

Onward and Upward Traveling Toward Zion in the Psalms of Ascents

[Louise Holzhauser](#)

Louise Holzhauser is a RTS Biblical Studies and MAC student at the Orlando campus, the wife of a PCA elder and mother of two wonderful children.

No group of psalms is so clearly or so mysteriously linked together as the fifteen poems in Book V known as the Psalms of Ascents. Even the meaning of the designation has been debated by scholars for centuries. Containing laments, wisdom psalms, and a royal psalm among other types, this collection is not grouped according to genre. With psalms attributed to David and Solomon, along with one which may date as late as the return from exile (“General Introduction” 531), these verses do not appear to have come from the same original author or even the same historic period or situation. John Calvin found so little obvious connection that he believed they must have been linked by their musical tones (qtd. in Spurgeon 1763). However, there is also a long-standing school of thought which views these poems as the traveling songs of the Israelites’ ritual pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In light of that hypothesis, the purpose of this paper is to examine the imagery, word choice, and editorial arrangement of these psalms in hopes of discerning the rhythm of a journey and the destination of the Psalms of Ascents.

The word “ascents,” or *ma’aloth* in the Hebrew, appears in the titles of Psalms 120-134 inclusive. The term has multiple, related meanings in the Old Testament. It indicates an elevation or the action of something rising and is translated “degrees” (2 Kings 20:9), “steps” (Ex. 20:26), and “going up” (Ezra 7:9) in various contexts. These definitions have resulted in numerous theories about the ascending nature of the psalms themselves. Several of those theories involve the rising of notes or advancing lines of poetry, but the majority of commentators feel there is a kinetic application of the label to these verses. Ancient Jewish tradition considers these fifteen poems to have been ritually recited on the fifteen steps between the women’s and the men’s courts of the Temple. Luther also agreed that they were compiled as part of the liturgy sung by the priests or the people on the Temple steps (qtd. in Spurgeon 1759). However, such a use, whether historical or conjectured, does not preclude their having served other purposes, as well. Several of the Psalms of Ascents, for example Psalms 121 and 132, contain imagery of the pilgrim journey toward Jerusalem and the Temple. The fact that the word for “ascents” is plural also suggests not one journey up a short flight of stairs, but the repeated pilgrimage from the outskirts of Israel into the citadel of Jerusalem which was traditionally made by the Israelites at any of three major festivals in the Jewish calendar year (Cox 4). The word “ascents” is also used for Ezra’s return from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:6) after the Exile, an arduous but joyful journey which suggests the many similar passages of other pilgrims throughout Israel’s long history.

The Bible describes pieces of this pilgrimage in both the Old and New Testaments. Exodus 34:24 records God's command to Moses that all the men of Israel shall appear in Jerusalem three times each year. As the people spread to more distant regions of the land over time, this trip became a family event, conducted in community. The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus' family traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover each year, a journey of at least several days. Pilgrim bands saw the beauty of the land even as they were exposed to the predations of robbers and the persecutions of conquering nations in various time periods (Cox 37). Walking or riding animals and packing all their food and baggage, these pilgrims burned in the sun, shivered in the cold and prayed for water along the way. Psalm 84 is a beautiful metaphor of pilgrimage which describes some of these experiences: "As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion" (NIV, Ps. 84:6-7). Isaiah also uses familiar images of the highway as a symbol for the community of God in its glorious future: "Each will be like a refuge from the wind and a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry country, like the shade of a huge rock in a parched land" (NASB, Is. 32:2).

Besides the conjecture of many wise scholars about the meaning of "ascents," there is another clue which leads toward the conclusion that these are pilgrim psalms. With only two purposeful exceptions, these poems contain bountiful images of movement, travel and ascension. For example, the Hebrew word *nasa'*, which means "to lift" in a variety of applications, appears five times throughout this grouping of poetry. In the beginning of the anthology, the psalmist lifts his eyes upward (Psalms 121 and 123), an activity which is most natural for the outdoor traveler, especially when searching for the first glimpse of his mountaintop destination. At the end of the journey, inside God's throne room, it is lifted hands which praise Him. *Yalak*, meaning "to go" or "to walk" is used in four of these psalms. *Quwm*, "to arise," is used three times. All these poems are filled with comings and goings, carryings and returnings. There is much falling, resting, escaping, and leading terminology. In addition, there are multiple images of the changing landscape, such as the morning dew in Psalm 133, the flash floods of Psalm 124, the mountains and "crooked ways" in Psalm 125, the houses and gates of Psalm 127, and the descriptions of farm and field in Psalms 126, 128 and 129 (gruesome as they may be).

The two psalms which do not contain this kind of verbiage are Psalms 120 and 130. The first is the lament of an exile, an outcast trapped in a foreign land. The active imagery in this poem is hostile, but the psalmist himself is rooted in despair. He "lives" and "dwells" in a place which he would rather have burned to the ground. This is the starting point for a pilgrimage from lies and violence toward the peace of God. The second psalm of stillness comes in the middle of more active psalms. In Psalm 130 the psalmist is caught in a different kind of trap: a cage of iniquity which he has fashioned for himself. He waits on the Lord like a lost soul, like a besieged villager who prays for the light of dawn. This might easily be the penitent cry of a pilgrim in the deep watches of an empty night.

Even the breaking of the active, traveling imagery so prevalent in the Psalms of Ascents suggests the rhythm of a journey broken by overnight encampments or the need for sudden shelter. These poems were likely ordered in their present format at some later time after their composition, so we must ask whether this grouping reflects a larger editorial purpose. If we view the Psalms of Ascents through the lens of pilgrimage, the arrangement of these fifteen poems can be seen as a journey in itself. Psalm 120 is the song of pagan lands, mentioning both Meshech and Kedar, far to the north and south of Israel (Kidner [73-150](#) 430). It qualifies as an individual lament, and expresses an unspoken longing for a peaceful home in God's presence. Psalms 121 and 122 contain the most vivid images of pilgrimage in the group, metaphorically crying, "Let us arise and go to Jerusalem!" Psalms 123 and 124 convey the hardships of traveling through hostile territory, including misery at the hands of man and nature. Psalm 125 is an appeal to banish the evil-doer from the holy city, perhaps glimpsed in the distance. Psalm 126, which may date as late as the return from Babylon, is the joyous exclamation of the pilgrim who has reached the gates of Zion. The next two poems celebrate the care with which Yahweh guards His communities (Psalm 127) and His covenant people with their children (Psalm 128). It is not too difficult to imagine walking through city gates and peering in the windows of family homes along the way.

Psalms 129-131 present a bit of an anomaly in the middle of this imaginary journey. They speak, once again, of oppression, of sin, and of perplexing matters which require great faith in God's tender care. In part, this change of mood may reflect the ups and downs of all journeys, the hills and valleys of Israel, the alternating hardships and joys of travel, or the sin and suffering apparent in the land. But if we look ahead to Psalm 132, which recounts the Ark's original journey from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem (Kidner [73-150](#) 448), the ritual entry of the triumphant God into His Temple, we may view the preceding verses as a preparation. The confession of sin, the desperate state of a nation without its God, and the faithful waiting of its remnant people present a fitting tableau for the coming of the King, the culmination of pilgrimage. The penitent people then worship at the Temple, gathering united in the presence of their High Priest, receiving the favor of God in Psalms 133 and 134. One may even sense the end of a great celebration as the Lord bestows His blessing outward from Zion at the close of a long and beautiful day.

The presence of the pilgrim at Zion, the home of the Lord, is the goal of all of the Psalms of Ascents. These psalms each have a strong national flavor, and only three out of fifteen fail to mention Zion, Jerusalem or Israel. One of those is the first psalm, a psalm of foreign lands, and there are references in the other two (123 and 127) which imply a view toward God's city. For example, Psalm 123 is a community prayer for God's mercy, and Psalm 127, attributed to Solomon, is the song of the Lord's watch-care over His own people. Although the Psalms of Ascents make up only 10% of the Psalter, they contain nearly 25% of the total references to "Zion," 27% of the references to Jerusalem and 21% of the references to Israel. These are clearly the songs of the people of God headed for the city of God.

The meaning of the name “Zion” has been lost in antiquity, but some have guessed that it meant a citadel (“Zion” ISBE), a mighty fortress. The first mention of Zion in the Bible occurs in 2 Samuel 5:7 when David captured the Jebusite fortress which became his capital. After Solomon built the Temple on an adjacent hill, the name was generalized to indicate the whole city of Jerusalem (see Is. 40:9, for example), and the nation as a whole (Zech. 9:13). In the New Testament the name is used for the New Jerusalem, that idealized city where God will dwell permanently with His glorified people (Heb. 12:22). As the goal of pilgrimage, Zion represents the center of the worship of God, the locus of God’s covenant community, and the very Presence of the Lord. Both the kingship of Yahweh and the Messiah’s Davidic dynasty find fulfillment in the imagery of Zion (Howard 10). In the Psalms of Ascents, Zion is the source of God’s help, the capital of the king, the throne of the Lord, the safety of His citadel, the place where evil cannot triumph, the seat of blessing, the house of worship and the home of God’s people. It is the right place for God’s people to be, the longing of their hearts when they are absent, and the ideal which they will brave great hardships to attain.

As modern Christians, we sometimes have difficulty understanding the rituals, the lives and the problems of the people who wrote God’s hymnbook so many eons ago. At first blush the Psalms of Ascents are no exception, but viewed as a metaphor of pilgrimage, these songs come alive for us. This journey from a pagan land through hostile territory, in waves of joy and despair, toward Mount Zion with its Temple, its community, and its High Priestly blessing, has obvious parallels for the history of the people of Israel, for later generations who looked for the coming of the Messiah and for the lives of believers today. These psalms are evocative of our own spiritual pilgrimage from darkness to light. They carry us as a community through a culture of opposition, through dry valleys and times of refreshing, toward Paul’s “upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (NASB, Phil. 3: 14). That heavenly call reminds us of our journey toward the New Jerusalem, the fulfillment of God’s Creation plan in our distant future. The end of our pilgrimage through life, the end of the pilgrimage of all God’s people through history, is to reach Zion, the Presence of God. We were created to enjoy His smile, and our struggles are the stumbling steps of pilgrims bound for theophany. The Psalms of Ascents contain the images of our comings and goings, our contrition and lament, our worship and our joy. To sing them is to sing of a destination obscured by the mountains in front of us, a city shining in the distance, the certain hope of the Mighty Fortress at the end of the road. The Psalms of Ascents urge us onward and upward. They call us to lift our eyes to the long horizon, to put one foot in front of the other, to seek the help of God for the journey and, in the midst of hardship, to always keep the end in view.

In summary, this loose collection of diverse psalms can be sung with purpose along life’s way. The imagery and word choices within the psalms themselves suggest a pilgrimage reading, and the arrangement of the psalms may also be viewed in this respect. The goal of each poem, as well as the motif of the whole collection, is to reach the high and holy city where hardships are ended, where worship and fellowship are the perfect desire and reward of all God’s children. People through many centuries have found the inspiration to journey through life to the metaphorical melody of these beautiful songs. The voices heard in the Psalms of Ascents continue to carry the

modern pilgrim onward and upward, ever closer to the Presence of God in His throne room at Zion.

Works Consulted

Anderson, Bernhard W. *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.

"Ascents." *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. CD-ROM. Seattle: BibleSoft, 1998.

"Ascents." *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. John D. Davis. Revised Edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1944.

Barker, Don. "Voices for the Pilgrimage: A Study in the Psalms of Ascent." *The Expository Times* 116 (2005): 109-116.

Cox, Samuel. *The Pilgrim Psalms*. 1874. Reprint Edition. Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1983.

Fausset, Andrew R. *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*. CD-ROM. Seattle: BibleSoft, 1996.

"General Introduction to Psalms 120-134." *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*. Eds. D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.

Howard, David. Appendix IV. *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*. Winone Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997. 200-207, 1 February 2008 <http://www.bethel.edu/~dhoward/classes/OT232/WisdomRoyalistTraditionsDMH.pdf>.

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 1-72*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973.

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 73-150*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973.

McConville, Gordon. "Jerusalem in the Old Testament." Introduction. *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*. Ed. P.W.L. Walker. Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1992. 21-51.

New Exhaustive Strong's Concordance. CD-ROM. Seattle: BibleSoft, 2003.

Spurgeon, Charles H. *Treasury of David*. CD-ROM. Rio, WI: Ages Software, 1998.

Stott, John. *Favorite Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988.

Unger, Merrill F. *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. 3rd Edition. CD-ROM. Seattle: BibleSoft, 1966.

“Zion.” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. CD-ROM. Seattle: Biblesoft, 1998.

“Zion.” *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. John D. Davis. Revised Edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1944.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).