

# An Embedded Chiasm in the Narrative Structure of Psalm 105

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## Abstract

This article suggests that a previously unrecognised chiasm is embedded within the narrative structure of Psalm 105. Both the narrative structure and the chiastic structure of Psalm 105 are described, and the rhetorical significance of these structures is explored. The narrative structure points to the value of historical recital as a form of testimony and theological articulation within the liturgical life of Israel. The chiastic structure highlights significant elements of the psalm and its story. The emphasis of Psalm 105 is on Yahweh's power and dominance over Israel's enemies, a dominance that generates trust and hope that would be particularly beneficial to those hearers who were suffering in the exilic or in postexilic contexts.

**Keywords:** chiasm; psalms; historical recital; transitioning; testimony

## Introduction

Psalm 105 recounts the familiar story of Israel, emphasising the exodus narrative and the ensuing covenant with Yahweh. Its basic content, therefore, shares characteristics of other psalms of historical recital, such as Psalms 78, 106, 135, and 136 (Allen 2002, 67). However, unlike Psalm 106, which elaborates upon repeated episodes of Israel's disobedience, Psalm 105 describes the history of Israel as a series of continual victories.

This study examines the structure of Psalm 105 and suggests ways in which that structure contributes to the rhetorical analysis of the psalm. It is argued here that Psalm 105 is made up of two interconnected structures. The more obvious of the two is the narrative sequence that tells Israel's foundational story, beginning with the call of Abraham and ending with the conquest of Canaan. Embedded within the narrative,



however, are verbal parallels that form a chiasm. As far as I can determine, this chiastic structure has not been identified before now.

## **Psalm 105**

<sup>1</sup> Oh give thanks to the LORD, call upon His name;

Make known His deeds among the peoples.

<sup>2</sup> Sing to Him, sing praises to Him;

Speak of all His wonders.

<sup>3</sup> Glory in His holy name;

Let the heart of those who seek the LORD be glad.

<sup>4</sup> Seek the LORD and His strength;

Seek His face continually.

<sup>5</sup> Remember His wonders which He has done,

His marvels, and the judgments uttered by His mouth,

<sup>6</sup> O seed of Abraham, His servant,

O sons of Jacob, His chosen ones!

<sup>7</sup> He is the LORD our God;

His judgments are in all the earth.

<sup>8</sup> He has remembered His covenant forever,

The word which He commanded to a thousand generations,

<sup>9</sup> *The covenant* which He made with Abraham,

And His oath to Isaac.

<sup>10</sup> Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute,

To Israel as an everlasting covenant,

<sup>11</sup> Saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan

As the portion of your inheritance,”

<sup>12</sup> When they were only a few men in number,

Very few, and strangers in it.

<sup>13</sup> And they wandered about from nation to nation,

From one kingdom to another people.

<sup>14</sup> He permitted no man to oppress them,

And He reproved kings for their sakes:

<sup>15</sup> “Do not touch My anointed ones,

And do My prophets no harm.”

<sup>16</sup> And He called for a famine upon the land;

He broke the whole staff of bread.

<sup>17</sup> He sent a man before them,

Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

<sup>18</sup> They afflicted his feet with fetters,

He himself was laid in irons;

<sup>19</sup> Until the time that his word came to pass,

The word of the LORD tested him.

<sup>20</sup> The king sent and released him,

The ruler of peoples, and set him free.

<sup>21</sup> He made him lord of his house,

And ruler over all his possessions,

<sup>22</sup> To imprison his princes at will,  
That he might teach his elders wisdom.

<sup>23</sup> Israel also came into Egypt;  
Thus Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.

<sup>24</sup> And He caused His people to be very fruitful,  
And made them stronger than their adversaries.

<sup>25</sup> He turned their heart to hate His people,  
To deal craftily with His servants.

<sup>26</sup> He sent Moses His servant,  
And Aaron whom He had chosen.

<sup>27</sup> They performed His wondrous acts among them,  
And miracles in the land of Ham.

<sup>28</sup> He sent darkness and made *it* dark;  
And they did not rebel against His words.

<sup>29</sup> He turned their waters into blood,  
And caused their fish to die.

<sup>30</sup> Their land swarmed with frogs  
Even in the chambers of their kings.

<sup>31</sup> He spoke, and there came a swarm of flies  
And gnats in all their territory.

<sup>32</sup> He gave them hail for rain,  
And flaming fire in their land.

<sup>33</sup> He struck down their vines also and their fig trees,  
And shattered the trees of their territory.

<sup>34</sup> He spoke, and locusts came,  
And young locusts, even without number,

<sup>35</sup> And ate up all vegetation in their land,  
And ate up the fruit of their ground.

<sup>36</sup> He also struck down all the first-born in their land,  
The first fruits of all their vigor.

<sup>37</sup> Then He brought them out with silver and gold;  
And among His tribes there was not one who stumbled.

<sup>38</sup> Egypt was glad when they departed;  
For the dread of them had fallen upon them.

<sup>39</sup> He spread a cloud for a covering,  
And fire to illumine by night.

<sup>40</sup> They asked, and He brought quail,  
And satisfied them with the bread of heaven.

<sup>41</sup> He opened the rock, and water flowed out;  
It ran in the dry places like a river.

<sup>42</sup> For He remembered His holy word  
With Abraham His servant;

<sup>43</sup> And He brought forth His people with joy,  
His chosen ones with a joyful shout.

<sup>44</sup> He gave them also the lands of the nations,

That they might take possession of the fruit of the peoples' labor,

<sup>45</sup> So that they might keep His statutes,

And observe His laws,

Praise the LORD! (NASB)

### **Narrative Structure of Psalm 105**

Psalm 105 divides quite easily into three main sections (cf. Gerstenberger 2001, 230):

I. Call to worship (1–6)

II. Recital of Israel's Story (7–45a)

a. Covenant with Abraham (7–11)

b. Patriarchal sojourn in Canaan (12–15)

c. Joseph's story concluding with Israel's entry into Egypt (16–23)

d. Israel's Time in Egypt (24–38)

e. Miracles in the Wilderness (39–41)

f. Reflection on God's faithfulness (42–45a)

III. Renewed Call to worship (45b)

Hossfeld and Zenger (2011, 66) would modify this outline by viewing vv. 1–3 as a unit and vv. 4–7 as a second unit. However, I would argue that the change of subject from “you” to “he” in v. 7 suggests that v. 7 starts a new unit that belongs with vv. 8–11 (cf. Terrien 2003, 723; Jacobson 2014, 783; and Allen 2002, 53).

The first section (vv. 1–6) consists of a series of ten imperatives and one jussive that make up an introductory call to worship. Apart from Psalm 150, Psalm 105 contains the most lengthy call to worship in the entire Psalter (in Psalm 150, the verb *הלל* is found twelve times in the imperative and once in the jussive). Israel is invited to give thanks, call, make known, sing, sing, talk, glory, rejoice, seek, seek, and remember. These imperatives are addressed to the “seed of Abraham,” the “children of Jacob, [Yahweh's] chosen ones” (Stevens 2003, 188). Allen (2002, 57) points out that the term “chosen”

had “postexilic associations with the promise of the land, in the light of Isa. 65:9–10.” Jacobson (2014, 787) observes that all of the imperatives are in the plural, “meaning that the entire congregation is to become those who *testify* about God’s actions. That is, the congregation is to become a corporate witness to what God has done and to the character of the Lord as a faithful God.” The emphasis here is on Israel’s testimony within the context of worship. Israel is called upon to glorify Yahweh on account of Yahweh’s deeds, wonders, holy name, signs, and judgements that have been manifested within the story of Israel (cf. Cate 1984, 56).

The second section (vv 7–45a) is a chronological recital of Israel’s story, beginning with Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham, which was subsequently confirmed to Isaac and Jacob. Yahweh promised the land of Canaan to the patriarchs and protected them in their nomadic wanderings throughout the Promised Land. Allen (2002, 58) observes that, to this small patriarchal group, the promise of obtaining the land “must have seemed an unattainable dream.” The story continues with descriptions of Yahweh’s faithful care of Joseph and Yahweh’s resolve to save Israel through the mission of Moses. The plagues upon Egypt are recounted in detail, and Israel’s departure from Egypt is celebrated with great relish.<sup>1</sup> The wilderness wanderings are described in terms of Yahweh’s wondrous protection and his miraculous provision of quail, bread from heaven, and water from the rock. This middle section concludes with the assurance that all of Yahweh’s works were based upon his faithful remembrance of the covenant with Abraham. Consequently, the covenant (i.e., “his holy word with Abraham,” v. 42) is fulfilled by Israel’s inheritance of the land (v. 44). While the first section focuses almost entirely on Israel’s praise of God, this second section supplies the motive for that praise. In 35 verses, we find 30 verbs with Yahweh as the subject of the action, a fact that suggests Yahweh’s saving activity as the dominant theme of the narrative.

The third and final section (v. 45b) consists only in the brief exhortation, “Praise Yah!”

### **Chiastic Structure of Psalm 105**

Although the narrative is laid out in chronological fashion from verse 8 to verse 44, the structure also includes embedded chiastic elements, which might be outlined as follows:

A – Call to thanksgiving and praise הלל (1–4)

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<sup>1</sup> There are questions regarding the exact number plagues. Psalm 105, for example, does not mention the boils or the diseased livestock. This omission, however, is not surprising. The psalms of historical recital omit many of the details that are found in the narratives of Genesis–Kings. For a discussion of the number of plagues see Margulis (1969, 491–496), Loewenstamm (1971, 34–38), and Tucker (2005, 401–411).

B – His chosen ones בחר (6)

C – Remembered (זכר) his word to Abraham דבר (8–9)

D – Wandering in Canaan הלך (12–15)

E – Yahweh sent Joseph שלח (16–22)

F – Israel enters Egypt יעקב/ישראל (23)

G – Yahweh made his people stronger than their enemies (24)

F' – Israel oppressed עבדיו/עמו (25)

E' – Yahweh sent Moses שלח (26–36)

D' – Returning towards Canaan הלך (37–41)

C' – Remembered (זכר) his word to Abraham דבר (42)

B' – His chosen ones בחר (43)

A' – Call to praise הלל (45b)

The chiasm that I propose corresponds broadly to the chiasms discerned by Alden and Vette, although mine is more extensive.

Alden (1978, 201–202) observes the following basic A B A' pattern:

A – Giving thanks to the Lord for remembering his covenant with Abraham (1–11)

B – Narrative of the exodus (12–41)

A' – Praising the Lord for remembering his word to Abraham (42–45).

Several of the elements of my chiasm are named by Alden (1978, 201) as repetitions. For example, he notices the repetition of “Abraham” (vv. 6, 9, 42), “remember” (vv. 8, 42), “word” (vv. 8, 42), “people” (vv. 1, 43), and “earth” (vv. 7, 44); but he does not recognise how these repetitions fit within a chiasmic pattern.



Vette (2016, 99) expands the chiasm from two levels to three:

A – “*Lob und Dank*” (“praise and thanks,” 1–7)

B – “*Bund*” (“covenant,” 8–11)

C – “*Geschichte*” (“history,” 12–43)

B’ – “*Bund*” (“covenant,” 44–45a)

A’ – “*Lob und Dank*” (“praise and thanks,” 45b)

Vette (2016, 100) points out that although the term “covenant” is not mentioned at the end of the psalm, the reference to “statutes” and “laws” referred to in v. 45 is an allusion to the covenant. Vette is correct to see that the reference to “statutes” and “laws” points to the Sinai covenant. However, the covenant that is in view in vv. 6–11 is not the Sinai covenant; it is the Abrahamic covenant. Although it is true that this is poetry, and it would not be unusual for the covenants to be seen as one; the emphasis of this psalm is on the word of God as promise not as law. In fact, the entire Sinai narrative is missing from the psalm. Therefore, v. 45a is not strictly parallel with vv. 8–11; rather, v. 42 (which mentions Abraham) should be paired with vv. 8–9 as it is in my chiasmic structure. Nevertheless, the unexpected call for obedience to “statutes” and “laws” provides a powerful conclusion to the psalm, and it creates a bridge to Psalm 106 (which emphasises obedience).

Although Alden’s and Vette’s observations are helpful, the chiasmic structure can be expanded even further by taking note of other verbal parallels that are listed in the outline above. It will be observed that the chiasmic structure that I propose corresponds quite closely to the chronological structure given earlier. However, the key Hebrew terms that are displayed in the chiasm point the hearer to elements of the story that might have been overlooked previously. For example, the call to worship stands out prominently no matter which structure is employed; however, the chiasm draws attention to the people of God as the “chosen ones” and to the covenant as God’s “word.” The repetition of the word “going” (Heb. הֵלֵךְ) suggests that Israel’s life with Yahweh is a journey, and the use of “sent” (Heb. שָׁלַח) in relation to both Joseph and Moses underlines Yahweh’s purposeful activity in guiding, preserving, and saving Israel. In the case of Joseph especially, the “path to glory lay through suffering,” a fact that would not be insignificant to those who suffered in the exile (cf. Allen 2002, 58, Gerstenberger 2001, 230). The middle verses (23–25) do not have precise verbal parallels, but the terms “Israel” and “Jacob” function as synonymous parallels to “his people”

and “his servants.”<sup>2</sup> The centre of the chiasm states, “[Yahweh] made his people very fruitful, and he made them mightier than their adversaries” (v. 24), thus drawing attention to Yahweh’s power to prosper his people even when they are surrounded by foes who would attempt to destroy them.

### **Rhetorical Analysis of Psalm 105**

Psalm 105 is a joyful celebration of the mighty acts of Yahweh that demonstrates Yahweh’s faithful commitment to the covenant with Israel (Jacobson 2014, 782–789). This psalm generates in the hearer a number of related responses that are based upon prominent elements of the psalm, which include Yahweh’s faithfulness, commitment, care, purposefulness, power, and resolve. In response to Yahweh’s character and actions, the hearer is moved toward the affections of gratitude, love, trust, courage, awe, and joy (cf. McMillion 2010, 179).

The story of Israel as narrated in Psalm 105 is the story of Yahweh’s mighty work on behalf of Israel, which includes Yahweh’s choosing, covenanting, guiding, protecting, saving, giving, and remembering. Yahweh performs “wonders” that both “*subvert our knowledge*, our epistemology, our ways of knowing,” and they also “*subvert our political-economic power arrangements*,” thus “displacing our certitude” and leaving us in a state of amazement (Brueggemann 1995, 41; emphasis in the original).

Everything revolves around Yahweh’s faithful devotion to the covenant with Israel (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, 70; Gerstenberger 2001, 231). In Psalm 105, the actions of Israel have little impact on the story—Israel’s role is to follow Yahweh’s lead. Even though Israel suffers at the hands of their Egyptian oppressors, the tone of the psalm is one of confident hope in Yahweh’s commitment to Israel. The original hearers, therefore, would be moved to trust in Yahweh’s ability and resolve to deliver Israel from her enemies. Ellington (2007, 25) writes: “The emphasis is placed on Yahweh’s power and dominance over the Egyptian empire.” The trust and hope that is generated by Psalm 105 would be particularly beneficial to those hearers who were suffering in the exilic or postexilic contexts (cf. Brueggemann and Bellinger 2014, 454).

The lengthy series of imperatives (vv. 1–5) invites Israel to remember Yahweh’s saving works and to praise Yahweh with singing. This text, therefore, calls upon the people of God to rejoice in God’s mighty works and faithful character and to praise God for those attributes and actions. Psalm 105, therefore, would be appropriate within any liturgical context that calls for the celebration of God as saviour, protector, provider, and guide:

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the significance of the terms “chosen” and “servant,” see Jacobson (2014, 794).

“Recounting and remembering God’s wondrous deeds in our history leads to reliance on God’s faithfulness and response in our own lives” (Stevens 2003, 189).

## **Value of Historical Recital as Testimony**

To some degree, the entire Psalter functions as Israel’s testimony to the character and acts of God.<sup>3</sup> Two types of psalms, however, are more explicitly testimonial in nature: 1) the thanksgiving psalms and 2) the psalms of historical recital. The thanksgiving psalms recount specific occasions when God intervened in the life of the psalmist to bring help either to the individual or to the community.<sup>4</sup> Normally, this divine intervention was in response to the psalmist’s cry for help as found in the psalms of lament. The psalms of historical recital, however, give more attention to Israel’s corporate story and testify to God’s saving activity in the history of Israel. This type of psalm bears close similarities to what we call the hymns and may even be classified as a hymn or as an expansion of the hymn type. Like Psalm 105, the hymns normally begin with a call to worship and end with a renewed call to worship. An important implication of the call to worship in Psalm 105 is that this testimony (like others in the Psalter) is performed in the context of worship (see Ellington 2011, 9–14). The themes of the hymns and the psalms of historical recital are similar and may include creation, God’s sovereignty, the exodus, and God’s care for the needy. In the hymns, therefore, the motive for praise often includes a reference to the exodus, but the psalms of historical recital are presented as a broader narrative that may reach back to the creation (cf. Psalm 136) and may extend forward into the monarchy (cf. Psalm 78).

Like the prose narratives of the Old Testament, the psalms of historical recital are articulations of Israel’s theology. Goldingay (2006, 217) states that Psalm 105 “does on a small scale what the great OT narrative works do on a large scale,” but the psalms are narrative theology set forth in the literary form of lyric poetry. The psalms, therefore, are sung theology. Childs (1979, 514) writes that the Psalms “accurately reflect the theology of Israel”; and Gerstenberger (1988, 36) expresses his amazement at the theological depth and breadth of the Psalms when he writes, “[T]he Psalter does not contain a summa of theological thought or any kind of theological system ... Still, the Psalter is so vast in its theological dimensions that any systematizing effort must fall short. It will continue to stimulate our life of faith even in this different age, just as it has done for centuries.” Thus, Goldingay (2006, 203) can write of Psalm 105: “It is thus teaching; but it is also worship.” The psalms of historical recital suggest that theological

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<sup>3</sup> In his Old Testament theology, Brueggemann (1997) presents the entire OT as a collection of testimonies regarding Yahweh. The testimonies are generated by what are commonly called the various “traditions.”

<sup>4</sup> Ellington (2000, 48–59) explores the kinds of testimony offered in the psalms of thanksgiving. He argues that thanksgiving (i.e. testimony) and lament are “two sides of the same coin” (50–51). See also Ellington (2007, 28–31), in which he elaborates on the nature of Scripture as testimony.

truth can be learned, taught, handed down, and understood in light of experience. Cate (1984, 50) argues that revelation is transmitted through the singing of Psalm 105 because “[t]he mighty acts of God reveal the God of the mighty acts.” Therefore, knowledge of God is more than propositional truth; it is relational truth. Ellington (2007, 28) adds: “Testimony in the Psalms is an act of traditioning in which Israel’s story is brought into the present, experienced anew, and projected into the future.” The God of Psalm 105 is a God who is deeply invested in the life of his people and who responds to their prayers and their cries by intervening with signs and wonders.

## Conclusion

Psalm 105 recounts the familiar story of Israel—from the time of Abraham to the settlement in Canaan. This poetic narrative emphasises God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham as God delivers Israel from Egyptian bondage and leads them to the Promised Land. Its basic content shares characteristics of other psalms of historical recital, such as Psalm 106; but, unlike Psalm 106, which elaborates upon repeated episodes of Israel’s disobedience, Psalm 105 describes the history of Israel as a series of deliverances by Yahweh.

This study has shown that Psalm 105 is made up of two interconnected structures. The more obvious of the two is the narrative sequence that tells Israel’s foundational story, beginning with the call of Abraham and ending with the conquest of Canaan. Embedded within the narrative, however, are verbal parallels that form a chiasm. The chiasmic structure brings attention to key elements of the narrative, such as the chosenness of Israel, Yahweh’s “sending” of Joseph and Moses as means of salvation, and God’s “word” to Abraham. The faithfulness of Yahweh that underlies the entire story would bring hope and courage to those Jews who were suffering in the exile and to subsequent generations who face difficult challenges in life.

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