

# Is Hallelujah Really the Highest Praise?

BY: DEARTRA D.  
MADKINS-BOONE

This paper explores whether "hallelujah" is the highest form of praise in Christianity. It analyzes its etymology and theological implications through Augustine's linguistic perspectives and biblical examples, concluding that it represents a profound call and expression of praising the Lord.

The well-known solo artist CeCe Winans sings "Hallelujah Praise." In the song, she repeatedly says, "Hallelujah is the highest praise" (Caldwell). This line from the song is often said in Christian churches. But, Biblically, is hallelujah the highest praise? In this paper, I will examine this question using Augustine's *On Christian Teaching, Book Two*.

"Hallelujah" is a Hebrew word that has transcended cultural boundaries and has been embraced widely across different Christian communities. Historically, the word "hallelujah" has its origins in the Hebrew Bible, where it is composed of two elements: "halal," which means to praise joyously, and "Yah," a shortened form of "Yahweh," the name of God. This combination translates to "praise the Lord," a command of exhortation and celebration.

In the Jewish tradition, the word is associated with the Hallel prayers, a series of psalms (Psalms 113-118) recited on religious holidays as an act of worship and thanksgiving. The early Christian church adopted this practice, and "hallelujah" became a part of the liturgical tradition, signifying a moment of pure worship and joy.

**According to Augustine and other church fathers, vocalizing this praise is not merely a ritualistic utterance but a manifestation of the soul's connection to the divine. Augustine argues that words like "hallelujah" carry with them the weight of genuine faith; they are a form of confession and testimony to God's glory.**

The usage of "hallelujah" varies significantly across Christian denominations. In Orthodox and Catholic traditions, it is often associated with liturgical music and is sung during pivotal moments of the service, especially during the Easter season. In Protestant churches, particularly within Pentecostal and charismatic movements, "hallelujah" is a spontaneous exclamation of praise and is used more freely throughout worship services.

"The familiar word Hallelujah looks exactly like a Biblical name (verb + name of God), and it's a bit of a miracle that it was never applied as one (as far as we know). And even though in our modern languages, it exists as a verbal orphan, like a little linguistic island in a familiar textual ocean, in Hebrew it's part of a vast cluster of frequently occurring names, words and phrases. Where in our experience, Hallelujah means something like YOO-HOO!!, in Hebrew the word Hallelujah was recognized as proper language, and perfectly understood," (Uittenbogaard).



A man stands with arms outstretched toward the heavens as dark clouds part and light descends, embodying a moment of divine intervention and spiritual awakening.

The word Hallelujah has two parts. The beginning of the word is halal, which has a few meanings. For this paper, the word means "to be boastful or to praise" (Uittenbogaard). Halal is found several times in the Bible. It has several meanings, including praise, in one form or another. The

ending of the word is Yah, which is YHWH or the Lord. When the two parts are combined, it becomes the word hallelujah, which means praise the Lord.

Augustine suggests that written texts are often misunderstood because unknown or vague signs obscure the word's meaning. To understand these signs, one must know languages. "An important antidote to the ignorance of literal sign is the knowledge of languages" (Augustine 159). According to Augustine, readers must know Hebrew and Greek to understand the Bible. This is important "so that recourse may be had to the original versions if any uncertainty arises from the infinite variety of Latin translators" (159). Understanding Hebrew and Greek is essential to answering the question asked in this paper.

Augustine's insights into the interpretation of sacred texts highlight the complexities inherent in translating and understanding scriptural language. He asserts that the obscurity of written words often results from the use of unknown or ambiguous symbols that cloud the intended meaning. This interpretative challenge underscores the necessity of linguistic knowledge, particularly of the original languages in which the texts were composed. Augustine specifically emphasizes the importance of mastering Hebrew and Greek for those who wish to deeply understand the Bible. This proficiency enables access to the original text, thus circumventing the potential distortions introduced by the "infinite variety" of Latin translations. According to Augustine, such linguistic acumen is not merely academic but is a crucial tool for uncovering the true theological and doctrinal insights of the scriptures, which is essential for addressing the theological inquiries posited in academic and spiritual discussions.

Theologically, "hallelujah" is rich with implications. According to Augustine and other church fathers, vocalizing this praise is not merely a ritualistic utterance but a manifestation of the soul's connection to God. Augustine argues that words like "hallelujah" carry with them the weight of genuine faith; they are a form of confession and testimony to God's glory.

**Viewing the word hallelujah in line with Nehemiah 9:5 as well as using the Hebrew translations of the two parts of the word, as Augustine promotes doing, one can say that hallelujah is the highest praise because the word meHallelujahse the Lord."**

Both the words halal and Yah are Hebrew words and through using these Hebrew words, the definition of the hallelujah is understood. "Hallelujah seems to fulfill the function of a mere liturgical term; a call to praise, like "here we go!" But under scrutiny a second meaning emerges, or perhaps the primary meaning that had slipped under the popular or liturgical one," (Uittenbogaard). Hallelujah becomes a call to praise the Lord, as well as a praise offered to the Lord.

While "hallelujah" is commonly regarded among many Christian circles as the highest form of praise due to its direct call to recognize and celebrate the sovereignty of God, its significance is multi-layered. It is a historical artifact and a living, breathing act of worship that engages believers in a dialogue with God. Through the lenses of history, cultural practice, and theological reflection, "hallelujah" stands out as a call to praise and a profound affirmation of faith, spanning centuries and touching hearts across generations.

The discourse within Christian theology often examines the profound implications of the expression "hallelujah" in relation to divine worship that characterizes the anticipated Kingdom of God. When believers vocalize "hallelujah," they do more than participate in a ritual; they express a deep-seated hope and trust in the promise of God's ultimate redemption and the renewal of creation. This concept is embedded within the broader context of Christian theology, which envisions a future where God's omnipresence is fully realized, and the faithful are united in eternal praise. The discussions surrounding "hallelujah" extend its theological significance beyond mere earthly worship, connecting it to the spiritual anticipation of the ultimate culmination—the end-time event where divine and human histories converge in fulfillment. Therefore, "hallelujah" emerges as a transcendent declaration, a glimpse of heavenly worship, resonating with the hope of resurrection and the perpetual celebration of God's glory and majesty.

Nehemiah 9:5 states, "Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise" ("Nehemiah"). Viewing the word hallelujah in line with Nehemiah 9:5 and using the Hebrew translations of the two parts of the word, as Augustine promotes doing, one can say that hallelujah is the highest praise because the word means "Praise the Lord." The word also encourages others to join in the praise as well.

**"Hallelujah is not a mere liturgic command, like a prelude to something exuberant" (Uittenbogaard).**

Several other biblical verses lend weight to this assertion to further underscore the significance of "hallelujah" as the highest form of praise within Christian worship. The Psalms, in particular, serve as a rich source for understanding the depth and breadth of this expression. For example, Psalm 146:1-2 exhorts, "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! While I live I will praise the Lord; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being." Here, the invocation to praise the Lord (hallelujah) is tied directly to a lifelong commitment to worship, highlighting its supreme importance ("Psalm 146:1-2").

Similarly, Psalm 150, often referred to as the "Great Hallel," encapsulates the essence of total and unrestricted praise: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord (Hallelujah)." This verse not only commands the praise of God but also extends it to all of creation, suggesting

an all-encompassing scope that aligns with the idea of "hallelujah" as the highest praise ("Psalm 150").

Moreover, Revelation 19:1-6 presents "hallelujah" in an end-times light, depicting its use in the heavenly realms: "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God..." This celestial chorus reaffirms that "hallelujah" is a liturgical expression and a victorious proclamation of the ultimate realization of God's kingdom ("Revelation 19:1-6").

Drawing upon the Hebrew origins of the word, its profound usage in scriptural texts, and the theological insights discussed, it is evident that "hallelujah" holds a place of unparalleled esteem in Christian doctrine and worship. The term does more than articulate praise; it encapsulates a multifaceted expression of worship, adoration, and reverence towards God that is both a personal declaration and a communal invitation. Through its biblical appearances and the powerful contexts in which it is employed—from the historical prayers of the Levites in Nehemiah to the eternal choirs of Revelation—"hallelujah" resonates as the highest form of praise. It bridges Earth and Heaven, temporality and eternity, uniting believers in a shared acknowledgment of God's sovereign majesty and enduring grace. Thus, within Christian spirituality and liturgical practice framework, "hallelujah" indisputably emerges as the highest praise, embodying the ultimate expression of faith and devotion.

---

### Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Il Convivio*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 184-190. Print.

Alighieri, Dante. *The Letter to Can Grande*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010. 188-190. Print.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 177-184. Print.

Augustine. *On Christian Teaching*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 154-162. Print.

Caldwell, Cedric, Adrian Israel Gurvitz, and Victor Caldwell. "'Hallelujah Praise' Lyrics." *CECE WINANS LYRICS*. AZLyrics.com, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.  
<<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/cecewinans/hallelujahpraise.html>>.

"Nehemiah 9:5." *Nehemiah 9:5*. Bible Hub, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.  
<<http://biblehub.com/nehemiah/9-5.htm>>.

"Psalm 146:1-2." *Psalm 146:1-2*. Bible Hub, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.  
<<https://biblehub.com/nkjv/psalms/146.htm>>.

"Psalm 150." *Psalm 150*. Bible Hub, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.  
<<https://biblehub.com/nkjv/psalms/150.htm>>.

"Revelation 19:1-6." *Revelation 19:1-6*. Bible Hub, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.  
<<https://biblehub.com/esv/revelation/19.htm>>.

Uittenbogaard, Arie. "The Amazing Word Hallelujah: Meaning and Etymology." *Abarim Publications*. Abarim Publications, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Hallelujah.html#.VBhSdGMXNrv>>.