

composed in the third century BCE. However, the first parts of Psalms 115 and 116 were distinct additions, composed later during the Seleucid persecutions of the Second Century BCE. Some Jews, who fled the anti-Seleucid conflict and moved permanently to Babylonia, objected to the language of *Lo lanu* as antagonistic to pagan religion and extremely provocative (see lines 4-8). These Babylonian Jews preserved their tradition of omitting *Lo lanu*. This explains why the Palestinian scholar Rav, who traveled to Babylonia in the third century CE, hundreds of years later, observed that the Babylonian Jews recited only “half Hallel” on Rosh Chodesh.

Anti-paganism: Hertz aptly titles this psalm “in defiance of Heathenism.” Lines 4-11 offer a theological harrangue in favor of the superiority of the Yahweh cult, reflecting the classic Jewish view that pagans actually believed their idols *were* gods, rather than just symbols of gods. According to Kaufmann, this represented a misunderstanding by ancient Jews of their neighbors’ religions.

Idolatry, line 4: What are *atzabeyhem*, their idols? In our culture, with its highly developed marketing, advertising, and media, popular objects of fetishism might include commodities, money (“the Almighty Buck”), fame, power, personal appearance, and so on. “Their idols” could connote an unthinking “conformity to society, mindless pursuit of success, submission to the thralldom of *things*.”³²

Psychology and theology: Line 1 clearly celebrates a military or political victory of the Jews, whether over the Seleucids or the Babylonians. Yet, the glory is not given to the popular leader (e.g., Judah Maccabee) but to God. Line 2 places the question “Where is their God (now)?” into the mouths of the non-Jewish nations and dismisses it as a baseless taunt. Yet line 2 cannot hide the fact that in times of national catastrophe—the Babylonian massacre and enslavement, Antiochus’ persecutions, the Nazi Holocaust—Jews, too, ask “Where is God?”

Chorus: Soncino describes Psalm 115 as a song recited antiphonally between a precentor (a leader or cantor, perhaps a Priest) and a chorus of Levites. The antiphonal method was mentioned in Ezra 3:11, where the Priests and Levites

sang to one another. The choir’s refrain (lines 9-11) is addressed to three significant groups who would presumably worship in the Temple: the mass of Jews, the Priests (literally “house of Aaron”), and the *yirey Adonai* (“God-fearers”), generally understood as converts or non-Jewish followers of Adonai who prayed in the Temple as well (see 1 Kings 8:41 and Isaiah 56:6). Second Temple Judaism was favorable to converts and proselytized. Later Jewish opposition to conversion was a response to Christian and Islamic hostility and prohibitions, and a consequent defensiveness on the part of the Jews.³¹

Did just what was planned, line 3: My translation follows the interpretation of Hirsch (“everything is even as He willed to make it”). A more conventional alternative would be “Now our God in the sky/Acts at will.”

Groan, line 7: This translation mimics the Hebrew word *b’gronam*. Artscroll translates: “Not even a grunt from their throat emits.”

PSALM 115B: BLESSING FOR BELIEVERS

יהוה זכרנו יְבָרֵךְ,
 יְבָרֵךְ אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל,
 יְבָרֵךְ אֶת־בֵּית אֱהֲרָן.
 יְבָרֵךְ יִרְאֵי יְהוָה, הַקְּטָנִים עִם הַגְּדֹלִים.
 יִסֹּף יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם, עֲלֵיכֶם וְעַל בְּנֵיכֶם.
 בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה, עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ.
 □ הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם לַיהוָה,
 וְהָאָרֶץ נְתַן לַבְּנֵי אָדָם.
 לֹא הַמֵּתִים יִהְלְלוּ יְהוָה
 וְלֹא כָל־יִרְדֵי דוֹמָה.
 וְאַנְחָנוּ נְבָרֵךְ יְהוָה מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.
 הַלְלוּיָהּ.

12. Adonai remembered us and will bless—
Bless the Jews
Bless the Priests
13. Bless the non-Jews who respect Adonai
The small with the great.
14. Adonai will bolster you
You and your children.
15. You are blessed for Adonai
Who made the sky and the earth.
16. The sky is Adonai's sky,
While the earth was given to people.
17. The dead do not praise Yah
Nor those who go down to their doom.
18. But we—we praise Yah,
From now and forever:
HalleluYah!

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 115B

Adonai will bolster you...and your children, line 14: This blessing may refer to those who resettled Judea after the end of the Babylonian Exile (Soncino). The demographic need to replenish the Jewish population of the land at that time parallels the more recent Zionist aim of increasing the Jewish population of Israel. I see the birth of every Jewish child as a blessing after the destruction of a million and a half Jewish children in the Holocaust.

Who owns the earth? line 16: The psalm states that the earth was given to people. From this verse, the Talmud deduces the importance of owning real estate (B.Yevamot 63a, Artscroll). On the other hand, Psalm 24:1 states that "The earth and what fills it belong to Adonai." (See also Leviticus 25:23 where God says "The land is Mine.") So who does own the earth? As we have learned from ecology, human modification of the environment produces unforeseen results. While human beings can dominate the natural environment through skill and technology, nature does not submit without consequence and, often, revenge. The earth is ours but does not belong to us.

The Bible strictly regulated the accumulation and alienation of land to preserve economic equality. During the millennium of ancient Jewish statehood, however, these ideals were gradually subverted, as the Prophets indicate. Eventually, the sabbatical year, the remission of debts, and other protections against inequality were disregarded, and a large part of the Jews forced into peonage or slavery.

A liberation theologian working with South American peasants has argued that Israel came forth from Egypt with a tribal, anti-feudal, anti-monarchical, egalitarian practice and philosophy of land tenure.³³ The Torah's land rules posed a threat to both the Egyptian and the Canaanite concentration of land and power in an aristocracy. The Jewish priestly class was deliberately landless; the *shmitah* (seventh year land rest) and *yovel* (50th year cancellation of debt and return of land to its tribe) reinforced the equalizing tendency. The Prophets' atavism is a call for a return to this ideal "covenant" which remains as a national archetype.

Is there an afterlife? line 17: What is the implication of the statement that the "dead do not praise Yah?" Until after the Prophetic era, Jews showed little interest in an afterlife. In contrast to the Egyptian religion, the Jewish Bible has no concept of a life after death and actually prohibits attempts to communicate with the dead (Sarna). The doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead was a late development in Israel, although it was fully embraced by the Pharisees and their descendants, the Rabbis, who strongly affirmed the existence of an afterlife.

What is the Psalmist's view? Finkelstein understands line 17 to clearly state that there is no life after death. As a result, Psalms 115-118 must have been composed in the post-Prophetic but pre-Pharisaic era. Anchor, on the other hand, translates *zikhharanu* in line 12 as "our throne" and therefore dates Psalm 115 as pre-Exilic, composed during the First Temple times when the Jews had an active monarchy.

Yordey dumah, line 17 is frequently interpreted as "those who go down to Sheol," the place where ancient Jews thought spirits went after death. The American Bible Society translates *dumah* as "the land of silence." I have translated the phrase as "those who go down to their doom" to reflect the sound as well as the flavor of the Hebrew.

The Fourth Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 116: INDIVIDUAL TROUBLES AND RESCUE

A. Personal Troubles

[Not recited on the last six days of Passover or Rosh Chodesh]

אָקבֶּתִי כִּי יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת־קוֹלִי תַחֲנוּנָי.
כִּי הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי וּבִיָּמִי אֶקְרָא.

אֶפְפוּנֵי חֲבַל־מָוֶת
וּמִצָּרֵי שְׂאוּל מִצָּאוּנַי,
צָרָה וְיָגוֹן אֶמְצָא.

וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא,
אָנָּה יְהוָה מִלְּטָה נַפְשִׁי.

חֲנוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק, וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ מְרַחֵם.
שִׁמְרֵ פִתְאִים יְהוָה, דְּלוֹתַי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ.
שׁוּבֵי נַפְשִׁי לְמִנוּחַיִכִּי, כִּי יְהוָה גָּמַל עָלַיִכִּי.
כִּי חִלְצָתָ נַפְשִׁי מִמָּוֶת, אֶת־עֵינַי מִן דְּמָעָה,
אֶת־רַגְלִי מִדְּחַי.

□ אֶתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּאַרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים.

הֶאֱמַנְתִּי כִּי אֲדַבֵּר, אָנִי עָנִיתִי מְאֹד.

אָנִי אֶמְרֵתִי בְּחַפְזִי, כָּל־הָאָדָם כֹּזֵב.

1. I love that Adonai hears
The voice of my prayers,
2. That I am listened to
When I call.
3. Ropes of death strangled me
And alleys of Sheol found me;
I discovered trouble and sadness.
4. So I called out in the name of Adonai:
“Please, Adonai, rescue my soul!”

5. Adonai is proper and just,
But our God shows compassion.
6. Adonai defends the simple,
I was lowered but then saved.
7. My soul, return to your place of comfort
Because Adonai treated you well,
8. Because you saved my soul from death
My eyes from tears
My legs from tripping.
9. I will walk before Adonai
In the lands of the living.
10. I kept faith even when I thought
That I was really poor,
11. Even when I rushed to say
That all people are liars.

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 116A

Division of Psalm 116 into two parts: The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible prepared for the Jews of Alexandria around the 3rd century BCE) divides Psalm 116 into two psalms, and combines Psalms 114 and 115. This could indicate an ancient origin for our current division of Psalm 116 in prayer.

I love that Adonai hears, line 1: The relationship of the Psalmist to prayer depends on how the words are read. Hirsch reverses the order of the Hebrew words and translates line 1 as “I love my voice..for the Lord will hear...” The American Bible Society translates: “I love the Lord, because he hears me; he listens to my prayer.” Line 1 could plausibly be translated as “I love to pray because God listens,” or “I love that God listens when I pray,” or even “I love to pray. Does God listen?”

The land of the living, line 9: Expressing confidence in deliverance (Hertz). But the Rabbis read into this verse a belief in an afterlife.

Even when I rushed to say, line 11: Even when I became upset and cynical.

PSALM 116B: PERSONAL HAPPINESS

מָה אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כָּל־תַּגְמוּלוֹהִי עָלַי.
 בּוֹס יְשׁוּעוֹת אִשָּׂא, וּבָשֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא.
 נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נִגְדָה נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ.
 יִקַּר בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה הַמְּוֹתָה לְחַסְדֵּיךָ.
 אָנָּה יְהוָה כִּי אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ
 אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ בֶן־אֲמָתֶיךָ,
 פִּתְחַתְּ לְמוֹסְרֵי.
 לָךְ אֲזַבַּח זֶבַח תּוֹדָה וּבָשֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא.
 □ נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נִגְדָה נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ.
 בְּחַצְרוֹת בַּיִת יְהוָה בְּתוֹכֵכִי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.
 הַלְלוּיָהּ.

12. What do I return to Adonai
For all these good turns to me?
13. I will lift the cup of victory
And I will call out in Adonai's name.
14. I will fulfill my promises to Adonai
In front of all the people.
15. Difficult in Adonai's eyes
Is the death of those who are kind.
16. Adonai, please let me work for you
I am your worker, your faithful child
You unlocked my chains.
17. I will bring a gift of thanks to you
And I will call out in Adonai's name.
18. I will fulfill my promises to Adonai
In front of all the people,
19. In the rooms of Adonai's house
In the center of Jerusalem.
HalleluYah!

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 116B

Promises, line 14: Oaths to God were regarded with great seriousness in the Bible. Deuteronomy 23:22-4 and Kohelet 5:3-5, 8:2 teach that it is better not to make an oath than to make one and break it. Artscroll interprets the word *na* as a word of request, making this a prayer that the individual may be able to fulfill the oath.

Difficult in Adonai's eyes/Is the death of those who are kind, line 15: This troublesome verse appears to be out of place. It would seem to be a prayer for continued life rather than death, on the grounds that God desires the help and life of the righteous. "Difficult" is Ibn Ezra's interpretation, but the Hebrew word is usually translated as "precious." The "preciousness" of a righteous person's death may refer to martyrdom (Abrahams).

Please let me work for you/I am your worker, your faithful child, line 16: According to the Masoretic text, there are different vowels for the words *avdekha* and *avd'kha*. To reflect this different pronunciation (which does not sound like repetition in Hebrew), I have chosen a plausible alternative translation "let me work for you" rather than repeating "I am your worker." Thus the word *na* appears as a word of request, rather than mere emphasis (e.g., "truly") as in most conventional translations. Anchor points out the dispute over whether *ben-amatekha* literally means the "son of your fidelity" or "the son of your handmaid," and settles on "your faithful son."

Zevach todah, a gift of thanks, line 17: The free-will offering (Anchor). The Rabbis of the Talmudic era, interpreting every biblical use of an imperfect tense as a reference to the future, commented on line 17 that the *zevach todah* is the only sacrifice which will continue in the messianic era (Artscroll).

Because the elaborate rituals for sacrifice set down in the Torah do not mention accompanying prayer or music, Sarna maintains that sacrifice and prayer were entirely separate in ancient Judaism. Indeed, the headings of the psalms do not mention sacrifice. However, the Mishnah expressly states that the recitation of Hallel accompanied the sacrifice of the paschal lamb on Passover (Pesachim 5:7, see B. Pes. 95a). In addition, the Gemara cites Raba's statement that Hallel was recited along with peace-offerings on every day of Sukkot (B. Pes. 71a).

The Fifth Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 117: UNIVERSAL PRAISE

הִלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כָּל־גּוֹיִם, שִׁבְחוּהוּ כָּל־הָאֲמִים.
 □ כִּי גִבֹר עֲלֵינוּ חֶסֶדוֹ, וְאֵמֶת יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם.
 הִלְלוּיָהּ.

1. All you nations, praise Adonai!
Sing compliments, all you peoples!
2. Because kindness is powerful for us
And Adonai's truth is forever.
Halleluyah!

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 117

Shortest psalm: this is the shortest of the psalms, leading some scholars to suggest that it may be a fragment of a longer poem.

Universalism and monotheism: Why does this psalm ask non-Jewish nations to praise Adonai for being kind to the Jews? The word *ha-umim* (“peoples”) in line 1 is spelled with an *alef*, rather than with the usual *ayin*. On the basis of this textual peculiarity, Anchor holds that the text should be read *emim*, referring to gods rather than peoples. This reading has Psalm 117 inviting all of the nations’ gods to praise Yahweh. On the basis of this textual emendation, Anchor concludes that Psalm 117 is universalist—appealing to all of humanity to praise God—but not monotheist, and therefore pre-Exilic. According to this theory, Psalm 117 was composed when the Jews were henotheistic, meaning that they accepted the existence of a multiplicity of gods but considered Yahweh to be the supreme deity.

Soncino and most other commentators, however, hold that Psalm 117 embodies a universal monotheism, calling on all humanity to recognize their common unified God. Traditional Jewish commentators take yet a different approach to this question, seeing in Psalm 117 a reference to the messianic era, when all of humanity will recognize and praise Adonai (Metsu-

dah). Thus, in their prescribed order, the Hallel psalms progress thematically from the memory of past redemptions (from Egypt in Ps. 113-114, from Babylonian Exile or Seleucid persecution, Ps. 114-115) to expectation of the future coming of the Messiah (Donin). This may be why, at the Passover seder table, Psalms 113 and 114 (liberation from Egypt) are sung before the meal, while Psalms 115-118 (the expectation of future liberation) are sung after.³⁴

The Sixth Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 118: NATIONAL THANKSGIVING

□ הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי טוֹב, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ.
 יֹאמֶר נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ.
 יֹאמְרוּ נָא בֵּית אֱהָרֹן, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ.
 יֹאמְרוּ נָא יִרְאֵי יְהוָה, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ.
 מִן הַמִּצַּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה, עֲנֵנִי בַמֶּרְחָב יְהוָה.
 יְהוָה לִי, לֹא אֵירָא, מִה יַעֲשֶׂה לִּי אֱדָם.
 יְהוָה לִי בַעֲזָרִי, וְאֲנִי אֲרָאָה בְּשֹׁנְאֵי.
 טוֹב לַחֲסוֹת בַּיהוָה מִבְּטָח בְּאָדָם.
 טוֹב לַחֲסוֹת בַּיהוָה מִבְּטָח בַּנְּדִיבִים.
 כָּל־גּוֹיִם סָבְבוּנִי, בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי אֲמִילָם.
 סָבְבוּנִי גַם סָבְבוּנִי, בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי אֲמִילָם.
 סָבְבוּנִי כְּדַבְרֵימָה, דַּעֲכוּ כִּי אֵשׁ קוֹצִים,
 בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה כִּי אֲמִילָם.
 דַּחַח דְּחִיתַנִּי לְנֶפֶל, וַיהוָה עֲזָרְנִי.
 עֲזֵי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה, וַיְהִי לִי לִישׁוּעָה.
 קוֹל רִנָּה וִישׁוּעָה בְּאֵהָלֵי צַדִּיקִים,
 יָמִין יְהוָה עֲשֶׂה חַיִּל.
 יָמִין יְהוָה רֹמְמָה, יָמִין יְהוָה עֲשֶׂה חַיִּל.
 לֹא אָמוֹת כִּי אֶחְיֶה, וְאֶסְפֹּר מַעֲשֵׂי יְהוָה.
 יִסַּר יִסְרָנִי יְהוָה, וְלִמּוֹת לֹא נִתְּנָנִי.

□ פִּתְחוּ לִי שַׁעֲרֵי צְדָק, אָבֹא בָם, אֹרְחָה יְהוָה.
 זֶה הַשָּׁעַר לַיהוָה, צְדִיקִים יָבֹאוּ בּוֹ.
 אֹרְחָה כִּי עֲנִיתָנִי וַתְּהִי לִי לִישׁוּעָה.
 אֲכֹן מֵאִסּוֹ הַבּוֹנִים הֵיטָה לְרֹאשׁ פְּנֵה.
 מֵאֵת יְהוָה הֵיטָה זֹאת, הִיא נִפְלְאֹת בְּעֵינֵינוּ.
 זֶה הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה יְהוָה, נִגְיְלָה וְנִשְׁמַחָה בּוֹ.
 אָנָּה יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא. אָנָּה יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא.
 אָנָּה יְהוָה הִצְלִיחָה נָּא. אָנָּה יְהוָה הִצְלִיחָה נָּא.
 בְּרוּךְ הֵבֵא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה, בְּרִכְנוּכֶם מִבֵּית יְהוָה.
 אֵל יְהוָה וַיָּאָר לָנוּ,
 אֶסְרוּ-חַג בְּעֵבְתֵימָם עַד קַרְנוֹת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ.
 אֵלֵי אַתָּה וְאוֹרְחָה, אֱלֹהֵי אֲרוֹמְמָה.
 הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי טוֹב, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ.

1. Beauty to Adonai who is good, for kindness is forever.
2. Let Israel say that kindness is forever.
3. Let their priests say that kindness is forever.
4. Let those who respect Adonai say that kindness is forever.
5. I called to Yah from a tight spot, Yah answered me broadly.
6. Adonai is with me, I have no fear; what can people do to me?
7. Adonai is with me in power, so I can meet my enemies.
8. It is better to depend on Adonai than to trust people.
9. It is better to depend on Adonai than to trust the authorities.
10. All the nations surrounded me but I survived them in Adonai's name.
11. They surrounded and encircled me but I survived them in Adonai's name.
12. Though they surrounded me like bees, they were snuffed out like burnt thorns. I survived them in Adonai's name.
13. I was pushed to fall but Adonai helped me.
14. Yah is my help and my hammer, and became my savior.
15. Song and victory sound in the tents of the just. Adonai's hand makes victory.

16. Adonai's hand is supreme. Adonai's hand makes victory!
17. I will not die but live, and tell the doings of Yah!
18. Yah challenged me but did not destroy me.
19. Open the gates of justice for me, I will come in and thank Yah.
20. This is the gate to Adonai, the just may enter here.
21. I thank you for answering me, you became my savior.
22. The stone which the builders rejected became the cornerstone.
23. This happened because of Adonai, it is miraculous in our eyes.
24. This is the day Adonai made, let us sing and be happy with it.
25. Please Adonai save us! Please Adonai make us successful!
26. Bless those who come in Adonai's name, we bless you from Adonai's house.
27. Adonai is God and gave us light. Wave your holiday branches up to the corners of the altar.
28. You are my God and I thank you, my God and I raise you up.
29. Beauty to Adonai who is good, for kindness is forever.

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 118

Historical event: Psalm 118 appears to celebrate some national historical event, but it is not clear which one. Some readers have connected it with the Maccabean victory and the rededication of the Temple in 165 BCE, noting that the refrain *Hodu l'adonai ki tov ki le'olam chasdo* was popular in that era, appearing in the Apocryphal 1 Maccabees 4:24 as well (Abrahams). The “surrounding” forces (lines 10-12) would refer to the Seleucid and perhaps other enemies of the Hasmoneans. “Adonai is God and gave us light” (line 27) is seen as a direct reference to the Temple menorah—although the first known, explicit reference to the Chanukah miracle of light came centuries later in the Talmud.

Soncino connects Psalm 118 with the first celebration of the Sukkot holiday after the return from the Babylonian Exile under Ezra in 444 BCE (see Nehemiah 8:14). The Jews brought *lulavim* [palm fronds] to celebrate their victory over the Samaritans who tried to prevent the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Here, the “surrounding” forces would be hostile natives opposed to the Jewish return to the land. This view is supported by the fact that lines 23 and 25 quote directly from the book of Nehemiah. However, an alternative

translation of line 27 is “Bind the festival sacrifice with ropes,” indicating that this line may not refer to *lulavim* at all (Metsudah).

These two historical connections are not as disparate as they seem, when we consider that the First Temple was originally dedicated on Shemini Atzeret at the end of the Sukkot festival, and that the Maccabees may well have rededicated the Temple on the same occasion.

Those who respect Adonai, line 4: As in Psalm 115, these are the Gentiles who believe in Yahweh and pray in the Temple.

Better to depend on Adonai than to trust people, lines 8-9: It is better to rely on God even without any assurance of help than to rely on people even with their assurances of help (Metsuda). The rabbinic approach takes *nedivim* in line 9 to refer to the 70 angels, who should not be trusted over God (Artscroll). The historical approach sees *nedivim* as foreign princes whose help was not considered decisive by the Jews in returning from Babylonian Exile or defeating Antiochus. Hirsch points out, “Whenever Israel has attempted to play politics...and has placed its trust in the help offered by other states, it thereby brought about its own ruin and incurred the loss of its independence.” I have translated *nedivim* more generally as “the authorities,” reflecting a certain distrust of officials which persists throughout Jewish history.

I survived them, line 10: Anchor translates this as “I cut off their foreskins,” which is a plain translation of *amilam* and sees it as an allusion to the cutting of Philistines’ foreskins recorded in 1 Samuel 18:25-7. This might similarly be a reference to the Maccabees’ forced circumcision of the Idumeans.

Yah is my help and my hammer, line 14: A direct quotation from the Song at the Sea in Exodus (Ex. 15:2). A more common translation is “my strength and my song.”

I will not die but live, line 17: In connection with a related verse in Psalm 30:10, Sarna asserts that one desires life not out of egotism, but because death ends communication and relationship with God. Rabinowicz aptly comments that in the aftermath of the Holocaust Jewish survival has a dimension of sanctity.

The gate to Adonai, line 20: The Talmud states that Alexander the Great discovered the aroma of a stream which led to the Garden of Eden. When he followed it and demanded entry, he was denied access and told, “This is the gate to Adonai, only righteous people may enter here” (Tamid 32b). Another legend maintains that in the hereafter, a person is asked for his or her occupation. If the person fed the hungry or clothed the naked, the person is told “This is the gate to Adonai, enter here” (Midrash Tehillim 118:17).

On a more literal level, the pilgrims or worshippers are asking for admittance to the Temple in line 19. The gate (line 20) refers to the door of the Temple, kept by the Levites. Lines 21-25 represent the peoples’ prayer. In line 26, the Priests welcome the people into the Temple and invite them up to the altar—but no further. The people end with the opening line of the psalm. Part of the pilgrims’ prayers were said to be the popular response to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (Freedman), whence derives the term “Hosannas” from the Hebrew *hoshiah na* (“save us”).

I thank you for answering me, line 21: The matriarch Leah was the first person in the Bible to thank God, using the words *Odeh et Yah* (“I will thank Yah”) to derive the name of her son, Yehudah or Judah (Gen. 29:35, Rabinowicz).

Repetitions: Psalm 118 consists of couplets or triplets which repeat the same idea. Because this pattern ends at line 21 (Rashi), it became customary to repeat verse 21 and the remainder of the verses twice each, a tradition referred to in the Talmud (Sukkah 3:11). But it is also possible that every line was traditionally repeated with the refrain HalleluYah (Abrahams).

The stone which the builders rejected, line 22: This plainly refers to the rebuilding of the Temple. Midrashically it alludes to David, who was initially rejected in favor of his older brothers (Soncino), or to Israel itself (Artscroll).

Waving of the lulav, lines 1 and 25: On Sukkot (except on Shabbat) the ceremony of *na’anuyim*, the waving of the lulav, is performed during these lines (after having earlier recited the blessings over the etrog and lulav). According to the Ashkenazic custom, one takes the lulav in the right hand with its green side (“spine”) facing the body. Hold the etrog with its *pitam* (tip) facing up in your left hand, next to and touching the lulav. At line 1, stretch the lulav and

etrog out as far as you can reach, give the lulav three shakes, then bring them close to your body and give three shakes, in each of the six directions corresponding to each of the following six words: *Hodu*–East, *ki*–South, *tov*–West, *ki*–North, *le'olam*–up, *chasdo*–down. At line 21, do the same for the following six words: *Ana*–East, *hoshiah*–South, *na*–West, *Ana*–North, *hatzlichah*–up, *na*–down. One does not wave on God's name Adonai. The details of this custom vary by locality.³⁵

Concluding Blessing

יְהִלְלוּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, כָּל־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, וְחַסִּדֶיךָ, צְדִיקִים עוֹשֵׂי
רְצוֹנְךָ, וְכָל־עַמֶּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרָנָה יוֹדוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ, וַיִּשְׁבְּחוּ
וַיִּפְאָרוּ וַיְרוֹמְמוּ וַיַּעֲרִיצוּ, וַיִּקְדְּשׁוּ וַיְמַלִּיכוּ אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ מִלְּבָנוּ.
□ כִּי לָךְ טוֹב לְהוֹדוֹת וּלְשַׁמֵּךְ נֶאֱדָה לְאֹמֵר, כִּי מַעוֹלָם עַד
עוֹלָם אַתָּה אֵל. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה, מְלֶכֶךְ מְהֻלָּל בַּתְּשׁוּבָה.

Let praise for you Adonai our God come from all your works and your kindnesses, the good people who do as you want, and all your people the Jews—with song let them bless you, compliment you, beautify you, raise you, admire you, make you holy and declare you our leader. Because it feels good to chant to you, pleasant to sing to your name, for you are God from world to world. Bless you Adonai, leader praised with song.

COMMENTARY TO CONCLUDING BLESSING

Hallel concludes with a paragraph called a doxology or hymn of praise, parallel to the paragraph *Yishtabach* which completes the cycle of psalms recited every morning. The use of multiple synonyms is a mystical device, which creates something akin to the effect of a mantra.

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Notes:

1. There are really four Hallel in Jewish tradition. *Hallel Ha-Gadol*, “The Great Hallel,” is Psalm 136, used daily in the *Shacharit* service, with a line-by-line refrain of *Ki le-olam hasdo* (“God’s kindness is forever”). The Passover Hallel is the one recited at the Seder at home. The complete Hallel recited on festivals and Chanukah in synagogue is called the *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, the “Egyptian Hallel,” and includes Psalms 113-118. Finally, the Babylonian Hallel or Half Hallel omits the first halves of Psalms 115 and 116 and is used on Rosh Chodesh and the last days of Pesach. The last five chapters of the Book of Psalms were also sometimes referred to as Hallel. Lewis N. Dembitz, *Jewish Services in Synagogue and Home* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1898).
2. Hayim H. Donin, *To Pray As A Jew* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 268.
3. “Hallel,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), pp. 1197-1199.
4. Dembitz, p. 180.
5. “The Origin of the Hallel,” XXIII *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1950-1), p. 319.
6. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), pp. 94-96.
7. A. Cohen, *The Soncino Books of the Bible: The Psalms* (London: Soncino Press, 1950).
8. Mary Ellen Chase, *The Psalms for the Common Reader* (1962); Nahum Sarna, *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), p. 3; see also: Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
9. See recording by Sam Eskin, *Hagadah Recorded in Israel in a Yemenite Home*, Passover 1953 (Folkways Records 8921, 1957).
10. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (1913), trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society/Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), p. 377.
11. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: A Critical Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), pp. 7-8; Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea: Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), pp. 77-79.
12. See the recordings: *Sholosh Regalim: Modzitzer Melodies* (Neginoh Records NR 1202); *Modzitzer Favorites* (Neginoh NRS 1203); *The High Holy Days and Festivals: Music of Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue* (1985).
13. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Gates of Understanding* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1977).
14. A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1932) p. 159.
15. J.H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, rev. 1963).
16. Israel Abrahams, *A Companion to the Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hermon Press, rev. 1966).
17. David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 239.
18. William G. Braude, trans., *The Midrash on Psalms*, Vol. II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 113:2.

19. Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms III* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).
20. S.Y. Zevin, *The Festivals in Halachah: An Analysis of the Development of the Festival Laws* (New York: Mesorah, 1981), pp. 165-6.
21. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. and abridged, M. Greenberg (New York: Schocken, 1960).
22. Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *The Artscroll Tehillim* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1985).
23. Avrohom Davis, *The Metsudah Siddur: A New Linear Siddur-Sabbath/Festival Prayers* (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1983), p. 530; see Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms* (New York: Feldheim, 1978), "homemaker."
24. P. Blackman, *The Mishnayoth: Moed* (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1990), p. 220; also see Pesachim 10:6.
25. J. Harlow, *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1985).
26. John R. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, rev. 1973).
27. Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah for Song of Songs* (London: Soncino Press, 1951), p. 133.
28. David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 3, p. 30.
29. Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 164-5.
30. *The Holy Bible: Today's English Version* (New York, American Bible Society, 1976).
31. "Proselytes," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol 13, p. 1182.
32. Rachel A. Rabinowicz, ed. *Passover Haggadah: The Feast of Freedom* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1982).
33. Roy H. May, Jr., *The Poor of the Land: A Christian Case for Land Reform* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 51-66. Not dissimilarly, historian John R. Bright speaks of a classic age in which the Twelve Tribes lived as a confederation or commonwealth, in relative equality in covenant with Yahweh; this "ideal" national situation was betrayed by later economic development which led to extreme inequality, slavery, monarchic despotism, and ignoring the land rules of the Torah. (See Bright, *A History of Israel*, op. cit.)
34. J. Elias, *The Haggadah* (New York: Mesorah, 2d ed. 1978), p. xxxiv.
35. Nosson Scherman, *The Complete Artscroll Siddur* (Nusach Ashkenaz) (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1984), p. 631; Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 164; Arthur I. Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy* (Toronto: Basic Books, 1982), pp. 58-60.