

Psalm 120

In the Dispersion

1. The Songs of Ascents

The Songs of Ascents, Psalms 120-134, were at some stage gathered together into a distinct collection, marked off from the other psalms by the title they share in common: “a song of ascents”. There are various theories about what this means.

- The Hebrew word “ascents” can mean “steps” as in the steps of a staircase. Interestingly in the temple there were 15 steps from the court of the women to the court of Israel, and it is said that the Levitical singers sang each of the 15 songs of ascents on these 15 steps on the first day of the feast of Tabernacles.
- A more plausible suggestion connects the word “ascend” or “going up” with the fact that at the end of the exile the Jewish people were encouraged by Cyrus to go up to Jerusalem. It’s actually the last word in the Hebrew Bible: “Let him go up.” So the return of the exiles was their “ascents”, and these songs of ascents would have been especially poignant to the returnees.
- The most popular understanding of the title “A song of ascents” is that it refers to the annual pilgrimages of the Hebrew people when they went up (ascended) to Jerusalem for the feasts of Tabernacles, Passover and Pentecost. These are pilgrim songs that breathe the atmosphere of devotion to Zion, and David’s throne, and the LORD as the source and focus of the life of the people of God.

Indeed all but one of the Psalms either names Jerusalem or Zion, or refers to the holy city or the hills that surround it in one way or another. And the one Psalm that makes no reference to Jerusalem (Ps. 120) does so very pointedly – its silence vis-à-vis Zion is eloquent (though even the speaker in Psalm 120 alludes to Jerusalem when he says “I am for peace”).

In addition to their common title, the songs of ascents are held together as a collection by two other shared characteristics.

First of all, they are full of blessings. Four elements of the Aaronic Blessing – “The LORD bless you”; “the LORD keep you”; “the LORD be gracious to you”; “the LORD give you peace” – are found in all but three of the psalms. Long ago the rabbis pointed out that the 15 words of the Aaronic Blessing correspond to the 15 songs of ascents. So here are songs of blessings – the very blessings that pilgrims need:

- safe keeping on the journey – there are trials and dangers on the way up to Jerusalem;
- a gracious reception on arrival – remember that all pilgrims are sinners and the access to God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone;
- peace – restoration, completeness, satisfaction, rest.

More than any other collection of psalms, the songs of ascents impress us with these blessings.

The other thing that holds this collection of psalms together is the care with which it has been arranged:

- It opens with distress – it closes with blessing. It opens with alienation – it closes with brotherhood. It opens far from Zion – it closes where the ark of the covenant is (132), with Aaron the priest (133), in the house of God (134).
- The 15 psalms are in three sets of five. And the central psalm of each set – Psalms 122, 127 and 132 – alludes to God’s promise to build David a house (2 Samuel 7:12-16).
- The central word of the central psalm (Psalm 127) is “his beloved” (*cf.* “Jedidiah”, the name God gave Solomon, 2 Samuel 12:25) – God’s Beloved has been placed at the very centre of the whole collection.

The point is that the songs of ascents aren’t an anthology of psalms randomly thrown together, but a careful arrangement that tells a story about how God brings his people home to himself by keeping his promise to build a royal house – which promise he fulfilled both through and for the sake of his Beloved, the Lord Jesus Christ. Does that explain why God’s people have so intuitively loved and enjoyed these songs of ascents – the songs of ascents re-tell the story of salvation?

2. Structure of Psalm 120

The psalm moves from prayer (vv. 1-2), to imprecation (vv. 3-4), to lamentation (vv. 5-7). The lamentation is almost as long as the prayer and the imprecation together. While the prayer looks to the past, and the lamentation at the present, the imprecation expresses the psalmist’s desire for a condition which is not yet.

3. Notes

This is a sad and heavy psalm. It gives the impression of a man who is living far from his homeland and who feels homesick and alienated.

(a) Prayer (vv. 1-2)

The psalm opens with a recollection of how God had answered the psalmist’s prayer on a previous occasion. He describes his adversary on that occasion under the metaphor of “lying lips” and “a deceitful tongue”. Lying and deceit in the Old Testament was often concerned with reputation (“bearing false witness”). The psalmist’s distress was, therefore, the result of a reputational attack mounted by an adversary. This fits with the application that he makes of this past experience to present circumstances – in vv. 5-7 he laments that he is surrounded by people whose speech is antithetical to his – he speaks for peace: they for war.

Although the psalm is going to move on to imprecation, it is important that it opens with a recollection of how the psalmist called on God for deliverance. By implication, the imprecation expresses, not a hot and selfish desire for revenge (the psalm is for peace, after all) but the psalmist’s desire for justice and his confidence that God is God of justice.

(b) Imprecation (vv. 3-4)

So the imprecation is a biblically informed expectation – that God will right all wrongs – that justice will be served and wickedness will be purged out of God’s good creation.

Although God is not mentioned in this stanza, the parallel between the expression “What shall be given to you, and what more besides” and similar oaths (e.g. Ruth 1:17; 1 Sam. 3:17; 2 Sam 3:35) strongly indicates that the psalmist understood God to be the unspoken subject of the giving.

Delitzsch sees “poetic justice” in the retribution paid out to the deceitful tongue: “It, which shot piercing arrows, is pierced by the sharpened arrows of an irresistibly mighty One; it, which set its neighbour in a fever of anguish, must endure the lasting, sure, and torturingly consuming heat of broom-coals.”

Apparently the wood of the broom tree burns with particularly fierce heat, and it was used for making quality charcoal.

(c) Lamentation (vv. 5-7)

The final stanza opens with the sound of lamentation – the psalmist uses a unique long form of the regular Hebrew word for “Woe!”

The psalmist laments that he sojourns in Meshech and tabernacles in Kedar. Meshech was in the north, in the centre of what we now call Turkey; Kedar was down to the south east in what is now Saudi Arabia. Clearly the psalmist couldn’t be in both places at once. Instead, his point is that these places aren’t home – they aren’t even close to home. Moreover, the verbs “to sojourn” and “to tabernacle” give the sense of (a) impermanent residence and (b) alien status which falls below the status of citizenship. So, wherever he is, the psalmist feels as though he’s living in exile. Hence his complaint: “I’ve been here too long.”

Where is home? The psalmist gives us a clue when he says, “I am for peace.” Peace (shalom) resonates with the name of Jerusalem, “the foundation of peace”. So the psalmist lives with this tension – “Where I live isn’t home – and home isn’t where I live.” And in his heart he longs to return to the mother city.

“I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.” The psalmist’s problem isn’t the place of his sojourn – his problem is the people among who he lives. The place isn’t home because the people aren’t family.

“With the shrill dissonance of [peace] and [war] the Psalm closes; and the cry for help with which it opens hovers over it, earnestly desiring its removal” (Delitzsch).