

# The Psalms of Ascent

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

We now begin the second half of the alternation that surrounds the paired Psalms about Messiah and Torah at the center of Book 5 (Table 1, chart).

The common title of Psalms 120-134, “a song of ascents” (מעלות, Strong 4609), from עלה (Strong 5927) “to go up” has two senses (see Note).

107, Suffering, coming to the land: ידה	120-134, Ascents: Coming to the Temple
	135-137, ברך, ידה, memory of suffering
108-110, Psalms of David	138-145, Psalms of David
111-112, Acrostic (111 Works of the Lord)	145, Acrostic (Works of the Lord)
111-117, Hallelu-Yah	146-150, Hallelu-Yah
118-119, Torah (Acrostic) and Messiah Pair	

Table 1: Structure of Book 5

Most often, it refers to stairs, which “go up” from a lower place to a higher one. God commanded that the approach to the brazen altar should not be by steps (Ex 20:26), and Neh 3:5 speaks of “the stairs that go down from the city of David.”

In Hebrew, “degrees” or “steps” is definite, “a song of the steps,” suggesting some specific steps. It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that the steps in question are connected with the history of Hezekiah, to which numerous passages in these Psalms may allude. Some time before the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> Hezekiah fell sick. Isaiah prophesied that he would live for fifteen more years. In connection with this promise, Hezekiah asked for a sign, which the Lord granted:

2Ki 20:8 And Hezekiah said unto Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall **go up** into the house of the LORD the third day? 9 And Isaiah said, This sign shalt thou have of the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he hath spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten **degrees**, or go back ten **degrees**? 10 And Hezekiah answered, It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten **degrees**: nay, but let the shadow return backward ten **degrees**. 11 And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the LORD: and he brought the shadow ten **degrees** backward, by which it had gone down in the **dial [steps]** of Ahaz.

In gratitude for his healing, Hezekiah wrote a Psalm, which is recorded in Isaiah 38. Toward the end of the Psalm, he promises to bring other musical offerings to the Lord:

Isa 38:20 The LORD was ready to save me: therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the LORD.

This arrangement of 15 Psalms (one for each extra year of life) may fulfill this promise.

Steps enter this story at two points. First, the words “degrees” and “dial” are literally “steps,” the word in our titles. This sun clock was two sets of steps, back to back, each facing a wall (Figure 1, chart). As the sun rises over the eastern wall, the shadow walks down the eastern steps, then back up the western steps. The “songs of the steps” might recall the sun’s reversal.

1 I am heavily dependent on D. Mitchell, *The Songs of Ascent*. Newton Mearns: Campbell, 2015.

2 J. Thirtle, *Old Testament Problems*. London: Henry Frowde, 1907; E. Bullinger, App 67 to *Companion Bible*

3 See commentaries for the chronological inversion of Isa 37 with 38-39

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But there's another possible set of "steps." In 2 Kings 20:8, Hezekiah wanted "to go up to the house of the Lord." And when he received the Assyrian letter demanding his surrender,

2Ki 19:14 Hezekiah **went up** into the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.

The palace was lower than the temple. Solomon showed the queen of Sheba

1Ki 10:5 his **ascent** by which he **went up** unto the house of the LORD;

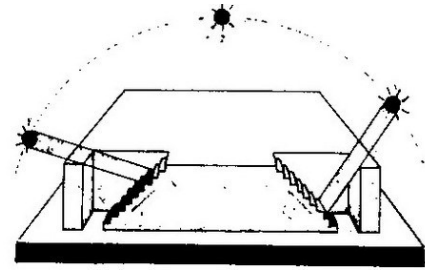


Figure 1: A Staircase Sun Clock  
(<http://www.britam.org/picturesYair/dial.jpg>)

Excavations in Jerusalem show that approaches to the temple mount in every direction consisted of extensive series of steps.<sup>4</sup> So "the steps" might also refer to the "ascent" between the palace and the temple that Hezekiah delighted to climb to bring his worship to the Lord.

One OT verse uses our word in a different sense. When Ezra returned from Babylon, we read,

Ezr 7:9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to **go up** from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, ...

The clause "he began to go up ... is literally, "that was the beginning of the ascent ...." Others also wanted to ascend the steps to the temple mount. Ezra made the journey, to promote the building of the temple. And in fact, the Lord required all Israel to **go up** three times to Jerusalem, at Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and the feast of Booths:

Exo 34:23 Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord GOD, the God of Israel. 24 For I will cast out the nations before thee, and enlarge thy borders: neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt **go up** to appear before the LORD thy God thrice in the year.

The compiler of Book 5 put these Psalms opposite Psalm 107, because that also describes the gathering of the people from many lands (107:3) to the city that he has prepared for them (107:7). It has often been suggested that these Psalms were sung by the pilgrims as they made these thrice-annual journeys, and certain expressions suggest such a reference. This explanation is not exclusive of the notion that Hezekiah originally formulated the collection. His own longing to ascend to the house of God was shared by those in exile. Recall the Psalm written by the sons of Korah for David while he was in exile during Absalom's opposition (chart):

Psa 42:4 When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. ... 43:3 O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. 4 Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy: yea, upon the harp will I praise thee, O God my God.

Desire for fellowship with the Lord and his people is a sign of spiritual health. When Adam and

4 Leem Ritmeyer, *The Quest*. Jerusalem: Carta, 2006.

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Eve sinned, they “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord” (Gen 3:8), but when God’s people are in good spiritual health, they delight to assemble with others to worship the Lord. These Psalms promote such gatherings. In fact, such a motive would be consistent with the policy of Hezekiah, who restored the temple, and after the fall of Samaria encouraged the remnant in the north to come once more to Jerusalem to participate in the temple worship, though the response shows in the main the spiritual weakness of the northern remnant.

2Ch 30:1 And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the LORD God of Israel. . . . 5 So they established a decree to make proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beersheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the LORD God of Israel at Jerusalem: . . . 10 So the posts passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them to scorn, and mocked them. 11 Nevertheless divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem.

Five of the Psalms are assigned authors: 122, 124, 131, and 133 bear David’s name, while the central Psalm, 127, is named after Solomon, and it refers internally to him as well. It is likely that the remaining Psalms were written by somebody from Transjordan, perhaps the Levite Jeduthun from Ramoth-Gilead<sup>5</sup> So Hezekiah’s role would have been one of editing and arranging these Psalms for the use of others who, like himself, desired to “go up to the house of the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

In Jerusalem, the pilgrims would often hear the Levites pronounce the Levitical blessing (chart),

Num 6:22 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 23 Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, 24 The LORD **ble**ss thee, and **keep** thee: 25 The LORD make his face **sh**ine upon thee, and be **gracious** unto thee: 26 The LORD lift up his **countenance** upon thee, and give thee **peace**. 27 And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.

Four elements of the blessing (24a, b, 25b, 26b) occur repeatedly throughout the collection.

Many correspondences among the Psalms<sup>7</sup> make discernment of an overall pattern difficult. However, several students suggest three sets of five Psalms each, with similar central and ending Psalms, each set with its own internal coherence.

## Psalms 120-124, From Opposition to Peace

The first five Psalms form a chiasm (Table 2, chart), a diary of the entire pilgrim experience. It begins (120) with a lament about adversaries at home, then moves through the Lord’s protection

5 Aramaisms in the anonymous Psalms (cf. Booiij, *Biblica*, 2010) suggest a Levite from Transjordan. Mitchell nominates Jeduthun, whom he situates in the Levitical city of Ramoth Gilead.

6 This view of the collection, like Mitchell’s dating to the founding of the temple, is very much at variance with the usual post-exilic dating of the collection, prompted by the the word “captivity” in 126. See discussion there.

7 Two good surveys of these are P. Auffret, *La Sagesse a Bati sa Maison*, OBO 49 (1982) 439-532, and H. Viviers, “The Coherence of the *maalot* Psalms (Pss 120-134),” *ZAW* 96 (1994) 275-289.

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on the journey (121) to the joyful gathering in Jerusalem (122). After further protection on the return (123), he is back among foes (124), but now confident of the Lord's care.

### ***Psalm 120, Motive: Opposition***

**A Song of degrees.**

**In my distress I cried unto the LORD, and he heard me. 2 Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue.**--Like David in Book 1, the Psalmist is surrounded by enemies and calling on the Lord for help.

120, 124	Motive for Pilgrimage: Affliction from Men
121, 123	Protection on the way: "lift up mine eyes"; Lord's <b>keeping</b> (121) and <b>mercy</b> (123)
122	Goal: <b>Peace</b> in Jerusalem

*Table 2: Psalms 120-124*

**3 What shall be given unto thee? or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue? 4 Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.**--The Psalmist addresses his enemies and tells them to expect severe judgment, fiery arrows from the Lord (cf. Heb 10:27, "judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries").

**5 Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!**--The Psalmist faces this opposition because of his pagan neighbors.

Kedar is the name of an Arabian tribe, and would be consistent with an Israelite starting his journey in Transjordan. Mes(h)ech may (as in 1 Chr 1:17) identify an Aramaic group that could be in the same area.<sup>8</sup> So we can imagine the author setting out from Ramoth-Gilead, weary with the pagan influence of his neighbors, like "just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked" (2Pe 2:7), but eager for a spiritual vacation at the temple in Jerusalem.

**6 My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace. 7 I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.**--He longs for peace, but his neighbors constantly threaten him with strife.

### ***Psalm 121, Provision: The Lord's Keeping on the Journey***

Such a journey in biblical times would be treacherous. The next Psalm describes the protection that the Lord gives him on the journey.

**A Song of degrees.**<sup>9</sup>

**I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help?**--The Hebrew particle is elsewhere always interrogative. During his trip, he passes many "high places" of pagan worship for which the northern kingdom went into captivity. He doubts that these will protect him.

**2 My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.**--His confidence is not in these high places, but in the Lord who created them and everything else.

Now the speaker changes, and someone encourages him of the Lord's protection.

<sup>8</sup> Michell 162

<sup>9</sup> In this case only, the title is שיר למעלות instead of שיר המעלות. I don't know of any motive for the change.

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**3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. 4 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. 6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. 8 The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.**--Five times, he uses the verb “keep” (שמר, Strong 8104) to describe the Lord’s protection. This expression echoes the Levitical blessing, “the Lord ... keep thee” (Num 6:24).

### ***Psalm 122, Goal: Peace in Jerusalem***

Finally, the pilgrim arrives in Jerusalem.

**A Song of degrees of David.**--During the reign of Saul, the Ark was away from the tabernacle, captured by the Philistines and then in Kiriath-Jearim. David established a sanctuary at Jerusalem, and wrote this Psalm to encourage people on their pilgrimages.

The shift in grammatical number suggests a conversation between a leader and the people.

**I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.**--The leader describes the joy of being able to go with others (“Let us go”) to worship the Lord.

**2 Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. 3 Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together: 4 Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the LORD. 5 For there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David.**--The people respond with their eager anticipation of the destination. V. 4 is an explicit reference to the periodic pilgrim journeys.

**6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. 7 Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. 8 For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. 9 Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good.**--The leader’s voice returns, asking prayer for Jerusalem’s peace. The three-fold reference recalls another clause in the Levitical blessing, “The Lord ... give thee peace” (Num 6:26).

### ***Psalm 123, Protection: The Lord’s Mercy on the Way Home***

**A Song of degrees.**

**Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.**--As in 121, a single speaker lifts up his eyes as he journeys. There, he looked at the high places; now, refreshed by his time in Jerusalem, he directs his attention to the Lord himself. Then the people respond,

**2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy חַנּוּן upon us. 3 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt. 4 Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.**--As in 121, the Lord protects

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them. There, they were passive; here, instructed by their time in Jerusalem, they seek him. There the main threat was sun and moon; now they anticipate the unbelievers who await them at home.

The threefold prayer for “mercy” חַנּוּן (Strong 2603) again echoes the Levitical blessing that they heard each day in the temple, “the Lord ... be gracious חַנּוּן unto thee” (Num 6:25).

### **Psalm 124, Motive: Angry Adversaries**

When the pilgrims return home, the adversaries are the same, but the pilgrims have changed, strengthened by their time spent worshipping with others.

**A Song of degrees of David.**

**If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, now may Israel say;**<sup>10</sup> **2 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us: 3 Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us: 4 Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul: 5 Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.**--He reports the wrath of his adversaries, and the distress it caused him.

**6 Blessed be the LORD, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth. 7 Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.**--The metaphor of a fowler is doubly relevant. David himself used it when fleeing from Saul:

1Sa 26:20 Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth before the face of the LORD: for the king of Israel is come out to seek a flea, as when one doth **hunt a partridge** in the mountains.

But Sennacherib also used it to describe the siege of Jerusalem, recording in his annals,

As to Hezekiah, the Jew, ... Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like **a bird in a cage**.<sup>11</sup>

Hezekiah may have selected this Psalm because of this Assyrian metaphor (chart).

**8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.**--Once we realize that God is the creator of all things, nothing should upset us. We rest in his sovereign and loving care.

The overall theme of the first cycle is the refreshment that God’s people find in fellowship before his throne, given the hostile environment of the world in which we live. We cannot change our environment, but we can change our ability to cope with it through corporate worship. For Israel of old, the sanctuary was the temple in Jerusalem, but for us it is the temple that is the church, the assembly of God’s people (Eph 2).

<sup>10</sup> This expression gives this Psalm the sense of a conclusion, suggesting an end to the first cycle. Each of the other cycles also ends with a call for the people to say something (129:1; 134:1-2). The references to blessing the Lord (v. 6, cf. 129:8b and 134) and the Lord as creator of heaven and earth (v. 8, 134:3; also in 121:2) reinforce this common ending.

<sup>11</sup> Pritchard, J. B. (Ed.). (1969). *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed. with Supplement, p. 288). Princeton: Princeton University Press.



## Psalm 125-129, God’s Judgment and Blessing

The first five Psalms laid out a chiasmic journey centered on the temple in Jerusalem, beginning and ending with references to the wicked, with the Lord’s provision in positions 2 and 4 (Table 3, chart). The second set of five Psalms has the same chiasmic structure and topics, but without the temporal sequence. We’ll consider these Psalms grouped by topic.

The Wicked	Divine Provision	Jerusalem	Divine Provision	The Wicked
120, At Home	121, Keeping on the Journey	122, Peace in Jerusalem	123, Mercy on the Return	124, At Home, but Controlled
125, Judged	126, Turning Fortunes	127, Davidic Covenant	128, Family Blessing	129, Judged
130-131, Confession: “Hope in the Lord”	(lacking)	132, Temple and Messiah	133-134, Blessings in God’s Presence	(lacking)

Table 3: Overall Structure of the Psalms of the Stairs

### Psalms 125 and 129, Judgment on the Wicked

The first and last Psalms in the set again describe the wicked, now under God’s judgment.

### Psalm 125, Deliverance from the Wicked

A Song of degrees.

They that trust in the LORD *shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.* 2 As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about his people from henceforth even for ever.--Higher hills surround the temple mount (Figure 2, chart).



Figure 2: The Mountains Round About Jerusalem  
(<http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,2,6,19,93&img=IJOTCD01>)

3 For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity. 4 Do good, O LORD, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts. 5 As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the LORD shall

lead them forth with the workers of iniquity:--The Lord gives them up to their own wickedness (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Note the progression: in 120, the wicked oppress the righteous. In 124, he is delivered from them. Now (v. 5) and in 129, the Lord judges the wicked (chart).

but peace shall be upon Israel.--In the first Psalm describing the wicked (120:6, 7), the Psalmist

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lamented the lack of peace. Now he is assured of receiving it.

### Psalm 129, Abandoning the wicked

The pronouns shift from a personal lament (“me,”1-3) to a description of the Lord’s judgment on the wicked (“they, them,”4-8a), leading to a final benediction (“we,”8b).

**A Song of degrees.**

**Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth, may Israel now say:**--As in the last Psalm of the first set (124:1), he exhorts Israel to bear witness to their experience.

**2 Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth: yet they have not prevailed against me. 3 The plowers plowed upon my back: they made long their furrows.**--The complaint recalls the bitter adversity that the nation has faced.

**4 The LORD is righteous: he hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked. 5 Let them all be confounded and turned back that hate Zion. 6 Let them be as the grass upon the housetops, which withereth afore it groweth up: 7 Wherewith the mower filleth not his hand; nor he that bindeth sheaves his bosom. 8 Neither do they which go by say, The blessing of the LORD be upon you:**--The judgment begun in 125 intensifies as they wicked are “cut asunder,” “confounded and turned back,” “withered” and rejected like the tares in Matt 13:30.

**we bless you in the name of the LORD.**--The shift from “he-they” to “we-you” suggests that this final clause is a priestly benediction.<sup>12</sup>

### Psalms 126 and 128, God’s Provision for his People

In the pilgrimage diary, the second and fourth Psalms described the Lord’s keeping and gracious care during the journey. Now they offer a more general vision of his care for his people.

### Psalm 126, Reversal of Fortunes

The key to this Psalm is the expression, “turn again the captivity,” שׁוּב שְׁבוּת, which appears in vv. 1 and 4. This expression appears 26 times in the OT, and our translation understands the second word as a reference to captivity, In this case the Psalm be post-exilic.<sup>13</sup> But the term can have a broader interpretation, illustrated in the book of Job. After Job’s trials are over, we read (chart),

Job 42:10 And the LORD **turned the captivity of Job**, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Many bad things happened to Job, but captivity was not among them. The expression should be translated, “restore the fortunes,” particularly after some judgment.<sup>14</sup> Return from captivity is one

<sup>12</sup> van der Wal, VT 38:3 (1988), 364-367.

<sup>13</sup> This would rule out pre-exilic ascriptions of the collection, whether to Hezekiah or (Mitchell) to Solomon.

<sup>14</sup> Deriving שְׁבוּת from שׁוּב "to turn" rather than שְׁבָה "to take captive." See J.M. Bracke, ZAW 97:2 (1985) 233-244



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form of restoration, and most instances occur in Jeremiah and Ezekiel referring to the captivity, but it could also refer to Jerusalem's delivery from the Assyrians under Hezekiah.<sup>15</sup>

### A Song of degrees.

**When the LORD ~~turned again the captivity~~ restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like them that dream. 2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them.--**The Psalmist recalls with joy a time when the Lord delivered his people in the site of the heathen.

**3 The LORD hath done great things for us; *whereof* we are glad. 4 ~~Turn again our captivity~~ restore our fortunes, O LORD, as the streams in the south. 5 They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. 6 He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves *with him*.--**The historical example should encourage them in their annual labor. Planting is a sober time, putting seed in the ground rather than eating it. If the harvest fails, one is throwing away one's last meal. Every effort undertaken for God entails some apprehension. But God's people not only sow in tears, but also "plow in hope" (1 Cor 9:10), trusting that the Lord will "restore their fortunes" and repay their efforts manyfold.

## Psalm 128, Blessing at Home

Just as 121, 122, and 123 concentrate the words "keep, peace, have mercy/be gracious" from the priestly blessing, 128 concentrates "bless." Psalm 126 encouraged the people with the Lord's restoration after times of trouble or risk. Psalm 128 promises blessing, both in the family ("thy wife ... thy children") and in the city ("the good of Jerusalem ... peace upon Israel").

### A Song of degrees.

**Blessed** is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. 2 For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy *shalt thou be*, and *it shall be* well with thee. 3 Thy wife *shall be* as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table. 4 Behold, that thus shall the man be **blessed** that feareth the LORD. 5 The LORD shall **bless** thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. 6 Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, *and peace* upon Israel.

## Psalm 127, The Davidic Covenant: House and Heirs

This Psalm is the central Psalm of the pentad and the collection, the only one ascribed to Solomon the temple builder; and it echoes the Davidic covenant (chart). Nathan promised David,

2Sa 7:11 Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house. 12 And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall

for analysis of usage and other references.

15 This Psalm poses difficulties for Mitchell's theory of Solomonic authorship, since it is difficult to identify an oppression of Zion after David conquered the city and before the oppression of Shishak (1 Ki 14:25, 26), in the fifth year of Rehoboam, that it could be celebrating.

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proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

David would receive a house, that is, offspring, which are promised in 127:3-5, and his son would build a house for the Lord as the center of his kingdom, which is promised in 127:1.

### A Song of degrees for **Solomon**.

**Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh *but* in vain.**--“The house” is the temple.

**2 *It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved [in] sleep.***--Solomon bears witness to the Lord’s goodness to him.

“His beloved” יְדִידוֹ (Jedido) recalls the name given Solomon by Nathan, “Jedidiah,” which means “Yah’s beloved.” “His beloved” simply replaces “Yah” with the pronoun “his.”

2Sa 12:24 And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, ... and she bare a son, and he called his name Solomon: and the LORD loved him. 25 And he sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet; and he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.

The gift in question is God’s promise to Solomon at Gibeon. “Sleep” should be understood adverbially, “in sleep.”

1Ki 3:5 In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee.

Solomon asked for “an understanding heart.” The Lord was pleased with the request, and granted him in addition riches, honor above all kings, and long life.<sup>16</sup>

**3 Lo, children *are* an heritage of the LORD: *and* the fruit of the womb *is* his reward. 4 As arrows *are* in the hand of a mighty man; so *are* children of the youth. 5 Happy *is* the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.**--Here is David’s promised house, his offspring to sit on his throne.

So the second cycle abstracts three themes from the physical pilgrimage: God’s judgment on the wicked, his care for the righteous, and the promise that lies behind the sanctuary.

## **Psalms 130-134, Claiming Blessing in the Sanctuary**

The last five Psalms also deal with the wicked, divine provision, and the Messianic temple, but no longer in a chiasm (Table 3). The temple is still in the center, but the first two Psalms both deal with wickedness, while the last two both celebrate divine provision and blessing.

Breaking the chiasm conveys a powerful message. In the first set, the temple was a vacation site, but one returned home to deal with wicked neighbors. In the second, the wicked still begin and end the story. Now we move from wickedness, through the temple, to end with God’s blessing.

<sup>16</sup> These correspond with the three elements of the Shema. See *The Triple Choice*.

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The wicked are gone. After two cycles of struggle, we finally enjoy victory and peace.<sup>17</sup>

### **Psalm 130, Confession**

130 and 131 call Israel to hope **לָה** (Strong 3176) in the Lord, the only instances of this verb in 120-134 and the high point in the Psalter (Figure 3, chart). Both emphasize the Psalmist's sin and humility before the Lord.

**A Song of degrees.**

**Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. 2 Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. 3 If**

**thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.**--This Psalm, like 120 and 125, mentions wickedness, but now the Psalmist recognizes that he himself is subject to this influence.

**5 I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. 6 My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. 7 Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy **רַחֵם**, and with him is plenteous redemption. 8 And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.**--A repentant sinner does not deserve anything from God, but casts himself on his loyal love (v. 7), the foundation of God's forgiveness in Exod 34:6, and looks forward to God's redemption.

### **Psalm 131, Humbled before the Lord**

**A Song of degrees of David.**

**LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. 2 Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child. 3 Let Israel hope in the LORD from henceforth and for ever.**--He continues the humble hoping in the Lord from 130.

### **Psalm 132, God's House and God's Messiah**

If the wicked oppress us (120, 124), we need the Lord to judge them (125, 129). When we recognize our own iniquity, we hope in the Lord, and Psalm 132 gives us the focus of that hope.

<sup>17</sup> This pattern of a sequence of chiasms ending in a linear pattern anticipates Ezekiel's visions (Parunak. *JBL*, 99(1):61-74, 1980). Twice the Lord takes Ezekiel from Babylon to Jerusalem and back again, but the third time ends in Jerusalem, and there the book ends with the captive returned from his captivity in a restored sanctuary.

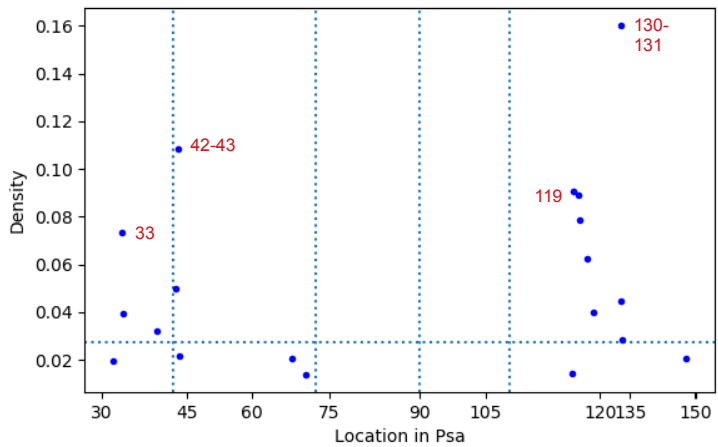


Figure 3: **לָה** (Strong 3176) in Psalms

## The Psalms of Ascent

Psalm 127 reminded us of the two parts of the Davidic covenant: David's children (centered on the Messiah), and the house of the Lord that he would build. This Psalm alternates these, ABAB (Figure 4, chart).

The two references to the Lord's Anointed (vv. 10, 17) are the only instances of this word in 120-124 (not to mention Book 5), and the third peak in the use of this term in Psalms, after 18:51 and 20:7 (the chiasm about Messiah and the Law in Book 1) and 89 (Ethan's lament over the apparent failure of God's loyal love).

Psalm 133, God's House and God's Messiah

1-9, God's House  
 10-12, God's Messiah  
 13-16, God's House  
 17-18, God's Messiah

Figure 4: Structure of Psalm 133

### A Song of degrees.

First we are reminded of David's zeal to establish a proper home for the Ark, which at the beginning of his reign was in a private home in Kiriath Jearim, not in the tabernacle.

**LORD, remember David, and all his afflictions: 2 How he swore unto the LORD, and vowed unto the mighty God of Jacob; 3 Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed; 4 I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, 5 Until I find out a place for the LORD, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.**

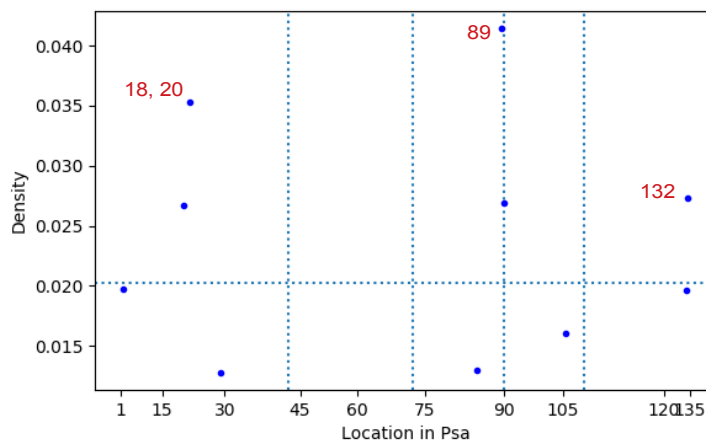


Figure 5: Anointed (אָנֻשׁ, Strong 4899) in Psalms

**6 Lo, we heard of it at Ephratah: we found it in the fields of the wood. 7 We will go into his tabernacles: we will worship at his footstool.**--Between two prayers, a statement of purpose.

**8 Arise, O LORD, into thy rest; thou, and the ark of thy strength. 9 Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness; and let thy saints shout for joy.**

Now the Psalmist turns to the promise of David's son, framed as a prayer followed by assurance.

**10 For thy servant David's sake turn not away the face of **thine anointed**.**

**11 The LORD hath sworn *in truth* unto David; he will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne.<sup>18</sup> 12 If thy children will keep my covenant and my testimony that I shall teach them, their children shall also sit upon thy throne for evermore.**

We return now to the kingdom and its capital Zion, the location of God's chosen dwelling.

**13 For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired *it* for his habitation. 14 This *is* my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it. 15 I will abundantly **ble**ss her provision: I**

18 Solomon concludes his dedicatory prayer in 2 Chr 6:41-42 with a paraphrase of vv. 8-11.

**will satisfy her poor with bread. 16 I will also clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy.**

Once again we are reminded of the sovereignty promised to the Messiah.

**17 There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed. 18 His enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish.**

### ***Psalm 133, The Joy of Fellowship with God's People***

Having recognized his own sin and place his hope in God's kingdom and his Messiah, the editor now concludes this series with two Psalms rejoicing in God's blessings on his assembled people. Just as 130 and 131 are unified by the exhortation to hope in the Lord, these are unified by the introductory "Behold" and the concluding reference to the Lord's blessings.

First we have a Psalm by David celebrating the unity of believers, illustrated by the priestly ointment that the worshippers might scent at the festivals where they gathered in joyful union.

**A Song of degrees of David.**

**Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! 2 It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; 3 As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.**--The ointment was exclusive, for the high priest alone; the dew is copious and abundant.

### ***Psalm 134, The Joy of God's Blessings***

The pilgrims urge the priests to bless the Lord, which (as we saw in Book 4) means to thank him for his goodness to us, and the priests respond with assurance that he will continue to bless.

**A Song of degrees.**

**Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD, which by night stand in the house of the LORD. 2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD.**--The people encourage the priests to thank the Lord for his blessings.

**3 The LORD that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.**--The priests in turn assure the people of continued blessing. "Heaven and earth" recalls the end of the first cycle (124:8), while the blessing recalls the end of the second (129:8).

The third cycle completely abandons the home-Jerusalem-home pattern of the first two for a linear sequence. We now begin with wickedness, not as something external but as something we recognize within ourselves. As we humbly look to the Lord for redemption, he brings our focus to his sanctuary and to his Messiah, leading us to rejoice in fellowship with his people and the enjoyment of his blessings when we assemble unto him.



## Notes

### Theories for “Songs of Ascents”

Thirtle, Kirkpatrick, and Booij give good summaries of most of these; only Thirtle (preceded by Lightfoot and followed by Bullinger) recognizes the reference to Hezekiah.

- Thirtle: “the steps,” referring to the sundial of Ahaz (Isa 38:8) by which the deliverance of Ahaz was marked, leading to his promise of 38:20 to write songs for the temple, the fifteen songs corresponding to the fifteen years by which his life was extended (38:5)
- The return from Babylon, echoing the use of the word in Ezra 7:9 (Ewald and others)
- The periodic pilgrimages, all described by “go up” (Hengstenberg, Kirkpatrick, Wilson “pilgrim ways,” and many others)
- The climactic poetic structure that characterizes some of them (cf. 120:5-7; Gesenius, Delitzsch)
- The fifteen steps in the temple, as described in the Mishnah (Mitchell and others)
- Sung in a high voice (Hengstenberg attributes this to Gesenius)

### Characteristics of the 15 Psalms

Psalm	ברך	שמר	חנן	שלום	Lament	J'lem, Zion	Lord	Temple	Mts	Children	Faith
120				x	x						
121		X					x		x		
<b>122</b>				X		x		x			
123			X		x						
<b>124</b>					x		x				
125				x		x	x		x		x
126						x	x				
<b>127</b>		x						x		x	
128	X			x		x				x	
129	x <sup>19</sup>				x	x					
130			x		x						x

19 Reporting the lack of such benediction

The Psalms of Ascent

Psalm	ברך	שמר	חנן	שלום	Lament	J'lem, Zion	Lord	Temple	Mts	Children	Faith
<b>131</b>										x	x
132	x					x		x			
<b>133</b>	x					x			x		
134	x					x		x			