

HALLELUJAH SCARCE

Here's another bit of biblical trivia: It's hard to find the word "Hallelujah" in the Bible. The way some people use it on just about any happy occasion, you'd think "Hallelujah" must be scattered on every other page or so.

Not so. In fact, in most English translations of the Bible you'll only find the word about four times, all lumped together in the last book of the Christian scriptures.

Check out the 19th chapter of Revelation. There in the space of eight verses it the only spot you're likely to find any Hallelujahs.

Here are a series of victory songs shouted by the angels in heaven and by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures and by the triumphant saints. Each of their cries of praise begins with the acclamation "Hallelujah."

And that's it. You won't find the word anywhere else in the Christian scriptures. The apostle Paul never uses it in any of his letters. The authors of the gospels never see fit to include any Hallelujahs in their stories about Jesus.

Before you go any farther, you need to stop and realize what the word "Hallelujah" means. It's not really a good English word. In fact, it's not really a Greek word either. Perhaps that's why it's so rare in the Christian scriptures, which were originally written in Greek.

"Hallelujah" is a Hebrew word, better yet, a Hebrew phrase. "Hallelu" is a command to praise someone. "Jah" is the short form of God's name "Yahweh." So "Hallelu-Jah" means "Praise Yah-weh," or as it's usually rendered, "Praise the Lord."

Now if you thumb around in the Jewish scriptures that's how you'll find it, not as "Hallelujah" but as "Praise the Lord." The phrase pops up at least two dozen times in the book of Psalms.

You can check it out by glancing at Psalm 113 or 115 or 116 or 117, a group of hymns usually sung by Jewish people in connection with the Passover celebration. A similar group includes the last five psalms in the book.

In each case the psalm begins or ends with the phrase "Praise the Lord." That's the way it shows up in most English translations, although a few will reproduce the Hebrew words as "Hallelujah."

And that's why the word is so hard to find in the Bible.

Can we milk this bit of biblical trivia for any more insights? Consider how the word was used in ancient times. Three facts stand out.

First, the technical terms for praising the Lord always seem to refer to some sort of public activity.

Not that pious folks couldn't or wouldn't worship in a private manner, but the fact is that this word for praise, "hallel," is a public thing.

Second, it's a group activity, not a solo performance. It's a not so subtle request for everyone within earshot to drop what they're doing and join in praising the Lord.

Not that individuals couldn't go it alone from time to time, but in this case "Hallelujah" is a plural command which requires a crowd of singers.

Third is the place. Hallelujahs were meant to be shouted in the temple. There probably wasn't any law against praising

the Lord in the privacy of your home or while trotting to town on your donkey.

But the fact of the matter is that those chapters of the Jewish scriptures which give more detailed directions for praising the Lord all seem to assume that it would happen in the courts of the temple.

So there you have it—more than you really wanted to know about Hallelujah. For what it's worth, it's one of the few words of Hebrew which religious people

around the world still use. Eighty percent of them may not know exactly what it means. But there's something about the way it sounds—all those Ls and long vowels—that makes it work.

It may be hard to find “Hallelujah” in the Bible. But it's still as good as it ever was for people who are determined to praise the Lord.

[FILE 31 & 70]