

# The Edition of the Psalms of Ascents

*Christoph Levin*

## A. Centre and Periphery

In the course of the Persian era, and still more during the Hellenistic period, Judaism gradually developed into one of the world religions of the ancient world. Its adherents lived as an ethnic and religious group in the central cities of the ancient world, constituting a significant cultural and religious group of their own. The worldwide spread of Judaism caused the question of commonality in the face of dispersion to be raised increasingly. What did the people have in common, and what connected them? How could a particular identity be developed and retained in spite of assimilation with the environment? The contribution made by Diaspora Judaism to the formation of a Jewish identity is still undervalued.

One of the reasons for this is that the biblical writings tend to have their eyes turned towards Palestine and, especially, Jerusalem. But Jerusalem's central position is itself a result of the development of the diaspora. In the Hellenistic period, in the framework of the power struggles between the Seleucids and Ptolemies, Jerusalem acquired a key role on the Levantine land bridge. At the same time, it became a religious centre of worldwide importance. The latter development is a mechanism which we also see at work in the case of other world religions which developed a central site. The greater the periphery, the more pronounced is the need for a centre.

Philo of Alexandria describes Jerusalem as a *metropolis* in the literal sense, just as the Greek metropolises were considered to be the "mother cities" of their colonies.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental difference is that Jerusalem was not a "mother" with whom her daughter cities traded or from which they took over a constitution and a legal system, but that it acted as a religious metropolis for worldwide Judaism.

In Jerusalem, the normative body of Judaism's writings was developed, interpreted, and its further transmission secured. It was to Jerusalem that pilgrimages were made at the great cultic festivals. Devout Jews viewed the

---

<sup>1</sup> Philo Alexandrinus, *Legatio ad Gaium*, §§ 281–282, in Philo, vol. 10: *The Embassy to Gaius. Indices to volumes I–X* (ed. and trans. Francis H. Colson and George H. Whitaker; LCL 379; London: Heinemann, 1962).

periphery of the Temple as the appropriate place for them to live. There were literary works such as the Priestly Code which promoted the relocation and castigated the Jews who did not give up their life among “the fleshpots” of Egypt (Exod 16:3), or – worse – wanted to return to them (Num 14:3).

It is generally agreed that the collection of Psalms of Ascents, Ps 120–134, belongs to this historical context. On the basis of the identical heading to these fifteen psalms, the aspect under which they have been gathered together is usually connected with the regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> In the arrangement of the collection, a sequence has been recognized which proceeds from the departure from the foreign land to the journey, arrival, sojourn at the Temple, and finally the return.<sup>3</sup>

My thesis is that this collection of psalms does not envisage a return to the Diaspora. The motif that binds them together is not the regularly repeated pilgrimage; it is a single journey. The traditional interpretation that these are “pilgrimage hymns” is a misunderstanding. Rather, these psalms are promoting the move from the Diaspora to the proximity of the Temple, because “it is good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity” (Ps 133:1). Those who follow the appeal and depart from the places where they presently live do so “from this time forth and for evermore” (Ps 121:8; 131:3). To put it in modern terms, these psalms constitute the accompanying music for the ‘*Aliyah*’ of Judaism to the promised land.

A first piece of supporting evidence is that the term מַעֲלֵה, which occurs in the headings for these psalms, is used in Ezra 7:9 to describe the move of a group of Babylonian Jews who are supposed to have come to Jerusalem under Ezra’s leadership. It would not, however, be appropriate to relate the Psalms of Ascents to the return from the exile in the narrower sense, as earlier research has done,<sup>4</sup> “an interpretation [...] which is not sufficiently justified

---

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation was most influentially supported by Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* (1782/83), in *Schriften zum Alten Testament* (ed. Rudolf Smend; Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), 1234.

<sup>3</sup> See Klaus Seybold, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen: Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Psalm 120–134* (BThSt 3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 69–73.

<sup>4</sup> This was already considered by David Kimchi, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi on Psalms CXX–CL* (ed. Joshua Baker and Ernest W. Nicholson; Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 3: “It is also possible to interpret the meaning of *hamma* “*loth* as being *ma* “*loth haggaluth* – the ascents from the exile – that is, the ascents whereby Israel will at some future time go up from the lands of the exile to the land of Israel.” See also Richard Preß, “Der zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund der Wallfahrtspsalmen,” *TZ* 14 (1958): 401–15. Preß notes that the Psalms of Ascents look back to the exile from some distance (409).

by the tenor of the poems.”<sup>5</sup> This has rightly been rejected on the grounds that the Psalms of Ascents depict the Temple as already rebuilt and life in the land of Judah as well settled. We should not rely on the historical picture as it is drawn in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose details are not historically reliable. The plural *הַמַּעֲלוֹת* is used because the move was not a unique historical act affecting only the Babylonian exilic community; it was a religious programme affecting the entire Diaspora in all parts of the world.

## B. Ps 120–134 as Part of the Book of Psalms

Among the former collections of psalms which later found a place in the Book of Psalms, the fifteen Psalms of Ascents are the most easily recognizable. Marked by the heading *שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת* “song of ascents,” and ending with Ps 134 as a concluding doxology, the collection forms an easily identifiable group which in all probability originally constituted a separate writing. With the sole exception of Ps 132, all these psalms are noticeably short.<sup>6</sup> There is a wide variety of genres. Side by side with regular prayers such as hymns, songs of lament, and songs of thanksgiving, there are wisdom sayings and more than a few benedictory wishes. These genres are somewhat foreign to the rest of the Psalter, and they give the collection a character of its own.

In order to deduce the intention behind this collection, we have to distinguish between the individual psalms as they were composed and transmitted, and the work of the editor who chose and arranged them under a particular aspect and, we must suppose, commented on them through literary additions. Earlier research has already begun with this task.<sup>7</sup> The investigations that have been made up to now are, however, confined to the simple distinction between transmitted text and editorial additions. This is hardly sufficient, for it is only possible to form a reliable judgement about the editing process of the Psalms of Ascents if we view the collection in the form it took when it was still outside the context in which we have it today.

---

<sup>5</sup> Justus Olshausen, *Die Psalmen* (KEH 14; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1853), 29; Engl. translation based on Julius Wellhausen, *The Book of Psalms: Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text* (trans. J. D. Prince; SBOT 14; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1895), 95.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible that Ps 132 was not added to the collection until later, see (among others) Bernhard Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (KHC 14; 2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922), 428.

<sup>7</sup> See esp. Klaus Seybold, “Die Redaktion der Wallfahrtspsalmen,” *ZAW* 91 (1979): 247–68. A redactional-critical inquiry has also been undertaken by Loren D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134): Their Place in Israelite History and Religion* (SBLDS 148; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996).

Consequently, the stratum of changes made while editing the collection itself must be distinguished from additions which served to incorporate the collection into the larger book of Psalms, or which were added when the collection had already become part of the Psalter, and which therefore are a part of the literary development of the book of Psalms as a whole.

We can still see how the collection came to be incorporated in today's Psalter. The point of departure is the great antiphonal prayer Ps 136, which begins with the familiar words: "Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good, his steadfast love endures for ever." This particular psalm once formed the conclusion to the whole Psalter.<sup>8</sup> The evidence for this is to be found in Ps 118. This psalm begins with the same words as Ps 136: "Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good, his steadfast love endures for ever," followed in vv. 2–4 by what may be called a "liturgical instruction": "*Let Israel say* (יִשְׂרָאֵל) *His steadfast love endures for ever. Let the house of Aaron say, His steadfast love endures for ever. Let those who fear Yahweh say, His steadfast love endures for ever.*" The speakers are named who are expected to respond. This instruction is clearly to be applied to Ps 136, where the antiphon "His steadfast love endures for ever" occurs no less than 26 times. In the sequence of the Psalter as we have it today, Ps 118:1–4 and Ps 136 stand far apart from one another. The reason is that other psalms were later added to the collection. Because these additions were not to be allowed to push Ps 136 out of its key position at the end of the collection, they were inserted between Ps 118:1–4 and Ps 136.

This applies to several individual psalms which today are incorporated in Ps 118: a song of thanksgiving (vv. 5, 14, 17–19, 21, 28), a song of trust (vv. 6–7, 10–13), a hymn (vv. 15–16), and the fragment of a festival psalm (vv. 22–27). The original sequence is resumed at the end of Ps 118 by way of v. 29 as a "catching line" which repeats the first line of Ps 118 and Ps 136, respectively.

The collection Ps 120–134 has been inserted in a similar way. In this case, the redactional changes can be detected on the basis of Ps 135. In its original form, which can be found in vv. 1–4 and 19–21, Ps 135 provided a synthesis of the liturgical instruction of Ps 118:2–4 and of Ps 134, the doxology which ends the Psalms of Ascents. By way of this synthesis, the liturgical-functional connection between Ps 118:1–4 and Ps 136 is preserved, although the collection of Ps 120–134 now intervenes. Ps 119, which completely upsets the proportions with its 176 verses, belongs to a later literary stratum.

It is hard to believe that each individual psalm was headed שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת whilst the Psalms of Ascents still constituted an independent collection. It is easier to imagine "that there was probably originally one general heading for

---

<sup>8</sup> See Christoph Levin, "Ps 136 als zeitweilige Schlußdoxologie des Psalters," *SJOT* 14 (2000): 16–25; also in *Fortschreibungen* (BZAW 316; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 314–21.

the collection, from which the present individual titles developed when the collection was added to the larger whole of the Psalter.”<sup>9</sup> An indication that this was indeed the case is that, as a result, several psalms have two headings: Ps 122; 124; 131 and 133 have לְדָוִד “of David,” and Ps 127 לְשֹׁלֹמֹן “of Solomon.”<sup>10</sup> We can therefore ascribe all fifteen headings to the redaction which incorporated the collection in the larger Psalter.

### C. Incorporation

The subsequent incorporation between Ps 118 and Ps 136 did not affect only the headings; it also left traces in the individual psalms of the collection.

At the beginning of Ps 124, there is an obvious doublet which is clearly secondary: “If it had not been Yahweh who was on our side – *let Israel say* (יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹאמַרְנָה) – if it had not been Yahweh who was on our side, when men rose up against us.” The first line of the psalm is repeated in quick succession and is joined with an instruction for Israel to say it. “This phrase is no part of the psalm itself.”<sup>11</sup> This *incipit* stands as abbreviation for the psalm as a whole, (which originally began in v. 2) and puts it in Israel’s mouth.

That it should be interpreted in this and no other way is shown by Ps 129:1, where the same speech pattern is used: “Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth – *let Israel say* (יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹאמַרְנָה) – sorely have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.” The agreement between Ps 124 and 129 cannot be a matter of chance. “What is clear from both psalms is that this is a revision of individual texts with the aim of making them of use to the whole community of Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

Did this revision take place at the time when the collection was still independent, or does it presuppose the context to which it belongs today? The question can be answered on the basis of Ps 118:2. The liturgical direction there, which puts the antiphon of Ps 136 on Israel’s lips – “Let Israel say (יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹאמַרְנָה), His steadfast love endures for ever” – was quite clearly the model. “The background for the expression probably lies in Ps 118:2a where

---

<sup>9</sup> Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 73 (my translation). See already Heinrich Ewald, *Die Dichter des Alten Bundes* (vol. 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1839), 196, who assumes that the collection originally had one common heading: שִׁירֵי הַמְּעֻלוֹת. The assumption was later shared by Hermann Hupfeld, *Die Psalmen* (vol. 3; Gotha: Perthes, 1860), 250, and others.

<sup>10</sup> In the double headings there is understandably a certain deviation in the transmission of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Crüsemann, *Studien zur Formgeschichte von Hymnus und Danklied in Israel* (WMANT 32; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), 167 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 27 (my translation); see also Crüsemann, *Studien zur Formgeschichte*, 173.

the same phrase occurs.”<sup>13</sup> This means that, just as Israel is to recite Ps 136, it is now also to pray the Psalms of Ascents, which are interpolated between Ps 118 and Ps 136. It is very probable that this revision is the work of the redactor who inserted the collection into the larger Psalter and thereby gave to it the place which it occupies today.

The alignment towards Israel can also be found at other points. Both *Ps 125* and *Ps 128* close with the wish: “Peace be upon Israel!” (שָׁלוֹם עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל). In both cases, the sentence has been added subsequently. *Ps 125* affirms the enduring character of Zion and Jerusalem. City and sanctuary are under Yahweh’s protection. If the psalm’s wish for peace relates it to Israel, then this can only be a foreign element. “The Ps. concludes with the additional gloss of congratulation.”<sup>14</sup> *Ps 128* is similar, being essentially an individual benediction which wishes the recipient’s family prosperity. This blessing is given a collective reference by the final wish for peace. “The whole concludes with a still later gloss, as 125:5: Peace be upon Israel.”<sup>15</sup> The two identical sentences most likely derive from one and the same editor.

The same may be true of the two identical sentences in *Ps 130:7* and *131:3*: “O Israel, wait for Yahweh!” (יְחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה). In both cases the admonition is out of place in the context. *Ps 130:5–7\** constitutes the “confession of trust” of the individual lament: “I wait for Yahweh, my soul waits [...]”<sup>16</sup> more than watchmen for the morning (מְשַׁמְרִים לְבַקֵּר). [...] For with Yahweh there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.” With the insertion of the exhortation “O Israel, wait for Yahweh,” this individual confession is related to Israel as a whole, and at the same time it becomes an appeal. “A glossator appends an exhortation [...] which has no place in the measure of the Ps.”<sup>17</sup> The exhortation is preceded by מְשַׁמְרִים לְבַקֵּר, which is obviously a doublet to מְשַׁמְרִים לְבַקֵּר.<sup>18</sup> The doublet looks as if it derives from a catchword which stood in the margin together with the gloss in order to mark its connection to the text. A later copyist moved the catchword together with the gloss to stand in the lines next to the word to which it refers.

<sup>13</sup> Marko Marttila, *Collective Reinterpretation in the Psalms* (FAT II/13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 170.

<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (vol. 2; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), 455; see also Walter Baumgartner, *Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia* (BZAW 32; Gießen: Töpelmann, 1917), 82; Friedrich Baethgen, *Die Psalmen* (HKAT II.2; 3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1904), 381; and others.

<sup>15</sup> Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 2:461.

<sup>16</sup> For *Ps 130:5b–6a* see below p. 389.

<sup>17</sup> Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 2:465. See also Werner H. Schmidt, “Gott und Mensch in *Ps. 130*: Formgeschichtliche Erwägungen,” *TZ* 22 (1966): 241–53, esp. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (HKAT II.2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), 563.

In *Ps 131:2–3*, we find the same method. Here, too, the context is an individual confession of trust: “I have calmed and quieted my soul; like a child at its mother’s breast (בְּגִמְלָ עָלַי אִמּוֹ) [...] is my soul [...] from this time forth and for evermore.” Once again, the statement is no longer related to the individual in the present text, but to Israel, and once again the statement changes from an affirmation of faith to the adjuration: “O Israel, wait for Yahweh!” And again this is preceded by an awkward doublet: בְּגִמְלָ עָלַי. The Masoretes have helped themselves by determining גִּמְלָ and by adding the suffix of the first singular to the preposition עָלַי: “like *the* child on *me* (עָלַי).” Here as well, the phrase was in fact probably a catchword, most likely “like a child at,” and not a complete sentence, and here, too, it serves to incorporate the sentence יְחַלּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֱלֹהֵיהוּה which has strayed into the text from the margin. “It is very likely that the collective supplements in Pss 130 and 131 date back to the same period and the same redactor(s).”<sup>19</sup>

Yet a third example of this way of working can be found. In *Ps 122:4* “a glossator, probably at first on the margin, inserted: *It is a testimony to Israel*], using the term of P for the Law.”<sup>20</sup> In this case the original psalm probably read: “Jerusalem, built as a city which is bound firmly together, to which the tribes (שְׁבֵטִים) go up [...], to give thanks to the name of Yahweh.” Again the psalm is related to Israel by way of an addition.<sup>21</sup> The words לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֵדוּת, “a testimony to Israel,” emphasize that, according to the Torah, Israel is enjoined to go to Jerusalem and to give thanks there to Yahweh. “The meaning of עֵדוּת is the same as in 19:8.”<sup>22</sup> The gloss is again preceded by a doublet: שְׁבֵטֵי־יָהּ “the tribes of Yah.” The combination שְׁבֵטֵי־יָהּ, “the tribes of Yah,” with the abbreviated form of the divine name (for which this is the sole evidence within the collection), is possibly a mistaken reading for שְׁבֵטִים. Again we can assume that this catchword stood in the margin of the column in order to incorporate לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֵדוּת.

A further Israel-addition is *Ps 121:4*: “Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”<sup>23</sup> The sentence repeats what is said in v. 3, but changes it from a wish to an affirmation. “May he who keeps you not slumber” (אֲלֵ־יָנוּם עִמָּךְ) becomes “behold, he does not slumber, he who keeps Israel, Yahweh” (לֹא־יָנוּם ... שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל). The change from the jussive to the indicative is not random. It is emphasized by the addition of a

<sup>19</sup> Marttila, *Collective Reinterpretation*, 173. See already Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien I: Äwän und die individuellen Klagepsalmen* (SVSK.HF 1921:4; Kristiania: Dybwad, 1921), 164–65.

<sup>20</sup> Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 2:449.

<sup>21</sup> See Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 24, and idem, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 479.

<sup>22</sup> Baethgen, *Die Psalmen*, 377 (my translation).

<sup>23</sup> See Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 478.

second verb: “nor does he sleep” (אֵלֹהִים יִשְׁנֶה). This addition deeply disturbs the benedictory form which determines the rest of the psalm.<sup>24</sup> Again the emphasis is on Israel. The benediction addressed to a single individual is secured to God’s people as a whole.

A final Israel-addition of this kind is added in *Ps 130:8*: “And he will redeem (וְהוֹאֵלֵךְ יִפְדֶּה) Israel from all his iniquities.” It is again easy to see that this application and interpretation has been added later. It picks up the utterance in v. 7: “for with Yahweh there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption (רַחֲמָנִים),” in order to relate the statement to Israel. The lines which complete the psalm as it stands today closely resemble the final line of *Ps 25*, which also proves itself to be an addition by going beyond the acrostic form: “Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles” (v. 22).<sup>25</sup>

It would seem obvious to assume that the nine Israel-additions are connected with each other. If they do not all derive from one and the same editor, then at least most of them do. The fact that *Ps 124:1* and *129:1* imitate the liturgical instruction *Ps 118:2–4* suggests that they were added when the collection entered the context of the current Psalter. It means that the Psalms of Ascents were fitted into the liturgical speech pattern which determined the sequence of *Ps 118* and *136*.

For the profile of the collection itself, the Israel revision must be disregarded.

## D. Further Additions: The Righteousness Revision

After *Ps 120–134* had been interpolated in the Psalter, the collection was submitted to the sequence of revisions which the whole book underwent during the late period. These additions must be identified as well, since they are insignificant for the edition of the collection. This applies, first of all, to the righteousness revision.

Traces of the revision are, as a rule, easy to detect. A typical example can be found in *Ps 128:1, 4*. The wish for blessing on which this psalm is based is initially directed to the God-fearing in v. 1: “Blessed is (אַשְׁרֵי) every one who fears Yahweh (יְהוָה) (כָּל-יִרְאֵהוּ), who walks in his ways.”<sup>26</sup> The makarism closely resembles *Ps 1:1*, which forms the overture to the righteousness

<sup>24</sup> The first word of v. 5 is probably also part of the addition. It disturbs the five-stress metre that is predominant in vv. 5–7.

<sup>25</sup> See Baethgen, *Die Psalmen*, 73; Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (vol. 1; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 226; Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, 79; Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 108; Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 108; and others.

<sup>26</sup> Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 33, and idem, *Die Psalmen*, 490, recognizes *Ps 128:1* as a later addition.



revision of the Psalter.<sup>27</sup> The change to an address from v. 2 onwards shows that the introduction has been made to precede this psalm at a later point. In the same way, v. 4 falls out of the address: “Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears Yahweh (יְהוָה יִרְאֶה גְבוּרָה).” The wishes for blessing are once more applied especially to those who fear God. The two utterances evidently belong together.<sup>28</sup>

*Ps 130* has also been revised from the angle of the God-fearers: “If you, Yahweh, shall mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness (הַסְּלִיחָה) with you, that you may be feared” (vv. 3–4). This statement has crept in between the address in vv. 1–2 and the expression of trust in v. 5. It is reminiscent of the way *Ps 103*, the great psalm of thanksgiving, has been related to the God-fearing under the motif of forgiveness (סָלַח, v. 3), see *Ps 103*:11, 13, 17 [only עֲלֵי־רֵאָיו], 18. An expansion in *130*:5b–6a probably goes together with vv. 3–4 which has upset the sentence structure there: “and in his word <hopes><sup>29</sup> my soul.” The bond of obedience to God’s word is characteristic of the God-fearers.

*Ps 125*:3–5a obviously derives from the righteousness revision: “For the sceptre of wickedness (עֵדֶן־רָשָׁע) shall not rest upon the land allotted to the righteous (הַצְּדִיקִים), lest the righteous (הַצְּדִיקִים) put forth their hands to do wrong. Do good, Yahweh, to those who are good (לְטוֹבִים), and to those who are upright (וְלִישָׁרִים) in their hearts! But those who turn aside upon their crooked ways Yahweh will lead away with evildoers (פְּעֻלֵי הָאָוֶן)!” The three statements were probably not made at the same time, but instead added after one another, as they are dissimilar in their speech forms. The first and the last are predictions, whereas the one in between is a wish directed to Yahweh. What is more, v. 5 forms a contrasting pair with v. 1a: “those who trust in Yahweh (בְּיְהוָה) (הַבְּטָחִים)” versus “those who turn aside.” This suggests that the first two words of the psalm also derive from the righteousness revision, and that the promise of salvation for Zion and Jerusalem was only subsequently applied to the devout in the narrower sense.<sup>30</sup> In that case, the psalm originally began: “<Mount> Zion shall never be moved, but abides for ever.” The closing wish, added by the Israel revision,<sup>31</sup> would then have

<sup>27</sup> See Christoph Levin, “Das Gebetbuch der Gerechten,” *ZTK* 90 (1993), 355–81; repr. in *Fortschreibungen* (see above n. 8), 291–313. See also *Ps* 2:12; 34:9; 40:5; 84:13; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1; and 25:12.

<sup>28</sup> See, among others, Oswald Loretz, *Die Psalmen II* (AOAT 207/2; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1979), 270.

<sup>29</sup> Reading 3.sg.f. with the Septuagint.

<sup>30</sup> See the considerations of Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 485, on the composite nature of *Ps 125*. Loretz, *Die Psalmen II*, 259, turns the literary-historical sequence of the promise for Zion (vv. 1b–2) and the righteousness-revisions (vv. 3–5a) on its head.

<sup>31</sup> See above p. 386.

followed v. 2: “Yahweh is round about his people, from this time forth and for evermore. Peace be upon Israel!”

The righteousness revision can be very easily traced in 129:4: “Yahweh is righteous (צַדִּיק); he has cut the cords of the wicked (רָשָׁעִים).” This assertion has been interpolated between the lament over the oppression of the petitioner in vv. 2–3 and his desire for the punishment of his opponents in vv. 5–8, and clearly constitutes an alien element here.<sup>32</sup>

## E. The Edition of the Psalms of Ascents

In what is left, we are struck by a number of recurring phrases.<sup>33</sup> The acknowledgement עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עָשָׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, “My help comes from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth,” in 121:2 is repeated in similar words at 124:8 עֲזָרֵנוּ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה עָשָׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ “Our help is in the name of Yahweh, who made heaven and earth.” The attribute of Yahweh as Creator עָשָׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, “who made heaven and earth,” recurs again in 134:3;<sup>34</sup> the benediction מִצִּיּוֹן יְבָרֵכְךָ יְהוָה מְצִיּוֹן, “May Yahweh bless you from Zion,” is to be found twice (128:5; 134:3); the time determination מִמְּעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם, “from this time forth and for evermore,” is repeated in 121:8; 125:2; 131:3.<sup>35</sup> The gesture אֶל־הַרִים עֵינַי אֶשָּׂא, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains” (121:1), recurs again in 123:1: אֶל־יְדֵיךָ נִשְׂאֵתִי אֶת־עֵינַי, “To you I lift up my eyes” (123:1), as well as the complaint רַבַּת שְׁכֻנַּת־לִּי נִפְשִׁי, “Too long have I had my dwelling,” in 123:4: רַבַּת שְׁבַע־הַלָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ, “Too long our soul has been sated.”

It would seem that these expressions belong to a literary stratum which extends beyond the individual psalms. Since these turns of phrase are essentially confined to the Psalms of Ascents and are characteristic of them, it is very probable that this distinguishing linguistic feature of the collection can allow us to trace down the collector and his intention. “These formulae are best explained as resulting from redactional activity.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Loretz, *Die Psalmen II*, 274.

<sup>33</sup> Hendrik Viviers, “The Coherence of the *ma‘alôt* Psalms (Pss 120–134),” *ZAW* 106 (1994): 275–89, esp. 279–83, presents an extensive list of “corresponding expressions, syntax and figures of speech.” Crow, *The Songs of Ascents*, 131, on the other hand identifies six “repeated formulae.”

<sup>34</sup> The two other instances for עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה in Ps 115:15; 146:6 depend on the Psalms of Ascents.

<sup>35</sup> Other instances are Isa 9:6; 59:21; Mic 4:7; Ps 113:2; 115:18. The two instances from the psalms again presuppose the Psalms of Ascents.

<sup>36</sup> Crow, *The Songs of Ascents*, 130.

## F. The Reworking of the Individual Psalms

This can be verified in several cases where the phraseology of the editor deviates from the essential form of the psalm in question. In the course of our investigation, a particular concept will emerge.

It is to be expected that the editor left traces of his work in *Ps 120*, with which the collection begins.

- (1) *In my distress I cried to Yahweh, and he answered me.*
- 2 Yahweh, deliver me [...] <sup>37</sup> from a deceitful tongue, [...] <sup>38</sup>
- 4 sharpened arrows of a warrior with glowing broom-coals.
- 5 *Woe is me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!*
- 6 *Too long have I had my dwelling with one who hates peace.*
- 7 I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war!

In v. 2, the lament of an individual begins with an address to Yahweh and a cry for help. The reason for the complaint is a false accusation delivered by a “deceitful tongue” (לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה). The person praying uses customary imagery and describes these tongues as sharp arrows<sup>39</sup> and as glowing coals of the broom tree. It is with weapons of this kind that fire is carried into a besieged city. By contrast, the speaker stresses his desire for peace in v. 7 and accuses his opponents of not looking for a peaceful settlement (שְׁלוֹם), but instead responding to his plea only to dispute it. The brief prayer had its *Sitz im Leben* in cultic jurisdiction.

The “site” of the psalm we are looking at is not, however, the Temple. In vv. 5–6, the person who is praying laments that he has to live as a stranger in Meshech and among the tents of Kedar – that is to say, far from the sanctuary and among the desert-dwellers. There, the opponent who rejects peace (שׂוֹנֵא שְׁלוֹם) holds power. The complaint made in v. 7 to a particular end is here generalized. The speaker declares his discontent at having to live among people like this: “Too long have I had my dwelling among those” (רַבַּת נְפִשֵׁי שְׂכַנְהֶ־לָּהּ). Since the phrase recurs in similar form in Ps 123:4, we probably have before us in vv. 5–6 the edition of the Psalms of Ascents. That could also apply to what is now the first verse, a phrase typical of the song of thanksgiving which can also be found in Jonah 2:3 with a different sequence

---

<sup>37</sup> The doublet משַׁפְּת־שִׁקָּר מְלִשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה, “from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue,” which has upset the metre 3+2, probably rests on a later addition; see Seybold, *Wallfahrts-psalmen*, 33. Verse 3 refers only to לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה.

<sup>38</sup> In the structure of the psalm as it has been transmitted, the arrangement is disturbed by an addition in v. 3 of a condemnation of the deceitful tongue: “What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you (אִי־יִסְרִי לָךְ)!” For this, a modification of the oath formula was used, cf. 1 Sam 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; 25:22; 2 Sam 3:9, 35; 19:14; 1 Kgs 2:23; 19:2; 20:10; 2 Kgs 6:31; Ruth 1:17.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ps 64:4; 140:4; Prov 25:18.

of words. This opening declares that the complaint has been heard and that the occasion for it has been eliminated. The praying person has left behind him the enemies of peace and departed on his journey.

*Ps 121* is concerned with the help the speaker expects at the end of his travel. The familiar psalm is an extended wish for blessing, parts of which are reminiscent of the Aaronic benediction. Here, however, the alternation between the writer's own confession of faith and the wish for the blessing of the other person appears incongruous:

- (1) *I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Whence comes my help?*
- 2 *My help comes from Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth.*
- 3 *May he not let your foot be moved, may he who keeps you not slumber. [...]*<sup>40</sup>
- (5) *Your keeper is Yahweh, your shade on your right hand.*
- 6 *The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.*
- 7 *Yahweh may keep you from all evil; he may keep your life.*
- 8 *Yahweh may keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore.*

Since the psalm contains several phrases which are also found in other Psalms of Ascents, it would again be reasonable to think of the revision of a core text. This core is constituted by vv. 5–7. These verses begin with the confession: יהוה שְׁמֹרְךָ יהוה, “Your keeper is Yahweh,” and end with the wish יְשַׁמְרֵךְ אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ (יהוה), “may Yahweh keep your life.” It is unclear whether the wish which now precedes in v. 3 always constituted the beginning, since the subject, Yahweh, is not named, but only presupposed.

At all events, there is a clear caesura between v. 2 and v. 3, for v. 2 is an affirmation of faith, not a wish. The one who is praying is not referring to another, but to himself: “My help comes from Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth.” This affirmation agrees with the final sentence in *Ps 124*, where it is the utterance of a group. It is highly probable that the corresponding sentences derive from the redaction of the *Psalms of Ascents*.

The first verse of the psalm cannot be separated from this affirmation due to the anaphora יהוה מֵעַם יְבִיא עֲזָרִי עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יהוה, “Whence comes my help? My help comes from Yahweh.” Furthermore, the very first sentence אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains,” has a parallel in the opening sentence of *Ps 123*, which suggests that the beginning of *Ps 121* as it stands today is probably the work of the editor.

The same may be said of v. 8, which concludes the psalm. It takes up the wish in v. 7 יְשַׁמְרֵךְ יהוה, “may Yahweh keep you,” – again anaphorically – and relates it to the occasion of a journey: יהוה יְשַׁמְרֵךְ־צֵאתְךָ וּבואֶךָ, “may Yahweh keep your going out and your coming in.” This journey leads towards a final goal: מִעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם, “from this time forth and for

<sup>40</sup> For v. 4 and the beginning of v. 5, see above pp. 387–88.

evermore.” The comparison with Ps 125:2 and 131:3 shows that the editor of the Psalms of Ascents was at work here as well.

At the centre of *Ps 122* stands a group of verses in praise of Jerusalem. These are followed by a prayer for peace (שְׁלוֹמִים) which is based on a play of words with the name of the city. This is a well shaped poetic unity of two and two lines:

- (1) *I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of Yahweh!*
- 2 *Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!*
- 3 *Jerusalem, built as a city which is bound firmly together,<sup>41</sup>*
- 4 *to which the tribes go up, [...] to give thanks to the name of Yahweh. [...]<sup>42</sup>*
- 6 *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they prosper who love you!*
- 7 *Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers!*
- 8 *For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will say, Peace be within you!*
- 9 *For the sake of the house of Yahweh our God, I will seek your good.*

In the present version of the psalm, the praise of Jerusalem is preceded and followed by a first person speech (vv. 1–2, 8–9). There is a sudden shift from the address “O Jerusalem” in v. 2 to the description of Jerusalem in v. 3. “Raising doubt about this close linkage of v. 3 to v. 2 is the fact that vv. 3–5 are a coherent set of statements [...] and the fact that Jerusalem is not addressed as ‘you’ in vv. 3b–5.”<sup>44</sup> At the beginning, the speaker confesses that he is glad to have been invited to come to the Temple in Jerusalem. At the end, the wish for the city’s peace is resumed and extended to the speaker’s companions, who are to settle near the house of their God. “The scenery of this section corresponds to that of vv. 1–2.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, in v. 9 the wishes are applied to the Temple itself.<sup>46</sup>

As has already been remarked, the opening of *Ps 123* resembles that of *Ps 121*:

---

<sup>41</sup> The reading is difficult. It may well be that the description of the city was changed and overwritten by the idea of uniting together (חִבְרָה יְהוּדָיִם) in accordance with the general theme of the Psalms of Ascents, see esp. v. 8.

<sup>42</sup> For the addition in v. 4 see above p. 387.

<sup>43</sup> Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 2:449: “Another glossator, careless of the measure, inserts a historical statement, making the line too long: 5. *For there sat they on thrones of judgment, thrones of the house of David.*” “Thrones of the house of David” may be a further clarification.

<sup>44</sup> Erich Zenger, in idem and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 335.

<sup>45</sup> Zenger, loc. cit.

<sup>46</sup> This verse was already seen as an addition by Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 24–5, and idem, *Die Psalmen*, 479.

- (1) *To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*
- 2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to Yahweh our God, till he have mercy upon us.
- 3 Have mercy upon us, Yahweh, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
- 4 *Too long our soul has been sated*  
*with the scorn of those who are at ease, the contempt of the proud.*

The main part of this psalm is the affirmation of trust by a group who compare their relationship with God to the relationship of servants to their master and of a maid to her mistress (v. 2). This is followed in v. 3 by the plea for grace (cf. Ps 57:2) in the face of the contempt that has been suffered.

This prayer is taken up in v. 4 and developed in a form which is a direct reminiscence of 120:6: *רַבַּת שְׂבַעַה־לָּהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ*, “Too long our soul has been sated.” As in Ps 120, those uttering the prayer wish to escape from their present situation. The goal they have in front of them is named in v. 1, which 121:1 closely resembles. Since it is in the singular, it clearly deviates from the rest of the psalm: *אֵלֶיךָ נִשְׂאֲתִי אֶת־עֵינֵי הַיְשָׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם*, “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!” This phrase is frequently used in the Psalter with the object *נַפְשִׁי*, “my soul,” instead of *עֵינֵי*, “my eyes” (25:1; 86:4; 143:8). The variation of “eyes” instead of “soul” may be due to the influence of 121:1. In view of this, the reference is probably not only to Yahweh’s heavenly dwelling, but also to its earthly counterpart, the Temple on Mount Zion.

*Ps 124* is a collective song of thanksgiving. Those who are praying describe their escape with hunting imagery. Although, like beasts of prey, men lay in wait for them, Yahweh gave them support. A second image draws on the practice of hunting of birds with the help of snares. Yahweh has destroyed the snares and freed those caught in them, who now give thanks:

- (2) If it had not been Yahweh who was on our side,  
when men rose up against us,
- 3 then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us; [...]<sup>47</sup>
- 6 Blessed be Yahweh, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!
- 7 Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped!
- 8 *Our help is in the name of Yahweh, who made heaven and earth.*

The psalm concludes by responding to this experience with an acknowledgment already familiar from 121:2. The experience becomes a statement about Yahweh, who as Creator of the world is the helper of his people.

---

<sup>47</sup> In vv. 4–5, the comparison is repeated twice in varied forms and supplemented by the reference to violent waters.

The nucleus of *Ps 128* is formed by a wish for family blessings: the fruits of one's labour, the wellbeing of one's wife and children, and a life long enough to see the next two generations grow up:

- [...] <sup>48</sup>
- 2 You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;  
you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.
  - 3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots around your table. [...]
  - 5 May Yahweh bless you *from Zion*,  
*and may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem*  
all the days of your life!
  - 6 And may you see your children's children! [...]

Surprisingly enough, the wish וְרָאָה בְּנֵי לְבָנֶיךָ, “and may you see your children's children,” from v. 6 is anticipated in v. 5, where it is expanded and applied to the fate of Jerusalem: וְרָאָה בְּטוֹב יְרוּשָׁלַם, “and may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem.” This change of perspective is connected with the mention of Zion immediately before. The phrase יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה מִצִּיּוֹן, “May Yahweh bless you from Zion,” occurs with the same wording in 134:3. The entire sentence is probably not secondary, though, for it finds an appropriate follow-up at the end of the verse: יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶיךָ, “may Yahweh bless you all the days of your life.”

In *Ps 129*, the one who is praying adopts the image of ploughing and harvesting in order to tell of the torment which he has long had to endure at the hands of his opponents, whom he then curses. He hopes that they will perish like wilting grass and empty straw:

- [...] <sup>49</sup>
- 2 Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.
  - 3 The ploughers ploughed upon my back;  
they made long their furrows. [...]
  - 5 *May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!*
  - 6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops,  
which withers before it grows up,  
7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand  
or the binder of sheaves his bosom,  
8 *while those who pass by do not say,  
The blessing of Yahweh be upon you!  
We bless you in the name of Yahweh!*

<sup>48</sup> The additions of the Israel-revision as well as of the righteousness-revision have been omitted from the translation. See above pp. 386, 388–89

<sup>49</sup> The additions of the Israel-revision as well as of the righteousness-revision are skipped from the translation. See above pp. 385, 390.

In v. 5, “the oppressors and exploiters of the individual psalmist are apostrophized as ‘Zion’s’ enemies [...] without any specific reason being given for this in the context.”<sup>50</sup> Here, the edition of the Psalms of Ascents has left its mark. At the end, in v. 8, the psalm unexpectedly changes into the reported speech of passers-by, and the agricultural imagery is abandoned. Those who are not offered a blessing are those who hate Zion. In a counter-move, blessing is conferred on Zion and its inhabitants: “We bless you in the name of Yahweh!”

The short *Ps 131* is a prayerful acknowledgment in the form of a cleansing oath. The person offering the prayer asserts that he is not arrogant but humble. The ethical ideal of *humilitas* may have had its *Sitz im Leben* at court, in the vicinity of the king.

- (1) Yahweh, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things too great  
and too marvellous for me.
- 2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
*like a child quieted at its mother’s breast [...] is my soul [...]*<sup>51</sup>
- (3) *from this time forth and for evermore.*

Brief though it is, this psalm too has been expanded. The cleansing oath has been transformed into an acknowledgment of trust. To express this, an impressive image has been chosen of a weaned child in its mother’s arms. The reason for the trustful confidence is not explicitly stated, but it is suggested by the concluding temporal determination: the person praying dwells in the protecting presence of Yahweh *וְעַד-עוֹלָם מְעַתָּה*, “from this time forth and for evermore” (cf. 121:8), i.e. on Mount Zion or in its immediate vicinity (cf. 125:2).

*Ps 133* has as its motif life in the presence of God and in the community of fellows who share one and the same religious conviction. This forms the climax of the collection, immediately before the concluding doxology:

- (1) Behold, how good and pleasant it is  
when brothers dwell in unity!
- 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head,  
running down upon the beard. [...]<sup>52</sup>
- 3 *It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion!  
For there Yahweh has commanded the blessing,  
life for evermore.*

<sup>50</sup> Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 28 (my translation).

<sup>51</sup> For the additions in vv. 2–3 see above p. 387.

<sup>52</sup> There follows a reference to the anointing of Aaron, an “obvious addition” (Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 500), cf. Exod 29:7; 30:30; Lev 18:12. On Aaron’s beard, cf. Lev 21:5.



At the basis of this short psalm is a sentence referring to the harmonious life of (presumably biological) brothers (see Deut 25:5). It connotes a peaceful life within the greater family and its positive effect on the population of the settlement. It consists of an exclamation in the form of a rhetorical question, which is then answered by image of precious perfume used for anointment at important occasions (cf. Ps 23:5).<sup>53</sup> While it runs from the head down into the beard, its fragrance permeates the surrounding environment.

This simile was applied to Zion in the edition of the Psalms of Ascents where the anointing oil being poured upon on the head is replaced by the dew on mount Hermon, the mountain that towers above the land from the north. It is the head of the land, so to speak. We should not ask how the abundance of water may come from Galilee to the mountains of Zion; practical reality is not decisive for the theological programme.<sup>54</sup> The point of the image is to depict Zion as the place where Yahweh has poured forth his blessings. At this place is to be found a life full of blessing and peace “for all time,” חַיִּים עַד-הָעוֹלָם.

*Ps 134* is the collection’s concluding doxology. The basic form consists of a call to praise in three lines, with four or five metrical stresses. It is addressed to the cultic servants who watch over the sanctuary during the night. They are to raise their hands in the direction of the Temple and praise Yahweh. Framed by the imperative בְּרַכּוּ אֶת־יְהוָה, “bless Yahweh,” in v. 1aα and v. 2b, it forms a self-contained unit:

- (1) Behold, bless Yahweh, all you servants of Yahweh,  
who stand by night in the house of Yahweh!
- 2 Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless Yahweh!
- 3 *May Yahweh bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!*

The final line, which unites two of the recurring phrases of the Psalms of Ascents, deviates from this form. It is a promise of blessing addressed to an individual person. The verb בָּרַךְ *pi.* is repeated, but it is used in a different sense than before. The blessing is addressed to an unspecified recipient; the sentence sounds as if it were a generally used formulary. It is emphasised that Zion, being Yahweh’s abode, is a source of blessing, and that the God of Zion is the sole Creator of heaven and earth.

---

<sup>53</sup> We also find evidence for this custom in Egyptian paintings: see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:480.

<sup>54</sup> The suggestion that the word “Zion” should be replaced by Ijjon (עֵיִן) in Galilee (see Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 571) misses the point.

## G. The Other Psalms of the Collection

The collection also includes psalms in which no definite traces of the editor can be discerned. Among these are Ps 126, with its prospect of a turn in Zion's fortunes; Ps 127, which describes how Yahweh allows households and families to prosper, and, finally, the *De profundis* psalm, Ps 130.

Conversely, in *Ps 125*, whose brief central section concentrates on praise of Zion, it is impossible to detect any traces of an older transmission:

- (1) [...] <Mount><sup>55</sup> *Zion shall never be moved,  
but abides for ever.*  
2 *As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,  
so Yahweh is round about his people,  
from this time forth and for evermore. [...]*

The comparison of Zion with Israel's protective God himself may have been composed entirely by the editor.

The royal *Ps 132* has a special role. The psalm is unique in the collection for its unparalleled length. Although it is not impossible that this psalm was added only later, it fits into the composition. At its centre stands the election of Zion, where Yahweh desires to have his dwelling. There are clear allusions to the promise in 2 Sam 7.

- 1 Remember, Yahweh, in David's favour, all the hardships he endured;  
2 how he swore to Yahweh and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,  
3 I will not enter my house or get into my bed;  
4 I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,  
5 until I find a place for Yahweh, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.  
6 *Lo, we heard of it in Ephrathah, we found it in the fields of Jaar.*  
7 *Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool!*  
8 Arise, Yahweh, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. [...]  
13 *For Yahweh has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation. [...]*

Verse 8 is a play on the Song of the Ark in Num 10:35: Yahweh is asked to take up his dwelling on the sanctuary which David is going to build for him. The psalm has later been expanded in vv. 9–12 by a promise to David's dynasty. But earlier to this, in v. 13, it has been added that Yahweh has agreed to this request, and indeed does dwell on Zion. Consequently, his followers can and should now come there as well and "worship at his footstool" (vv. 6–7; cf. Ps 99:5).

---

<sup>55</sup> The original psalm may have begun with הַר־צִיּוֹן. The present text goes back to the addition of הַבְּטָחִים בַּיהוָה, "those who trust in Yahweh." See above p. 389.

## H. The Arrangement of the Collection

Taken together, the thematic editing of the individual psalms and the selection and arrangement of the collection allow us to make out a clear editorial profile. As has often been observed, two theme groups dominate the collection: blessing and the presence of God on Zion. The way in which these two themes are related to each other is of essential importance for understanding the intention behind the editorial changes.

Again and again, the short psalms return to the theme of blessing. Ps 121, one of the most beautiful benedictions in the Old Testament, occupies the second place in the collection. The blessing focuses on what is of immediate importance in life: the household and the well-being of the family. The farmer hopes for the fruits of his labour (128:2) and a good harvest (126:5–6). His happiness in a capable wife (128:3), numerous sons (127:4–5; 128:3) and even grandsons (128:6) is apparent. Peaceful times and public order provide the necessary premises for this good fortune. Any further-reaching political goal is not evident.

At present, the person praying is admittedly living among those who hate peace (120:6), and he asks where his help is to come from (121:1). He lifts his eyes to Yahweh (121:1; 123:1), for he suffers mockery and contempt (123:4). He expects Yahweh to help him, for Yahweh is not just one God among others. He is the Creator of heaven and earth (121:2; 124:8, 134:3). He has the power to preserve the security of his people, and to guarantee their well-being.

This God has, or takes up, his dwelling place on Zion, the place he has chosen (132:13). Consequently, Zion does not waver but stands fast in the midst of all the storms of chaos (125:1). Its enemies will be put to shame (129:5). Zion is the place of blessing *per se* (133:3). From there, Yahweh disseminates his blessing (128:5; 134:3).

Consequently, the prayers focus not on the complaint, but on the experience of help and the triumphant account of that help. The first verse of the whole collection sounds this counterpoint: “In my distress I cried to Yahweh, and he answered me” (120:1). Just as Mount Zion is never shaken, so Yahweh protects his people “from this time forth and for evermore” (125:2). The author of the prayer knows that with Yahweh he is in safe-keeping “like a child quieted at his mother’s breast [...] from this time forth and for evermore” (131:2–3).

The lasting duration of the blessings, which is repeatedly stressed in these psalms, speaks emphatically against their being interpreted as songs for regular pilgrimages. The author of these prayers does not intend to leave Zion ever again. He is convinced that it is “good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity” (133:1), and do so “for evermore” (133:3), as we read towards the end of the collection. The Psalms of Ascents strive to convince the followers

of Judaism, scattered as they are throughout the world, that the place to settle is in proximity to Zion.

The programme of the collection is not the pilgrimage, but the complete relocation to the land in which God is near. The dramaturgy for this is provided by the sequence of the individual psalms. The beginning is characterised by weariness with life in a foreign land (Ps 120). The departure begins with a blessing for the journey: "Yahweh will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore" (121:8). The goal of the journey is final: it is a journey without any return to the previous misery. Ps 122 describes the arrival in Jerusalem, and Ps 123 the arrival at the Temple. This is accompanied by a look back at the misery which the author of the prayer has left behind. Ps 124 describes the act of liberation which the arrival in Zion signifies. The author of the prayer feels like the bird who has escaped from the hunter's snare. Now he is in Zion, in the place of safety (Ps 125), where he can resume a normal life, one blessed by Yahweh, who has given Israel's destiny a fresh turn (Ps 126). Houses can be built and families established (Ps 127), and Yahweh's blessing, emanating from Zion, may be enjoyed in this new setting (Ps 128). Once more, there is a glance back to the wretched situation which has been surmounted, and to the opponents who hate Zion (Ps 129). The psalmist's deep past distress is remembered, but his hope in Yahweh has not been in vain (Ps 130).

Now the author of the prayer has reached his goal and rejoices at being in safe keeping in the proximity of God (Ps 131). The reason is given in Ps 132: Yahweh, God the Creator, has chosen Zion to be his dwelling place. Hence whoever makes his own dwelling place in the proximity of Zion will forever enjoy the blessing of the unsurpassable nearness of God (Ps 133). The last line summarizes once more the message of the collection: "Yahweh bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!" (Ps 134:3).