in three clauses each of seven words.<sup>20</sup> For a liturgical text in which the number of verbal units is significant, see the 21 words in the first sentence after the morning Shema, which match the 21 biblical verses of the Shema. The 248 words in the Shema, which for some rabbinic writers symbolize the parts of the human body, are in this way echoed in the following paragraph, beginning with the affirmation ‘true’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> BT Ta’anit 28b.

<sup>13</sup> BT Berakhot 14a.

<sup>14</sup> BT Megillah 10b.

<sup>15</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* 3:32, 6:12 n. 60; and see BT Sanhedrin 39b, Exodus Rabbah 23:7, *Tanhuma B Beshalah* 13, *Tanhuma Beshallah* 10, *Mekhilta Shirata* 1 (ed. Lauterbach, vol. 2, p. 6; Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea*, 74-5), and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, supplement 2:8.

<sup>16</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1; Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:3.

<sup>17</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 1:10.

<sup>18</sup> *Alfabet de rabbi Akiva*, and Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:5-8, 5:5, nn. 10-12.

<sup>19</sup> M Sanhedrin 4:5.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 2:2, 3a; I am grateful to Andrew Levy for referring me to Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part I: From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 61.

<sup>21</sup> This reasoning, if correct, was unknown to the talmudic writers who argued that the full version should be used on a day with a large number of Temple offerings, and the shorter one on days with fewer. On Sukkot the number of offerings increased daily, while on Pesach it remained the same (BT Arakin 10b), they point out, ignoring the fact that the full form is read also on the opening day or days of Pesach. The same text then explains that no Hallel is read on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur because these are days when God decides the fate of humanity, with the books of judgement lying open before him, and ‘How can Israel sing at such a time?’ The writers seem not to have considered the crossing of the Red Sea as a time of danger, however. The text goes on to ask why Hallel is missing on Purim, and reply that it celebrates a redemption that occurred outside the land of Israel. If so, they go on to ask, why is the crossing of the Red Sea, which was outside the land, celebrated with a full Hallel? The question of location arose only once the Israelites had entered the land, so in the wilderness years the Hallel remained appropriate, they conclude. The text does not discuss why Hallel is shortened also on the New Moon, which commemorates no rescue at all, a question to which we shall return.

## The Liturgical Setting

In the Passover Haggadah, the first two psalms of Hallel are the climax to the readings before the meal, and are preceded by a summons to praise God. On all other occasions, when Hallel is read without interruption following the morning service, the reading is introduced by a brief rabbinic blessing. Its antiquity is evident from the fact that one Ashkenazi setting for Ps 113 resembles a ninth-century Christian chant.<sup>22</sup> Ps 114 has attracted some memorable musical bombast, although a more ancient chant exists for the lines from v. 5.

Pss 115 and 116 are read relatively quickly, the first part often recited, and the remaining verses sung. Ps 117, the shortest chapter in the Bible, is read or sung without change, although one modern composer has risen to the challenge it presents. Ps 118 is transformed by repetitions and antiphonal reading into a complex dialogic text. It opens and closes with the classic statement of psalmic praise that forms the basis of Ps 136, comprising a series of short introductory statements, each followed by 'for his loving-kindness is forever'. In most rites the prayer leader recites each of the 4 opening lines of Ps 118 to a melody specific to the festival, after which the congregation repeats the first of the four lines. Verses 5-20 are then recited or chanted without repetition, verses 21-24 are each repeated once, and the two clauses of verse 25 repeated twice each, making a total of four readings. The last four verses, 26-29, are sung, and repeated in the Ashkenazi rite, the last line being identical to the first of the psalm.

On Pesach eve, Hallel is followed by a liturgical statement of praise and then by Ps 136, and in morning services by a rabbinic blessing resembling that with which the sequence began.

## The Narrative

The most striking feature of Hallel is clearly Ps 118, which Jonathan Magonet has correctly shown to comprise several voices, as though accompanying an ancient ritual drama.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that Hallel contains a dramatic core, of which this psalm is merely the climax.

In all rites this last psalm receives special treatment, talmudic texts referring to various patterns of repetition. These are mostly described in the context of discussions of Sukkot, which is probably its primary locus, rather than of Passover.<sup>24</sup> These patterns of recital do not necessarily coincide with the ones in use today, but they do reflect a similar concern with narrative shape. Ps 118 may therefore have been an early form of Hallel, independent of Pss 113 and 114, and reserved for Sukkot. If so, perhaps Pss 115-117 were added in order to bridge between them, even though they do not carry the same narrative theme.

On all morning readings of Hallel, as distinct from Passover eve, the framing blessings underline its formal unity. But on Sukkot the dramatic quality of Hallel is highlighted, and not only in the context of Ps 118. Sukkot's key symbols are the sukkah itself, the hut or 'tabernacle' in which Jews live for the seven days of the feast, and the bouquet of 'The Four Kinds' consisting of the Lulav and Etrog, two sprigs of willow and three of myrtle, which are held by worshippers during the recital of Hallel. The Mishnah explains how it is 'waved' or 'shaken' at Ps 118, vv. 1-4, 25 and 29, in each case pointing in the cardinal directions and then up and down, delineating a circle around each worshipper, or even a sphere.<sup>25</sup> This defined area may relate to the reduced zone of influence suggested by the leafy hut in which Jews live during the festival, which is built before the

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<sup>22</sup> According to Francis Cohen, 'Hallel', *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York 1901, vol. 6, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> I understand that he re-enacted this drama here some years ago, with you all as participants.

<sup>24</sup> M Sukkah 3:11, BT Sukkah 38b, and J Shabbat 16:1.

<sup>25</sup> M Sukkah 3:9.

feast and destroyed after it, emphasizing each person's vulnerability to the elements. Waving or shaking the palm branch makes a sound resembling the wind in palm trees that precedes rain, for which a prayer is recited on the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly, after the seventh and last day of Sukkot itself. Sukkot, which falls in September / October, marks the end of one agricultural cycle and the start of another, and each of the items in the bouquet needs water, making the waving itself a physical prayer.

The cyclic nature of this Sukkot ritual is represented also by circuits of the synagogue each morning, culminating in seven circuits on the seventh and last day of Sukkot, known as Hoshanah Rabbah – 'the great "Save Us"'. The words 'save us' appear in Ps 118:25, suggesting that the psalm might be a circuit prayer.

Ps 118 is not the only text with narrative undercurrents, since the entire Hallel cycle, I would argue, reflects the central features of the biblical itinerary of exile, redemption and return, culminating in the rebuilding of the Temple.

Hallel opens with Ps 113, which begins by addressing God's 'servants', the same word as 'slaves' in the Exodus context. A major theme of the Passover haggadah is the transition from servitude (*avodah*) to Pharaoh to the service (*avodah*) of God, and the paradox of using the same word for each is perhaps implicitly underlined here, although there is here no reference to human masters, only to God enthroned on high and looking down on the world, lifting up the poor to sit with princes, and making a barren woman the mother of sons. God's control over the vertical movement from low to high might be related to the end of the previous psalm (112) which declares the fate of the wicked, even if that text is not itself included.

Ps 114 epitomizes Hallel Mitsri, alluding to the crossing of the Red Sea in terms that recall conception and birth – the Hebrew *har*, 'hill', also means 'pregnant'. The fleeing of the Jordan is more obviously closely related to Joshua's entry into the land than the exit from Egypt via the Red Sea, but mythic conflation is matched by the transformation of flint into water in the last line.

Ps 115 must be viewed in two parts, since verses 1-11 are omitted at the end of Pesach and on New Moon. In the opening sequence God is urged to act so that he is not mistaken for an inert and ineffective idol, which seems to be more of a threat than an expression of praise. But if this is the reason the verses are sometimes omitted, why are they ever included? The second sequence is indeed devoted to praise, but threatens in the penultimate verse: 'dead men don't praise God', as though to explain why the speaker must not be allowed to die. This polemical and petitionary material seems remote from the praise suggested by the title of the sequence.

Ps 116, which is again divided after verse 11, thanks God for rescue from death, but ends with the admission that 'I said, in my anger, all men are false', suggesting that this is now seen as an error. The opening words 'Not for us', have been read as a complaint that the Exodus has not been repeated for us<sup>26</sup> – far from praise or thanks, therefore. The second part announces the intention to worship in the court of God's house in Jerusalem, the Temple thus making its first appearance here. Hallel was known to be recited in the Temple and, as the sole place where offerings may be made, is where those wishing to praise God must go. Liturgical references to the Temple remain a way of explaining why God is irresponsive to prayer: it was seen as the sole location for divinely ordered worship, which is why regaining the Temple, if only in the imagination, is a way of returning perhaps to a child-like state in which everything can be put right.

Ps 117, which is the beginning of a possibly Temple scene in which praise is sung, is universal in scope.

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<sup>26</sup> *Midrash on Psalms* 44:1.

Ps 118, the last, seems to describe a Temple-based ritual sequence, culminating in arrival in the sacred structure. Verses 1-4 are a call to praise. Verses 5-13 describe a near defeat that is barely survived. Verses 14-18 are about surviving with God's help, and verses 19-20 depict arriving at the 'gates of righteousness', perhaps as predicted in Ps 116:19. Verses 21-29, which are repeated individually, may re-enact entering the Temple. The reference to a rejected building stone in v. 22 suggests both a structure and the worshipping community, illustrating the multiple layers of the poem. Verse 24 focuses on present intimacy with God, although the petitions of v. 25 suggest that the Temple and the joy are illusory. Particularly haunting is the implied rebuke of 'Dead men don't praise God' (Ps 118:18), which highlights the fact that the covenant has not yet been fulfilled. This psalm, and Hallel as a whole, therefore concludes with a processional entry into the Temple together with a sacrificial animal. The repetition of the first verse: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for his kindness is forever', could be seen as a complaint or accusation, in view of the fact that the Temple is still unrestored.

A victorious return is suggested by the words 'this is the day when God acted' (Ps 118:24), perhaps recalling the conquest of the land, while 'open for me the gates of righteousness' (Ps 118:19) suggests arrival at the Temple or Jerusalem. This arrival looks back to an idyllic past and the now lost sanctuary in Jerusalem, and forward to its eventual messianic rebuilding and a national homecoming. Exodus is linked to the Temple most obviously by the biblical narrative – the Exodus led to the conquest of the land and Jerusalem. But the Temple is implicitly embedded much earlier in the Exodus narrative. The closing lines of the Song of the Sea, sung immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea, describe how God will bring his people to 'the mountain of your inheritance', meaning Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> The targum of Onkelos finds a still earlier allusion to the Temple in the Song, in the word *ve'anvehu*, usually translated 'and glorify him', but by him as a promise to build him a *neveh*, 'home', in the form of the Temple.<sup>28</sup> The Red Sea begins a journey that leads not only to the Land, but out of it into exile and ultimately back into it in messianic times. That entire process is encapsulated by these psalms, which were chosen for liturgical use because they recall events at the Red Sea, as well as successive subsequent rescues celebrated by biblical prophets.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusions

Hallel therefore offers far more than the praise its name is taken to suggest, and perhaps spans some of the other definitions mentioned for the root letters *h'l'l'*. The images of light and brilliance are obviously relevant in the context of the sacred narrative, as is a sense of triumph in relation to the messianic advent, designed to encourage the downtrodden. Pride and madness are not

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<sup>27</sup> Exodus 15:17.

<sup>28</sup> See Onkelos on Exodus 15:2, and BT Shabbat 133b for the conventional reading.

<sup>29</sup> A still earlier narrative element of the Hallel narrative emerges in the prayer added to the Amidah and to Grace after meals on the main festivals and on New Moon. In this text, known as *Ya'aleh veyavo*, several elements of the sacred narrative – messiah, Jerusalem and the people – are listed in that order. But at the head of the list appear 'our forefathers', the patriarchs, who do not seem to be present in Hallel. But if one reads reference in the closing verse of Ps 113, to the transformation of a barren woman into the mother of children, as an allusion to Sarah's and Rachel's difficulties in conceiving, or perhaps to Hannah, who late in life conceived the prophet Samuel, anointer of David, the founder of the messianic line, then Hallel spans the full sacred narrative.

A further parallel text to Hallel is the Grace after Meals which is inserted between Ps 114 and 115 on Passover eve. In one talmudic text Rabbi Nahman dates the four blessings of the Grace respectively to events around the Exodus and the exile from the Holy Land. The first blessing was composed when manna began to fall, the second at the entry into the land when it ceased to fall, the third at the building of the Temple and the fourth at the fall of Betar, the last town held by Jews in the Bar Kochba revolt (BT Berakhot 48b). The end of Grace then glances towards the messianic restoration, just as Hallel employs the past as a lens through which to view the future. Grace therefore fits precisely into the narrative framework of Hallel, filling the space between the Exodus in Ps 114 and the arrival in Jerusalem in Ps 118.

so evident, unless we consider the dangers of national enthusiasm.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the entry into Jerusalem is identified in this way as a fantasy.

When Hallel was transposed from the Temple to the synagogue, sacrifice was replaced by memory, and processional ceremonies by words. It also offered the sacred narrative from the patriarchs to Egypt, freedom and the Temple court, ultimately offering a dream of the Temple recreated in language. The idea of this sanctuary, born at the Red Sea and made real after the Exodus, survives as the dream of a future home. This narrative is suited to the pilgrimage festivals and Hanukah, with their Temple focus, but not to the High Holy Days or to Purim, in which the Temple plays no central role and when Hallel is not read. Hallel is abbreviated on New Moon perhaps out of sorrow for the Temple, where the start of the month was announced and celebrated. The Temple's absence would make any reference to it particularly poignant.

Most importantly, the traditional practice of omitting 22 verses hints that victory is tarnished by the death of enemies, since each human, even an enemy, has the potential to create a world, as the world was created with 22 letters.

Reading Hallel in this way shows how it both praises God for bringing his servants (or perhaps his slaves?) to their home, and warns against triumphalism. As Rashi says of the first verse of Genesis, the Torah begins with the creation of the earth in order to show that land is held not by right, but by God's will, which is influenced at least partly by human morality. To see this we must reach beyond *wissenschaftlich* liturgical studies that focus on the separateness of each text, and cast our net wider in the Sea of Torah. The deeper relevance of these psalms is revealed when they are read together.

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<sup>30</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:17, 10:13.