

A TRANSFORMING PATH¹ – THE PILGRIMS’ SONGS

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to try two things: 1. to give you a small insight into the composition of the Pilgrims’ Songs by discussing the first part of the journey, Psalms 120 – 122, and 2. to take you with me into my discussion of Psalm 123.

1. Psalms 120 – 122 as Prelude to the Pilgrims’ Songs

1.1 The Work of Praying begins

At the beginning of Psalm 120 is the coagulated experience of generations: “To the ETERNAL I cried in my distress, and he answered me” (v. 1). Biblical Tradition grew up out of this experience. It is also the source of the 15 Pilgrims’ Songs. Our words do not fall into emptiness, they have meaning, for God comes to speak when we speak and pray. This is why it makes sense to speak, to pray, to compose.

What is special in this beginning becomes clear if we compare Psalm 120 with the great majority of Psalms, the Songs of Lament of an individual. The Songs of Lament of an individual comprises the elements lament – request – statement of trust. Psalm 120 turns the order around. Lament – request – statement of trust becomes: Statement of trust – request – lament. The trust is at the beginning. A request to be saved from the power of language (vv. 2-4) follows: “ETERNAL, save my soul from lying lips ...” (v. 2). The third stanza is lament over a life that is entirely alienated (vv. 5-7).

This is to say that Psalm 120 plays with the elements that traditionally belong to the genre of individual songs of lament. But Psalm 120 does not lead out of distress – as is usual in songs of lament. Psalm 120 leads into distress. The work of praying begins with the trust that God answers: looking, finding words for what cannot be said, composing poetry against becoming mute.

That which cannot be said, for which the Psalm finds words, is the normality of war:

⁵ Woe is me...

⁶ Too long I was among those who hate peace.

⁷ I (want) peace,
but even if I speak,
they want war.

¹ For the whole topic cf. Klara Butting, *In die Gänge kommen. Die Psalmen 120 – 134. Ein Pilgerweg der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens*, Uelzen 2018.

The I-figure identifies with peace, but this attains nothing. The words of peace fall into emptiness. The world is turned around. The words of peace have no strength. The powerful who do not want peace have the word, since those who benefit from war live of war – thus I interpret it. Violence serves economic expansion. In the background, I see the Persian, perhaps also the Hellenistic empire that ensures a huge global economic space through military violence. But also the violence of expanding land owners who want to produce in order to export and who are greedy for the farmers' land.

The lament over this turned around world is a cry of alarm because of the consequences of violence in my own soul. "Woe is me ... far too long my soul dwelt among the one who hates peace!" (v. 6). This becoming startled about oneself follows as a reaction to the desire for revenge, with which the second stanza ends. The I-figure had wished that hate-speech would have consequences, that "arrows of a warrior!" would come upon those who get their way by means of lies. The I must then discover with horror that the climate of violence also bears fruit in his / her own soul. I speak like them, I hate like them. Woe is me!

How can one get out of thus being determined through others? This is the question at the beginning of the Pilgrims' Songs. A pilgrim's path of righteousness and of peace begins with this opening question, a text-space opens up, in which I gain images of peace and in which steps are taken along the path of peace.

1.2 Arrival and Crisis in Jerusalem

After recognising that "I have to get out of here" (Psalm 120), comes the departure (Psalm 121). I shall skip over this departure, the wonderful Psalm 121 that begins with a movement of one's own body: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains", a Psalm that practices the movement away from the self toward the others, which Carolin Emcke in her book *Gegen den Hass* ("Against Hatred") called the most important form of resistance against hatred.²

After the departure, the third stanza, Psalm 122, already leads to the journey's goal, to Jerusalem. Jerusalem's silhouette already tells of this city's significance. "Jerusalem, built up again as a city, firmly put together, a unity" (v. 3). The impression of Jerusalem as a whole, "a unity (Hebrew: *yachdav*)" is like an omen of the vision that is put into words at the end of the Pilgrims' Songs: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is, when siblings live together *in agreement* (Hebrew: *yachad*)" (Psalm 133:1). The fact that this city could be built up again after the Exile, against resistance from the outside and in the face of bitter poverty, is like a promise that the work of people in community can change this world's architecture toward peace. Jerusalem stands for the attempt to develop regional structures that are contrary to known forms of an independent State and to maintain a certain autonomy and equality under foreign rule.

It is interesting that worship does not play a part in the Pilgrims' Songs. The priests' clothing of office is "righteousness" (Psalm 132). Their significance does not lie in sacrificial activity, but in blessing. As the centre of regional economic relations and as guarantor of a certain autonomy under foreign rule, Jerusalem incorporates the hope for a regionally organised redistribution.

Psalm 122 is about the fact that this city makes true the hopes to which it gives rise. In the third stanza, the I-figure turns toward others with an invitation to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and the I-figure him-/herself begins this prayer:

² She writes: "Perhaps the most important gesture against hatred is: not to allow oneself to become separate. Not to let oneself be pushed into silence, into the private, into the protection of one's own refuge or milieu. Perhaps the most important movement is the one out of self. Toward the others." Carolin Emcke, *Gegen den Hass*, Frankfurt am Main 2016, 20.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May those who love you find peace!
May peace be within your walls,
Contentment in your palaces! (vv. 6-7)

And in so doing, something strange happens. Suddenly the I-figure has to admonish him-/herself not to give up the hope for peace. Suddenly the I-figure no longer speaks to others, but to him-/herself. The I turns to him-/herself with a cohortative.

For the sake of my siblings,
for love of my companions on the way,
I will after all speak for peace in you. (v. 8)

The prayer for peace ends with an invitation to self to hold fast to the commitment for the peace of Jerusalem. In the harmony of the Pilgrims' Songs, this invitation to self receives surprising weight. For two words from Psalm 120 turn up again. The two words "peace" and "speak". Let us remember the end of Psalm 120.

I want peace,
but even if I speak,
they want war. (Psalm 120:7)

The call to peace was directed toward others – it fell into emptiness. In Jerusalem, the call to peace becomes a call to the I-figure him-/herself.

For the sake of my siblings,
for love of my companions on the way,
I will after all speak for peace in you. (Psalm 122:8)

Now the I-figure's own commitment becomes the topic. Now I must admonish myself to hold onto the perspective of peace. This is to say that in the place of faith the I-figure, who wanted to flee from alienation and violence by turning toward Jerusalem, comes into a faith crisis. The prayer for peace becomes a temptation, because violence and lack of peace are in Jerusalem as well!

A Side Comment:

The context of the 15 Pilgrims' Songs reinforces this observation. For when the normality of war, over which Psalm 120 laments, is more closely described in the 15 Psalms, internal social problems come into sight. The violence that Israel suffered in the course of its history through other nations is remembered, but in the present reality, the enemies are not standing before the gates, but in the city's gate. There, the farmers need their own sons as bodyguards. The Songs of Zion in this cycle do not sing of God's battle with the globalised international elite. War, hatred and violence characterise an *internal social* conflict. The voices that can be heard in the Pilgrims' Songs come from the margins of society. Slaves who are abandoned without rights to their reign; people who because of poverty have to work for too many hours; farmers who weep when they sow, presumably because they have to take the seed from the family's food rations. Gert Prinsloo calls the people who raise their voice in the Pilgrims' Songs "Exiles in their own country".³

In my opinion, the crisis in Jerusalem is a key to understanding the entire composition of the Pilgrims' Songs. The "ETERNAL's house" in Jerusalem is named at the beginning of the Psalm (Psalm 122:1) as the goal of the movement at the departure. This goal already can be seen at the third station, but the path goes on. The goal, the place of faith, becomes a station on the way. For the centre of faith is also the place where the power of the forces standing against God's story and corrupting it are experienced. The hope of finding a home in the midst of the political fights in Jerusalem still has a long path before it. Only at the very end, in Psalm 134, we are taken along to a festive happening in the house of the Eternal (Psalm 134:1). Between the arrival in Jerusalem and this arrival in the "house of the ETERNAL" there are twelve Psalms that are marked by the crisis of religious and societal life. The pilgrimage becomes a street retreat. Going on pilgrimage to a

³ Gert Th.M. Prinsloo, *The Role of Space in the shire ha-ma'alot (Psalm 120 – 134)*, in: *Biblica* 86/2005, 458-477, 477.

goal becomes a path on the periphery that leads back to the centre only at the end.⁴ The journey becomes an argument with points of pain which come about because also in the special places of faith we are overtaken by the societal circumstances that have to be thought through and thought anew while on pilgrimage.

2. Psalm 123: The New Departure – God’s Liberation in Prayer

In Psalm 123, the path to the centre of Jerusalem begins anew. This Psalm is the lowest point on the entire path taken by Psalms 120 – 134. A Psalm without a statement of trust, without a certainty of being heard. The crisis that could be seen concealed in the assertion in Psalm 122 of one’s own obligation for peace is put into images and a language.

“To you have I lifted up my eyes, you who throne in the heavens” (Psalm 123:1) – the renewed departure begins with this attitude. The tiny gesture, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains” (Psalm 121:1) – an expression of the movement away from self – is remembered. But now the eyes go beyond the mountains to heaven. Having arrived in the place of faith, it is necessary for survival that God “thrones in heaven” (v. 1). When our dreams in the hard world of politics turn into an illusion and our ideals break, it is necessary for survival that the primeval source from which dreams of peace, justice and human dignity and solidarity arise over and over again be in heaven beyond the reach of human power.⁵

2.1 God – Slaveholder

To “You who throne in the heavens”, Psalm 123 laments over the experience with God on earth. Terrible images are at the centre of Psalm 123. God is compared to slaveholders.

Behold,
as the eyes of slaves
on the hand of their masters,
as the eyes of slavegirls
on the hand of her who commands,
so our eyes are
on the ETERNAL, our God,
until he be gracious to us. (v. 2)

Some interpreters see this as an image of trust. Erich Zenger, among others, contradicted this by referring to the word “*shiphchah*, slavegirl”. This word *shiphchah* means “not the (hand-)maid but the slave (...) who occupies the lowest social level within the house and family community, who has no rights and who is considered as part of the material property”.⁶ Also, the eyes of the slaves only go so far as their masters’ hands. The hand of the master or mistress is not just a symbol of authority to command but also – and I am again quoting Erich Zenger – “of the punishment of slaves”.⁷ That is to say: Here is seen the life and work situation of people who are delivered with body and life to their owners. Face to face encounters do not happen. The hands of the owners are the only source of hope, even if these hands spread violence and fear. For in spite of cruel experiences – food and survival come from these hands. In the misery of such working conditions, poets and hearers recognise their relationship with God. The slaves’ lack of rights, their total dependence on their owners’ arbitrary proofs of kindness – thus they are delivered up to God in the hope of God’s care.

⁴ Cf. Michael Johannes Schindler, *Gott auf der Straße. Studie zu theologischen Entdeckungen bei den Straßenexerzitien*. Tübinger Perspektiven zur Pastoraltheologie und Religionspädagogik Bd. 54, Berlin 2016, 358.

⁵ Cf. Bas Wielenga, *Und ich sah eine bewohnbare Erde*, Knesebeck 1994, 60.

⁶ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150* (HThKAT), Freiburg im Breisgau 2008, 470.

⁷ *Ibid.*

In the place of faith, the misery that must be named and worked on is the corruption of the relationship with God through violence. The language of power and the language of religion are mingled. On the way, "God" has adapted to the societal conditions and has been perverted by them.

2.2 *Perverted Grace*

The gateway to the perversion of God is the hope of grace. "Grace", this great word of tradition, has become a tool for oppression. Grace is a primeval experience of biblical faith. By its nature, "grace" belongs to the very being of God (Exodus 34:6). However, grace is not first of all a theological concept, but a word that had its firm place in the social hierarchies of the ancient Oriental world. This world was structured from top to bottom. To find grace in the eyes of a more highly placed person meant to be well seen and to be able to continue to exist; in many situations it was necessary so as to be able to advance, and it was often also a matter of survival. Thus for example the Book of Esther speaks. Esther wants to find grace in the eyes of the Persian King Ahashveros so as to thwart Haman's plans of destruction. Esther's hope of grace means entering into total dependence on arbitrariness. The king can grant grace or death. To grant grace is one way of using the power which can with authority do or not do whatever it pleases.

Sometimes I'm afraid that an understanding of grace like at King Ahashveros' court still influences theological speaking about grace today. Now of course I'm only talking about my context. Already the usual and widespread liturgical formula of "almighty and merciful God" over and over again re-establishes this order in the church service. First the power, then the care! First: God is the almighty sovereign, he is free to give life and death in a sovereign and arbitrary way, but then he is after all gracious to us. Instead of trust that grace has power, we hope for grace from power.

Presumably such reversals fit so long as hierarchies mark as above and below our life together, our language and our images. The worldly images of power reach for God precisely because we hope for world-changing power from God. Of course the images have changed in the course of time. With the word "God" we no longer think of a slaveholder, but possibly of "something great", comparable to a central place of government that "somehow" works over us. We hope in it and we "stare at hands", as the Psalm describes, we stare at the power of a super-great X-Man in heaven.

2.3 *The Liberation of God*

Psalm 123 works against the perversion of God by speaking with God. The freezing before the God-Slaveholder is held up before the one "who thrones in the heavens". The simile of the God-Slaveholder is spoken in the third person. It is framed by the address to God (vv. 1 and 3-4). The one "who thrones in heaven" should "look" and be concerned about what has become of "the Eternal, our God" on earth.

In the practical implementation of their praying, the people praying leave behind the relationship with God in which human beings sit only as people receiving, who are powerless and captive. Those who are praying here, "Be gracious unto us, ETERNAL, be gracious unto us", do not stare passively on the hands of some master. They become active. They pray. Neither submissiveness nor fear of God are expressed in the prayer. The misery with "God" is held before "God": "We've had enough, more than enough, we've had our fill of contempt and are fed up!" God is addressed as a partisan for people in miserable, dependent work conditions. The grace demanded by the prayer is at the same time the source of this praying. The spell of the conditions of power in which the people praying see themselves as captives has been broken. They know – said in a modern way – that they have been placed at eye level (and that is exactly what it means "to find

grace in someone's eyes"⁸), and they maintain their human dignity and the strength to resist. The end of contempt, for which they plead, is already being lived here in prayer by those praying. Their prayer is an act of freedom in the face of the existing conditions of power.

In Psalm 123, the strength and essence of prayer is forcefully experienced. Praying is recognition of God's gift of self to us human beings.⁹ In prayer, the mystery of God's grace is revealed. We have been looked at and found to be good as God's partners. God is not some higher being who works at God's own discretion, that is perhaps gracious, but perhaps not. Rather, the biblical divinity wants to work with us and wants prayer. Not-being-able-to-do-anything-of-ourselves disappears in a relationship in which human beings experience their dignity and become capable of acting. Praying, we receive the recognition that we are not alone and without power on our journey, but that we participate in the life of God. This also implies an understanding of God's freedom. It is not a sovereign being-able-to-do-or-not do. God's liberty is freedom from the power of violence that destroys and poisons everything. It is freedom to love.

2.4 Summary

As the prelude to the path that begins in Jerusalem, prayer holds an important place in the composition of the Pilgrims' Songs. Psalm 123 is the lowest point on the pilgrimage – and a turning point. I am convinced that it takes us along into a spiritual work that over and over again befits us in the places of our faith. Permit me to describe this in a very personal way:

I often experience praying as a fight between two voices. There is one voice that asks: What am I doing here? Do I believe in fairy tales? Do I imagine that a highest being does away with the laws of nature and magically hastens to our aid? I'm staring at the hands of the heavenly X-Man, like the description in Psalm 123. The other voice also asks: What am I doing here? And is amazed: I'm praying! How incomprehensible is that! How come God doesn't just do what God wants and asks of us nothing more than that we say okay and Amen? And I have an inkling of the mystery of the biblical divinity: God-with-us in relationship. Our God is not a power of destiny who does everything and creates everything. The movement from heaven to earth goes through us. God asks us to work with him so that God's freedom might gain space among us and the world might be transformed. Psalm 123 lets both voices be heard, and yet it strengthens the second one. It takes us with it in the prayer that thaws the freezing.

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Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern, für Bau
und Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS



Bistum
Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages

⁸ Rainer Kessler, *Gnade im Licht der Hebräischen Bibel*, in: *Junge Kirche* 1/2017, 1-3.

⁹ Kornelis Heiko Miskotte, *Der Weg des Gebets*, München 1964, 50.54-55.