

PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM IN PSALMS

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A study of references to Israel and the nations in the Psalms yields some insights into the intellectual and emotional attitudes of the writers toward the outer and inner worlds. This is especially so with attention to the endings of the five books included within the Book of Psalms, and the endings of the five Halleluyah Psalms (146 – 150).

A word is necessary on the concept of the division of Psalms into five books. The similarity between the pentateuchal structure of the Torah and of the Psalms cannot be ignored. It is beyond the purview of this article to analyze the separation into five books in the Torah or in the Psalms. Suffice it to say that commentators cite a tradition that just as Moses gave Israel five books, so did David give Israel five books.

First, we shall examine the endings of the five books. Then we shall look at the endings of the five Halleluyah Psalms. Then we shall look at the manner in which the two groupings are connected in the *siddur*. .

Book One concludes with Psalm 41, that ends:

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
From everlasting to everlasting.
Amen and Amen.*

In terms of our theme, we notice that here we have reference to Israel. The word for everlasting is "*olam*" which has connotations of both space and time. Both infinity in space and in time could be appropriate in this context.

Book Two concludes with Psalm 72, that ends:

*Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel.
Who only doeth wonderful things.
And blessed be His glorious Name forever,
And let the whole earth be filled with His glory.
Amen and Amen.*

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Again, we have the God of Israel. In this case, the element of universalism comes in with the reference to the "*whole earth*." The Psalmist is not content with God spreading His glory only over Israel.

Book Three ends with Psalm 89:

*Blessed be the Lord for evermore.
Amen and Amen.*

This is a repetition of the ending of Book One. Here Israel is omitted.

Book Four ends with Psalm 106:

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
From everlasting even to everlasting,
And let all the people say: Amen.
Hallelujah.*

The new element here is "*And let all the people say*." Obviously, all the people refers to Israel, not to the nations. Also, the proclamation of "*Hallelujah*" is added.

Book Five ends with Psalm 150:

*Let everything that has breath Praise the Lord.
Hallelujah.*

Here we clearly have a broadening of awareness from Israel to all living things.

When we examine the endings of the five Hallelujah Psalms, we find a similar mixture of national and universal outlooks.

Psalm 146 ends:

*The Lord will reign for ever.
Thy God, O Zion, unto all generations.
Hallelujah.*

It is the God of Zion. "*Unto all generations*" would seem to refer to Jewish generations. Or, could we stretch the concept of generations to all men?

Psalm 147 ends:

*He declares His word unto Jacob,
His statutes and His ordinances unto Israel.
He has not dealt so with any nation,
And as for His ordinances, they have not known them.
Hallelujah.*

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This is a negative attitude towards the nations; only Israel receives God's word.

Psalm 148 ends:

*His glory is above the earth and heaven.
And He has lifted up a horn for His people,
A praise for all His saints.
Even for the children of Israel, a People near unto Him.
Hallelujah.*

Again, we have earth and heaven as the abode of God's glory. But the horn is for His people, and His people is Israel, who are near to Him.

Psalm 149 ends:

*To execute vengeance upon the nations.
Chastisements upon peoples.
To bind their kings with chains,
And their nobles with fetters of iron.
To execute upon them the judgment written.
He is the glory of all His saints.
Hallelujah.*

Vengeance is unmitigated. There is an awareness of other nations, but that awareness is hostile.

Psalm 150 ends:

*All breath will praise You.
Hallelujah.*

We may also consider Psalm 145, which does not begin with *Hallelujah* but does end with it. It is quite possible, in fact, that the verse:

*And we shall praise the Lord, from now and forever,
Hallelujah,*

was added in order to fit Psalm 145 into the scheme of the last five Psalms which begin and end with *Hallelujah*.

There may, however, have been another reason for the addition of this verse. In this Psalm, the first letters of the verses form an alphabetic acrostic, that ends with "ת" in the next-to-last verse. Why is this followed by an additional verse that does not seem to belong here?

What we now suggest borders on the homiletic, but the associations of this verse בְּרַחֵם [But we will. . .] are irresistible. Where does this verse come from? In Psalm 115, there is the verse:

*The dead praise not the Lord,
Neither any that go down unto silence.*

This is followed by:

*But we will bless the Lord,
From this time forth and for ever.
Hallelujah.*

The contrast here is between the living and the dead. We, the living, will praise You.

In Psalm 145, the "H" verse reads:

*The praise of the Lord my mouth shall speak,
And all flesh shall bless His Holy name.
Forever.
Hallelujah.*

This is universalism *par excellence*. All flesh will bless the Lord. Along comes the tradition and introduces the particular emphasis upon praises coming from Israel. All flesh may praise the Lord, But We shall praise Him, in our way, forever.

In the *siddur*, in the *pesukei dezimra* section of the *Shacharit* service, which uses the Psalms as the basis for the song and praise of the Lord, there is a similar mixture of particularist and universalist elements. The blessing before the *zimra* section speaks in terms of Creation: בָּרַךְ שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם [Blessed be He who spoke and the world came into being]. Next comes the paragraph which begins וְדַלֵּי, and in it we say: Make known among the nations His deeds.

Then comes the Psalm 100, the Thanksgiving Psalm:

Shout unto the Lord all the earth.

Then comes a collection of various verses, one of them being:

The Lord will rejoice in His creatures.

Then come Psalms 145-150, which we have examined. These are followed by the endings of the books of the Psalms upon which we have touched:

*Blessed be the Lord forever and ever.
Blessed be the Lord God, God of Israel, who does wonders alone.*

And blessed be His glory forever, and may all the earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen."

Another verse is inserted here, from Psalm 135:

*Blessed be the Lord from Zion,
Who dwells in Jerusalem,
Hallelujah.*

It is as if the compilers of the *siddur* felt constrained to introduce more nationalism than appeared in the original endings of the books of the Psalms.

Following the Hallelujah Psalms in the *pesukei dezimra*, is the section that includes the blessing of the people by King David, taken from I Chronicles, and verses from the Book of Nehemiah, leading into the climax of the Song at the Sea. The concluding blessing harks back to "heaven and earth," and concludes: *King, God, Life of the worlds.*

The contrasts and comparisons of verses, reflecting attitudes and outlooks, cannot be entirely accidental. In them, we can perceive biblical philosophy and theology. As in the Bible as a whole, the interests of Israel lie in a context of a world of nations who, for better or worse, cannot be ignored. At times, the emphasis is particularist even to the point of being hostile. At other times, the emphasis is clearly universalist and open to the world. One thing is clear: The God of Israel is the God of the Universe.

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