

## Psalms 114-116 and Their Neighbors

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Psa 114-116 are treated differently in the Septuagint or Greek text (G, 02c) and in the Masoretic text (M, 6c). M has three Psalms: 114-116. G combines M 114 and 115; but separates M 116 into 116:1-9 and 116:10-19, here called 116A and 116B, also yielding three Psalms. Which is right? Here are some commentaries (*emphasis* added).

### On Separating Psalms 114 and 115

- Delitzsch (1867, on 115): “has *scarcely anything in common* with the preceding.”
- Bittenwieser (1938, on 114): “it seems to be only *the first part* of an originally longer poem which treated the Exodus, the march through the deserts, and the entry into Canaan, and was composed for the Passover celebration.”
- Kraus (1978, on 114): “in every respect a *self-standing* entity;” (on 115): “in every respect an *independent* song. A union with Psalm 114 (thus Gk) is *impossible*.”
- Terrien (2003, on 115): “This psalm appears to be *part* of some ceremonial liturgy.”

### On Separating Psalms 116A and B

- Delitzsch (1867, on 116): “The four sections or strophes, the beginnings of which *correspond to one another* (v1 and 10, 5 and 15), are *distinctly separate*.”
- Bittenwieser (1938, separating 116A as v1-11 and 15-16, plus 118:25): “in the “I” of which the nation is personified, as in a goodly number of the preceding Psalms;” (on 116B as v12-13a, 17a, 13b, 14, and 19): “From *what is left* of the Psalm, it seems to be a liturgical hymn.”
- Kraus (1978, on 116): “First, we should point out that, according to G . . . a *new* Psalm begins at v10. The fragmentlike collection in Psalm 116 could suggest such a procedure . . . components seem to follow one another without any apparent order.”
- Terrien (2003, on 116): “the style of v10 may indicate the beginning of a *new* poem.”

### Comment

There is agreement that 114 and 115 are not parts of one Psalm, and that 116 is not convincing as a single Psalm. We then seem to be dealing with four Psalms. Notice that 114-115 and 116 *end in the same praise formula*, which seems to mark division points. Our four Psalms may more exactly be *two pairs* of Psalms. Members of the proposed two pairs are different in style; 114 is almost humorously brief, whereas 115, the great “Non nobis, Domine, is long and penitential. Delitzsch notes of 116A/B that internal links suggest two poems, not one poem. Both poems address perils, but *different* ones: death in one part, and liars in another.

Here are the texts, in the ASV translation (slightly amended).

## Psalms 114 and 115

- 1 When Israel went forth out of Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
- 2 Judah became his sanctuary,  
Israel, his dominion.
- 3 The sea saw it, and fled;  
the Jordan was driven back.
- 4 The mountains skipped like rams,  
the little hills, like lambs.
- 5 What aileth thee, O thou sea, that thou fleest?  
thou, Jordan, that thou turnest back?
- 6 Ye mountains, that ye skip like rams?  
ye little hills, like lambs?
- 7 Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord,  
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
- 8 Who turned the rock into a pool of water,  
the flint, into a fountain of waters.

- 
- 1 Not unto us, O YHWH, not unto us,  
but unto thy name give glory,  
for thy lovingkindness, and for thy truth's sake.
  - 2 Wherefore should the nations say,  
where is now their God?
  - 3 But our God is in the heavens,  
he hath done whatsoever he pleased.
  - 4 Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of men's hands.
  - 5 They have mouths, but they speak not,  
eyes have they, but they see not;
  - 6 They have ears, but they hear not,  
noses have they, but they smell not.
  - 7 They have hands, but they handle not,  
feet have they, but they walk not,  
neither speak they through their throat.
  - 8 They that make them shall be like unto them,  
yea, every one that trusteth in them.
  - 9 O Israel, trust thou in YHWH:  
*he is their help and their shield.*
  - 10 O house of Aaron, trust ye in YHWH:  
*he is their help and their shield.*
  - 11 Ye that fear YHWH, trust in YHWH,  
*he is their help and their shield.*
  - 12 YHWH hath been mindful of us; he will bless us:  
he will bless the house of Israel,  
he will bless the house of Aaron.
  - 13 He will bless them that fear YHWH,  
both small and great.
  - 14 YHWH increase you more and more;  
you and your children.
  - 15 Blessed are ye of YHWH,  
who made heaven and earth.
  - 16 The heavens are the heavens of YHWH,  
but the earth hath he given to the children of men.
  - 17 The dead praise not YHWH,  
neither any that go down into silence.
  - 18 But we will bless YHWH  
from this time forth and for evermore  
*Praise ye YHWH!*

## Psalm 116A/B

- 1 I love YHWH, because he heareth  
my voice and my supplications.
- 2 Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,  
therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.
- 3 The cords of death compassed me,  
and the pains of Sheol gat hold upon me:  
I found trouble and sorrow.
- 4 Then called I upon the name of YHWH:  
O YHWH, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.
- 5 Gracious is YHWH, and righteous;  
yea, our God is merciful.
- 6 YHWH preserveth the simple,  
I was brought low, and he saved me.
- 7 Return unto thy rest, O my soul,  
for YHWH hath dealt bountifully with thee.
- 8 For thou hast delivered my soul from death,  
mine eyes from tears,  
my feet from falling.
- 9 I will walk before YHWH  
in the land of the living.

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- 10 I believe, for I will speak:  
I was greatly afflicted.
  - 11 I said in my haste,  
all men are liars.
  - 12 What shall I render unto YHWH  
for all his benefits toward me?
  - 13 I will take the cup of salvation,  
and call upon the name of YHWH
  - 14 *I will pay my vows unto YHWH,  
yea, in the presence of all his people.*
  - 15 Precious in the sight of YHWH  
is the death of his saints
  - 16 O YHWH, truly I am thy servant;  
I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid;  
thou hast loosed my bonds.
  - 17 I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and will call upon the name of YHWH.
  - 18 *I will pay my vows unto YHWH,  
yea, in the presence of all his people.*
  - 19 In the courts of YHWH's house,  
in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem.  
*Praise ye YHWH!*

## Comment

Psa 114 and 115 both allude to the Exodus. They are internally linked by the common terms noted by the commentators. But it seems to this reader that these links are such as often connect *two adjacent* poems, and that they may properly continue to be considered as two. The conspicuously light tone of 114, in particular, suggests a separate poem. But the thread that connects them, a theme drawn from the Exodus, *does indeed connect them*; “independent” is too strong. Psa 114, with its brief evocation of Israel’s victories, is followed by the solemn 115. They are perhaps better seen as a linked group of two: a poetic diptych.

May not something similar be said of Psa 116? Its internal continuity is not strong; it is rather sectional than unitary. And the two most strongly contrasted sections are those which the Gk separates: 116:1-9 (where the enemy is illness) and 116:10-19 (where it is liars). That both are appeals is clear; like 114-115, they complement each other, encompassing both the threat of death and the threat of subordination to others. 116A presents a dilemma ending in confidence (116:4-9); line 10 begins over again with a different complaint, also briefly stated, and ends with an extended celebration of reprieve and gratitude. This is the common AR pattern of Appeal + Response,<sup>1</sup> but we do not expect to find that pattern *twice in the same poem*.

If so, then we have, not three Psalms, but four Psalms. Which the G and M texts have *in different ways* reduced to three, doubtless to reach a neat total of 150 Psalms.

### Their Neighbors

**Psalm 113.** Witte (2003) – rejected by Zenger (2011) 189, who sees 114 as independent – had proposed that Psa 113:1-115:1 formed a “sort of diptych” with 115:2-18, citing in support the “twinned pair of Psalms 111-112.” But it may be more important that Psa 113 begins a series of Psalms, called the “Egyptian Hallel,” which praise YHWH for bringing Israel out of Egypt, all associated with the Passover feast. Psa 113, as the introduction to that series, seems to stand alone. But more precisely, it stands in relation to the following Psa 114-118 as a sort of entry portal.

**Psalms 117-118.** These conclude that sequence. Psa 117 is the smallest Psalm,

- 1 Oh praise YHWH, all ye nations,  
    laud him, all ye peoples,
- 2 For his lovingkindness is great toward us,  
    and the truth of YHWH endureth for ever.  
    Praise ye YHWH!

and 118, following, is one of the longest. For all their disparity in size, the two are intimately related, since 118 picks up from 117 the line

For his lovingkindness endureth for ever

as a refrain in lines 1, 2, 3, and 4. There are other refrains in 118 (“It is better to take refuge in YHWH,” 8 and 9; “in the name of YHWH I cut them off,” 10-12, “the right hand of YHWH doeth valiantly,” 15 and 16). But the end echoes the beginning:

- 29 Oh give thanks unto YHWH, for he is good;  
    for his lovingkindness endureth for ever.

We may now turn around, and move backward from Psalm 113.

**Psalms 111-112** are both acrostic Psalms, with complementary subjects (praise of YHWH in 111; the thriving of the righteous in 112) plus a common “law” theme:

- 111:7 The works of his hands are truth and justice;  
    all his precepts are sure.
- 112:2 Blessed is the man that feareth YHWH,  
    that delighteth greatly in his commandments.

<sup>1</sup>The classic example is Palm 22:1-21 (Appeal) and 22-31 (Response and Rejoicing).

**Psalms 109-110** are labeled as “Psalms of David.” The first makes a complaint; the second is an assurance of response. Taken together, they make a series on the common AR pattern:

- 109:23 I am gone like the shadow when it declineth;  
I am tossed up and down as the locust.
- 110:6 He will judge among the nations,  
He will fill the places with dead bodies,  
he will strike through the head in many countries.

**Psalm 108** is a hybrid. It is composed of the conclusions (the post-Selah portions) of Psalms 57 and 60. It too is labeled as a “Psalm of David:”

A [FROM PSA 57:7-11]

- 1 My heart is fixed, O God,  
I will sing, yea, I will sing praises, even with my glory.
- 2 Awake, psaltery and harp;  
I myself will awake right early.
- 3 I will give thanks unto thee, O YHWH, among the peoples,  
and I will sing praises unto thee among the nations.
- 4 For thy lovingkindness is great above the heavens,  
and thy truth reacheth unto the skies.
- 5 Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens,  
and thy glory above all the earth.

B

- 6 That thy beloved may be delivered;  
save with thy right hand, and answer us.

[FROM PSA 57-7-11]

- 7 God has spoken in his holiness, **I will exult;**  
**I will divide Shechem, and mete out the valley of Succoth;**
- 8 **Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine,**  
**Ephraim also is the defense of my head;**  
**Judah is my sceptre.**
- 9 **Moab is my washpot,**  
**upon Edom will I cast my shoe,**  
**over Philistia will I shout.**
- 10 Who will bring me into the fortified city?  
who hath led me unto Edom?
- 11 Hast thou cast us off, O God?  
and thou goest not forth, O God, with our hosts.
- 12 Give us help against the adversary,  
for vain is the help of man.
- 13 Through God we shall do valiantly,  
for it is he who will tread down our adversaries.

This is not the usual AR pattern; it begins with praise of God, and ends with confidence in God’s assurance of aid against the nations (delivered in the first person, than which there could be no higher assurance). It is a psalm without doubt.

None who sang it, and probably few who listened, will have been unaware of its composite nature, and the piece may thus have been perceived not as one David Psalm, but as two. With 109-110 following, we would have a group of four David Psalms: two diptychs.

### Book IV

Now we come to a rough place. There is only Psalm 107 left, before the beginning of Book IV of the Psalter, and there is little warrant for analyzing it as composite.

The alternative is to analyze it as integral, but *not* as the beginning of Book IV. In support, I note that this division never made conspicuous sense, and one recent opinion argues strongly for a pairing of 106 and 107, spanning that supposed section break:

Psalm 107 opens Book V with what appears to be a direct response to the concluding plea of Book IV (see “gathered]” in Pss 106:47, 107:3). Psalm 107 also features in an impressive way one of the key words in Psalm 106 and the psalter as a whole: “Steadfast love” . . . The word occurs in the first and last verses of Psalm 17 (note that 106:1 and 107:1 are identical), and it occurs in the second of the psalm’s two refrains (vv8, 15, 21, 31). There are still more literary and conceptual links between Psalms 106 and 107 – “wonderful works (106:7, 22; 107:8, 15, 21, 24, 31), “rebel” (106:7, 33, 43; 107:11), “redeemed” (106:10; 107:2), “counsel” (106:13; 107:11), “subjected” (106:42; 107:12), “distress/trouble” (106:44; 107:2, 6, 13, 19, 29), “iniquity” (106:43, 107:17). Indeed, Psalm 107 can be regarded as a further illustration evident throughout Psalm 106 and summarized in 106:43-46.<sup>2</sup>

**Psalms 106-107** may then be regarded as yet another diptych. Moving on:

**Psalms 104-105** are respectively in praise of YHWH’s works in nature, and his coventantal relation with Israel. They too make a plausible pair. And we have passed, without a bump, over what is now the barrier between Books IV and V.

It was inevitable that there should be Five Books, to match the Pentateuch Five. But if not at 106/107, then where might the division between Books IV and V, which is now located at what seems to be a wrong position, have originally come?

### The Torah Psalter

I suggest that Psalm 119, the longest acrostic, giving not *one* verse but *eight* to each letter of the alphabet, all the verses praising the Law, was at one point the latest Psalm to be added; the last Psalm. Law is also the theme of Psalm 1 (“but his delight is in the Law of YHWH”), and Psalm 1 may have been added at the same time, the two constituting a framing device. With Law pieces at the head and tail of the Palms collection, there would have existed, if only for a time, a Torah Psalter.

**Psalm 1.** Many view Psalms 1-2 as an introduction to the Psalter, or, alternatively, to Book I of the Psalter. But Psalm 1 (a “wisdom” psalm) is about the rewards of virtue, while Psalm 2 depicts a kingdom and its enemies. It is Davidic, and it alone relevantly introduces Psalms 3-41, which are attributed to or associated with David. Says Delitzsch (1/82) of Psalms 1-2:

These two anonymous hymns are only so far related, as that the one is adapted to form the proemium of the Psalter from its ethical, the other from its prophetic character. . . . Ps. i. being the proper prologue of the Psalter in its Pentateuchal arrangement after the pattern of the Tôra.

<sup>2</sup>McCann (1996) 1116-1117.

So also Buitenwieser 792 on the Davidic Psalm 2:

The description given in the psalm of the kings and nations of the earth as rising up in revolt against God and his anointed ruler in Zion days does not relate a real situation but is visionary, for at no time in its history did Israel enjoy world-dominion. It only dreamed of it . . . The words, "Thou art my son," find their explanation in such parallels as Ps. 89B:27-28, "He shall invoke me, 'Thou art my father, My God, and rock of my salvation,' And I will set him up like a firstborn" . . . Even so does Psalm 2 by the words "This day have I given birth to thee," make clear that not by descent, but by God's recognizing him as Messiah, is the future ruler God's son.

And (p852) on Psalm 1:

There has been much speculation as to why the psalm was placed at the head of the Psalter . . . If editors of the Psalter purposely assigned it this place, to serve (as has been thought) as a sort of preface or motto, they showed poor judgement, giving evidence of a lack of understanding rather than of a judicial estimate of the Psalms.

The hypothesis of an incompetent author or editor, often proposed in the literature, may itself show a lack of understanding. Everybody involved probably knew very well what they were up to *at the time*, even if their aims were not those of later readers.

**Book I.** There may be a further advantage in seeing Psalm 1 as added, for Torah reasons, to a Davidic collection. With Psalm 1, Book I consists of 41 Psalms, but as a number, 41 has nothing much going for it. 40, however, is full of magic, evoking the Forty Years of the Exodus, the time of Mosaic leadership, and the precedent for the later literal Davidic Kingship. The Exodus (Moses) and the Kingship (David) are the two poles of the Hebrew historical imagination. Book I, at one time the Only Book, would thus have powerfully *evoked both*. Praising in song the One Kingdom.

And later, when the Kingship seemed to have failed, and thoughts turned instead to Torah as the core of Hebrew religious identity, reshaping the Psalter (with the addition of the framing elements Psalms 1 and 119) to focus it on its Torah aspect, overriding its original Davidic emphasis, would have made all the sense in the world.

All the *practical* sense, in a changing world.

The ultimate moral seems to be that the Psalter was put together in several stages, each having a rationale in the situation of Israel at that time. As the situation of Israel changed, the layout, and thus the message, of the community songbook also changed. To a modern hymnologist, few things will seem less problematic

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