

THE STRATEGIC PLACEMENT OF THE “HALLELU-YAH” PSALMS WITHIN THE PSALTER

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I. INTRODUCTION

Because of its universal usage across numerous languages, it might be supposed that the exclamation “*Hallelu-YAH*” appears regularly and in a variety of places throughout the OT and NT. But this expressive term occurs only in one book of the OT and one book of the NT. Only in the book of Revelation after the defeat of all enemies of the LORD’s kingdom of righteousness and peace does this NT book conclude with multitudes shouting “*Hallelu-YAH*” (Rev 19:1–6). Correspondingly, only in the book of Psalms and only in the concluding three psalms of Book IV along with two climactic groupings and one lone psalm in Book V does this triumphant praise word appear (Book IV: Psalms 104–106; Book V: Psalms 111–117; 135; 146–150).

II. ANALYSIS OF “*Hallelu-YAH*” IN SCRIPTURE

Analysis of the occurrences of this word in the Psalter displays strong evidence of deliberate placement by the final editor(s) of the Psalter. This structural arrangement merits further consideration.¹

First to be noted is the pattern of the term’s usage in the final three psalms of Book IV (Psalms 104, 105, 106):²

Psalm 104 ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*”;

Psalm 105 ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*”;

Psalm 106 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*.”

This arrangement would not seem significant if it were not that this pattern finds its echo twice in the initial appearances of the term in Book V. Two united triads of “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms reflect the arrangement in the triad of Book IV, though with a distinctive reversal of order in the first case:

Psalm 111 begins with “*Hallelu-YAH*”;

Psalm 112 begins with “*Hallelu-YAH*”;

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¹ Cf. the excursus by Erich Zenger on “The Function of the ‘*Hallelujahs*’ in the Redaction of the Psalter,” in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 39–41.

² The following placements reflect the arrangement of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

Psalm 113 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*.”

The next triad follows, with only the classic “When Israel came out of Egypt” of Psalm 114 intervening.³ This time, the grouping of three psalms follows exactly the order of the original pattern as set in Psalms 104–106:

Psalm 115 ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 116 ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 117 begins with “*Hallelu YAHWEH*” and ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*.”⁴

Whether or not this specific analysis of the *Hallelu-YAH* sequence is affirmed, a clear intention behind the arrangements of the final editor(s) seems fairly certain.⁵

The fourth and final grouping of “*Hallelu-YAHP*” psalms is more straightforward. But its positioning at the climax of the Psalter lends further support to the prospect of intentional placement by the final editor of the Psalter. Each of the five concluding psalms of Book V follows an identical pattern:

Psalm 146 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 147 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 148 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 149 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAHP*”;

Psalm 150 begins and ends with “*Hallelu-YAH*.”

What more fitting climax to this “Book of Prayers and Praises” could be imagined? Though this final grouping does not appear as a triad of psalms, its reflection of the pattern featuring “*Hallelu-YAHP*” at the beginning and the ending of a psalm clearly echoes the earlier design found at the conclusion of Book IV and the earlier groupings of Book V. Once more, a deliberate editorial arrangement seems almost certain.

³ Significant discussion has surrounded the precise layout of the *Hallelu-YAHs* in these psalms. Divergent manuscripts and versions suggest different arrangements. See in particular the article of G. T. M. Prinsloo, “Unit Delimitation in the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118): An Evaluation of Different Traditions,” in Marjo C. A. Korpel and Josef M. Oesch, eds., *Unit Delimitation in Biblical Hebrew and Northwest Semitic Literature* (Assen, Netherlands: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2003) 232–63. Prinsloo notes three main traditions regarding the delimitation of Psalms 113–118, with one of these traditions seeing Psalms 114–115 as a single psalm that ends in *Hallelu-YAH* (p. 246).

⁴ *Hallelu YAHWEH* in Ps 117:1 is not identical with *Hallelu-YAH*, but the meaning and function of the two phrases are the same. Both phrases mean “All of you, praise *YAHWEH*,” and both summon the people to a united praise of *Yahweh*.

⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3* 3, recognize Psalms 111–117 as a collection of “*Hallelu-YAHP*” psalms, but include Psalm 118 in the grouping. This analysis of the structure fails to note the coupling of Messianic Psalm 118 with Torah Psalm 119. As a consequence, as these authors themselves indicate, Psalm 119 “feels in its context like an erratic block” (p. 4). Their effort to “frame” Psalms 113–118 with Psalms 111/112 and 119 violates the unity of both clearly structured “*Hallelu-YAHP*” triads (Psalms 111–113; 115–117).

A second major consideration regarding the placement of these “*Hallelu-YAH*” groupings has to do with their function in the larger structures of the Psalter. Each “*Hallelu-YAH*” grouping concludes a section of the Psalter as it leads the reader to a climax of praise-expression. Obviously the last three psalms of Book IV (Psalms 104, 105, 106) bring this penultimate Book of the Psalter to its climax. The two triads in Psalms 111 through 117 may be viewed as a single unit with Psalm 114, a non-“*Hallelu-YAH*” psalm, as its focal center. In Jewish tradition, the bulk of this collection is designated as “The *Hallel* of Egypt,” due to the reference to Israel’s coming “out of Egypt” in Psalm 114. Despite the absence of “*Hallelu-YAH*” in this psalm, it nonetheless serves as the focal pinnacle of this collection, with three “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms preceding and three following this pivotal center.

This grouping of seven psalms (Psalms 111–117) immediately precedes the third coupling of a messianic psalm with a Torah psalm in the Psalter (Psalms 118, 119; cf. Psalms 1, 2, and Psalms 18, 19), which marks the conclusion of the first major section of Book V.⁶ After a total absence of the exclamatory “*Hallelu-YAH*” throughout the OT apart from the concluding triad of the Psalter’s Book IV, this collection of six “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms with its focal center reflecting the deliverance from Egypt strikes the reader with the full force of its exhortation to “Praise the LORD.”

The final grouping of “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms (Psalms 146–150) clearly intends to serve as the climactic conclusion of the whole of the Psalter. Five times in succession, each of these psalms opens and closes with a triumphant “*Hallelu-YAH*.” The final editor(s) of the Psalter lifts the eyes of *Yahweh*’s worshipping people above the strife and struggle of the first two Books of the Psalter (Psalms 1–72), above the painful experience of the exile as vividly depicted in Book III (Psalms 73–89; cf. Psalms 74, 79, 80, 89), and even beyond the repeated declaration of “*Yahweh Malak*” (“The LORD reigns”) in a context of national exile as affirmed in Book IV (Psalms 90–106). By the ten-fold “*Hallelu-YAH*” concluding Book V, the celebrative consummation of the Psalter has come. The LORD God Omnipotent reigns.

III. CONCLUSION

So what may be concluded in view of the strategic positioning of the collections of “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms within the Psalter? Three observations may be offered:

First, a movement, a flow, may clearly be detected within the overall structure of the Psalter that leads to the “*Hallelu-YAH*” endnote. Confrontation with the enemies of *Yahweh*’s kingdom of righteousness and peace characterizes the opening two Books of the Psalter. The devastation of the nation prevails in the third Book

⁶ Cf. Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) 2, who proposes that Psalms 1 and 2, 18–21, and 118 with 119 represent three instances of deliberate joining of a Torah psalm with a messianic psalm.

(cf. Psalms 74, 79, 80, 89). As a consequence, the nation has no kingship, no temple, no priesthood, no sacrifices. Yet in the opening phrase of Book IV the psalmist can triumphantly declare:

Lord, *YOU* have been our dwelling place through all generations ... from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Ps 90:1, 2).

Climactically, in Book V the psalmist leads the worshipping community to the heights of consummative celebration.⁷ The people may shout with all the enthusiasm they can muster, “*Hallelu-YAH*.” Finally, the climax has been reached. The redemptive-historical circumstance depicted in the Psalter has moved from Confrontation (Books I and II) to Devastation (Book III) to Maturation (Book IV) to Consummation (Book V). The reserving of “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms to the very end of Book IV and conclusions of Book V underscores this deliberate progression across the Psalter.

Second, fresh insight may be gained regarding structural elements of the Psalter by further analysis of the major substance of the psalms and not merely by incidental elements. Earlier efforts at detecting structure in the Psalter have concentrated on the titles, the “seams,” and certain catch-phrases.⁸ But the role of the “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms in providing structure for the Psalter encourages a search for other groupings or structures based on themes of substance contained in the actual message of the psalms.

Third, encouragement may be found for interpreting the various individual psalms in their context within the Psalter rather than viewing each psalm in splendid isolation or depending principally on genre considerations.⁹ If multiple “*Hallelu-YAH*” psalms are structurally connected with one another, their fullest understanding may be achieved by considering their meaning in the context of Psalter groupings that bind the various psalms together. This principle of contextual analysis in view of structural considerations may serve to enrich Psalter studies significantly.¹⁰

⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3* 2, note the dominance of an exilic perspective in Book IV and restoration after exile in Book V.

⁸ Cf. Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). Wilson discusses editorial shaping by the designation of authors in the titles of the psalms and underscores the significance of the “seams” joining the various Books of the Psalter as a significant structural element (pp. 157, 163).

⁹ Cf. the opening statements of Wilson, *Editing* 1–6, which made a significant contribution to initiating a movement from concentration on genre studies to greater consideration of the final form of the Psalter’s structure. Note also among others Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Cf. particularly the commentary work of Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); idem, *Psalms 3*. These authors indicate that they regard the Psalter “as a successively developed, but nonetheless compositionally structured entity whose form gives an additional dimension of meaning to each individual psalm” (*Psalms 2* xi). Regarding the *Hallelu-YAH* psalms of Book V, Zenger (*Psalms 3* 40) detects three blocks of psalms: “Psalms 107–117 (beginning with the *Hodu* Psalm 107 and ending with the *Hallelujah* triad, Psalms 115–117); Psalms 118–135 (beginning with the *Hodu* Psalm 118 and ending with the *Hallelujah* Psalm 135); Psalms 136–150 (beginning with the *Hodu* Psalm 136 and ending with the *Hallelujah* composition of Psalms 146–150).” This perspective on a macro-structure for Book V has much to commend it.