

An Introduction to Praise in the Old Testament

by Linda Metz

The word “praise” first appears in the Old Testament in Genesis 29:35. While not disputing that “context is king,” this first use of the word “praise” sets an important tone for the concept of praise found throughout scripture.

The text reads: *And she conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, Now I will praise the Lord: therefore she called his name Judah; and left bearing.* Let’s unpack this verse to understand its significance for the concept of biblical praise.

Genesis 29:35 tells of the birth of Leah’s fourth son, Judah. The name “Judah” is the Hebrew word *Yehudah*, derived from another Hebrew word *yadah*, which means worship, praise, or thanksgiving with extended hands, or, in other words, the lifting of hands in praise, worship, or thanksgiving.

The significance of Leah naming this son “Judah” cannot be lost on the modern reader. Her first three sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi—were thus named in an effort to gain the love of Jacob (Genesis 29:32-34), who was tricked into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, whom he loved. With her fourth son, Leah turned her heart from trying to please Jacob to pleasing the Lord, hence the name which described her heart posture of praise to God. Perhaps she lifted her hands toward heaven as she proclaimed the name “Judah.”

The Tribe of Judah became the most powerful of the twelve tribes of Israel and became the Kingdom of Judah, from which King David and eventually our Lord Jesus Christ descended. Revelation 5:5 calls Jesus “*the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David,*” and is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Genesis 49:8-10: *Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.*

In the aforementioned passage from Genesis 49, the Hebrew word for praise (*thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise*) is the same word that “Judah” is taken from, the word *yadah*, and as already mentioned, means to praise, worship, or give thanks with extended hands. It is a common praise word in the Old Testament, indicating the physical nature (at times) of Hebrew praise. The lifting of hands in praise became

popular with the charismatic movement, but was not invented by that movement. It was implemented long before charismatics or pentecostals ever raised their hands.

Yadah is one of seven basic Hebrew words for the concept of praise in our English Bibles. As we read through the Book of Psalms, we find these seven Hebrew words throughout. Let's look at Psalm 145, entitled *David's Psalm of Praise*, which contains six of these words ... one translated as the English *extol*, one translated as the English *bless*, and four translated as the English *praise*.

This Psalm's title is noteworthy. David's psalms typically contain, at the very least, hints of praise even in the midst of his great trials, and sometimes pointedly in the midst of great trials. But this particular psalm is completely devoted to extolling, praising, uplifting, and adoring God. The only slight references to suffering are in verses 14 (*The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down*) and 19b (*he also will hear their cry, and will save them*). Otherwise, this entire psalm is devoted to glorious praise to the Lord.

Psalm 145 title - *David's Psalm of Praise* highlights the first Hebrew praise word in the psalm. The Hebrew word is *tehillah*, which uniquely means "hymn, laudation, or sung praise." Some call *tehillah* praise "the high praises of God" based on Psalm 149:6a (*Let the high praises of God be in their mouth ...*), those *high praises* being *tehillah* or sung praise. It seems fitting for David's "Psalm of Praise" to be entitled literally as a song to be sung, perhaps even *the high praises of God*, given that he was an accomplished musician who typically sang his own poetry. II Samuel 23:1 calls David *the sweet psalmist of Israel*. See also Psalm 71:22-23, Psalm 108:1-3, Psalm 144:9.

Psalm 145:1 - *I will extol thee, my God, O king; and I will bless thy name for ever and ever.* "Extol" is the Hebrew word *ruwm*, and means to rise or raise, to bring up, to exalt, to set up on high, to hold up, lift up, to promote. It has the connotation of loftiness. Thus, *I will extol (ruwm) thee, my God, O king.* "Bless" is the Hebrew word *barak*, and means to bless God as an act of adoration, to congratulate, to praise, to salute, to kneel down. This is another indication that Hebrew praise sometimes involved the physical body, here in a kneeling down position. When we prostrate ourselves before God, or kneel on our knees in worship, we are showing our adoration to the Lord in an ancient and well practiced biblical way. Thus, *I will bless (barak) thy name for ever and ever.*

Psalm 145:2 - *Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever.* "Bless" in this verse is once again the Hebrew word *barak*, just as in verse 1, and often denotes bowing down. The word "praise" in the second part of this verse is the Hebrew

word *halal*, and means to make a show, to shine, to boast, to be clamorously foolish, to rave, and to celebrate. This kind of praise is often compared to the rowdy celebrations that happen at sports events, with people cheering, screaming, and making a big show for their team. It is believed by many that we must do no less for God, who is more worthy than any sports team.

An interesting sidenote pertains to the word "hallelujah." This is a compound word, composed of the Hebrew words *halal* (explained in the previous paragraph), and *Yah*, which is the shortened form of *Yahweh*. Hence, we may deduce that "hallelujah" means *halal Yah*, or in other words, boast and make a show of celebratory praise for Yahweh. Without understanding *halal* praise, we miss the greater meaning of the well known word "hallelujah."

Psalm 145:3 - This verse borrows the word from verse 2, which is again the Hebrew word *halal*. The repetition of words and phrases in scripture is always worth noting, as it emphasizes what the author is communicating. In this case, *Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised* (made a show over, boasted about) *and his greatness is unsearchable*. Such words as these, telling how great the Lord is and that his greatness is unsearchable, surely require (at least in David's mind) the extreme level of boasting and praise which the word *halal* indicates.

Psalm 145:4 - *One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts*. The praise word used in this verse is the Hebrew word *shabach*, which means to address in a loud tone, and to commend. This is powerful imagery of one generation communicating across the chasm of time to another generation, declaring and commending the greatness of God to each other. This truly gives a more expansive view of praise, that praise itself is not limited by our time-space dimension, but praise speaks across time and space, i.e. one generation to another.

Psalm 145:10 - *All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy saints shall bless thee*. This verse introduces a praise word we've yet to see in this psalm, although we did see this word in Genesis 29:35. In that instance, it was Leah engaged in *yadah* praise. In this verse, it is God's *works* engaged in *yadah* praise, which literally means that God's works are praising him with extended hands. What a beautiful picture this brings to mind, as we contemplate nature reaching up to the sky, whether trees or flowers or rocks or flocks, we can easily envision the praise that is constantly engaged around us. Jesus himself, addressing the Pharisees in Luke 19:40, said: *I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out*, meaning that if the people stopped praising him, the rocks would take up the chorus!

Verse 10b continues the theme of praise: *and thy saints shall bless thee*. This is the third instance of this Hebrew praise word in Psalm 145. This English word “bless” translates into the Hebrew word *barak*, as we’ve already seen in verses 1 and 2, and it means to bow in praise to God. How interesting to see this contrast in verse 10, first with *thy works* praising God with extended hands, and now with *thy saints* blessing thee on bended knee ... a beautiful picture of creation and humanity praising God, who is unsearchingly worthy of such praise.

Psalm 145:21 - Finally we come to the last verse of this psalm and the final two praise words. The first of these two praise words we saw in the title of the psalm, *David’s Psalm of Praise*, or *David’s Psalm of tehillah* (sung praise). The second praise word in this verse is *barak*, the kneeling down praise which we saw in verses 1, 2, and 10. Verse 21 then says: *My mouth shall speak the praise (tehillah) of the Lord: and let all flesh bless (barak) his holy name for ever and ever*. How fitting to end this psalm of praise, indeed *David’s Psalm of Praise*, with singing the high praises, and inviting all flesh to kneel and bless God’s holy name forever.

The focus in this introduction to Old Testament praise is on praise words. This focus helps clarify the different elements of praise. Further study of Old Testament praise must include the history of the Ark of the Covenant, and the great significance of David returning the Ark to Jerusalem and placing it in a tent (the Tabernacle of David) where it was available to all people, not just to the high priest. The importance of this event cannot be overstated. Keep in mind that the Ark had been stolen by the Philistines, and then during King Saul’s reign it was brought back to the town of Kiriath-Jearim in Judah, where it remained and was neglected for 70+ years. Its return to Jerusalem under David brought it back into the center of national life, restoring a sense of God’s blessing upon Israel, as well as opening the doors of praise to all.

For further study, see:

- II Samuel 6:1-18 - bringing the Ark back to Jerusalem
- I Chronicles 15: 25-29 - another account of bringing the Ark back to Jerusalem
- I Chronicles 16:1-36 - David appoints Levites to minister before the Ark
- II Chronicles 20:1-26 - praise used in battle, as Jehosaphat appoints singers to go before the army, to sing *Praise the LORD; for his mercy endureth for ever*.