

## PSALMS OF ASCENT

*Shani Tzoref*

I am excited to be joining you here at Osnabruck for the Jewish-Christian Bible week. I am very grateful for the kind invitation and for the opportunity that it has given me to think about the Psalms of Ascent. Since my expertise is in Hebrew Bible and Jewish texts, I have decided to focus this talk on biblical and rabbinic texts, and I am looking forward to learning more from you about Christian exegesis and reception in the coming days.

In my study of the Psalms, I have found a most useful rubric to be Hermann Gunkel's form-critical approach. I would even say that it has served me as a key to deciphering the corpus, helping me discern sense and structure amidst the poetic language. My personal religious experience of Tehillim as prayer had given me an early appreciation of the biblical Psalter, but in a way that was quite atomized—individual phrases had strong resonances for me; I had less sensitivity to larger blocs of text and literary cohesion. I'd like to use our time together to consider the Psalms of Ascent through two of Gunkel's form-critical lenses, *Sitz-im-Leben* and *Gattung*, and concluding with an intertextual glance at Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 6.

### 1. *Sitz im Leben* and Reception: Ascent as Pilgrimage / Return

A major goal for Gunkel was to reconstruct the original setting for the composition and formal recitation of biblical Psalms—for example: royal coronations, festivals, life-cycle rituals or historical events. I am rather skeptical about such historical reconstructions, but in the case of the Psalms of Ascent, speculations about *Sitz im Leben* illuminate the nature of the group and their reception history. The 15 short Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) are named for the superscription that initiates each: שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, “a song of the ascents” (שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת in Ps. 121:1).

Jewish tradition as well as subsequent scholarship associate these psalms with the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach / Matzot (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles). The Ascent is thus taken to refer rather literally to the ritual journey of the Israelite pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Mishna Sukkah 5:4 and some related Tannaitic texts presume an even more literal and concrete understanding of מַעֲלָה, as “step,” with the “ascent” indicating the steps of the Temple. Describing the joyous celebration of Sukkot in the Temple, the mishna states that the Levites

accompanied them with harps, lyres, cymbals, and musical instruments without number—on the *fifteen steps* that go down from the court of Israel to the court of the women, corresponding to the *fifteen Songs of Ascent* in the [Book of] Psalms, on which the Levites would stand and would recite in song.

The same idea is found in Mishna Middot 2:5:

And there were *fifteen steps* that went up from its midst to the court of Israel, corresponding to the *fifteen Songs of Ascent* that are in the [Book of] Psalms, on which the Levites would stand in song.

This understanding of the *מעלות* as “steps” reflects the usual meaning of the word in the Hebrew Bible, for example in the instructions for building the altar in Exodus 20:26 and the description of King Solomon’s throne in 1 Kings 10:19.

In the parallel to Mishna Sukka, in Tosefta Sukka 5:4, the connection between the Temple steps and the liturgical function of the psalms is made more explicit, as Psalm 134:3 is cited (with some conflation with Psalm 128:5) as the content of the Levitical singing:

And the Levites with their harps and lyres and cymbals and all manner of musical instruments without number were there, saying, “Now bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD ... May the LORD bless you from Zion” (Psalm 134:1) ... The herald cried out: they sounded a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note ... R. Judah said: ... he who blew before the altar did not do so on the tenth step ...

These rabbinic descriptions of the recitation of the Psalms of Ascent in the Temple on Sukkot complement the brief statement in Mishna Pesahim 5:7, about the ritual of the Passover sacrifice; it states there that when individuals were engaged with the priests in the sacrificial ritual, “they (presumably the Levites) read the Hallel”—Hallel, meaning “praise,” and “the Hallel” referring to Psalms 113-118, in which the verb *h.l.l.*, “to praise” occurs 10 times.

Most contemporary scholars would challenge the relevance of these rabbinic reports for reconstructing cultic ritual in the time of the First Temple, particularly since it is generally accepted that the Temple envisioned in the Priestly depictions in the Pentateuch was a “Sanctuary of Silence.” The two views of the Psalms of Ascent as pilgrimage psalms can be harmonized by presuming an original *Sitz im Leben* of recitation by festival pilgrims on their journeys to Jerusalem, and a later incorporation of these songs into cultic rites within the Temple itself—whether as a historical reality, or in the rabbinic imagination.

An alternative proposal is prompted by verse 1 of Psalm 126, and what might be a secondary superscription:

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים

When the LORD restore(d/s) the fortunes of Zion we were / are as dreamers.

The nature of the biblical Hebrew verbal system, and of dreams, allows for multiple interpretations of the temporal perspective of this psalm—anticipating future redemption, or narrating the past, or declaring the present. The psalm is most logically understood as post-exilic, composed after the destruction of the First Temple. Thus, another plausible *Sitz im Leben* for the composition of the Psalms of Ascent is that they are “Songs of Return.” Proponents of this view still see the origin of the Psalms in a physical journey to Jerusalem, but they locate this journey in the specific historical phenomenon of the post-exilic Return to Zion in the days of Nehemiah, rather than in the cyclical ritual of the pilgrimage festivals. Once again, the various proposals can be harmonized, by proposing that some of the *Shir haMa'alot* psalms were composed and performed in the context of the Return to Zion, and then re-used, along with other Ascent psalms, in the context of pilgrimage festivals.

As a segue between our brief overview of the historical and cultural origins of the Psalms of Ascent, and our discussion of Genre, let us look at the text of Psalm 122. The content and form of Psalm 122 are especially well-suited to the proposed setting for the Psalms of Ascent as the festival pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem and to the Temple. This *pilgrimage psalm* is a particular variation of the genre known as a Psalm of Zion, which is a form of *Hymn*, praising the Lord by praising Jeru-

salem. Psalms of Zion tend to address the holy city in 2<sup>nd</sup> person apostrophe—“O Jerusalem,” and to call down blessings upon it.

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents. Of David. **I rejoiced when they said to me, “We are going to the House of the LORD.”**

<sup>2</sup> Our feet stood inside your gates, **O Jerusalem**, <sup>3</sup> Jerusalem built up, a city knit together, <sup>4</sup> **to which tribes would make pilgrimage**, the tribes of the LORD—as was enjoined upon Israel—to praise the name of the LORD. <sup>5</sup> There the thrones of judgment stood, thrones of the house of David. <sup>6</sup> Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem: “May those **who love you** be at peace. <sup>7</sup> May there be well-being within your ramparts, peace in your citadels.” <sup>8</sup> For the sake of my kin and friends, I pray for your well-being; <sup>9</sup> **for the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I seek your good.**

## 2. *Gattung*: Hymns, Thanksgiving, Laments, Wisdom Psalms

Reading Psalm 122 as a Psalm of Zion, and understanding Psalms of Zion as a form of *Hymn*, makes it easy to identify key words and themes—the **2<sup>nd</sup> person address to Jerusalem**, praise of God, Jerusalem, and the Temple, and the recurring words of praise, joy, and well-being. Gunkel’s form-critical analysis of Psalms identifies simple templates, which serve as frameworks for both simple and complex artistic variation. For example, Gunkel observed that much of the Psalter is written in first person, in the voice of either an **Individual** or the **Community**.

He further distinguished between Hymns and Thanksgiving psalms, as compared to Complaints and Laments. I think of these classifications as “*Positive*” vs. “*Negative*,” although I see both groups as ultimately conveying a positive faith in God’s benevolence. *Thanksgiving psalms* and Hymns contain primarily—respectively—gratitude and praise. *Complaints* or *Laments* affirm the psalmist(s)’s trust in God in times of trouble. I do not mean that they are entirely free of doubts, and certainly they express anxiety—Psalms often challenge God more than one would expect in conventional wisdom contexts. Thus, where the book of Proverbs presumes that the world functions justly, and makes empirical sense, the books of Qohelet, Job, and Wisdom Psalms, as well as many *Complaints* and *Laments* in the book of Psalms, express deep distress about visible injustice, especially the flourishing of the wicked, and suffering of the righteous. Nevertheless, the message of even a “negative” psalm is generally an expression of faith that God will save the psalmist from his, or their, troubles. Sometimes this expression of faith is explicit, as in the classic example of Psalm 130, “out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord” (מִמְעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ), which ends with the declaration that “God will redeem Israel from their sins” (vs. 8, וְהוּא יִפְדֶּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו). In other cases, the affirmation is more subtle, and consists mainly in the fact that the psalmist is appealing to God, such as the opening verse of the first ascent psalm, Psalm 120, an individual lament that is primarily an expression of pain and confusion:

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents. In my distress I called to the LORD and He answered me.

<sup>2</sup> **O LORD, save me from treacherous lips, from a deceitful tongue!**

<sup>3</sup> What can you profit, what can you gain, O deceitful tongue?

<sup>4</sup> A warrior’s sharp arrows, with hot coals of broom-wood.

<sup>5</sup> Woe is me, that I live with Meshech, that I dwell among the clans of Kedar.

<sup>6</sup> Too long have I dwelt with those who hate peace.

<sup>7</sup> **I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war.**

The following are the typical formal elements of a Lament, as I have marked them in the text of Psalm 120:

- 1) Summons to the Lord (see v. 2, “O Lord”)
- 2) *Complaint / Lament*, often preceded by a description of the prayer (see vss. 4-6, and vs. 1, “in my distress I called to the Lord”)
- 3) Inducements to the Lord to intervene: e.g., challenging God’s honour, describing the wickedness of the oppressor (vss. 3-4, if they are taken to address the wicked enemies; vs. 7)

- 4) **Petition / Entreaty: plea for deliverance**; confession of guilt or **protestation of innocence** (vss. 2,7)  
 5) **Conviction of being heard** and / or a vow (vs. 1, וְיִעֲנֵנִי)

In Psalm 120, we see a protestation of innocence. In contrast, in *Psalms of Confession*, like the national psalm of confession, Psalm 130 (“I cry out to you from the depths”), the psalmist exhibits awareness of guilt. The plea for divine deliverance is supported by an appeal to mercy rather than justice:

If You keep account of sins, O LORD, Lord, who will survive? Yours is the power to forgive so that You may be held in awe” (vss. 3-4).

In *Psalms of Trust*, like Psalm 131, an individual psalm of trust, and Psalm 125, a *national* psalm of trust, the affirmation of confidence overtakes the other usual elements of the lament. Psalm 125 thus affirms divine justice, God’s reward of his faithful and meting of punishment to the wicked (e.g., v. 1, “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion that cannot be moved, enduring forever”). There is a direct appeal to God in verse 4 (“Do good, O LORD, to the good, to the upright in heart”), but most of the psalm is in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, as is typical of a Psalm of trust. The reference to the security of Mt. Zion in verse 1, and to Jerusalem in verse 2, mixes elements of the Song of Zion genre into the Psalm of Trust: “Jerusalem, hills enfold it, and the LORD enfolds His people now and forever.” The analogy serves as a double reinforcement—when God is said to enfold his people, now and forever, as Jerusalem is enfolded with hills, this doubly expresses and impresses the certainty of divine protection of both Jerusalem and Israel. Psalm 125 ends with another typical element of a psalm of trust, a blessing: “May it be well with Israel!”

If Laments, Psalms of Confession, and Psalms of Trust affirm confidence in God’s future or general support and salvation, mercy, or just reward, *Thanksgiving Psalms* recognize past and present experiences of divine grace. Among the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 124 and 129 are Thanksgiving Psalms:

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents. Of David. <sup>2</sup> Were it not for the LORD, who was on our side, let Israel now declare, were it not for the LORD, who was on our side when men assailed us, <sup>3</sup> they would have swallowed us alive ...  
<sup>6</sup> Blessed is the LORD, who **did not let** us be ripped apart by their teeth ... <sup>8</sup> Our help is the name of the LORD, maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 124)

Psalm 124 describes scenarios of distress and divine salvation, like a lament. But the framing is the acknowledgment that this salvation has already occurred, the suffering that has been averted. In this psalm, the depiction of suffering is mostly an imagined counterfactual—what would have happened had the Lord not intervened. But **he did intervene**, and the community of the Psalm expresses their gratitude.

A number of the Psalms of Ascent are categorized as *Liturgies* (Psalms 121, 126, 132 and 134). The element of summons to praise is highlighted in these psalms and they often feature a call-and-response, or “antiphonal” structure, and explicit references to priests and **Temple worship**. For example, the brief Psalm 134:

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents. Now bless the LORD, all you **servants of the LORD** who stand nightly in the **house of the LORD**. <sup>2</sup> Lift your hands toward the **sanctuary** and bless the LORD. <sup>3</sup> May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

The Psalms identified as Liturgies represent other genres as well. Psalm 132, for example, was identified by Gunkel also as a Royal Psalm, concerned with the Davidic dynasty. Psalm 121 was identified by Gunkel as a liturgy but others, who accept this, also classify it as a Psalm of Trust:

<sup>1</sup> I turn my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD, maker of heaven and earth. <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot give way; **your guardian will not slumber**. See, the **guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps** ...

The 1<sup>st</sup> person opening of the psalm yields to 2<sup>nd</sup> person assurances, in which are embedded 3<sup>rd</sup> person affirmations of God's trustworthiness. The "step repetition" that characterizes a number of the Psalms of Ascents helps the movement from the personal to the general: from mountains to heaven and earth; from "your guardian" to "the guardian of Israel." The closing of the psalm is suited to a pilgrimage context: "The LORD will guard your going and coming now and forever."

In calling attention to such dual classification—royal psalm and liturgy; liturgy and psalm of trust—I wish to emphasize my strong preference for using form-criticism descriptively rather than pre-scriptively. For Gunkel, identifying *Gattung* was a means towards assigning a *Sitz im Leben*. I see the identification of formal elements primarily as a tool for understanding the language, themes, message, and mood, of psalms texts. By noticing patterns and placing psalms in conversation with one another, and within a broader system, I become better positioned to understand contextual valence and nuance. This is very useful for psalms, since poetry tends to be both dense, packing much meaning into each word and expression, and elusive, or fluid, fluctuating with the mood and focus of the reader.

A final genre that I will point out in our 15 Psalms of Ascent is the Wisdom Psalm, with Psalms 127, 128, and 133 as exemplars. These are characterized more by content than by discrete structural elements. They are similar to other biblical wisdom texts, in presenting instruction about the way of the world, and the ways of the Lord, emphasizing the fear of the Lord. Divine justice and providence are prominent themes as in the other genres we have looked at. The opening verse of Psalm 128 is typical: "Happy are all who fear the LORD, who follow His ways." Verse 1 of Psalm 127 ascribes this song to King Solomon, famed for his superior wisdom:

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְשִׁלְמֵה אֱמִינָה | לְאֵי-בֵינָה בַּיַּת שְׁוֹא | עֲמִלּוֹ בּוֹנֵי בַּיַּת אֱמִינָה לֹא-יִשְׁמְרֵ-עֵיר שְׁוֹא | שְׁלֹד שׁוֹמֵר:

A song of ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain on it; unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman keeps vigil in vain.

This reference to Solomon and the Temple leads me to my concluding section, on the prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple, as depicted in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.

### 3. King Solomon's dedicatory prayer: 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 6

1 Kings 8:2 describes an occasion of pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, in a sort of anticipation of the description of Sukkot in the Mishna with which we began: "All the men of Israel gathered before King Solomon at the Feast, in the month of Ethanim—that is, the seventh month." The text proceeds to describe Solomon's supplicatory prayer, asking God to listen to the prayers that will be directed towards the Temple. The first situation that Solomon specifies is Judgment between rivals:

<sup>31</sup> Whenever one man commits an offense against another, and the latter utters an imprecation to bring a curse upon him, and comes with his imprecation before Your altar in this House, <sup>32</sup> oh, hear in heaven and take action to judge Your servants, condemning him who is in the wrong and bringing down the punishment of his conduct on his head, vindicating him who is in the right by rewarding him according to his righteousness. (1 Kings 8)

One can detect a resonance here with the lament of Psalm 120, "O LORD, save me from treacherous lips, from a deceitful tongue!", as well as with the psalms of trust and wisdom psalms. After outlining additional situations of supplicatory prayer—war and disease, as well as foreign worshippers coming from afar—Solomon closes with a prayer for God to hear the future prayers of Israel in exile. Reflecting the classic Deuteronomistic motif of Sin-Exile-Return, this text asks for divine receptivity to the national prayers:

<sup>46</sup> When they sin against You—for there is no man who does not sin—and You are angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, and their captors carry them off to an enemy land, near or far; <sup>47</sup> and then they take it to heart in the land to which they have been carried off, and they repent and make supplication to You in the

land of their captors, saying: We have sinned, we have acted perversely, we have acted wickedly, <sup>48</sup> and they turn back to You with all their heart and soul, in the land of the enemies who have carried them off, and they pray to You in the direction of their land which You gave to their fathers, of the city which You have chosen, and of the House which I have built to Your name—<sup>49</sup> oh, give heed in Your heavenly abode to their prayer and supplication, uphold their cause, <sup>50</sup> and pardon Your people who have sinned against You for all the transgressions that they have committed against You.

Although the text does not state so explicitly, the prayer of the people is surely for Return, as in the framing chapters of Deuteronomy. When Israel returns to God, with all their heart and soul, God returns Israel to God, and to the Land. That is—the proposed settings of the Psalms of Ascent as Psalms of Return and of Pilgrimage both align with the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings.

2 Chronicles 6:41-42 recapitulates the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings, but with some modification, adding:

<sup>40</sup> Now My God, may Your eyes be open and Your ears attentive to prayer from this place, and now, <sup>41</sup> Advance, O LORD God, to your resting-place, You and Your mighty Ark. Your priests, O LORD God, are clothed in triumph; Your loyal ones will rejoice in [Your] goodness. <sup>42</sup> O LORD God, do not reject Your anointed one; remember the loyalty of Your servant David.

Those verses are equivalent (with minor variation) to Psalm 132:8-10, from our “Songs of Ascents”. Rather than unpack the significance of these intertextual connections, I present them as a basis for further thought. (I will be happy to discuss further in the question time, or personally). Along with a more general observation: I opened this talk by referring to a disparity between religious experience and text study. The connections between Kings, Chronicles, and the Psalms of Ascent relate to this distinction and overlap, which has been a focus of Psalms study for at least a millennium and probably two: Psalms as prayer, Scripture, and prophecy, or, as it is often stated: Humans speaking to God or / and God speaking to humans. That text from Psalm 132, and 2 Chronicles, added to 1 Kings, has found a new locus of performance that is neither a return to Jerusalem nor a festival pilgrimage journey, but rather a ritual in modern synagogue liturgy: the removal of the Torah from the ark for the ritual reading of Scripture. The following melody is that of German-Jewish composer Louis Lewandowski (April 23, 1821 – February 4, 1894), which feels like an apt way to start off our week of study:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQKXCn7HUtk&fbclid=IwAR2fEXwtFOXG\\_I4L0KzD-twwf-rFihAsKUTf0FrvfbRK0-QLqoThJf8DJKM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQKXCn7HUtk&fbclid=IwAR2fEXwtFOXG_I4L0KzD-twwf-rFihAsKUTf0FrvfbRK0-QLqoThJf8DJKM)

*Shani Tzoref is a specialist in Hebrew Bible and digital humanities. From 2015-2019 she was professor of Hebrew Bible and Biblical Exegesis at the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam and the Abraham Geiger Rabbinical College. Dr. Tzoref is an alumna of Yeshiva University (B.A., M.S.) and New York University (PhD), and has taught at universities in the US, the UK, Australia and Israel. The focus of her research is biblical interpretation, particularly Jewish reception of biblical writings in the Second Temple era, with a specialization in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her current academic interests also include narrative and discourse, as well as the history of Jewish biblical research, particularly in the context of Wissenschaft des Judentums.*

*Translation: Sr Katherine Wolff nds*

Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium  
des Innern, für Bau  
und Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE  
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS

Bistum  
Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses  
des Deutschen Bundestages