

ARTICLES

Voices for the Pilgrimage: A Study in the Psalms of Ascent¹

By PROFESSOR DAVID G. BARKER

*Heritage Theological Seminary, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada**Introduction*

Who would true valour see,
 Let him come hither;
 One here will constant be,
 Come wind, come weather;
 There's no discouragement
 Shall make him once relent
 His first avow'd intent
 To be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
 With dismal stories,
 Do but themselves confound,
 His strength the more is.
 No lion can him fright,
 He'll with a giant fight,
 But he will have a right
 To be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
 Can daunt his spirit;
 He knows he at the end
 Shall life inherit.
 Then fancies fly away,
 He'll not fear what men say;
 He'll labour night and day
 To be a pilgrim.²

WHETHER from Valiant-for-Truth, from Christian himself, or from the biblical patriarchs Abraham or Moses, pilgrimage is a dominating idea in Christian and biblical imagery. In writing to believers engaged in the fray of faith,

the author of Hebrews stated, 'You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God' (Heb 12:22). The Christian faith is a pilgrimage. It is a journey from earth to heaven, from curse to blessing, from judgment to salvation, from the earthly city to the city of God.

But it is a pilgrimage fraught with all kinds of challenges and struggles. Whether the Slough of Despond, Beelzebub Castle, the Hill of Difficulty, or three giants – Bloody-man, Maul, and Slay-good; whether the heat of the day or the ominous moonbeams of the night (Ps 121:6), or whether the lure of the good and rich life (Gen 13:1–18), the pilgrimage brings all of life's pains and joys into the arena of reality and experience.

And so we ask, 'What are the prayers and praises, the calls, confessions, and complaints that we have been given for the journey? What are the valid ones? Are there enough? Are they adequate? What is there to learn and use in our prayer, praise, worship and witness? What has God, in Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith pilgrimage, given as the Word for the journey?' In short, 'What are the voices for the pilgrimage?'

The Psalms of Ascents

There is in Holy Scripture a group of songs that take us a long way towards answering these questions. The Book of Psalms contains a collection of fifteen psalms (120–34) all with the title שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, 'A Song of Ascents'.³ While this title has created a plethora of interpretations,⁴ the consensus of recent

³ Direct biblical quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ For a survey of such interpretations see the presentation in C. C. Keet, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents* (London: Mitre, 1969), 1–17.

¹ This paper was delivered at the International Baptist Conference, Toronto Baptist Seminary, October 2002.

² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1953), 303–304.

scholarship is that it points to these psalms as 'Songs of Pilgrimage', hence voices for the journey. The term *תְּפִלָּה* is apparently related to the pilgrim's *ascent* of Mount Zion to Jerusalem for worship.⁵ It happened in many ways. For example, three times a year the nation was called to Jerusalem for three great pilgrimage feasts, Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Ingathering (Exod 23:14-17; Isa 30:29). These were some of the songs of the journey to these feasts. The title may also represent the processional ceremonial 'ascents' to the temple at the festivals, either by the pilgrims themselves, or the professional choirs (cf. 2 Sam 6:12; 1 Kgs 13:33; 2 Kgs 23:2; Neh 12:37; Ps 42:4; Isa 26:2; 30:29; Jer 31:6; Mic 4:2).⁶ Then, these songs are likely to have been among those sung by the returning exiles from Babylon as they ascended the mountains to Jerusalem and home (Ezra 2:1; 7:7).⁷

The Collection

The final form of the collection is post-exilic since Psalm 126 seems rooted in the wonder and joy of the return from Babylon,⁸ and Psalm 125 may be reflecting Babylonian oppression. Further, the collection is located in Book V of the Psalter which is widely recognized as coming into its final form in the post-exilic era. Undoubtedly each song, however, had its own context and purpose in its initial composition, and could date from almost anytime in Israel's national history.⁹ Collections such as this one were formed over time, and what we have in our text today reflects a history of composition and collection that may well date as far back as Solomon and the temple, or even to Moses and the tabernacle.

Leon Liebreich argues that the fifteen psalms in the collection were chosen to accord with the fifteen words of the priestly blessing in Numbers

6:24-26. He observes that the four key words of the blessing, *בֵּרַךְ*, *שָׁמַר*, *תִּנּוּן*, and *שְׁלוֹמִים* occur throughout these psalms, and are in fact commentaries on these words.¹⁰ Some have linked these psalms with the ten 'degrees' (*מַעְלֵוֹת*) the shadow receded in Hezekiah's courtyard (2 Kgs 20:8-11; cf. Isa 38:8). The central psalm (127) is attributed to Solomon, and on either side of it the flanking seven psalms contain two by David and five anonymous ones. It is suggested that Hezekiah composed the five anonymous ones, and reappropriated the Davidic and Solomonic psalms for his purposes (cf. Isa 38:20).¹¹ Jewish tradition links the fifteen psalms to the fifteen steps of the temple, and the practice of singing each song as the priests and pilgrims ascended the steps.¹²

There is significant debate over the structure of the collection. There seems to be some kind of progression since it begins with a prayer of distress by the one who is far from home (120) and ends with a call to praise in the sanctuary of Zion (134). However, to suggest that it is a simple linear progression does not satisfy the complexity of the collection. Walter Kaiser is certainly correct when he suggests that there does seem to be some type of grouping and sequencing within the collection.¹³

The proposal in this paper affirms the following: the first three psalms (120-22) stand together as an introduction and concentrate on the journey and the arrival at Jerusalem. They form an introductory overview of the journey. Psalms 123-26 bring both lament and thanksgiving together. They are a reflection of the life of faith outside the place of worship and they anticipate the reorientation that the worship at the sanctuary would bring. Psalm

¹⁰ Leon J. Liebreich, 'The Psalms of Ascents and Priestly Blessing', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955), 33-36. Three of the psalms do not have one of the four key words (124, 126, 131), and Liebreich suggests that the original collection had only twelve psalms (twelve tribes?), and Pss 124, 126, and 131 were added to bring the number of psalms in line with the fifteen words in the blessing.

¹¹ See Keet's discussion of this view (*A Study of the Psalms of Ascents*, 10).

¹² *Middot* 2:5; *Sukka* 5:4.

¹³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Journey Isn't Over: The Pilgrim Psalms for Life's Challenges and Joys* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1993), 17. He gives several alternatives of what that sequencing might be. This little book, along with Eugene Peterson's *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), provides a wonderful popular entry into and analysis of the collection. Kaiser also provides the lyrics of the hymns of Isaac Watts and others which are based on the psalm under study.

⁵ It is derived from the verbal root *עָלָה* 'to go up' (cf. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907], 748-52).

⁶ Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 219.

⁷ That the songs are more than just 'Songs of Repatriation' is evident by the fact that there are both Davidic and Solomonic psalms in the collection.

⁸ The psalm may be a more general praise for restoration of fortunes, see discussion below.

⁹ The Psalter contains a psalm as early as Moses, Psalm 90.

127 stands at the centre of the collection, and with its twin (128) celebrates the prosperity that comes from trusting and fearing God. Psalms 129–31 return to deep lament with a final word of trust. Psalm 132 directs the pilgrim's attention to the hope of the Davidic messiah. The final two psalms (133–34) conclude the collection with a focus on Zion – a call to unity and a final liturgy of doxology to Yahweh.¹⁴

The following is an outline of this proposal:

A. Introductory Overview: The Journey Home (120–22)

1. The departure from darkness and suffering (120)
2. The pilgrimage of fear and faith (121)
3. The arrival at Jerusalem and *shalom* (122)

B. Journey Engaged: The Living Voices of Life and Faith in Pilgrimage, Part 1 (123–26)

1. The pilgrimage is full of pain and contempt (123)
2. The pilgrimage is full of attack and danger (124)
3. The pilgrimage is ruled by the wicked (125)
4. The pilgrimage is dominated by exile (126)

C. Theological Centre: The Centrality of Trusting and Fearing Yahweh for Covenantal Blessings (127–28)

1. It is Yahweh who builds, watches over, and prospers his people (127)
2. It is the 'fear of Yahweh' that brings covenantal blessing (128)

B'. Journey Engaged: The Living Voices of Life and Faith in Pilgrimage, Part 2 (129–31)

1. The pilgrimage is full of oppression (129)
2. The pilgrimage is full of despair and doubt (130)
3. The pilgrimage is ruled by hope when we are people of penitence (131)

¹⁴ The skeleton of this sequencing is not original to me. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 220, Kaiser, *The Journey*, 17, and James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 386 are among others who suggest a similar kind of grouping. What is distinctive about the proposal in this paper is how the parts relate to each other and form a cohesive and intentional progressive whole.

D. Hope and Goal: The Messiah and Eschaton in View (132)

E. Arrival: The Way and Words of Worship (133–34)

1. The blessing of covenantal and community unity (133)
2. A final liturgy of doxology (134)

There are four significant things that we need to note. First, we see the centrality of Psalms 127–28. The whole collection pivots on trust in, and fear of, Yahweh for success and blessing in the pilgrimage. Second, we see that the mixture of lament, complaint, despair and hope flanks the central theological affirmation (123–26, 129–31). While we readily understand Yahweh as the centre of all things, as part of the heart of that theological reality, we are given the voices of real living faith and pilgrimage, voices that encompass despair and even anger all the way to ecstasy and unrestrained joy, and are invited, yea instructed, to bring them into the throne room of the King.¹⁵ Third, we dare not miss the eschatological dimension of the journey as its hope and goal (132). Finally, the whole collection shows a progression from despair to hope (cf. 120 and 134), and we are given the concluding way and words of worship in the last two psalms (133–34).

Voices for the Pilgrimage

Many modern pilgrims have taken great solace in the prison poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹⁶ In these poems we hear the voice of the (recent) past which gives a

¹⁵ A significant discussion in the theology of the Psalter is the recognition that the foundational understanding of God is that of king. The psalms are the voices of the people as they enter the throne room of the king. As king, God is also shepherd, judge, and warrior. The central seven psalms of the Psalter are celebrations of Yahweh as king (93–99) concluded by the powerful doxology of Psalm 100. For an excellent discussion of this critical idea see Robert B. Chisholm, 'A Theology of the Psalms', in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck et al. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991), 257–304; and for the messianic implications this has for all the psalms see Bruce K. Waltke, 'A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms', in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), 3–18.

¹⁶ Edwin Robertson, editor and translator, *Voices in the Night: The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

living voice to life and faith in the present. We do the same with the Psalms of Ascents. Songs of faith and pilgrimage from the past become expressions of living, present, and vital faith and pilgrimage in the present.¹⁷ The following exposition is a summary exploration of those voices as the text itself allows those voices to emerge.¹⁸

A. *Introductory Overview: We Sing of the Journey Coming Home (120-22)*

The world is full of distress, pain and oppression. Our opening cry is a cry for rescue, 'Save me O LORD from deceitful tongues' (120:1-2). Yes, there is hope for vindication (120:3-4), but lament continues to rule our lives because we are a people of peace living in a world of war (120:5-6).¹⁹ The voice of lament is the opening voice, and is the dominating voice of the collection.²⁰ This challenges current popular notions of the form, structure and content of both worship and prayer.

So we look to the hills (121:1). Those hills contain both fear and hope, the presence of the enemy as well as the dwelling place of God. We ask who 'my help' (עֲרֹרִי) will be²¹ and immediately the answer returns, 'My help (עֲרֹרִי) is in the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth' (121:1-2). At this

¹⁷ There are many fine commentaries and expositions of these psalms in the standard commentaries. However, Samuel Cox, *The Pilgrim Psalms: An Exposition of the Songs of Degrees* (London: R. D. Dickinson, 1885), must be noted as probably the classic presentation of this collection.

¹⁸ Perhaps it would be easier to study these psalms according to traditional categories – lament, praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, etc. However, the arrangement and structure does speak; hence the point of this paper is to allow each psalm to 'lend its voice' from within the biblical matrix.

¹⁹ Whether or not the psalmist is living in exile (cf. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, New Century Bible [Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1972], 850), or in Israel (cf. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, World Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 [Waco, TX: Word, 1983], 146) is unclear. However, it is not necessary to conclude that he is in actual exile since the psalm takes on a broader canonical function in giving a voice for all of life and faith (cf. Willem Van Gemeren, 'Psalms', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991], 121).

²⁰ Of the fifteen psalms in the collection Bernhard Anderson identifies possibly six as individual or community lament (cf. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983], 242).

point a 'blesser' speaks,²² and assures us that our shepherd does not sleep or fail (121:5-6). So we begin our journey by passing our hand over the mezuzah on our doorposts and reciting the benediction 'The LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore' (121:7-8).²³

In Psalm 122 we do arrive, safely. It was a joy to hear the announcement²⁴ of the journey (122:1-2) and now we focus the goal of our life and faith on the place where God dwells, the place of refuge and unity, the place of the praise and worship of Yahweh, and the place of justice (122:3-5). And we call for peace (שְׁלוֹמִים) three times! We have already identified ourselves as people of peace (120:6-7), and now for sake of security in a world of suffering and uncertainty we make our three-fold call for peace (122:6-9).

As a microcosm of the entire journey, the collection begins with these three psalms that take us from beginning to end, from war to peace, and from oppression to blessing and security.

B. *The Journey Engaged: We Hear and Use the Voices of Life and Faith in the Pilgrimage, Part 1 (123-26)*

The pilgrimage has both now and not-yet realities. While we look to the not-yet (122), we live in the

²¹ The particle עֲרֹרִי must be read as an interrogative particle (per NIV), not as a relative pronoun (per KJV). Julian Morgenstern writes, 'As is recognized by all scholars, עֲרֹרִי can under no condition whatever be regarded as a relative pronoun or relative particle' ('Psalm 121', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 [1939], 312; cf. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 327).

²² There is a clear change of speaker in this verse as evidenced by the change of pronouns. See my article 'The Lord Watches Over You: A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April-June 1995), 169.

²³ The common practice of pious Jews today is upon departure of the home to pass their hand over a small cylinder mounted on the doorpost containing a piece of parchment inscribed with Deut 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, and recite Ps 121: 8. See Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, 'Mezuzah', in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11:1474-75, and Nathan Ausubel, 'Mezuzah, in *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, 290-91.

²⁴ The term הִלְבֵּן probably an imperfect rather than a cohortative (cf. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970], 204), and may be better translated as an announcement, 'We will go', rather than an invitation, 'Let us go' (per the NIV and most other translations).

now. As we lift our eyes to the hills (121:1), we lift our eyes to Yahweh in a confession of trust for his mercy because, in fact, *there is need* for his mercy. We cannot look to the hills without looking to the king, who rules from heaven, for mercy, even as a slave does to his master or a maid to her mistress (123:1-2). And yet, while we do commit ourselves in trust for Yahweh's mercy, we do not always see it clearly. We see only a pale reflection now (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and in fact, ridicule and contempt from the ungodly is very real and painful (123:3-4). So trust and lament are mixed.²⁵

Walter Brueggemann has helped us understand how these things interface. He talks about our experience of faith as revolving around orientation, disorientation and reorientation.²⁶ Orientation is the world of equilibrium. Life makes sense and God is 'well placed' on his throne in heaven. Here is the place for psalms of praise. 'Hallelujah' is the first and last word of our worship (e.g. 100, 113, 146-50).

However, not many of us are here, or we are not here for long! Dislocation and relocation tend to be a dominating part of the journey. The cry 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (22) is not just the cry of our Saviour hanging derelict on the cross, but is the real and living voice of the pilgrim of faith. 'Darkness is my closest friend' is the final reverberating line of Psalm 88. Psalm 13 gives us the haunting question in our doxology, 'How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever?' Life is raw, and we need a voice to 'answer God' as it were. These psalms of disorientation are called the psalms of lament. It is significant that they form the largest category of psalms in the Psalter. The pilgrimage is tough going, and our king has given us the voices of disorientation to enter his throne room out of the pain and despair of life.

²⁵ Derek Kidner states about this psalm, 'These pilgrim psalms preserve many moods, reflecting something of the turbulent history of Zion, which history continues into the story of the church' (*Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975], 435).

²⁶ Brueggemann has developed this notion in a number of places, but one of the most passionate and poignant is his *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1989). See also Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1989) and Anderson, *Out of the Depths*.

But all is not lost. We do not remain here. Inevitably in the psalm of lament we hear and speak a final vow of praise and confidence.²⁷ Further, in the Psalter as a whole we hear the voice of reorientation, what we call thanksgiving psalms (e.g. 30, 103, 114, 116). Thus, the pilgrimage of faith is a life of gratitude. These psalms take us from disorientation to orientation, and bring a new orientation that is a fresh and better understanding of God's will and ways in the world.

So, we cry for mercy (123:3a). In the throne room of the king we lament the ridicule and contempt from the proud (123:3b-4). Further, while we state our confidence in Yahweh's loyalty to us, and call on all God's people to echo the call (124:1-2a),²⁸ we talk about the attack of angry and destructive people, and compare them to a raging torrent that would engulf us (124:2b-5). We praise Yahweh for his protection against the tearing and grinding of their teeth (124:6), and we celebrate the narrow escape from the 'fowler's snare' (124:7). In the midst of all this, our confidence is still in 'the Maker of heaven and earth' (124:8; cf. 121:2).

But the next two psalms point to two realities that challenge faith in the pilgrimage. First, from Psalm 125 we learn that we are under 'the scepter of the wicked' (125:3). Whether it is found outside the community of faith (perhaps a reference to the Persian or Babylonian rule), or inside the community of faith (Manasseh, Ahab), we find the righteous tempted to 'use their hands to do evil' (125:3b). But we are assured that as God's people trust Yahweh, we are as secure as the everlasting symbol and centre of God's presence in the world - Jerusalem (125:1-2)²⁹ and we are promised that this scepter will not last forever (125:3a, 5). We reach our final call for peace by the only path

²⁷ Most lament psalms end or contain some kind of 'vow to praise' or statement of affirmation of faith. Psalm 88 is a clear exception to this (cf. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 75-77).

²⁸ The repeated lines of v. 1 reflect a crescendoing call by the cantor to affirm our confidence in Yahweh's loyalty (cf. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 165).

²⁹ The temple and Jerusalem as the symbol and centre of God's presence in the world has been 'fulfilled' in Christ and is manifest today in the church, his body (1 Cor 3:16-17). We look forward to a day when we will see all this climaxed in a New Heavens, a New Earth, a New Jerusalem. See David Peterson, *Engaging with God. A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

that leads to it – righteousness, uprightness, and good (125:4).

Second, we face exile or loss of fortune (126).³⁰ But we live in hope – hope of the return and/or reversal of fortune, hope to have our mouths filled with laughter, and hope to have the nations declaring that Yahweh has done great things for us (126:1–3). As our forbearers sang in memory and nostalgia, we continue to pray, even as they did, ‘Restore our fortunes, O LORD’ and cling to the promise that while, in fact, we do live in exile and wilderness sowing in tears and sorrow, we will someday have our fortunes restored with all the covenantal promises fulfilled (126:4–6).

C. Theological Centre: We Centre our Faith on Yahweh and the Fear of Yahweh (127–28)

At the very heart of our faith and confidence lie three declarations of what is ‘vain’ (שָׁוְיָ). Unless it is Yahweh who builds the house³¹ (whether the temple, or more generally the kingdom of God), our building is vanity (127:1). Unless it is Yahweh who watches over his people and city, we watch and guard in vain (127:2). Unless it is Yahweh who prospers our labour for food and sustenance, we toil in vain (127:3). But when it is Yahweh who is at the heart of our attempts at accomplishment, our guarding for security and our efforts to prosper, the blessings of the (old) covenant flow (children, prosperity, security, 127:3–5; cf. Deut 28:1–14). Solomon, above anyone else, knew these things (note title).

Further, at the centre of our faith is ‘the fear of Yahweh’. The fear of Yahweh is the foundation of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10), and wisdom is the foundation for all blessing (cf. 1 Kgs 3:5–14).

³⁰ The phrase שָׁוְיָ צִיּוֹן is uncertain and may be scribal error related to שָׁוְיָ צִיּוֹן from v. 4 (from the root שָׁוָה). Thus, the psalm may well speak of broader reference than mere homecoming and refer to the restoration of national fortunes in general (cf. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 790 for a precise discussion of the issue. Note also his textual discussion of כְּחֻלְמִים ‘as men who dreamed’). A helpful article on this psalm is Alan M. Harman, ‘The Setting and Interpretation of Psalm 126’, *The Reformed Theological Review* 44 (1985), 74–80.

³¹ A delightful little play on בֵּית ‘house’ (v. 1) and בָּנִים ‘sons’ (v. 3) link the two stanzas of the psalm as well as make sure we understand both senses of house, a ‘dwelling’, or a ‘family’ (cf. 2 Sam 7:5, 11ff.). See the careful study by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., ‘Psalm 127 – The House that Yahweh Builds’, *JSOT* 22 (1982), 119–32.

We remind ourselves of the central place of the fear of Yahweh (128:1, 4) and hear the (old) covenantal promises of the prosperity of field and family (128:2–3) as well as the more global horizon of the continuing favour of God from his dwelling place in the world (128:5), the success of that dwelling place in the world (128:5b) and long life (128:6). As new covenant believers we understand that such blessings are realized in the realm of Spirit/spirit and a dispersed community of faith lived out in the One who completed the Law, Jesus Christ. For the second time we call for peace upon Israel (cf. 125:5). It remains a prayer for the people of the ‘new Israel’, the church of Jesus Christ (Gal 6:16).

B'. The Journey Engaged: We Return to the Voices of Life and Faith in the Pilgrimage, Part 2 (129–31)

As is so often the case in Hebrew expression, the central theological premise of hope and blessing is flanked by the voices of disorientation and despair.³² After our central confession of Psalms 127 and 128, again we hear the cantor cry out, giving us voice in our pain of oppression – oppression that has been from our earliest days (129:1–2a; cf. Hos 11:1). But with it, we also recount God’s deliverance (129:2b–4).³³

Imprecation is also part of the arsenal of voices. Those who would dare oppress the people of God come under our call on God to curse. To hate God and Zion is to be relegated to wisps, withering and silence (129:5–8).³⁴ Inevitably, however, it is from

³² Two brief examples to illustrate. First, the laments of Job 3:1–26 and 29:1–31:41 bracket the lengthy ‘comforters’ discourses and responses (Job 4–27) and the classic central poem on wisdom (Job 28). Second, in Psalm 42–43 the chaos of the deep (42:6–7) and the accusation of God’s forgetfulness (42:9–10) bracket the central affirmation of God’s הָסֵר (42:8[9]).

³³ The voice of the psalms is the voice of Israel in worship. However, the perfect Israel is Jesus, and as Waltke suggests, all the psalms are ultimately the voice of Jesus (‘Canonical Process Approach’, 7). Psalm 129:3 then takes on interesting messianic implications (cf. Isa 50:6).

³⁴ For some beginning help in understanding imprecations in the psalms consult Chalmers Martin, ‘The Imprecations in the Psalms’, *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903), 537–553, J. Carl Laney, ‘A Fresh Look at Imprecatory Psalms’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (January–March 1981), 35–45, and John N. Day, ‘The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April–June 2002), 166–86.

De Profundis, 'Out of the depths', out of terror and despair (cf. 69:1, 14) that we call out to Yahweh (130:1).³⁵ But we immediately rehearse that our God is a God of forgiveness (130:3-4), that there is hope in waiting for him (130:5-6) and that we need to call on all people of God to put their confidence in Yahweh's אהבה ('love') and קריחה ('redemption') (130:7-8).³⁶ As the Apostle Paul later stated, 'Where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (Rom 5:20).

But how can we receive such grace? We curb our pride, our concern for the strong, the powerful and heroic (131:1; cf. Zech 4:6; Matt 5:3, 5), and we remain quiet and content in Yahweh as a child who has been weaned from its mother, and who has begun to live freed from infantile demands and dependencies (131:2). We then call ourselves back to the real source of hope – Yahweh, and not ourselves (131:3; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5).

D. Hope and Focus: We bring the eschaton into present life of the pilgrimage (132)

Jürgen Moltmann said that eschatology is the 'doctrine of the return to the pristine beginning ... "the new creation of all things" and the universal dwelling of God in that creation'.³⁷ It is the hope of the eschaton that gives us the goal of the journey and the resilience to carry on. Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee knew this well:

Sam struggled with his own weariness ... The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or of foot. Far above Ephel Duath in the West, the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloudwrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him.³⁸

As we proceed in our journey we stop and affirm hope in the person and rule of the 'anointed one'.

We call on Yahweh to remember David (132:1) and his tireless efforts in providing the place for Yahweh to live (132:2-5). We rehearse the call to assemble and worship at the sanctuary (132:6-9). David who 'swore an oath to the LORD' catches the stuff of pilgrimage and a life of commitment and obedience. But all of this looks to יהושׁע, your anointed one' (132:10). God, in turn, 'swore an oath to David'. While Solomon, David's son, was an earnest of that One, and each 'son' continued the promise, ultimately none other than the final 'son', Jesus of Nazareth, could 'sit on your throne forever and ever' (132:11-12; cf. 2 Sam 7:11b-16; Ps 89:19-37; 1 Chr 10b-14; 2 Chr 6:42). The pilgrim's hope turns on the sure word of God. Yahweh has chosen Zion as his place of rest, rule, and blessing (132:13-16), and as the place from which the anointed will rule with strength ('horn'), enlightenment ('light'), vindication (enemies clothed 'with shame') and splendour ('crown ... resplendent') (132:17-18). As the pilgrims of that day looked to the future in hope, in fact the 'anointed one' has come and brought inauguration and then returned. So now we wait for his coming again to bring consummation. This is Sam's star, twinkling and beautiful, and we carry on.³⁹

E. Arrival: We Affirm the Way and Words of Worship (133-34)

Finally we stand in the temple gates. As we do, we remind ourselves of the wonder and joy of kindred unity (133:1). Such kindred unity extends beyond natural family unity (cf. Deut 25:5) to 'the pilgrimage practices of people who were kin through the Lord's covenant, sitting together at festal meals ... The festival transformed the pilgrims into a family that for a holy time ate and dwelt together'.⁴⁰ Such kindred unity is both preparatory and consecratory as was the anointing oil on Aaron's head (133:2; cf. Exod

³⁵ This is the 6th of the 7 penitential psalms, Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

³⁶ Rick R. Marrs, 'A Cry from the Depths' (Ps 130)', *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentum Wissenschaft* 100 (1988), 81-90.

³⁷ *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 57.

³⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, in *The Lord of the Rings*, vol. 3 (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 234.

³⁹ Most critical studies on Psalm 132 revolve around David and the return of the ark, e.g. D. R. Hillers, 'Ritual Procession of the Ark and Psalm 132', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), 48-55. However, seeing it in the larger context of the pilgrimage psalms collection, the eschatological aspect takes on greater significance.

⁴⁰ James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 413.

29:7), as well as that which brings blessing and life (133:3).⁴¹ Jesus surely had this in mind when he prayed, '... that all of them will be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21). The repeated 'running down', obscured somewhat in translation, points us to the truth that 'true unity, like all good gifts, is from above – bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement'.⁴²

We now hear the final voice of doxology and blessing. We have moved from disorientation (Meshech and Kedar, 120:5) to orientation (the 'house of the LORD'). We come into the presence of Yahweh calling on the ministers in the house of the Yahweh (cf. 1 Chr 9:33) to praise (134:1) and to lift up their hands (134:2). In response we hear a final benediction of blessing from the ministers calling on Yahweh, the Maker of heaven and earth (a return again to 121:2), to bless us from our future home, from Zion, the goal of the journey (134:3; cf. Heb 12:22–24).

Summary and conclusion

From 'The Psalms of Ascents' we learn at least some of the voices for the pilgrimage, and that the voices for pilgrimage cover the gamut of human experience and response to God. It encompasses *lament*, 'Have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt' (123:3), *trust*, 'He who watches over you will not slumber' (121:3), *thanksgiving*, 'Praise/bless the LORD who has not let us be torn by their teeth' (124:6), *penitence*, 'If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?' (130:3), *imprecation*, 'May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame' (129:5), *wisdom*, 'Blessed are all who fear

⁴¹ It is important to note that the 'there' of v. 3 refers to the 'kindred unity' of v. 1, not Mount Zion. This is evident by the wordplay made between 'brothers' (אָחִים) and 'life' (חַיִּים). If we insist that the referent is Mount Zion we have to at least acknowledge a double entendre here.

the LORD' (128:1); hope in *messianic/royal promises*, 'For the sake of David your servant, do not reject your anointed one' (132:10), *affirmation of Zion, the city of God*, 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem' (122:6), and *doxology*, 'Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD' (134: 1).

We learn that God has given voices that speak to the breadth of the orientation, disorientation and reorientation that is so much the essence of the pilgrimage. We are invited into the throne room of the king in order that we might bring all facets of life and faith boldly and openly into his presence.

In our days and times in the contemporary church, with so much pain and fracturing over forms and structures of worship, it is clearly evident that we must restore and renew the voices of the pilgrimage of faith of old Israel for the pilgrimage of new Israel, the present people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. Further, as we write and sing our 'new songs' to the Yahweh, we must hear and learn what it is to speak and sing to one another and our God 'in psalms and hymns and spiritual song'.

Finally, we must learn to recognize and honour the pilgrimage. We must talk about departure, the anxiety in the journey and the joy of arrival (120–22). We must know and affirm what it is to integrate our theological affirmations with lament, thanksgiving, and trust (123–31). We must rekindle the need to look to the eschaton for hope (132). We must learn the words and ways of arrival and doxology (133–34). When we begin to understand and live out all this, it will take us away from the contentment and satisfaction in a strange and foreign land that is so common among the contemporary people of God, and bring us to a new and radical perspective of hope, mission and citizenship as 'pilgrims on a journey on a narrow road'.⁴³

⁴² Kidner, *Psalms* 73–150, 453.

⁴³ Lyrics from Steve Green's 'Find Us Faithful' (Vancouver: Sparrow Corp, 1988).

Eagle-eyed readers will notice that *The Expository Times* is now published by SAGE Publications, rather than Continuum Ltd. SAGE Publications are an independent publishing company founded 40 years ago in the USA, who have had an office in London for over 30 years. They are best known as publishers in the field of the Social Sciences. With the acquisition of Continuum's theological journals, SAGE are keen to establish themselves as a key publishing presence in all of the theological subject areas. Readers will be assured to hear of their commitment to maintaining the high reputation for academic rigour allied to practical application of which *The Expository Times* is proud.

Copyright of Expository Times is the property of Sage Publications, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.