

Psalms 135-137

Overview

Today's Psalms lack the titles "Psalm of the Steps" (120-134) or "Psalm of David" (138-145) that mark the rest of this panel. 135-136 are an appendix to the former, while the 137 sets the stage for the latter (Table 1, chart). They also recall the first panel (Figure 1, chart).¹

107, Suffering, coming to the land: ידה, חסד	:Ascents, 120-134 Coming to the Temple ברך, ידה, חסד 135-136, hymns for the temple Call for Judgment, 137
Psalms of David, 108-110	Psalms of David, 138-145
Acrostic (111, 111-112) (Works of the Lord)	Acrostic (Works of the Lord), 145
Hallelu-Yah, 111-117	Hallelu-Yah, 146-150
Torah (Acrostic) and Messiah Pair, 118-119	

Each stanza of Psalm 107 has three features:

1. God's people are in affliction,
2. but God delivers them and gathers them to the city he has prepared for them,
3. so they should praise him (107:8, 15, 21, 31)

Table 1: Structure of Book 5

The recurrent theme of the wicked in 120-134 corresponds to the first feature. The pilgrimage theme recalls the second feature, and the destination, Jerusalem, is the place where the exhortation is fulfilled, leading to the final exhortation to the priests to bless the Lord (134:1).

Psalm 135:1-2, echoing 134:1, introduces an anthology of praise for the priests to use.

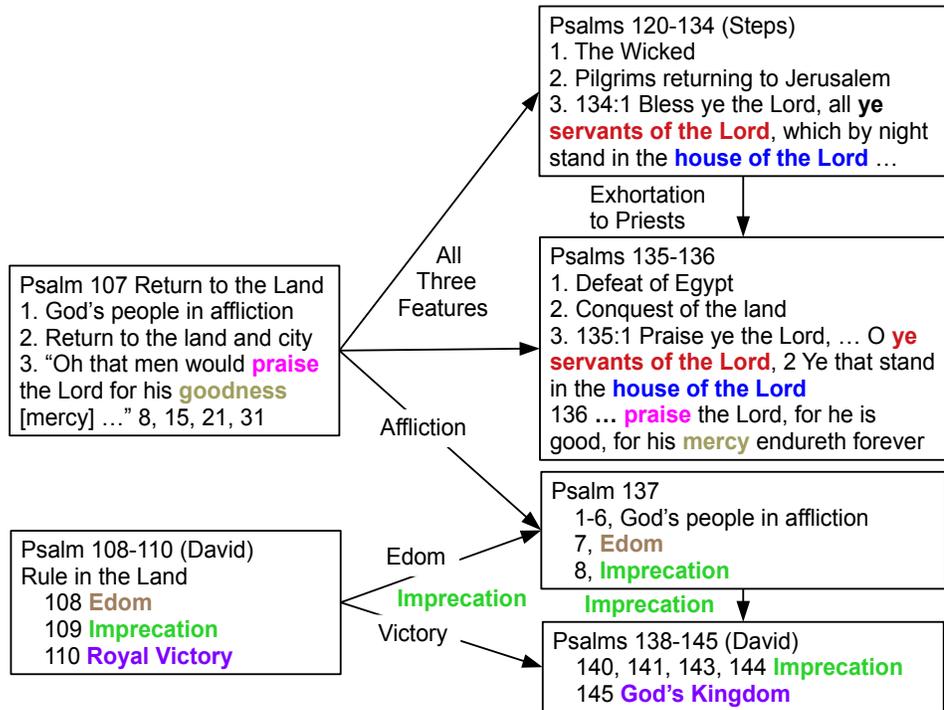


Figure 1: Relations of Psalms 135-137 to their Context

The antiphonal structure of Psalm 136 echoes Psalm 107's refrain, and suggests a temple hymn that the pilgrims might often have sung during their spiritual vacations. Both Psalms recall the Egyptian

¹ Robertson points out the suitability of 137 as anticipating 138-145.

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oppression, the conquest of the promised land, and the offering of praise to the Lord, again recalling the three features of Psalm 107.

Psalm 137 is different. Like 107, it describes affliction. It mentions Edom as an enemy, a rare topic in Psalms (only seven times in only four Psalms). One of those is 108, the first Psalm of David. It continues with imprecation, which dominates the following Psalms of David (138-145).

Each panel of the fifth book ends, like the Revelation, with God enthroned, bringing judgment on those who reject him.

Alignment of 135 and 136

Psalms 135 and 136 have similar structure (Table 2, chart). Both are historical hymns. They begin and end with calls to praise God, and together they use all three of the verbs we studied in Psalms 104-106. In between, both recount the Lord’s creative power, the smiting of Egypt and conquest of the land, and his care for his people. Together, they would be good Psalms for the priests to sing in the temple—135 during their nightly vigils when they are there alone; 136 in a setting where the people respond to the priests’ declarations.

Imperative Introduction	1-3 [Praise ye the Lord]	1 Give thanks unto the Lord, ... his mercy endureth forever
Indicative Body	4 For the LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, ...	
	5 For I know ... that our Lord is above all gods.	2-3 [God of gods ... Lord of lords]
	6-7 Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. ...	4-9 [Creation of heaven and earth]
	8-9 Who smote the firstborn of Egypt , both of man and beast. ...	10-15 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn : ...
		16 To him which led his people through the wilderness: ...
	10 Who smote great nations, and slew mighty kings; 11 Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan: 12 And gave their land for an heritage, an heritage unto Israel his people.	17 To him which smote great kings: ... 18 And slew famous kings: ... 19 Sihon king of the Amorites: ... 20 And Og the king of Bashan: ... 21 And gave their land for an heritage: ... 22 Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: ...
	13 Thy name, O LORD, endureth for ever; and thy memorial , O LORD, throughout all generations. 14 For the LORD will judge his people , and he will repent himself concerning his servants.	23 Who remembered us in our low estate: ... 24 And hath redeemed us from our enemies : ... 25 Who giveth food to all flesh: ...
15-18 [Futility of idols]		
Imperative Close	19-21 [Bless the Lord; praise ye the Lord]	26 O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Table 2: Similarity of Psalms 135 and 136

Psalm 135, An Anthology of Praise

Every verse of this Psalm quotes or alludes to some other Scripture (consult the Treasury for details). It is thus a summary of many Psalms that the priests would sing.

Structurally, it is chiasmic (Figure 2, chart), beginning and ending with a call to praise. The next layer states God's care for Israel, and his distinctiveness from other gods. This pairing shows his care as the special way in which he is distinct from other gods. The center recounts his works through history, from creation through the conquest, and reminds us that though these events are past, his reputation is to be remembered forever (which is what the priests do by singing this Psalm and those on which it is based).

135:1 Praise ye the LORD. Praise ye the name of the LORD; praise *him*, O ye servants of the LORD. 2 Ye that stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God, 3 Praise the LORD; for the LORD is good: sing praises unto his name; for *it is* pleasant.--"Praise ye the Lord" is "Hallelujah," recalling 104-106 and 111-117. The parallel of vv. 1-2 with 134:1 suggests that this Psalm is a hymn for those priests to sing as they minister.

4 For the LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, *and* Israel for his peculiar treasure. 5 For I know that the LORD is great, and *that* our Lord is above all gods.--The next layer describes the Lord's special relation to Israel, and his superiority to other gods.

6 Whatsoever the LORD pleased, *that* did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. 7 He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain; he bringeth the wind out of his treasuries.--The historical recollection begins with the creation.

8 Who smote the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast. 9 *Who* sent tokens and wonders into the midst of thee, O Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his servants.--Next we have the plagues on Egypt.

10 Who smote great nations, and slew mighty kings; 11 Sihon king of the Amorites, and Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan: 12 And gave their land *for* an heritage, an heritage unto Israel his people.--Then comes the conquest of the land.

13 Thy name, O LORD, *endureth* for ever; *and* thy memorial, O LORD, throughout all generations.--Though specific historical events are past, he himself is eternal, and the memory of his historical deeds abides forever.

14 For the LORD will judge his people, and he will repent himself concerning his

Psalm 135, Anthology of Praise

1-3, **Call to Praise:** "Praise"

4, **Care** for Israel

5, The Lord is **above all gods**

6-12, **Historical** Recollection

6-7, Creation

8-9, Judgment on Egypt

9-12, Conquest of the Land

13, God's **Eternal** Name & Memorial

14, **Care** for Israel

15-18, Other gods are **lower than man**

19-21, **Call to Praise:** "Bless, Praise"

Figure 2: Structure of Psalm 135

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servants.--This verse comes from Deuteronomy:

Deu 32:36 For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left.

“Judge” דין (Strong 1777) puts special emphasis on vindicating the victims of wrongdoing. “Repent” נחם (Strong 5162) in this context means to withdraw judgment.² This verse is not a threat, but like v. 4, it assures Israel of his loving care.

15 The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. 16 They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; 17 They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths. 18 They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them.--Amplifying the claim of v. 5, the editor quotes 115:4-6, 8 to show the weakness of rival deities.

19 Bless the LORD, O house of Israel: bless the LORD, O house of Aaron: 20 Bless the LORD, O house of Levi: ye that fear the LORD, bless the LORD. 21 Blessed be the LORD out of Zion, which dwelleth at Jerusalem. Praise ye the LORD.--“Praise” (Hallelujah) is a generic term for exalting the Lord. The term “Bless the Lord” indicates appreciation for his benefits to us (chart).

The list of groups who are to bless the Lord reflect Psalms 115:9-13 and 118:2-4, both of which mention Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. But those do not include the “house of Levi.” Now the blessing expands to include not only the priests (the house of Aaron) but also the others who serve in the temple. The worship of Israel is founded on his historical deeds, and those who serve his sanctuary should be particularly thankful for what he has done.

Psalm 136, Confessing God's Love

Like 135, this Psalm has a historical core, recalling God's works in history, surrounded by a call to praise (Figure 3, chart). But it has several distinctive features.

- The repeated refrain, “for his mercy [חסד loyal love] endureth for ever,” suggests congregational response, as in the curses that the nation accepted at Ebal and Gerizim when they entered the land (Deut 27:14-26). In every age, worship is not just listening to what others say. It includes “say[ing] ‘Amen’ at [the] giving of thanks” (1 Cor 14:16).
- The refrain itself comes from the heart of Israel's confession of God. God's חסד is the foundation of his forgiveness in Exod 34:6, 7. David composed this exhortation in the Psalm he gave the Levites to sing when they brought the Ark into Jerusalem in 1 Chr 16 (v. 34), and that Psalm is the core

Psalm 136, Confessing God's Love

1-3, Call to Praise: LORD, God of Gods, Lord of Lords

4-22, **Historical** Recollection

4-9, Creation

10-15, Judgment on Egypt

16, Wilderness Wanderings

17-22, Conquest of the Land

23-25, God **Remembers & Cares** for his people & all flesh

26, Call to Praise: God of Heaven

Figure 3: Structure of Psalm 136

2 Parunak, *Biblica* 56 (1975), pp. 512-532, esp. Section 5.5.2, p. 529f.

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of the concluding praises in Book 4 (cf. 106:1). A variant of this refrain ends each stanza in Psalm 107. At the dedication of the temple, when this exhortation was sung, “the house was filled with a cloud” (2Ch 5:13). Jeremiah promised that after the captivity, the people would again exhort one another with these words (33:11), a promise that was fulfilled when the foundation of the second temple was laid (Ezra 3:11).

- The exhortation, not only in the surrounding call to praise but also in the refrain, is הַיָּיִן Strong 3034, in our version “give thanks,” rather than “praise” or “bless.” The point of this verb is not thanksgiving in our usual sense of the word, but confessing something about God’s intrinsic nature. Psalm 135 looked at God’s works in history from the perspective of what they brought us. Psalm 136 considers them in the light of what they tell us about him.
- Throughout Psalm 135, God is called LORD, Jehovah, and the emphasis is on the different groups of people (vv. 19-21). Psalm 136 emphasizes different names for God (1-3, 26).

136:1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is good*: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 2 O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 3 O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.--The first name for God is his covenant name, LORD, “Jehovah,” specifically Israelite. But the names become progressively more inclusive. “the God of gods” recalls comparison with idols in 135:5, 15-18, and “Lord of Lords” claims his dominion over all human rulers. A fourth name comes in the last verse.

4 To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 5 To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 6 To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 7 To him that made great lights: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 8 The sun to rule by day: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 9 The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.--Like Psalm 135, we hear of God’s creative power, but in terms much more reminiscent of Genesis 1.

10 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 11 And brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 12 With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. 13 To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 14 And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 15 But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.--Again, we have the delivery from Egypt.

16 To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.--This detail was not in 135.

17 To him which smote great kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 18 And slew famous kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 19 Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 20 And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 21 And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 22 Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.--Psalm 135 quotes these verses.

23 Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy *endureth* for ever: 24 And hath

redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy endureth for ever. 25 Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth for ever.--The regular introduction “to him who ...” (preposition ל "to" plus participle) is now replaced by the relative pronoun with finite verb, marking a break.³ This section picks up the theme of memory from 135:13, but this time God is doing the remembering. It also recalls the Lord's care for his people in 135:4, 14, but extended to all flesh.

26 O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endureth for ever.--The final name for God is oriented toward the Gentiles. It first appears when Abraham exhorts his servant, Eliezer of Damascus (Gen 24:3, 7) concerning a bride for Isaac. There and everywhere else in Hebrew “God” is plural, recalling the common use of אלהים, a plural of majesty, for Israel's God. Here alone in Hebrew it is singular, as is the Aramaic expression that we hear, often on the lips of pagan kings, in Ezra and Daniel. This name continues the progression we saw in “Lord of Lords” in emphasizing Jehovah's dominion over all the earth.

Psalm 137, Call for Judgment

After two Psalms looking back to the Psalms of the Steps and worship in Jerusalem, we now look ahead to Messiah's rule in the Psalms of David, 138-145.

This Psalm falls into three sections, distinguished by the pronouns. First “we” recall the sorrow of captivity in Babylon. Then a single “I” declares abiding love for Jerusalem, and finally the singers turn to the Lord and ask him to bring justice on those who have abused them.

137:1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. 2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. 3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. 4 How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?--This stanza is a stark conclusion to the joyful theme of fellowship and praise so far in 120-136. Those Psalms describe the joy of those who come to Jerusalem, a joy that was precious to the rebuilders after the captivity. But there is unfinished business.

5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. 6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.--The experience of being captives has given the singer a new appreciation for the city that God has chosen.

7 Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. 8 O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. 9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.--The final stanza is a prayer for the Lord to bring just judgment on those who abused his city in the captivity.

Two foes are in view. First, “the children of Edom,” perennial adversaries of Judah, supported Babylon in the attack against Judah (a treachery that forms the central subject of the prophet

3 The relative ׀ is late, and with the singular “God of heaven” in v. 16 suggests a post-exilic date for this Psalm.

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Obadiah). Second, Babylon had been especially cruel, destroying even the young children. God's fundamental law of justice, "an eye for an eye," requires that judgment be returned upon them, and in fact the Lord had promised no less through Jeremiah:

Jer 51:24 And I will render unto Babylon and to all the inhabitants of Chaldea all their evil that they have done in Zion in your sight, saith the LORD.

The cruel treatment of children described in v. 9 is amply documented in the OT (Isa 13:16; Hos 10:14; Hos 13:16; Nah 3:10; 2Ki 8:12).

The reference to Edom takes us back to the first Psalm of David in Book 5 (108), and the theme of imprecation, absent in 107⁴ and 120-136, is also prominent in the Davidic section (109, 140, 141, 143, 144). This Psalm introduces the final Davidic section. Recall our earlier analysis of imprecation. Judgment is not a private matter, but one that belongs to the Lord and his messianic king. When we feel such passions, the right thing to do with them is just what the Psalmist here, and the souls under the altar in Rev 6:10, do: bring it to the Lord and leave it with him.

4 107:33-34, 39-40 appear to describe the chastening hand of the Lord that led to the afflictions from which the four stanzas celebrate deliverance, rather than final punishment.