



# How to praise God

## A companion guide to Psalms 101–150

“Praise the Lord, brother/sister....” We’ve heard that refrain quite often in recent years, especially among renewal movements, whether evangelical or charismatic. But it should not be exclusive to these movements as if praise were optional for the majority of the faithful. It is not so in biblical spirituality: “Praise is due to [God]” (Ps 65[64]:1) at all times and is meant to be sung not only by the congregation of the faithful, but by all flesh and by all nations. Praise of God is the “alpha and omega” of biblical

prayer, and if there is one place in Scripture that can help us to learn how to praise God in a fitting manner, Psalms 101–150 makes for a natural choice.

For practical reasons, we have split our reflection on the psalms into three installments covering fifty psalms each. But as we have seen from the very beginning, the editorial or, if you will, canonical division, is rather into five sections or books of unequal length and number of psalms. The closing of the first four sections is well marked with a formal bless-

ing and the response “Amen.”

So in this third installment bearing on the last fifty psalms, our study overlaps the end of book four ([90]–106) and all of book five (107–150). Let us first go straight to the heart of the matter by considering the dominant, actually overwhelming theme of this section: praise of God.

## A paean of praise

The main characteristic of these fifty psalms is the prominence given to praise. For one thing, this section contains all the alleluias—25 altogether—of the Hebrew Scriptures. If you’re looking for an alleluia in the Old Testament, this is the place you should go—more precisely to Ps 102:19[18] for the first hit and then read through to Ps 150 to find the remaining twenty-four. Although we find approximately a hundred songs and canticles in the Old Testament, none of them contains an alleluia. The only other alleluias to be found in Scripture belong to one single chapter in the New Testament (Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6), the last of these references having inspired Handel’s famous *Hallelujah*, which is part of his famous *Messiah* (end of second part).

*Alleluia* in Hebrew is one word, albeit a compound: the first half, *hallelu*, is the imperative second-

person plural of the verb *hallel*: hence, “praise.” The latter part of the word, *yah*, is the abbreviated form of *Yahweh* and the object of the verb *hallelu*: hence, “praise the Lord.” These 25 alleluias punctuate the whole collection, mostly in opening or concluding verses of psalms, and make for a resounding summons to praise addressed to Israel, in the first place, and then to all those who will recite, sing, and pray the psalms through all generations, from all horizons and denominations.

In addition to the alleluias being exclusive to this series of psalms, the section also holds the hymns so dear to the Jews and deservedly called “the Hallels” (“praises”). Jewish tradition has identified two of them. The first one is made of Pss 114–118 and is called the “Full Hallel,” or at times the “Egyptian Hallel” for the reference to the exodus in its opening verse: “When Israel went out from Egypt...” (Ps 114[113]:1). The second one is called the “Great Hallel,” a traditional title for Ps 136[135], known mainly for its refrain, “for his steadfast love endures forever,” recurring in each of its 26 verses.

A last and decisive confirmation about the importance of praise comes from the total occurrences of the verb *hallel*—all forms included—65 in Pss 101–150, about three quarters

of the total for the whole Psalter (89) and more than half of all occurrences (122) in the Hebrew Scripture. The verb has a high liturgical connotation, and the praise of God definitely accounts for the main theme in Pss 101–150, best summarized in Ps 145[144]: “Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable” (vv. 2-3). Without any exaggeration, one can say that Pss 101–150 form “the holy of holies” of praising in the Old Testament.

### **What else in the collection?**

The prominence given to praise is no reason to downplay the rest of the collection and its other themes. As we will see in “Rediscovering hidden treasures: The responsorial psalms,” the smaller collection made of the fifteen Songs of Ascents is well-unified and of great significance in terms of its pilgrim spirituality and its amazingly profound theological insights. It also tells us a lot about the likely liturgical role of psalms in the life of biblical Israel and about the importance given to Jerusalem and its Temple.

Out of the 50 psalms, 22 can be labeled “orphan,” that is, deprived of any reference to author. For the

remaining 28, it might be interesting to note that, apart from one psalm (Ps 127) where attribution is made to Solomon, they are all attributed to David, which makes this collection very special compared to the three previous collections that displayed a great variety of attributions. Yet, the stature of David in Pss 101–150 appears to be primarily as a singer of God’s praises and as a spokesperson for pilgrims to, and lovers of, Jerusalem, rather than as the anointed one (only three mentions: Pss 105:15; 132:10, 17). As opposed to the first 100 psalms, the headings of this section referring to David make no reference whatsoever to specific life situations and circumstances otherwise attested in David’s story told in 1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1–2.

One last observation on one of the curiosities of this set of 50 psalms: It holds, within the narrowest sequence of three psalms, both the shortest (Ps 117 with only two verses) and the longest (Ps 119 with 176 verses). Appraisal of these two psalms may vary considerably but the pedagogical and spiritual value of both remains momentous.

In all its brevity, Ps 117 makes a perfect summary of praise and can easily be memorized so as to be used as a kind of “mantra” for prayer: “Praise the Lord, all you

nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!” As for Ps 119, we find ourselves at the other end of the spectrum with regard to length. To be sure, the psalm is not meant to be memorized and even less so to be recited in one go. Each strophe is to be pondered and savored, one strophe at a time, so as to develop ever greater affection and delight for God’s word:

“Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments. Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your custom toward those who love your name” (vv. 119[118], 129-132).

And now, let us start our journey into this “best of” songs of praise and make them become our own melodies to God. **GWT**

## REVELATION A BOOK OF PRAISE?

### ***Singing Alleluia to God and to the Lamb***

*People who think of the book of Revelation only in terms of doom and gloom see their understanding seriously challenged by the mere presence in it of four resounding and jubilant alleluias—the only ones in the whole New Testament (Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6). The skeptics might say “Too little too late,” but such is not the case. The four alleluias celebrate unreservedly God’s final act of salvation and wondrous victory over evil and death, through the Resurrection of Christ. The last three chapters of the book will provide ample illustration of what the new world inaugurated by the Resurrection of Christ means for the future of humankind: marriage feast of the Lamb, reign of the saints with Christ, new heavens and new earth, new Jerusalem where all nations gather to worship God and the Lamb, and paradise regained. That’s more than enough to start singing with all saints in heaven: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev 19:6-7).*