

ABSTRACT

“YHWH, Remember!”:
Place, Memory, and Ritual in Psalms 120–137

K. W. Bodenhamer, Ph.D.

Mentor: William H. Bellinger, Jr., Ph.D.

This dissertation examines the collection of psalms with the superscription *šîr hamma’ălôt* (120–134) along with the triad of psalms, 135–137, that follows the collection. The project begins with a history of scholarship with regard to the Songs of Ascents, with special attention given to studies that have explored the importance of “space” as a critical category in the Songs of Ascents. After providing a brief overview of the concept of critical spatiality and its application in biblical scholarship, this dissertation proposes that “place” as it relates to ritual provides a better framework for examining biblical texts than critical spatiality alone. Jonathan Z. Smith’s work *To Take Place: Toward a Theory of Ritual* serves as the theoretical basis for the exegetical portion of the project.

Psalms 120–134 are examined individually, with attention to structure, space and content. Building on Gert Prinsloo’s organizational model, the psalms will be

approached in triads. This study proposes that the additional triad of psalms, 135–137, reinforces the collection’s emphasis on place and memory. The conclusion of the project explores the implications of this study for the “shape and shaping” debate in Psalms scholarship, specifically the influence of the Levitical singers in the collection of the Psalter.

"YHWH, Remember!":
Place, Memory, and Ritual in Psalms 120-137

by

K.W. Bodenhamer, B.A., M.T.S

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William H. Bellinger, Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

William H. Bellinger, Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

Deirdre Fulton, Ph.D.

Stephen B. Reid, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>LIST OF FIGURES</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| <i>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</i> | <i>viii</i> |
| <i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i> | <i>x</i> |
| <i>DEDICATION</i> | <i>xi</i> |
| <i>CHAPTER ONE</i> | |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Purpose and Thesis | 1 |
| Overview of Chapters | 2 |
| History of Scholarship | 3 |
| Conclusion..... | 28 |
| <i>CHAPTER TWO</i> | |
| Methodology | 30 |
| Space | 30 |
| Taking Place | 31 |
| Approaching the Text | 38 |
| A Note About Structure..... | 42 |
| <i>CHAPTER THREE</i> | |
| Establishing the Center | 45 |
| Psalms 120–122..... | 46 |
| Psalms 123–125..... | 72 |
| Conclusion..... | 84 |
| <i>CHAPTER FOUR</i> | |
| Transferring the Center | 86 |
| Psalms 126–128..... | 86 |
| Psalms 129–131..... | 104 |
| Conclusion..... | 121 |
| <i>CHAPTER FIVE</i> | |
| Remembering the Center..... | 122 |
| Psalms 132–134..... | 123 |
| Psalms 135–137..... | 149 |
| Conclusion..... | 167 |

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| <i>CHAPTER SIX</i> | |
| Conclusion | 169 |
| <i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i> | 185 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 5.1. Chiastic structure of verses 1–2 | 142 |
| Figure 5.2. Chiastic structure of verses 2–3 | 142 |
| Figure 5.3. Stair-step parallelism of verses 1–2..... | 151 |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|---|
| AB | Anchor Bible |
| AOAT | Alter Orient und Alter Testament |
| BBB | Bonner biblische Beiträge |
| Bib | Biblica |
| BETL | Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium |
| BthSt | Biblisch-Theologische Studien |
| CBQ | Catholic Biblical Quarterly |
| ConBOT | Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series |
| DSS | Dead Sea Scrolls |
| FAT | Forschungen zum Alten Testament |
| FOTL | Forms of the Old Testament Literature |
| HKAT | Handkommentar zum Alten Testament |
| HAR | Hebrew Annual Review |
| Herm | Hermeneia |
| ISBL | Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature |
| IBC | Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| JSOT | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament |
| JSOTSup | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series |
| JBL | Journal of Biblical Literature |

| | |
|---------|--|
| JHS | Journal of Hebrew Studies |
| JSS | Journal of Semitic Studies |
| KAT | Kommentar zur Alten Testament |
| LHS/OTS | Library of Hebrew Studies/Old Testament Studies |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| NKZ | Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift |
| NCBC | New Cambridge Bible Commentary |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLDS | Society of Biblical Studies Dissertation Series |
| Sem | Semeia |
| LXX | Septuagint |
| SJOT | Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament |
| SJT | Scottish Journal of Theology |
| SSN | Studia Semitica Nederlandica |
| TZ | Theologische Zeitschrift |
| VT | Vetus Testamentum |
| VTSup | Vetus Testamentum Supplement |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WTJ | Westminster Theological Journal |
| ZAW | Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft |

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To my boys
and in memory of my grandmother who said, "You write the sequel."

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Songs of Ascents are a collection of fifteen psalms, Pss 120–134, that share the same superscription, *šîr hamma'ălôt*.¹ In addition to the shared superscription and placement together in the Psalter, scholars have long recognized the internal coherence of the group of psalms both linguistically and stylistically, with some discerning a narrative sequence and organization.² The Songs of Ascents fall within Book V of the Psalter, following one of the most familiar Torah meditation psalms, Ps 119. The collection precedes the quintessential exile song (Ps 137) and a grouping of psalms with Davidic superscriptions and praises to close out the book (Pss 138–145). The collection itself opens with a cry of both distress and praise; the psalmist is thankful for YHWH's answer and salvation from treachery, but also expresses woe at being surrounded by war when he desires peace. The collection concludes with a blessing for those worshiping at the house of YHWH.

¹ The only exception in the group is Ps 121, which reads *šîr lamma'ălôt* in place of the definite article. I have chosen to follow the translation "ascents," acknowledging that this is not the only possible interpretation. Early commentators often followed the LXX tradition, translating the superscription literally as "song of steps," "a song of going up," "gradual songs," "songs of degrees," or "pilgrimage song." Dahood argues for the superscription as a genre designation and translates the superscription "song of extolments," recognizing even in this argument that the designation does not fit all the psalms of the collection. See: Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III*, AB 17A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 14.

² Unlike the Psalms of Asaph, which has one psalm (Ps 50) that is separated from the group of psalms with a shared superscription, all the superscripted *šîr hamma'ălôt* psalms appear together. For a brief overview of the linguistic and stylistic coherence of the individual psalms of the collection, see: Henrik Viviers, "The Coherence of the 'Ma'alôt' Psalms (Pss 120–134)," *ZAW* 106 (1994): 275–89. Proposals related to the narrative sequence of the collection will be discussed in more detail below.

Purpose and Thesis

What is the purpose of this grouping of psalms with a shared superscription? Is there internal unity and arrangement, or have scholars been too free with the term “collection” simply because of the shared superscription? The purpose of this psalm grouping as well as its compositional history remain issues of debate. This dissertation proposes that an understanding of place and memory as it relates to ritual provides a more robust reading of the collection and its function as a sacred text.

Overview of Chapters

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the project and provides a brief overview of the shape of this dissertation. Chapter One presents the history of scholarship relating to the Songs of Ascents, with special attention given to studies that explore the importance of “space” as a critical category in the Songs of Ascents. Two brief studies by Susan Gillmayr-Bucher and Gert Prinsloo, that discuss space as a guiding concept in the collection, will be summarized in this chapter and revisited throughout the dissertation.

Chapter Two moves the discussion forward to scholarship related to space and ritual. After providing a brief overview of the concept of critical spatiality and its application in biblical scholarship, this dissertation proposes that “place” as it relates to ritual provides a better framework for examining biblical texts than critical spatiality alone. This chapter explores Jonathan Z. Smith’s work *To Take Place: Toward a Theory of Ritual* as the theoretical basis for the exegetical portion of the project. In addition to theoretical considerations, this chapter will discuss the

process of moving from theory to text, as well as discuss why this dissertation considers Pss 135–137 in addition to the superscripted Songs of Ascents.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five comprise the exegetical portions of the project. Psalms 120–134 will be examined individually, with attention to structure, space and content. Building on Prinsloo’s organizational model, the psalms will be approached in triads. Chapter Three will examine the opening group, Pss 120–122, followed by Pss 123–125. Chapter Four examines the center of the collection, Pss 126–128 and Pss 129–131. The final exegetical chapter, Chapter Five, closes the discussion of superscripted psalms with the final triad, Pss 132–134, followed by Pss 135–137.

Chapter Six will discuss the findings of the analysis of the collection plus the additional triad, Pss 135–137. Concluding the study, the chapter will explore the implications of this study for the “shape and shaping” debate in Psalms scholarship, particularly the influence of the Levitical singers in the collection of the Psalter.

History of Scholarship

Loren D. Crow, in his 1996 monograph, notes that the history of interpretation of Songs of Ascents has traditionally been concerned with the meaning of the superscription, with this concern for the meaning of *šîr hamma’ălôt* even taking precedence over the interpretation of the collection of songs itself. Throughout history the superscription has been interpreted as an indicator of the *Sitz im Leben* of the collection and each individual psalm. Patristic interpreters largely treated the Songs of Ascents with a mystical bent, emphasizing the soul’s “ascent to God” fostered through meditation on the psalms. Athanasius also

identifies the collection as a collection of songs for exiles, but carries his historical interpretation forward up to his own time, so that Ps 132 speaks of Christ's incarnation, Ps 133 speaks of initiates in the church, and 134 tells of the church's worship in his day, one step further in God's redemption history.³

Although popular up to modernity due to use in the Church, the mystical, metaphorical interpretations have had very little impact on modern scholarship except for the metaphorical interpretation linking *hamma'ălôt* to the steps of the temple. The word *ma'ălôt*, indicating "steps" in all other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, was an influential factor in interpretation of the function of the collection from the beginning.⁴ In translating the superscription, the LXX chooses the noun *anabathmoi* elsewhere indicative of steps, which influenced early commentators. The Mishnah notes a correspondence between the fifteen psalms with the fifteen steps of the temple leading to the Court of Israel out of the Court of Women, declaring that the Levites would sing these songs with instruments.⁵ At the end of the second century the Christian bishop Hippolytus also notes the correspondence between the number of steps and the number of psalms in the collection, perhaps reflecting a tradition of interpretation extending from earlier Jewish interpretation.

³ Loren D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134): Their Place in Israelite History and Religion*, SBLDS 148 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 8.

⁴ David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 109. From 109n4, "Steps of an altar: Exod. 20.26; of the throne: 1 Kgs 10.19–20; 2 Chron. 9:18.19; of the palace: 2 Kgs 20.9–11; Isa 38.8; of the City of David: Neh. 3.15; 12.37; of ordinary buildings: 2 Kgs 9.13; of the temple: Ezek 40.22, 26, 31, 34, 37, 49."

⁵ Mitchell, *The Message*, 109.

Whether the connection reflects a tradition of actual use of the psalms while ascending the steps of the temple or merely a tradition of connecting the Psalms to the temple because of the numerical correspondence cannot be determined from early sources.⁶

The concern to determine a single historical event or unified usage of the collection reflects some of the same concerns of ancient commentators. The following sections will explore the various interpretations of modern scholarship, most of which are concerned with determining the occasion for writing, performance, or collection of the Songs of Ascents.

*Return from Exile*⁷

Heinrich Ewald's study marks the beginning of modern studies of the Songs of Ascents. Ewald's translation "pilgrim songs" was attached directly to the historical event of the exiles returning home from Babylon.⁸ Ewald bases his argument on inter-biblical exegesis, pointing to Ezra 7:9 which refers to the returnees from Babylon as *hamma'ālāh mibābel*. The only discrepancy between the usage in Ezra is the use of the singular rather than plural form of *hamma'ālôt* used in the superscription.

⁶ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 10.

⁷ The following categorizations have been adapted from Frank-Lothar Hossfeld's and Erich Zenger's discussion. For their formulation of the history of scholarship see: *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Herm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 284–94.

⁸ Heinrich Ewald, *Allgemeines über die Hebraeische Poesie und über das Psalmenbuch*, Die Dichter des Alten Bundes, erster Theil (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1839), 195–6.

This interpretation is a revival of an ancient interpretation in the Psalms Midrash that connects the Songs of Ascents with returning exiles. The Midrash, however, does not limit the idea of returning exiles to the sixth and fifth century returnees from Babylon, but many events of return, even an eschatological return of Israel's political ascendancy. Ewald's modern attempt narrows the situation of return specifically to the Babylonian exile by looking at the movement of the collection as a whole. Ewald notes the presence of psalms that can be described as traveling songs, such as Ps 121, alongside pleas for the restoration of Zion (Ps 126) that culminate in an ideal or actual restored temple community in the final psalms of the collection (Pss 133–134). Ewald traces a narrative throughout the collection that begins with a journey from Babylon and ends with worship at the temple.⁹

As Crow notes, however, the bulk of evidence resists the exilic journey interpretation. As envisioned in the collection, the cult appears to be fully operational (Pss 132 and 134) and the city walls appear to be in place (Ps 122:7).¹⁰ Secondly, the majority of the psalms appear to be set in the land of Palestine, not in a distant land moving toward Palestine. Thirdly, Crow appeals to the lack of historical evidence of an exodus *en masse* from Babylon.¹¹ Although very little evidence either internally in the collection or from external references supports the idea of a pilgrim psalter specifically for the returnees from Babylon, the collection as a general

⁹ Ewald, *Allgemeines*, 196.

¹⁰ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 13.

¹¹ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 13.

Pilgrim Psalter for those journeying to worship in Jerusalem remains an influential hypothesis, even adapted by Ewald himself in the second edition of his book.

Pilgrim Psalter

Much earlier than the turn toward questions of the “shape and shaping” of the book of Psalms, B. D. Eerdmans wrote of the collection that the Songs of Ascents cannot be adequately understood individually. “As songs of pilgrims, recited either in the temple or on their way to the holy city, the psalms are difficult to understand if they are taken separately. But the context shows that such a method should not be applied. The psalms appear to be mutually connected.”¹² Marina Mannati carries the collection idea a step further, arguing that each psalm is organized by chronological order of “the events surrounding the arrival and worship of pilgrims to Jerusalem.” The narrative of the Pilgrim Psalter is not necessarily used during pilgrimage, but the concept of pilgrimage as a ritual act is preserved in memory in a literary representation.¹³

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the most popular consensus of the psalms as songs to be sung on a religious pilgrimage. Crow identifies Rabbi David Qimhi as possibly the first to espouse this position. Rather than connecting the idea of pilgrimage with a specific pilgrimage (i.e., from Babylon to Jerusalem) Qimhi

¹² B.D. Eerdmans, *The Hebrew Book of Psalms, OTS 4* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1947), 555–6.

¹³ Marina Mannati, “Les Psaumes Graduels consistent-ils un genre littéraire distinct, l’intérieur du pastier biblique?” *Sem* 29 (1979): 85-100, 99.

proposes that the group of songs were part of the ritual act of pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁴

Ernst Hengstenberg revives this hypothesis for the modern era, noting the simplicity and memorability of the songs and the everyday images as “peculiarities of sacred popular and pilgrim song.”¹⁵ Hengstenberg provides an analysis not only of the collection as a whole, but also outlines one of the first scholarly arguments of the collection’s structure. He proposes a careful symmetry of arrangement: a central poem surrounded by two heptads, each containing the divine name twenty-four times. He also divides the two heptads in sections consisting of four psalms, then followed by a section of three psalms. Each of the sub-sections of the heptads contains a psalm with a Davidic superscription in addition to the Ascents superscription, surrounding the central psalm (127) attributed to Solomon, the only one of the collection.¹⁶ Hengstenberg holds that the short, easy to remember poems arranged in a careful collection constituted a devotional handbook for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Jacob Bosniak, ed. *The Commentary of David Kimhi on the Fifth Book of the Psalms CVII–CL, edited on the basis of Manuscripts and Early Editions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the Library of Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (New York: Bloch, 1954), 153.

¹⁵ Ernst W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms* 3, trans. John Thomason and Patrick Fairbairn, 2nd ed., (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1854), 407–8. While not concerned with the popular character of the songs, an early study by Gesenius of the poetic structures of the Songs of Ascents led him to conclude that *ma’ālôt* refers to a specific type of climactic parallelism unique to this collection of Psalms. [Wilhelm Gesenius, *Thesaurus Philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebrae et Chaldaee Veteris Testamenti*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Lipsiae: Fr. Chr. Wil. Vogelius, 1839), 1031–1032]. Although Gesenius’s interpretation was adopted by influential scholars (Delitzsch and de Wette), later commentators questioned the uniqueness of this type of parallelism to the collection as well as the presence of this parallelism throughout the collection. See Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 15.

¹⁶ Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 407–8.

The devotional handbook terminology has been reworked in several recent iterations. Klaus Seybold's work on the Songs of Ascents has perhaps been the most influential recent work, which, like Hengstenberg's proposal, identifies the Songs of Ascents as the work of the people originating in poetry outside of the cult.¹⁷ Seybold proposes that the psalms, left as votive offerings, were edited together by officials of the cult at a later date. Seybold identifies an early, original strata from the popular realm and secondary priestly additions.¹⁸ One problem with this approach is the circularity of argument in editing out "priestly" portions from "popular" ones in order to fit the hypothesis that the popular layer reflects an original setting.

Loren Crow also proposes a two-layered compositional model based on a socio-historical and redactional study of the collection. Crow views the collection as a unified group (regardless of superscription) that originated outside of Jerusalem, most likely in small northern Israelite towns and have undergone a redaction into a collection with a narrative structure pointing toward Jerusalem as the ultimate source of blessing. He writes,

The nucleus songs pray for God's blessing, seek God's curse against enemies, and assure that it is only with God's help that prosperity can come about; the redactor asserts that God's help is primarily available at Jerusalem. In order to accomplish this task the editor reshaped them, both by editing several of the individual songs and, perhaps more significantly, by framing them in a new interpretive context.¹⁹

¹⁷ Klaus Seybold, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen: Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Psalm 120–134*, BThSt 3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 67.

¹⁸ Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 60–1.

¹⁹ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 185.

The purpose of the new interpretive context, for Crow, is in the power of the collection as a propagandistic tool to convince Israelites residing in outlying regions to come to Jerusalem as an act of religious pilgrimage. Although he is careful throughout the work not to make bold claims about the precise date of the psalms in the collection, he suggests that “the use of folk traditions by centralized powers in order to provide a *mythos* for the state is of course not new in the Persian era.”²⁰ While Crow is cautious to tie the redacted collection specifically to the Persian period, he hints strongly that this is the best explanation.²¹

Crow’s hypothesis raises several issues. First, one must ask if the idea of a redacted collection of popular songs would be effective propaganda for outlying northern towns. Primarily, how would this edited information be disseminated to the “laity” so that it convinced worshipers in their own cities to journey to Jerusalem? Secondly, does this view of the use and rewriting of psalms align with current research on scribal practice and the dissemination of literature in the ancient world which has been an area of interest in recent decades? Without supporting research to uphold the theory, the reason for this redacted collection as centralizing propaganda for outlying regions seems untenable as it is presented.

Melody Knowles also supports the Pilgrim Psalter hypothesis in her work on centrality and religion in the ancient world. Knowles goes further in her support of the pilgrimage idea than her predecessors by connecting the pilgrimage psalter idea with research on pilgrimage practices in the ancient world rather than attempting to

²⁰ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 186.

²¹ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 186.

locate each text of the collection within a liturgical moment of pilgrimage or overall movement of the collection. The four aspects that Knowles finds common to Songs of Ascents and ancient pilgrimage are 1) the call to the shrine, 2) emphasis on YHWH's geographic connection to Jerusalem, 3) desire for agricultural and biological fertility and 4) pursuit of justice.²² Knowles' presentation, while not an in-depth examination of the psalms of the collection, is a movement in a positive direction for scholarship on the Songs of Ascents because she relates the Pilgrim Psalter hypothesis to existing scholarship on pilgrimage and practice rather than assuming the concept of pilgrimage aligns with medieval or modern concepts of the ritual act.

Of the Ascents collection, Susan Gillingham concludes:

The post-exilic editors have organized this theologically diverse collection into a unit whose purpose was to serve the faith of those who came to Jerusalem to seek God's blessing at the Temple. As a collection, it exudes a spiritualized, "apolitical" view of the Temple and its worship — one appropriate for those living under Persian (and later under Greek) rule.²³

Stephen Reid questions whether one can use the term "apolitical" in reference to a collection that includes such psalms as Ps 132, which celebrates David bringing the Ark to the Temple and recounts promises for the future of his family.²⁴ In the history of scholarship on the Songs of Ascents, little consensus can be found on the purpose

²² Melody Knowles, *Centrality Practiced: Jerusalem in the Religious Practice of Yehud and the Diaspora in the Persian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 96–100.

²³ Susan E. Gillingham, "The Levitical Singers and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010), 91–123, 96.

²⁴ Stephen Breck Reid, "David and the Political Theology of the Psalter," in *The Psalter as Witness: Theology, Poetry, and Genre*, eds. W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. and W.H. Bellinger, Jr. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 47–62, 54.

or milieu of the songs. What one scholar interprets as centralizing propaganda, another interprets as apolitical; what one sees as encouragement to make pilgrimage, another views as a devotional handbook for those living in the Diaspora.

Festival Liturgy

Closely related to the Pilgrim Psalter idea are various proposals connecting the Songs of Ascents with specific festivals. Whereas scholars in the above section propose broadly that the collection encouraged or aided pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, some scholars have attached the collection with a specific celebration. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem has been associated with the three great annual feasts. For Cuthbert Keet the historical setting of the Ascents collection is the presentation of First-Fruits in according with its description in the Covenant Code.²⁵ Keet leans heavily on an excerpt from tractate Bikkurim, which indicates that verse 2 of Ps 122 was sung in the First-Fruits procession.²⁶

Sigmund Mowinckel connects several of the Songs of Ascents with the New Year's Festival. Mowinckel identifies several motifs found in the Songs of Ascents that he identifies with the enthronement festival: God as creator, Zion as the site of YHWH's throne, and the inviolability of Zion. Mowinckel does not attach the collection as a whole to the celebration that he promoted as the most important Israelite enthronement festival, but does identify Ps 132 as a crucial element of the

²⁵ See Exod 22:29; 23:19; 34:26

²⁶ Cuthbert Keet, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary upon Psalms CXX: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary upon Psalms CXX to CXXXIV* (London: Mitre, 1969), 15.

festival as the ark is carried by the Temple.²⁷ Of all of the psalms he ascribes to the festival, Ps 132 does have the advantage of providing a scene of Ark procession, as well as accommodating the interpretation of *hamma'ălôt* as steps, the steps from the City of David to the temple. H.J. Kraus, a form critic and critic of Mowinckel, was unwilling to accept dramatization of myth put forward by Mowinckel. Kraus connects Ps 132 to a festival at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the bringing up of the Ark and Nathan's promise to David.²⁸

Michael Goulder addresses the question of unity and setting with a bold hypothesis related to feasts and festivals. Putting to rest once and for all the connection of the Songs to the returnees of the sixth century, Goulder argues that the Songs cannot be dated on linguistic evidence any earlier than 445 BCE, and sometime before the Chronicler. Goulder limits the time of composition and collection to between 445–350 BCE, correlating the Songs with Nehemiah. He proposes:

The 'I' passages in Nehemiah were Nehemiah's testimonies at the Tabernacles celebration in 445 BCE, in the weeks after the wall had been completed. They were delivered in short units, and the Songs were responses to them, chanted by a leading Levite who was a loyal follower of the Governor, sometimes addressing him, often identifying himself with his plans and policies.²⁹

²⁷ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 176.

²⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. H.C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 475.

²⁹ Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V: Psalms 107–150): Studies in the Psalter IV*, JSOTSup 258 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 30.

Goulder breaks the Nehemiah Testimonies (his term) into fourteen episodes, aligning a response psalm with each Testimony. The festival begins on the first day of the Festival of Booths and proceeds in the order of the psalms. He proposes that one psalm was read in the morning and one each evening until the final day of the festival.

While elaborate in detail and correlation between psalms and events in the Nehemiah memoir, Goulder's hypothesis remains problematic. As Zenger notes of all theories that attempt to correlate the Songs of Ascents with historical events, methodologically the attempt is flawed in that it reconstructs the history of the psalms' origins by importing history from external texts, not from information within the texts themselves.³⁰ In agreement with Zenger, the above feast or festival theories all have the flaw of lack of sufficient internal evidence from the content of the psalms to correlate the collection with a specific event.

Temple Liturgy

While the Pilgrim Psalter hypothesis remains the most widely held view of the Songs of Ascents, considerable scholarship has also associated the Songs with the Temple, rather than the journey to the Temple. Perhaps the earliest "cultic interpretation" of the psalms is found in the Talmud, which links the Songs of Ascents to each of the fifteen temple steps (Ezek 40:26, 31). Martin Luther rejects the speculative conjecture, but does carry forward the interpretation of the superscription as referring to a specific location for the singing of psalms, an

³⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 289.

elevated place or steps where the singer or singers could be seen and heard above the congregation.³¹

Reviving ancient interpretation for a modern era, E. G. King advances a theory associating the Songs of Ascents with the steps of the Temple as represented in the ideal temple of Ezekiel. King extends the correspondence to the steps to the structure of the collection, divided into two groups of steps: seven in the outer court, eight in the inner court.³² The latter group corresponds with the first group in an inverted order. In addition to matching the structure of the collection to a specific step structure, King expands the rabbinic temple step idea by proposing that the psalms were composed specifically for a dedication service. King identifies the most likely dedication occasion as the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah.³³ King goes so far as to reconstruct the ceremony procession; he envisions two bands of singers walking from opposite directions that eventually meet and greet each other with Ps 134. The two processions also occurred at night watch, in which one procession moved east and one west, which would align with Ps 134's mention of those who "stand by night in the house of YHWH" (134:1b).

Keet, one of the few scholars earlier in the twentieth century to contribute a monograph on the Songs of Ascents, argues against the rigidity of the structure

³¹ From Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 199fn63. Martin Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms Called Psalms of Degrees; in which, among other interesting subjects, the scriptural doctrine respecting the divinely instituted and honorable estate of matrimony is explained and defended, in opposition to the Popish errors of monastic seclusion and enforced celibacy* (1514, repr., London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1819), 110.

³² E.G. King, *The Psalms, in Three Collections* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1898), xvi.

³³ Keet, *A Study of the Psalms*, 140.

associated with the steps and counters that there are no references to the psalm collection's use in this manner in any literature, and "finally, if traditional Dedication-Psalms existed would they not be expected to figure prominently in the later Dedication festivities of *Hannukah*?"³⁴ His primary objective in opposing King's hypothesis, however, is to direct readers away from a dedication festival of Nehemiah to the presentation of First Fruits, as discussed above.

While not technically a "temple liturgy" Thomas Willi's proposal rejecting the idea of a pilgrim psalter altogether can fall in this category as it relates to the Jerusalem cult. Finding too little evidence of pilgrimage or feasts present in the content of the songs, Willi proposes instead that the post-exilic situation created a problem of participation in the sacrificial system for all of Israel.³⁵ The songs serve, instead as pilgrimage songs, as songs to commission those for service in the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem from outlying areas. While Willi is correct that the atmosphere of pilgrimage has perhaps been overblown in interpretation, his analysis fails to explain why this group of songs commissioning bands of personnel to sacrificial service fails to mention sacrifice.

A brief study by Leon Liebreich starts with the content of the psalms to explain the superscription. Liebreich proposes that the language corresponds closely to the priestly blessing in Num 6:24–26.³⁶ Liebreich proposes that each of

³⁴ Keet, *Psalms of Ascents*, 141.

³⁵ Thomas Willi, "Das *šîr hamma'ălôt*: Zion und der Sitz im Leben der "Aufstiegslieder" Psalm 120–134," in., *Prophetie und Psalmen: Festschrift für Klaus Seybold zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Beat Huwyler, Hans-Peter Mathys, and Beat Weber, AOAT 280 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001), 154–62.

³⁶ Leon Liebreich, "The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing," *JBL* 74 (1955): 33–36.

the psalms of the collection is a meditation, or expansion, upon one of the fifteen words of the priestly blessing in its final form. Liebreich also provides a unique compositional model. Noting that Pss 124, 126 and 131 are loosely related to the priestly blessing, Liebreich proposes that the twelve Songs of Ascents were composed as meditations upon the priestly blessing. When they were assembled into a collection, the desire to have fifteen psalms corresponding to the fifteen words of the priestly blessing, necessitated that Ps 124, 126, and 131 were added to the collection. Liebreich does not specify if the three psalms were pre-existing or composed for the occasion, stating only that the desire for fifteen psalms was the impetus for the addition of a few psalms that are only indirectly related to the priestly blessing.³⁷ Liebreich views the collection not only as an early interpretation of the priestly blessing, but also as a liturgy pronounced on the steps going into the Temple. The superscription thus indicates a song to be sung in response or alongside the priestly blessing.

As Zenger notes, Liebreich's observation about the connection between the priestly blessing and the Songs of Ascents is correct, but does not warrant a corresponding compositional model. Zenger also questions the close connection between the collection and the blessing liturgy of the Temple.³⁸ One of the key theological elements missing from the Songs of Ascents is that of YHWH's countenance, which would seem to be a large gap in the compositional model and theology of a collection expanding upon the priestly blessing. However, Liebreich

³⁷ Liebreich, "The Priestly Blessing," 33.

³⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 291.

does draw attention to the liturgical aspects of the psalms, connections to the priestly milieu, and the prominence of blessing that other commentators overlooked.

Zion Theology

Against narrow cultic interpretations linking the collection to a single celebration, or broader ideas of pilgrimage only loosely supported by internal evidence from the psalms, a final category of scholars have chosen to focus on the literary character of the collection. Zenger writes, “Quite recently, a number of authors have insisted...that here we have a highly poetic psalm composition that projects a theology of Zion that can at most be understood as a *literary* portrayal of a pilgrimage.”³⁹ David C. Mitchell and Gert Prinsloo are two representatives of this scholarly camp. Both scholars emphasize the eschatological perspective of the collection which reflect the songs of a marginalized community dealing with a new social and religious situation.⁴⁰

Egbert Ballhorn urges scholars to drop the Pilgrim Psalter language completely in favor of the term “Zion Psalter.” Ballhorn argues that far too many exceptions exist to maintain that the collection is a collection for pilgrimage. Rather, the Zion Psalter serves to place one, in imagination, at the center of Israel and allows

³⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 292–3.

⁴⁰ Gert Prinsloo, “The Role of Space in the שירי המעלות (Psalms 120–134),” *Bib* 86 (2005) 458–77; David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 108–27.

one to await God's blessing from there.⁴¹ Ballhorn describes this function as a literary-mystagogical movement toward Zion. "With this newly strengthened faith in Zion as the source of blessing for all Israel, one can live full of confidence at any place in the land."⁴² While Ballhorn's thesis is enticing to the modern reader, one must ask if his vision of small group and individual meditative readers is possible even by the Hellenistic period. While this dissertation does not agree with Ballhorn's thesis regarding the purpose of the collection, his emphasis on place as a significance aspect of the collection is a helpful contribution.

Michael Rohde has recently questioned the pervasiveness of the Zion theology throughout the collection. Rohde argues that while Pss 122 and 132 certainly stand as "mountains" of Zion theology, the surrounding psalms in the collection, perhaps the rest of the collection appear only as smaller hills of Zion theology at most. Rohde's concern, like many previous scholars working on the collection, is that exegesis of the Psalter (or collection within the Psalter) replaces exegesis of the psalms (individually).⁴³ Rohde's call for exegesis of individual psalms may sound like a return to psalms scholarship of a different century, but he is pointing to a need for balance between the study of the shape of the Psalter and the pieces that fit together to create that shape.

⁴¹ Egbert Ballhorn, *Zum Telos des Psalters: Der Textzusammenhang des Vierten und Fünften Psalmenbuchs (Ps 90–150)*, BBB 138 (Berlin: Philo, 2004), 249–50.

⁴² Ballhorn, *Zum Telos des Psalters*, 250.

⁴³ Michael Rohde, "Observations on the Songs of Ascents: A Discussion about the So-Called Zion-Theology of Psalms 120–134," *Baptistic Theologies* 1 (2009): 24–42.

Recent Approaches Focusing on Space

Attention to “space” or “place” in the Songs of Ascents is not a new endeavor. The shared superscription of the collection, *hamma’ălôt*, encouraged interpretations that associated the psalms with movement. Interpreters searched for an explanation for why these psalms were associated with “going up.” Early interpretations emphasized literal pilgrimage from distant lands, going up from Babylon to Jerusalem. The rabbinic interpretation viewed the collection as a songbook for ascending the temple steps, thus giving attention to the ideas of movement and space in the Songs of Ascents, although attention to space was primarily derived from the superscription and not the content of the collection, as Crow demonstrated. While the superscriptions are not always helpful in interpretation, in the case of the Songs of Ascents the impulse to focus attention on movement and space in the collection proves to be a fruitful endeavor. Two recent updates on attention to space in the Songs of Ascents are the brief studies by Gert Prinsloo and Susan Gillmayr-Bucher.

Gert Prinsloo. In Gert Prinsloo’s 2005 article he uses the concept of space as a means to identify a progression of thought and theological development, or a “story line” through the Songs of Ascents. Prinsloo argues that the movement of psalms studies from individual poems to the relationship between psalms has expanded scholarship on the Psalter as a whole, the “shape” of the Psalter as it were, but the Songs of Ascents have largely been treated as a collection before the shape of psalm studies changed. Prinsloo claims that inadequate attention has been given to the

story of the Songs of Ascents, and proposes a reading of the collection with attention to the progression of space.⁴⁴

Prinsloo recognizes that there is no one definition of “space” or one overview of the concept, as it is an ongoing discussion. Prinsloo engages with the social-scientific conversation of “critical spatiality” and employs the concept of space as three distinct spaces called firstspace, secondspace, and thirdspace. Firstspace includes what one would typically identify as space: physical space, descriptions of a concrete space, etc. Secondspace entails “the description of space on an emotive level where space touches upon psychological, ideological, religious and philosophical dimensions of human behavior.”⁴⁵ Thirdspace indicates the social dimension of space, and ideologies and conflicts within that space. We will return to discussions of space and dialogue within biblical literature, but Prinsloo presents one engagement with critical theory and the Songs of Ascents that aids this study.

This study will reference Prinsloo’s arguments throughout the exegesis of the psalms, but a summary of his view of the role of space in the story-line of the Songs of Ascents will be helpful moving forward. Prinsloo follows Zenger’s division of the collection into five groups of three psalms each. In the first group (120–122) there is a movement from negative space to positive space, as the psalmist begins “in distress,” a negative space, and describes the extremities of space in the biblical

⁴⁴ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 457–77.

⁴⁵ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 460. Prinsloo acknowledges that his presentation of critical spatiality is drawn primarily from J.L. Berquist’s 1999 SBL Presentation. See also Jon L. Berquist, “Critical Spatiality and the Uses of Theory,” in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, eds. Claudia V. Camp, Andrew Mein, LHS/OTS 481 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 1–12.

world in terms of geographical regions, Meshech and Kedar. Psalm 121 describes movement and 122 envisions the psalmist's arrival in Jerusalem. "Psalms 121–122 describe a journey from negative space towards positive space, an ascending movement from the depths of despair and exile to the joyous arrival in Jerusalem."⁴⁶

Prinsloo identifies the next cluster of Psalms (123–125) as echoing the spatial orientation of the previous group on an abstract level.⁴⁷ Psalm 123 begins with the assertion that YHWH is enthroned in heaven and prevents ascent into the depths. YHWH's "protective presence, symbolized by Mount Zion and Jerusalem (Ps 125), ensures the survival of his people in the midst of negative imagined and lived space, the experience of being off-centre, the target of proud and arrogant people."⁴⁸ This is the section of Prinsloo's argument that needs the most teasing-out. It is difficult, from his brief description of the spatial mirroring, to see the connections between the texts of the psalms and the argument moving forward.

Prinsloo then identifies Ps 126–128, the central panel of psalms, as reflecting the words of Ps 125:1–2 that YHWH surrounds his people. Prinsloo takes this sentiment as the structural theme of the three psalms of the central group. He writes,

The third triad of poems describe the experiences of individuals going about their daily business of sowing and reaping (Psalm 126), working and raising their families (Psalm 127), and expecting the fruit of their labor (Psalm 128). This experience and expectation is set in the context of the trials and

⁴⁶ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 465.

⁴⁷ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 467.

⁴⁸ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 467.

tribulations of Zion (Psalm 126, 1–3; Psalm 128, 5–6). These three poems describe a life at-centre, in the presence of Yahweh.⁴⁹

Prinsloo identifies a chiastic structure, a Zion frame, around the center psalms that he interprets as a “surrounding” of the people.

Prinsloo describes the fourth triad as a continuation of the focus on abstract space in Pss 125–128, but moving toward public space as opposed to primarily private space. Within this triad both oppression and reconciliation are experienced by the psalmist, which is a movement from the depths to the presence of Yahweh. Prinsloo describes the experience of the depths as an experience of “being off-centre” and far from Yahweh.⁵⁰

The final triad (Pss 132–134) returns to Jerusalem as a concrete space and symbolic space. Psalm 132 calls to remembrance experiences at Jerusalem, as well as draws attention to regions of the ark’s journey. There is movement to and movement from Jerusalem, as Zion is depicted as the place from which Yahweh’s blessings will pour out. And finally, Ps 134 is “the most vivid description of being at-centre,” envisioning Jerusalem as the ultimate destination for those experiencing oppression and exile.”⁵¹

From this look at the “space” of the Songs of Ascents, Prinsloo traces a story of despair to hope, albeit not in a straight line. Prinsloo maps a journey that “peaks” in Pss 123 and 131 as those psalms look to the heavens, while always moving

⁴⁹ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 469.

⁵⁰ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 469.

⁵¹ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 471.

forward to the concrete, physical space of Jerusalem. The above discussion of Prinsloo's spatial analysis is primarily an examination of firstspace and secondspace, and in his final analysis he adds in the thirdspace consideration: what is the ideology of space in this collection? Prinsloo examines several components to "add up" to the ideology of space. The first is the position of the presumed psalmist throughout the collection. The psalmist is witness and participant in Israel's struggles and identifies with the persecuted righteous ones, while also described his humble servitude of Yahweh. The psalmist also crosses into two kinds of space, the political and religious public space of Zion and the private space. The private space, however, is not disconnected from the political and religious sphere.

Prinsloo connects this ideological stance of the servant of YHWH who is investing in the public and private space, looking forward to the Messianic Kingdom, as a purposeful vocabulary pointing us toward a particular group of people that experienced religious pressure and "exile" in a distinct way. Throughout Book V, Prinsloo argues, is a group of people identifying as the "poor" and the "servants of the Lord" who also have interest in Zion.⁵² Prinsloo follows the argument of Joseph Blenkinsopp and others that this group is a group of Levites who were expelled from the Temple in the post-exilic period.⁵³ Thus the "exile" experienced in the Songs of Ascents is not the Exile to Babylon, but an exile from religious control of the temple. "Their voice is heard in the *šîr hamma'ălôt* as they visit Jerusalem and find

⁵² Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 476.

⁵³ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 476. See Ulrich Berges, "Die Knechte im Psalter. Ein Beitrag zu seiner Kompositionsgeschichte," *Bib* 81 (2000): 153–176; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 5–20, 10.

consolation in the fact that, even though they are exiles in their own country, they are safe in the protective arms of YHWH who will never forsake his true people.”⁵⁴ The resolution to the spatial “story” of the Songs of Ascents is not pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but an eschatological and Messianic future envisioned by the marginalized religious leaders. “The happy end resides especially in the expectation that YHWH ‘ascends’ with his people towards the eschatological and Messianic future.”⁵⁵ I am less confident in the eschatological trajectory argued by Prinsloo, but his approach provides a good foundation for a study that connects spatial representation with representations of power in a ritual system, as discussed by Jonathan Z. Smith in the following chapter.

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher. Another approach to the Songs of Ascents with attention to space is the brief study by Susan Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space in the Psalms of Ascent.”⁵⁶ Gillmayr-Bucher observes that throughout the psalms, the well-ordered world is a centered world. Horizontally, danger is located on the periphery, as in the wilderness or foreign lands. Vertically, the sphere of the heavens above and sheol below locate the individual between the poles. Natural, social and symbolic spaces are all included in the spaces of the psalms.

⁵⁴ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 477.

⁵⁵ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 477.

⁵⁶ Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, “‘Like Olive Shoots around Your Table’: Images of Space in the Psalms of Ascents,” in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. E. Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010), 489–500.

Although the spatial dimensions of the Songs of Ascents are not explicitly stated, Gillmayr-Bucher identifies the margins of the collection as “the depths” (Ps 130:1), foreign land (Meshek and Kedar in Ps 120) on the “dangerous side” and heaven, as God’s dwelling place (Ps 121) on the other end. The psalmist searches for the center between these margins.⁵⁷

Gillmayr-Bucher identifies the center, the longing of the psalmist, as shalom, which is represented in three different ways in the Songs of Ascents. Gillmayr-Bucher identifies shalom as a *Leitwort* throughout the collection, as specifically connected with stability and steadiness, and explicitly connected with divine blessing from the sacred center of Zion.⁵⁸

In a spatial reading of the collection, Gillmayr-Bucher identifies Pss 120 and 121 as setting up the spatial imagery of the rest of the collection. In 120, the psalmist laments, from the margins, the lack of stability and shalom. Psalm 121 commences the search. The psalmist asks, “From where does my help come?” (v. 1) emphasizing the directionality of the search. The psalmist then provides an answer: “My help comes from YHWH, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” (v. 2) Gillmayr-Bucher writes of this initial spatial orientation

The answer (v. 2) connects God to the spatial orientation as the one who guarantees the existence and order of space (“creatio continua”) but not one who is located within it. Although the psalmist hopes for YHWH and his guarding, the search for security is extended beyond space, to the foundation of its possibility.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 489–90.

⁵⁸ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 490.

⁵⁹ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 491.

The first psalms indicate that the center is not necessarily topographical. The center, as Gillmayr-Bucher will trace through her argument, is in YHWH's protective presence which emanates from Jerusalem but is not limited to the topographical center.

The ultimate center for Songs of Ascents is Jerusalem and Zion, established by Ps 122. Jerusalem is described as a place of social and political stability as well as the place where YHWH's thrones are founded. Psalm 132 also reflects this "central" aspect of Jerusalem, which describes a merging together of divine and human space. Gillmayr-Bucher describes Zion "as the culmination point of human and divine history."⁶⁰ The final psalm, 134, demonstrates Zion as the place where God is worshipped and where blessing issues forth from God, the bi-directional aspects of blessing.⁶¹

As also noted by many interpreters, the house and household imagery play a prominent role.⁶² This observation has spawned redaction theories and varying hypotheses about the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalms. Gillmayr-Bucher focuses especially on Pss 127–128 as examples of the center being transferred to other cities or the individual house. "The dynamic of these psalms moves from the particular to the general: from the house to Jerusalem, from a man to Israel. Vice versa, it becomes obvious that every person, house and city has a part in the centre

⁶⁰ Gillmayr-Bucher, "Images of Space," 492.

⁶¹ Gillmayr-Bucher, "Images of Space," 492.

⁶² Hossfeld and Zenger emphasize the role of the house and household throughout their exegesis of the Songs of Ascents (*Psalms* 3, 286–490).

and its blessings.”⁶³ Of particular interest is the observation that the individual body serves as a “center” in the Songs of Ascents (Pss 125, 129, 131).

Single images of space are combined with images of distance and movement. Movement toward the center is especially obvious in Pss 122 and 132. Psalm 125 combines direction and body images, comparing ones who are “straight in their heart” to crooked ones, the right way becoming an attitude oriented by the body. Psalm 126 combines intense images of movement to indicate the power of God’s movement. Psalm 123 uses imagery of social and spatial distance (master/servant) and applies it to symbolic space, which Ps 133 draws on spatial imagery to indicate relationship. The flowing liquids (oil, dew) are connected both with topographic imagery (Hermon, Zion) and cultic imagery (oil on the head, Aaron, robe) to indicate a social relationship. The three combined culminate in blessing on Zion.⁶⁴

Gillmayr-Bucher argues that while the psalmist is oriented toward Zion as the source of blessing in the Songs of Ascents, there is also an element of the individual space as the center. The spatial images “transfer the idea of the one centre, Jerusalem and Zion, to everyday life and individual cities and houses.”⁶⁵ The day to day is “revalued by its connection to the centre.”⁶⁶ She concludes the “Psalms of Ascents hence achieve a double enhancement: they emphasize the importance of Jerusalem and Zion and simultaneously let individuals (men, women, houses and

⁶³ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 493.

⁶⁴ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 495–6.

⁶⁵ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 499.

⁶⁶ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 500.

cities) take part in the image of the centre.”⁶⁷ Gillmayr-Bucher provides a reading of the Songs of Ascents that effectively addresses the question of the relationship between the individual and religious life at the “center” without resorting to redactional layers.

Conclusion

The brief studies by Gillmayr-Bucher and Prinsloo represent a promising direction in the study of the Songs of Ascents. Missing from the above discussions of space and biblical literature is adequate attention to the relationship between ritual and space. The analysis of the role of space in the collection of psalms can be supplemented with ritual theory for a more robust spatial analysis.

Smith’s movement toward theory in ritual with a focus on place brings together several disparate aspects of attention to the Songs of Ascents. The propositions of a pilgrimage or meditation book of Zion, or a temple liturgy, propose a ritual aspect to the texts that is not thoroughly explored, either from the point of view of pilgrimage or the idea of a meditative ritual text. Other scholars focus on the emphasis of Zion, of place, and blessing, while others emphasize power, public and private religious expression. This dissertation proposes that Jonathan Z. Smith’s approach to ritual theory can bring together many of these ideas in a cohesive approach. The next chapter will provide an overview of theory relevant to this study and discuss issues related to moving from theory to text and propose a way forward for this study related to the Songs of Ascents.

⁶⁷ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space”, 500.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

The overview of the history of scholarship on the Songs of Ascents has illustrated a way forward in the study of this collection through attention to space. The following chapter will introduce the work of Jonathan Z. Smith that unites space and ritual in a helpful way for the study of the Psalms. After a brief overview of Smith's primary work on space and ritual in *To Take Place*, I will then discuss methodological considerations before turning to exegesis of the collection in Chapter Three.

Space

Previous work on the Songs of Ascents and space represent different directions of Psalms scholarship. Prinsloo interacts with critical spatial theory, which looks to Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre as the forefathers of modern spatial theory.¹ Gillmayr-Bucher interacts primarily with biblical scholarship, rather than attempting an interdisciplinary approach, but draws attention to the importance of the body as a "space" for interpretation. Both Prinsloo and Gillmayr-Bucher provide compelling arguments for the importance of attention to space in the interpretation

¹ For a brief overview of critical spatiality, see Jon L. Berquist, "Critical Spatiality," 1-12; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).

of the Songs of Ascents, but have not provided an adequate critical theory with which to examine the further implications of space in biblical scholarship.

As illuminating as the discussions of “space” are, there is little denying that “place” is a dominating aspect of this collection. Commentators that have urged the move away from the Pilgrim Psalter interpretation have not denied the importance of Zion, but have rather emphasized that perhaps the collection is more about Zion and the desire for blessing of Zion than journey to that place. The title “Zion psalter” is an apt title and concern, but holding together ritual and place in a new way allows for a more full reading and understanding of these psalms as a collection, and perhaps even the Psalter as a whole.

Taking Place

As a historian of religions who draws from a variety of disciplines in his work “toward” a theory of ritual, Smith interacts widely with the intellectual heirs of Soja and Lefebvre. Primarily, Smith offers in his attempt at ritual theory a flexible framework that deals with specific instances of religious ideals in a case by case basis. Smith focuses on place rather than “space” in ritual. Quoting geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who observes:

Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.²

² Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). 28. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspectives of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

Smith explores the relation of place to ritual, an element which has been missing in ritual theory and that can be applied to the conclusions drawn regarding the Songs of Ascents.

Smith begins by deconstructing the Tjilpa myth summarized by Mircea Eliade and transmitted as the influential representative myth of the “sacred center.” In the summary of the myth Eliade concludes that the sacred pole of Numbakulla is the cosmic axis of the Tjilpa, that the pole turns a “territory” into a “world.” When the pole is broken, Eliade relates from the field notes of another source, that the Tjilpa lost their sacred center, aimlessly wandered around, then finally lay down and awaited death.³ As Smith notes, this interpretation of the sacred pole as the sacred center that holds off chaos is an approach that has been applied to destruction, the breaking of the sacred centers, of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Smith deconstructs this foundational interpretation of the sacred center by working through the source material used by Eliade to construct the Tjilpa myth. In Eliade’s construction and interpretation of the myth, Smith identifies significant importation of Christian elements. Most significant for Smith’s examination of the ancestral myths is Smith’s observation that Eliade omits from the myth what Smith identifies as the generative element of the story: when an event happens (a sacred pole breaks), it is not the breaking of the pole that leads to a memorial, which provides an etiology for a topographical feature. “It is anthropology, not cosmology that is to the fore. It is the ancestral/human alteration of an objectification in the

³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 2.

landscape that has transformed the undifferentiated primeval space during the Dream-time into a multitude of historical places in which the ancestors, though changed, remain accessible.”⁴

In interpretations of the Songs of Ascents and in the Hebrew Bible generally, one can trace the influence of the idea of the sacred center. Smith summarizes Eliade’s symbolic notions as such (quoted below):

- 1) The “sacred mountain,” where heaven and earth meet, stands at the center of the world;
- 2) Every temple or palace, and, by extension, every sacred town and royal residence, is assimilated to a “sacred mountain” and thus becomes a “center”;
- 3) The temple or sacred city, in turn, as the place through which the Axis Mundi passes, is held to be the point of junction between heaven, earth, and hell.⁵

The cosmic mountain of ANE influence has significantly influenced the study of Zion as the center in the Psalms and the Hebrew Bible generally. However, this idea has been called into question. “The philological evidence the Pan-Babylonians relied on has all but evaporated. Not one of the terms, understood by them to refer to a central mountain with its roots in the underworld and its summit in the heavens, has survived scrutiny.”⁶ Instead, Smith argues,

The language of ‘center’ is preeminently political and only secondarily cosmological. It is a vocabulary that stems, primarily, from archaic ideologies of kingship and the royal function. In any particular tradition, it may or may not be tied to cosmological or cosmogonic myths.⁷

⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 11.

⁵ Smith, *To Take Place*, 14.

⁶ Smith, *To Take Place*, 16.

⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 17.

Smith's aim in deconstructing the Tjilpa myth interpretation is not to propose a new interpretation for all theories of religion. Smith's effort aims to reorient comparative approaches, in order that there is space for difference. Rather than imposing the Pan-Babylonian temple-building motif on the Tjilpa ancestor wanderings, Smith calls for a range in interpretation that starts with place. To contrast the first two examples (the Arandan tradition and ANE temple building broadly) with respect to place, Smith observes that in the Arandan tradition "all significant places are the result of ancestral activity...Although each place might, in the myths, be the accidental by-product of their wanderings, once marked, each place is precisely where the event occurred—it cannot be another."⁸ In the ANE, a temple is located where it is located not because of the place, but because of the king or god.

In the examination of Ezekiel's temple text, Smith can offer a starting place for study of the Songs of Ascents. Smith observes that Chapters 40–48 of Ezekiel are "the most articulate in offering a coherent ideology of place: of temple and city, with focus on the temple."⁹ The temple layout chapters are quite obviously concerned with place, and on an ideal place. "While drawing heavily on archaic Zion traditions, rather than on the city-centered and king-focused Jerusalem traditions, Ezekiel 40–48 is an endeavor in mapping the social configurations of an ideal cultic place."¹⁰ What does a wall mean? Can its significance be reduced primarily to defense from

⁸ Smith, *To Take Place*, 22.

⁹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 48.

¹⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 48.

external threats? It is a common practice to celebrate the city wall, as occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ The city or buildings possession of a wall, Smith argues, is also a function of status and prestige.¹² A shift in religious scholarship has likewise taken a turn toward viewing the city wall as marking off the sacred from the profane.¹³ What does the wall, the city mean in a psalm and how has it been interpreted? Is psalm scholarship moving with the current of scholarship that reexamines our assumptions about critical spaces and objects such as cities and walls (and thrones)? It is perhaps taken for granted by biblical scholars that we know what a city is (Jerusalem, Zion) and that we know how it is significant. Smith's journey into the changing landscape of humanistic geography reminds us that we cannot bring outdated assumptions about place, power and religion to the text. Are the assumptions about Jerusalem as the *omphalos mundi* safe to import to all texts and collections?

Smith's discussion of Ezekiel's temple description sounds similar to conversations around the purpose of the Songs of Ascents. He writes

Even lacking a king or temple, or (as later) even without the realistic hope of a restored kingship or temple, the system of status could be transferred, even though that power might have to be adjusted or abandoned. Whether it be expressed in the arrangement of the crops in a farmer's field (as in the wisdom poem of Isaiah 29.23–29) or in the complex exfoliation of the Mishnah, the hierarchical relations of status do not require centralization in the temple. The system can be decentered.¹⁴

¹¹ For example, Pss 46–8.

¹² Smith, *To Take Place*, 49.

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958).

¹⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 73.

Studies that propose the purpose of the collection is to replicate the experience of pilgrimage, and particularly Gillmayr-Bucher's argument that the center is "spread around" to the everyday life while maintaining the importance of Zion are dealing with the question of space without taking into effect the broader implications for ritual.¹⁵

The interpretation of the psalms in general and the Songs of Ascents particularly has been significantly influenced by the search for the center and the focus on dramatization. For many, the high point of the collection is Ps 132, where the ark is described as being brought joyously to Zion. The search for the corresponding festival, the drama, the event corresponding to a psalm has dominated as the expression of ritual or ritual acts in the psalms. In his reexamination of the Tjilpa myth Smith provides an understanding that moves away from Eliade's focus on events to the significance of memory. He concludes:

The central ritual connection between the ancestor and his 'place,' between the ancestor and the individual Aranda, the central mode of celebrating and signifying objectification, is not dramatization, but recollection. In the words of Gurra, one of Strehlow's most important informants, 'My elders kept on repeating these ceremonies time and time again in my presence: they were afraid that I might forget them....Had I forgotten them, no one else would now remember them.' In such a system, rupture does not occur by breaking poles linking heaven to earth; rupture occurs through the human act of forgetfulness.¹⁶

The central connection of ritual, to a place in Smith's reading, is memory not dramatization. Put briefly, the connection is anthropological, not cosmological. This

¹⁵ Gillmayr-Bucher, "Images of Space," 499.

¹⁶ Smith, *To Take Place*, 13.

dissertation will explore the role of memory throughout the Songs of Ascents as it relates to constructing a ritual identity of the community.

Prinsloo's spatial analysis used the critical category of space to discuss the ideological stance of the collection. Smith's ritual analysis also provides an example of conceptual mapping that can be applied to the Songs of Ascents. Since Smith's ritual approach is comparative, he discusses various examples of differing conceptual maps of a place. One example he provides is of the Winnebago tribe's conceptual mapping of villages. The tribe is divided into two moieties, "Those Who Are Above" and "Those Who Are Below," and although both groups insist that there is not a greater or lesser group, with one having more power than the other, Group A is the tribe from which chiefs are chosen. "A is responsible for war, for preserving peace, and for acting as intermediary with other tribes. B's powers are more internalized. B is responsible for the internal order and discipline of the tribe."¹⁷ When asked about the ideal village map, the two groups describe the ideal village layout differently. Group A (Those Who are Above) perceive the structure as "symmetrical and reciprocal" with the two groups situated in a mirror image on a north south axis.¹⁸ Group B, (Those Who Are Below) insisted on a concentric layout, with Group A situated at the center of the village. Smith writes

The taxonomic clarity of *A* and its position of superordination are what enables it to perceive the relations between the moieties as symmetrical; the classificatory fuzziness of *B* and its position of subordination are what leads it to perceive the relations between the moieties as hierarchical and

¹⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 44.

¹⁸ Smith, *To Take Place*, 42.

asymmetrical. These opposing positions give rise to two discordant ideological maps of geographical and social space.”¹⁹

The Songs of Ascents contains ideological maps of geographical and social space, in the descriptions of Jerusalem and the Temple space, as well as in the individual household. The following discussion will draw attention to ideological mapping in the collection.

Approaching the Text

Moving from theory to text requires careful consideration. This work aims to remain situated in the tradition of psalms scholarship, not abandoning the progress of form criticism.²⁰ As Marvin Sweeney wrote of the new millennium, “This is a time bubbling with activity in form-critical studies, of emerging patterns of substantial methodological change and conceptual reshaping of what form criticism either is or should be about.”²¹ Approaching the Psalms using a form-critical method is not a

¹⁹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 45.

²⁰ A good guideline for form-critical methodology has been set forth by the editors of The Forms of the Old Testament Literature commentary series. The work of this group of scholars that have dedicated the past several decades to refinement of the form-critical methodology will form the basis of my textual work, with insights from ritual studies providing a new avenue forward for form criticism. Other guides to methodology that will inform this dissertation include: Martin J. Buss, *The Changing Shape of Form Criticism: A Relational Approach*, HBM (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010); Rolf Knierim, “Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered,” *Int* 27 (1973): 435-468. James Muilenberg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18; Odil Hannes Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to Methodology*, trans. James D. Nogalski, SBLRBS 33 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); Marvin A. Sweeney, ed., *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, GBS (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). The new approaches are often called “New Form Criticism” or the tongue-in-cheek designation “more mature form criticism” by James Nogalski in recognition of the continuous development of the method over time. See: Nogalski, “Where Are the Prophets in the Book of the Twelve?” in *New Form Criticism and the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Mark J. Boda et al., ANEM 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 163-182, 163.

²¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, ed., *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 5.

novel task, but this dissertation proposes that a ritual theory informed by form-critical work can provide new insights into the psalms. Moving away from some of the problematic aspects of the form-critical method, such as ties to evolutionary models of religion, optimism about authorial intent, and discovery of an oral prehistory, scholars have outlined some aspects of a new form criticism for current research. Examples include greater attention to literary artistry in the combination of typical and unique aspects of texts and genre combinations, recognition of the fluidity of genres, and expansion of the concept of “setting” beyond “social setting.” Form criticism, as recognized by others before, has been concerned with space and place.²² The more radical attempts of form critics were so optimistic about the connection between language and place that they sought the literal “place” of a psalm’s writing.²³

²² Colin Toffelmire, who has applied Systemic Functional Linguistics to the study of the Book of the Twelve, observes that there is a common scholarly genealogy in the work of Gunkel and Bronislaw Malinowski, an early anthropologist who studies ritual. Toffelmire writes,

It was Malinowski who proposed that social context was intrinsically linked to linguistic communication, and who coined the term ‘context of situation.’ One of Malinowski’s other academic contacts was the famed Egyptologist Alan Gardiner, who appears to have been influential in the development of Malinowski’s theories of language and social context...Gardiner studied and worked in Berlin at the same time that Hermann Gunkel was developing his theories of form and context, and would certainly have been cognizant of developments in the field of biblical studies.²²

A common ‘genealogy’ between the development of form criticism and anthropology points to the different possible avenues of development for the idea that captured the attention of scholars and continues to be worked out more fully: that situation and content are somehow related. How scholars have approached the task of describing that relationship continues to be refined. Colin Toffelmire, “Sitz im What?” in *New Form Criticism and the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Mark J. Boda et al., ANEM 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 221–244, 226.

²³ In linguistic theory the helpful distinction is made between the context of writing and the context of situation. A text “comes to life” in a situation. Context of situation is not a description of the surroundings in which a language event takes place, but is attention to categories relevant to the text. “The context of situation may be totally remote from what is going on round about during the act of speaking or writing.” M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 109. The context of situation can be distinguished from the “material situational setting,” the physical space with material elements in which a text takes place.

We might first ask the question in a similar vein to form critics, how is place related to text? Henri Lefebvre sees not only text, but specifically poetry as a working-out of one's place in the world. Mary R. Huie-Jolly writes:

Lefebvre sees the human body as an extension of nature and reasons that civilization is formed by the seed of nature. He understood poetry, its return to feelings and appropriation of forms from nature into ordinary life, to be consistent with spatial consciousness. Like psychoanalysis and the festival, poesis and appropriation are part of the cure. They bring memory and story into connection with place. They hold time and space together, allowing an acknowledgment of the parts within the whole, allowing what has become separate to return to its source of nourishment. Our way of organizing ourselves spatially is in fact our way of relating to the world itself.²⁴

Jo-Marí Schäder provides a helpful insight into the exegesis of psalms from the perspective of critical spatial theory. In her analysis of Ps 47, Schäder observes the texts, like maps, are representations of power and observes indicators in the text, such as repetition of concepts, the use of prepositions, and vocabulary selection.²⁵ The following analysis will also give attention to shifts in the direction of discourse throughout each psalm. In a written text, space is represented not only by descriptions of physical spaces, but within the written text in the interpersonal relationships between speakers. Attention to the direction of discourse and perceived distance between participants is part of attention to space. Prinsloo

²⁴ Mary R. Huie-Jolly, "Formation of Self in Construction of Space," in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography, and Narrative*, ed. Jon L. Berquist and Claudia V. Camp, LHB/OTS 481 (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 51–67, 67.

²⁵ Jo-Marí Schäder, "The Implied Transcendence of Physical and Ideological Borders and Boundaries in Psalm 47," in *Constructions of Space V: Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, eds. Gert T.M. Prinsloo and Christl M. Maier, LHB/OTS 576 (New York: T & T Clark, 2013), 69–86. See also the article by Till Magnus Steiner that combines redaction criticism with spatial analysis, "Spatial Theory and Theology in Psalms 46–48," in *The Psalter as Witness* (Waco: Baylor Press, 2017), 63–76.

proposes that spatial ideology can be identified by giving attention to who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, and the vocabulary chosen by the speaker.²⁶

Prinsloo is attentive to the spatial “story line,” but an area of his analysis that can be strengthened is in expanding the very linear notion of the story line. Using the language of space allows for one to relinquish the linear language. My analysis will allow for greater attention to how the discourse echoes within the space created by the collection, across psalms.

We must also note that the Psalms are not “ritual texts” in the sense that one could recreate a ritual based on instructions; indeed, there are no “ritual texts” according to this strict definition anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. Regardless of the wealth of texts transmitted, Smith recognizes that complete a Temple ritual is not preserved in any text. He writes:

Not a single Temple ritual in the Hebrew Bible is capable of being performed fully on the basis of the information contained therein. There are, no doubt, particular historical reasons for this, but the fact remains: in their present form, the largely Priestly documents have already reduced the rituals of the

²⁶ Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 474. Gunkel and Mowinckel, in their own ways, made claims about ritual language without the benefit of recent advances in the field of ritual studies and language. Thomas Csordas provides a list of scholars who have paid attention to the role of language in ritual. Although lengthy, his opening paragraph is worth including here because of the amount of information he packs into a single paragraph:

Although much anthropological discussion of ritual has focused on symbolic objects and actions, specific concern with the linguistic dimension of ritual can be traced back at least as far as Malinowski's (1935) *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. Lienhardt's (1961) work on Dinka religion encouraged this concern by offering, in addition to a chapter on ritual action, a separate chapter on religious language. Since then, a variety of analyses has appeared. These studies can be summarized under the following general headings: specialized religious vocabularies (Fabian 1971, Wheelock 1981, Zaretsky 1972); genres of religious language (Bauman 1974, Fabian 1974, Gossen 1974, McDowell 1983); religious speaking as illocutionary act (Ahern 1979, 1982, Austin 1962, Finnegan 1969, Gardner 1983, Gill 1977, Ray 1973, Tambiah 1968, 1973, 1979, Wheelock 1982); religious language as discourse (Fabian 1979, Jules-Rosette 1978, Samarin 1976); religious language as power or authority (Andelson 1980, Bloch 1974, Fields 1982, McGuire 1983); ecstatic language and glossolalia (Eliade 1964, Goodman 1972, Jennings 1968, May 1956, Motley 1981, Pattison 1968, Samarin 1972).” (Thomas J. Csordas, “Genre, Motive, and Metaphor: Conditions for Creativity in Ritual Language,” *CA* 2 (1987): 445–469, 445).

Temple from performances to systems—primarily by modes of emplacement. They could be thought about in abstract topographies; they could be transported to another place; they could be extended to other sorts of social space; they could become sheerly intellectual systems.²⁷

This study recognizes that the biblical text presents an intellectual system. This is what distinguishes later form criticism from earlier form criticism which was concerned with origination, with a dramatic event or reenactment that attempted to wed together myth and ritual, or extract the myth from ritual.²⁸

A Note about Structure

Exegesis of the collection requires consideration of the structure of the psalms as a group. Is there deliberate ordering of the psalms, and if so, are there significant subdivisions that effect the narrative of the collection? As Loren Crow has emphasized, much of the scholarship concerning the Songs of Ascents has given weight to the superscription as a guiding interpretive device. This dissertation proposes that looking beyond the fifteen psalms to include Pss 135–137 solidifies place as the guiding theme of the collection.

²⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

²⁸ Gunkel was also highly influenced by an early proponent of the Myth and Ritual School, W. Robertson Smith. One could even hypothesize that Gunkel's form-critical work would not have been possible without the growing interest in ritual. The marks of ritual studies continued to be seen in the most influential form-critical studies following Gunkel. Von Rad's form-critical examination and the Hextateuch hypothesis were inextricably linked to the generative performance of the ritual credo in the cult, for example. The emergence of ritual as a discrete field of study has brought a renewed interest in ritual in the biblical text. Examples of ritual studies employed broadly in biblical scholarship include: Frank H. Gorman Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, JSOTSup 91 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); Ithamar Gruenwald, *Rituals and Ritual Theory in Ancient Israel*, BRLJ 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Gerald A. Klingbeil, *Bridging the Gap: Ritual and Ritual Texts in the Bible*, BBRSup Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007); Herbert J. Levine, *Sing unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David P. Wright, "Deciphering a Definition: The Syntagmatic Structural Analysis of Ritual in the Hebrew Bible," *JHS* 8 (2008): 1–9.

Hossfeld and Zenger propose a division of the fifteen psalms into three subgroups, with each subgroup situated around a central psalm (Pss 122, 127, 132) with significant ties to Jerusalem. Each group of five, they maintain, establishes an “arc of tension” which is ultimately fulfilled in the community life and cultic worship at Zion.²⁹ Laura Joffe argues for the divine name as an organizational device in the Songs of Ascents. Building on the work of Ernst Hengstenberg, Joffe organizes the collection into two heptads based on occurrences of the divine name, with Ps 127 as the central panel.³⁰

Gert Prinsloo identifies a spatial story line of the collection that is based on groups of psalm triads, but ultimately focuses on the trajectory of negative to positive space, a moving movement from a sad beginning to a happy end. For Prinsloo, the movement is toward an eschatological future. “The happy end resides especially in the expectation that YHWH ‘ascends’ with his people towards the eschatological and Messianic future.”³¹ This study will retain the proposal that the grouping of five triads is significant for the spatial story of the collection, but challenge Prinsloo’s conclusion that the collection moves toward a Messianic future. In addition to the five triads of the collection, this study will include the additional triad, Pss 135–137. The addition of 135–137 to the group of psalms titled “Songs of Ascents” carries forward the concern of memory place throughout the Songs of Ascents. Smith contends that “ritual is a means of performing the ways things ought

²⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 296.

³⁰ Laura Joffe, “The Answer to the Meaning of Life, the Universe and the Elohist Psalter, *JSOT* 27 (2002): 223–35.

³¹ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 477.

to be in conscious tension with the way things are.”³² This is not eschatological hope, this is “taking place” through memory.

³² Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

CHAPTER THREE

Establishing the Center

With the history of scholarship and methodological considerations in place, we may now turn to the collection. The first psalm to bear the superscription *šîr hamma'ălôt* is Ps 120, which follows one of the most famous and the longest psalms of the Psalter. In contrast to the lengthy acrostic extolling the magnificence of YHWH's Torah, the Songs of Ascents that follow are short songs without reference to Torah obedience. The longest psalm of the collection, Ps 132, contains eighteen verses, twice as many as the second longest psalm, Ps 122. Although brief, the songs cover a wide range of themes, from the despair of attack at the hand of enemies to the blessing of a large family, to the memory of David's triumph in bringing the ark to Jerusalem. The following analysis will focus on the importance of place in the collection and suggest that place is a focusing lens (ritual) through which to view the diverse themes of the Songs of Ascents. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the psalms of the collection will be discussed in five triads, then extend the analysis to an additional triad, Pss 135–137 which in the final shaping of the Psalter picks up the theme of place within the Songs of Ascents, focusing on not an eschatological but a ritual emphasis on place and memory.¹ The first two triads will be discussed below.

¹ See the discussion on structure of the collection above, page 42.

The First Triad: Psalms 120–122

Psalms 120–122 begin in a distant place and conclude with the psalmists' feet standing in the gates of Jerusalem. The joyous experience of place, and the danger of being without place, loom large in the first three psalms. This opening triad establishes the importance of place, and particularly the physical space of Jerusalem at the outset of the collection.

Psalm 120

Psalm 120 opens the collection with a situation of trouble with the psalmist exclaiming, "To YHWH in my distress I called, and he answered me!" (v.1) This address is rare as an opening cry but usually indicates a statement of thanksgiving or affirmation of confidence in YHWH's continual assistance to the community and the individual. In Ps 81, where the community's attention is drawn to the saving acts of YHWH in the past, a first-person oracle from YHWH is reported: "In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder, I tested you at the waters of Meribah" (v.8). In Ps 99, a YHWH *mālak* psalm, YHWH's kingship from Zion is tied to the history of calling and answering; Moses, Aaron and Samuel are mentioned as the ones who "cried to YHWH, and he answered them" (v.6). That the psalmist opens with the words "To YHWH" are also significant for the collection, which uses the name YHWH exclusively and over fifty times within fifteen psalms.²

² Hossfeld and Zenger argue for the monotheistic emphasis of the formula's construction. It is not to another god, but to YHWH that the psalmist cries. (*Psalms* 3, 306).

Hossfeld and Zenger acknowledge the spatial dimension of the opening verse of the psalm: “The statement of situation in v. 1b, which is pointedly placed before the verb, evokes the image of a world that is a space in which the petitioner’s life is pressed upon from every side: ‘in the distress that was mine.’”³ Although Hossfeld and Zenger are not consistently conscious of the spatial elements throughout the Songs of Ascents, in their analysis of the opening line of the first psalm, which they hold was composed for the purpose of introducing the collection, they identify space as a key idea.⁴

The formulation of the opening words and the use of the cry and answer formula as an introduction immediately draw attention to 1) the spatial positioning of the psalmists, 2) the individual’s memory of YHWH’s saving action, and 3) the community’s collective memory of YHWH’s saving action in the past. Verse 1 is a look back for the psalmist on YHWH’s saving action in the past, the foundation of faith in which the psalmist comes confidently with a new petition to YHWH.⁵ Zenger writes “the psalm begins pointedly in v. 1bc with the recollection that the petitioner

³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 306.

⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 296.

⁵ This verb is the most problematic for form critics of this psalm. Gunkel emended the verb. Kittel determines that the verb should speak in the present based on a comparison with Jon 2:3, which begins with approximately the same construction and, narratively, the prayer is understood as coming from inside the belly of the fish. Verse 2 could be thought of as a quotation, a recounting of what the psalmist cried out in distress, in which case vv.1–2 would constitute the first section. It can be argued that the psalm is a thanksgiving psalm in which the speaker takes a retrospective look at her petition and distress. The problem with this analysis, notes Zenger, is that the crisis situation continues to exist in the following verses, which is atypical for thanksgiving psalms. Tucker asserts that Ps 120 is better understood as a lament song than a song of thanksgiving, although it presents the lament elements in reverse. “The previous experience with distress mentioned in verse 1 is meant to buttress the faith of the psalmist in a world where such oppressive activities have not ceased” (Tucker, *Construction and Deconstructing Power in Psalms 107–150*, SBL 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 97).

has experienced that YHWH is the God who hears the cry of his people...and of individuals for help...and answers.”⁶

There are three participants in the psalm: the suppliant, YHWH, and enemies, which are spoken of in metaphorical language as the “deceitful tongue” as well as a collective group of ones who hate peace. YHWH does not speak directly in this psalm, but is addressed directly by the suppliant. From the opening recounting of the psalmist’s history of call to and answer from YHWH, in verse 2 an immediate shift in the direction of discourse occurs to a petition addressed directly to Yahweh through the use of a standard imperative, “O YHWH, tear me from the lips of the lie, from the tongue of deceit!” (v. 2). The psalmist complains of the danger of speech. Erhard Gerstenberger expresses the danger placed upon the psalmist as marginalization, a concept that is a spatial category commonly employed to describe social or political status. “The specific grievance is with murderous slander...These allusions are quite concrete and usually fixed on a determined social mechanism of marginalization and threat against deviant members of a group.”⁷ The distress of the psalmist is described by the threats of lying lips and a deceitful tongue, but the situation seems to be more serious than someone spreading slanderous speech against the psalmist. Dennis Tucker argues that the particular description of

⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 305.

⁷ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 2, with Lamentations*, FOTL 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 318.

“arrogant and deceitful language” is associated with the behavior of empires.⁸ In the opening of the collection, the enemy is ambiguous, but associated with social power.

In verses 3–4 the direction of discourse shifts again as the psalmist addresses the slanderer directly with rhetorical questions with language borrowed from typical cursing formulae.⁹ Gerstenberger writes “The Contest and Curse of the marginalized supplicant over against his persecutors indicate the ritual implications of the psalm.”¹⁰ The questions of verse 3, “What will he give to you, and what will he add to you?” are addressed to the deceitful tongue. In an inversion of the self-cursing formula, the psalmist turns the formula typically used to call a curse on oneself if a vow is not fulfilled to call a curse upon one’s enemy.¹¹ “The rhetorical, challenging, and defensive question (v.3) derives from Contest discourse, implying God’s curse. Apparently, the oath formula ‘May God do to you this or that [and continue to do so]’ looms behind that question.”¹² The response that the psalmist then imagines against the enemy is drawn from war imagery, arrows and glowing coal, frequent indicators of power of evil (Pss 64:4; 140:4; Prov 25:22). The psalmist’s marginalization is apparent in the discourse of the psalm. The psalmist invokes a formula typically used for bonding oneself to another, and uses it to curse.

⁸ W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., *Constructing and Deconstructing* 97. Tucker draws from Göran Eidevall’s study that traces prophetic speech in Isaiah: Eidevall, *Prophecy and Propaganda: Images of Enemies in the Book of Isaiah*, ConBOT 46 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 30, 302.

¹⁰ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 318.

¹¹ Hossfeld and Zenger point to two representative examples, that of Ruth invoking the oath formula with Naomi (Ru 1:16–17) and the oath Jonathan makes with David (1 Sam 20:12–13).

¹² Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 318. See 1 Sam 3:17; 14:44; 25:22; 2 Sam 3:9, 35; Gunkel, 538.

Further, the psalmist answers his own rhetorical question by responding with war imagery, indicating a dramatic breach in relationship.

In verses 5–7, the psalmist turns further inward, as the direction of discourse shifts again, away from the direct address to YHWH and to the enemies with an uncommon oath formula as the psalmist claims to be an alien in Meshech, one who dwells in Kedar. “The opening formula *’ôyāh lî*, “woe to me,” with the mourning cry itself extended by the syllable *–āh*, is unique in the whole Hebrew canon.”¹³ The shorter form occurs in Jeremiah and Isaiah in typical expressions of loss and fear. “By saying ‘woe to me/us’ the ancient Israelites made public their grief in ritualized form.”¹⁴ The psalmist’s language indicates an interesting tension between the isolated individual and the public expression of grief. Walter Brueggemann and W.H. Bellinger note it this way: “Here could be hidden a special subtlety: a member of the Israelite/Jewish community formally complains about some legendary inhumane people who do not let a stranger live in peace. But he or she does so within a community where the prayer was certainly used.”¹⁵

The question of great concern in this psalm has been the identification of the terms “Meshech” and “Kedar.” This psalm has been at the center of *Sitz im Leben* discussion because it does in fact mention geographic places, or rather tribes associated with regions. Because of these specific references to Mesech and Kedar,

¹³ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 319.

¹⁴ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 319

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann and W.H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 524.

earlier form critical scholars situated the origination and performance of this psalm in a foreign land among foreign peoples, as an indication of the exilic situation of the psalmist. The mention of far geographic regions has also contributed to the reading of the psalms as a collection of pilgrim psalms, as the psalmist can be envisioned as dwelling away from Jerusalem.

As Gerstenberger notes, it is highly unlikely that the actual location of composition for this psalm was among the “barbarians” of Meshech and Kedar and used in strange territories, making its way into the collection from some distance. The location of both are uncertain, as they both indicate nomadic tribes. Isaiah 21:16–17 “leaves the impression of a wild and doomed people of ‘archers’” making a metaphorical connection to the “archers” who are slinging slander.¹⁶ Prinsloo identifies the use of Kadesh and Meshech as a merism, binary opposites signifying isolation and exile from YHWH’s presence.¹⁷ The purpose of the reference of the complainer could also be a slight against the Israelite/Jewish neighbor: by calling them a legendary inhumane people, and himself the stranger in their midst trying to be peaceful, it conjures up images of Egypt. Gerstenberger concludes:

We may surmise, therefore, that the complaint gives voice proverbially to how much a given suppliant is suffering from ostracism among his or her neighbors, all the more so when a foreigner becomes the target of communal disdain...The setting is just the community transmitting that song to be used in prayer services for those who were suffering from social marginalization.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 320.

¹⁷ Prinsloo, “The Role of Space,” 462.

¹⁸ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 320.

The problem that the psalmist faces is alienation, and the psalmist envisions an existence for himself that is not well-placed, nomadic, and alienated.

Verse 7 presents difficulty both grammatically and in content. The phrase can be literally rendered “I am peace, but as I speak, they are for war.” As the psalmist has just completed an oath requesting weapons be brought against the deceitful tongue, the irony of Ps 120 is the one who calls himself peace speaking out and requesting violence against his enemy.¹⁹ “This self-righteous attitude, to some degree necessary in certain situations of brutal injustice, has been molded into liturgical shape, of a black-and-white type, e.g. in protestations of innocence (Ps 7;17;26), discourses of contest (Ps 4; 11; 62; Job), and cursing rituals (Ps 109).”²⁰ The social aspects of the psalmist’s distress are brought to the fore as the military language intensifies and culminates in the psalmist’s cry “They are for war!”²¹

Summary

Place is a central concern of the psalm, but not in a physical, material sense. The psalm begins with an acknowledgment of the power of the psalmist’s words in memory and in the present: I called—YHWH answered. The performer’s speech motivates YHWH to respond. The remainder of the psalm utilizes common analogies comparing the mouth/tongue/lips to weapons of war and acknowledging their tremendous power. This analogy is paired with the trauma of being dis-located.

¹⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 524.

²⁰ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 320.

²¹ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing*, 97.

Within the psalm, there is both an acknowledgment of the destructive power of words by an enemy (attacks described or envisioned), the overwhelming helplessness of the psalmist when one's words do not carry power (when I speak, they are for war) and the power that is found in directing speech toward enemies and toward the deity in the midst of such powerlessness.

Prinsloo describes Ps 120 as the low point of lived space for the psalmist.²² As there are no indications through language of a "low point," Prinsloo is using an idiom of modern English as a description of the psalmist's emotional state. A more accurate reading of the spatial story of Ps 120 is that the psalmist is dis-placed. The rapid shifts in discourse with no response except for the psalmist's own answers draws attention to the psalmist's alienation. The psalm collection begins with a recollection, a meditation on language and place and the destructive/constructive power of both as the psalmist is trapped in distress amongst people that speak slanderously. Deceitful talk (social unrest) and dislocation are two pieces of a unified psalm, and ritual speech is envisioned as a solution to this dire situation.

*Psalms 121*²³

Psalms 121 begins with a statement and rhetorical question of the supplicant, "I lift my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?" (v.1b). The interpretive

²² Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 462.

²³ This is the only psalm with a varying superscription. "There is not, thus far, any persuasive explanation for this divergence, which, incidentally, was not followed by the ancient versions. Some authors think that this may be a scribal error, while others consider the possibility that this, in contrast to the statement of the situation in Ps 120, is meant to signal the beginning of the pilgrimage or return to Zion." Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 320.

issues of the psalm are primarily centered on the question of place as the psalm begins by directing one's attention to "the hills." (v. 1b) Similar to the previous psalm, the geographic references in the psalm have been the source of much debate about the setting and purpose of the psalm. In this piece of liturgy, are the mountains associated with the tradition of "the mountains" as a place of divine dwelling, perhaps as the ancient pillars of creation, or are the mountains referenced as a dangerous place through which one must travel and therefore require assistance from the divine? Taken literally, some commentators situate the petitioner as a wanderer in Bedouin territory, drawing from the previous psalm's references to distant lands. More frequently the hills are identified as the hills surrounding Jerusalem, combining a reference to the hills with the pilgrim psalter hypothesis, an indication that the pilgrim is coming within sight of Jerusalem.²⁴

Gerstenberger is representative of this view, arguing that "pilgrims are approaching Jerusalem and watching out for their God. The hills around the Holy City with their sanctuaries do not offer any divine helpers."²⁵ Gerstenberger also notes that *hārîm* may also connote mountaintop sanctuaries (Deut 12:2; Jer 2:20; Ezek 18:6, 11, 15, etc.) and is not limited to hills around Jerusalem. Neither Zion nor Jerusalem are mentioned in this psalm, and Gerstenberger sees no reason to exclude this psalm and the blessings within it from having been used in local services before incorporated into the collection. Brueggemann and Bellinger take the view that the

²⁴ See John T. Willis, "Psalm 121 as a Wisdom Poem," *HAR* 11 (1987) 435–51, 441–443 for a history of scholarship on the life setting of the psalm.

²⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 322.

opening question is not an acknowledgment that YHWH is among the mountains, but that the hills are an ominous place.²⁶ The psalmist's sense of displacement is fraught with social and theological meaning.

Psalm 121, however, begins to move toward resolution, or emplacement. In verse 2a the supplicant immediately follows with an answer, an affirmation of confidence that help comes from YHWH.²⁷ Dahood argues that the sense of the phrase "from YHWH" is better captured as "from the home of YHWH."²⁸ Help is envisioned as coming from a place, that is inextricably bound with the person of YHWH.

Answering her own question, the answer functions as a confession of faith in YHWH. "This solemn affirmation of an individual carries with it a highly liturgical epithet of Yahweh: "creator of heaven and earth" (v. 2b)."²⁹ The title "creator of heaven and earth" is exclusive to Book V of the Psalter, and used almost exclusively within the Songs of Ascents. The phrase appears five times in the Psalter, with three occurrences in the Songs of Ascents.

Maker of Heaven and Earth. The phrase "Maker of Heaven and Earth" is a formula that concludes Ps 124, a collective song of thanksgiving, as well as Ps 134,

²⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 525.

²⁷ As Gerstenberger notes, looking out of help and expecting it are common in the Hebrew Bible. Only Job 6:13 asks this question expressing a need for help without receiving it or an answer. Gerstenberger considers this introduction a type of plaintive question in the same vein as the "how long?" clauses.

²⁸ Dahood, *Psalms III*, 200.

²⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 322.

the concluding psalm of the collection. In Norman Habel's tradition-critical study he explores the relationship between this phrase, associated exclusively with the divine name YHWH in the Songs of Ascents, and the possible forerunner "El Elyon, Maker (*qōnēh*) of Heaven and Earth," of Gen 14:19, 22.³⁰ Habel concludes that with the description "El Elyon," one can draw a few conclusions about the character of the described deity. 1) A god, El, is involved with Abraham and Abraham's association with this deity remains in the narrative and blessing of Gen 14. 2) El is the object of worship by patriarchs in Genesis and is also identified with YHWH in covenant with Israel. 3) El takes on various epithets, which probably originate in a variety of sources. Formulations similar to "El Elyon" such as El Shaddai and El Olam suggest the designation as a title.

Habel argues that the title "El Elyon, Maker (*qōnēh*) of Heaven and Earth," belongs to the Jerusalem cult and was eventually adapted "YHWH, Maker (*ʾōśēh*) of Heaven and Earth." He observes that 1) Both have a "common formulaic structure in cultic contexts. The verbal ascription appears in participial form. 2) In most of the uses in the Psalter the title is tied to a blessing context. Habel concludes, "In short, the dispensation of blessing seems to have been intimately related to this divine title from the time of its entry into the Israelite Jerusalem cult as part of earlier El shrine tradition."³¹ What of the transition of the appellative participle from *qōnēh* to *ʾōśēh* in the title? Habel claims that later Yahwism was averse to applying sexual,

³⁰ Norman C. Habel, "'Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth': A Study in Tradition Criticism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 321–337.

³¹ Habel, "Maker of Heaven and Earth," 324.

procreative language to YHWH. According to Habel, *’ōśēh* does not have a Ugaritic cognate, and perhaps distances from the procreative aspects suggested by *qōnēh*.

Within the Psalter, Habel asks “What lines of continuity or clues of discontinuity can be traced between the cultic use of this formula in the Psalms and the El tradition which formulated its prototype in Genesis 14?”³² The first occurrence of the formula is in Ps 115:15. Like the blessing formula in Gen 14:19, the first usage follows the proclamation of a blessing on an entity. In the case of Gen 14 the entity is Abraham and in Ps 115 it is presumably the cultic community. Verse 12 of the psalm is a fourfold blessing on groups of the community, followed by a double appeal for blessing in verses 14–15. First, the appeal is made for increase in number, and secondly, YHWH is appealed to as “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” an appeal to cultic power. In this context, the formula functions as a title for evoking blessing in worship. Habel notes the nature of this deity in verses 3 and 16 is consistent with El, one who is a high god noted for distance and difference. “The presence of this particular cosmic polarity in the context of liturgical blessing suggests that the formula in question continued to live in the mood and thought-patterns of its El cult origins.”³³

Habel connects each of the occurrences of the title in the Psalms with a cultic situation. In Ps 134 the title is preceded by the piel form of *BRK*, which Habel claims as the “distinctly theological mode of that verb.”³⁴ In this psalm, there is

³² Habel, “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” 326.

³³ Habel, “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” 327.

³⁴ Habel, “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” 327.

acknowledgement of a mediating vehicle of blessing. Psalm 134 follows traditional ANE patterns of invoking blessing from sacred sites. Psalm 121 invokes the cultic formula in a plea for blessing and protection on a journey. Habel connects El and cosmic mountains with this invocation of YHWH. Psalm 124 recounts the help of YHWH in the face of an attack by a human enemy. The help of YHWH is not mediated through the mountains, in this case, but through the name of YHWH. Psalm 146 is an example of a formula that has undergone an expansion. “As a cultic title, ‘Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth,’ has continued to live in blessing-type contexts similar to that from which it arose in the early Israelite cult.”³⁵ Habel traces the formula back to the El cultic tradition, and proposes that the function and characteristics have been transferred to YHWH in similar situations.

Tucker identifies the phrase as one of several employed in Book V of the Psalter that assert YHWH’s rule even over the seemingly absolute power of the Persian Empire.³⁶ The participle *’ōśēh* “creates a link with Deutero-Isaiah and the extensive usage of the term in that collection” although the exact phrase is not repeated.³⁷ Tucker argues for a more nuanced use of the phrase than in Deutero-Isaiah, where the emphasis seems to be placed on the ongoing creation and protection of the world.³⁸ Used as a title, YHWH, the one who makes heaven and

³⁵ Habel, “Maker of Heaven and Earth,” 332.

³⁶ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power*, 142.

³⁷ For example, Isa 41:4, 20; 43:7, 19, 45:7, 9; 46:4, 10, 11; 48:3, 5, 11. Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power*, 147.

³⁸ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power*, 147.

earth, the “emphasis resides in the claim that it is Yahweh who has the power...As the ‘maker,’ Yahweh stands over his creation as a king does over an empire, prepared to address those who challenge his rule or threaten his people.”³⁹ In Ps 121, and again in Ps 124, the titular use of the phrase is coupled with a recognition of Yahweh as “help.”

Psalms 121, Continued

The direction of discourse shifts following the initial question and answer, suggesting an answer by another participant.⁴⁰ Whereas in Ps 120 the social alienation is emphasized by the psalmist’s unanswered plea, the psalmist’s assurance of faith in YHWH is now placed in a dialogue. The identity of the dialogue participants in this psalm is undefined; divergences in the interpretation of the psalm stem largely from one’s interpretation of the number of “speakers” in the psalm, ranging from an internal dialogue, a dialogue among at least two actors, or a dialogue only in a literary sense. Hermann Gunkel describes the psalm as a dialogue between layperson setting out on pilgrimage and priest offering assurance of YHWH’s protection along the way.⁴¹ A similar view by Volz connects the psalm with pilgrimage, but situates the psalm in a family religious context rather than an official priestly dialogue.⁴² Volz proposes a dialogue between son and a father imparting blessing for pilgrimage. Still others envision a dialogue upon arrival to the hills near

³⁹ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power* 147–148.

⁴⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 319.

⁴¹ Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 192.

⁴² Willis, “Psalm 121,” 438.

Jerusalem, among pilgrims, or between pilgrims as they return home.⁴³ Kittel recognizes the dialogic components of the psalm, but proposes that the psalm was constructed for use as an internal dialogue, so that the petitioner becomes his own priest. Removed from the temple and his homeland, the supplicant makes use of a liturgical form to carry out an internal dialogue when he cannot access an officiant.⁴⁴ Within the collection, this psalm moves the supplicant from alienation to conversation as the supplicant moves from the margins to the center, from dislocation on the way to the center.

The initial supplicant who poses and answers the rhetorical question with a statement of faith is then addressed in the second person and offered assurances that affirm the supplicant's decision to place faith in YHWH. Verses 3–8 can be divided into three units of assurances that are bound together by the repetitive use of the verb *SMR*.⁴⁵ In six verses, YHWH as keeper is referenced six times, starting with the presentation of a vigilant guardian and culminating with a blessing over the supplicant's life that endures into eternity.

Verses 3–4 comprise the first unit of assurances spoken directly to the supplicant. Throughout this unit, the divine name is not invoked, rather, the speaker references YHWH indirectly as “the one who keeps Israel” (v. 3b). YHWH, the one who creates, is the one who keeps the individual, and is the same as the one

⁴³ Willis, “Psalm 121,” 442. Paul Volz, “Zur Auslegung von Psalm 12 und 121,” *NKZ* 36 (1925): 576–85.

⁴⁴ Willis, “Psalm 121,” 442. Rudolf Kittel, *Die Psalmen, übersetzt und erklärt*, 4th ed., KAT 13 (Leipzig: A Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1914), 438–439.

⁴⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 323.

who keeps Israel. The first assurance is formulated negatively, starting with the affirmation that the psalmist's foot will not be "shaken." This affirmation is frequent in poetic literature.⁴⁶ Paired with the mention of the mountains, some have interpreted this literally as a reference to safe traveling conditions for the pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. In almost all cases, however, the phrase is used poetically to speak of protection against enemies and security. In Deuteronomy the one whose foot slips is one who is receiving just punishment for their wickedness (32:35); in the Psalms we also see the one whose foot does not slip as one who has kept to YHWH's path (Ps 17:5), and who has been protected by YHWH (Ps 66:9).

Although enemies are not described, the threat of enemies looms large in the dialogue. The language of the assurances invokes political-military threats throughout, as seen in the rather unique assurance that closes out the first unit, that YHWH will not take a nap while he is tasked with watching over the supplicant.⁴⁷ This psalm assures the supplicant that YHWH does not sleep, but elsewhere the danger lurks that YHWH could be asleep on the job, and sometimes he needs to be awakened from slumber. (Pss 7:6; 44:23, 59:5, Isa 51) "The word *nûm*, 'snooze off,' is rare in the OT (see Isa 5:27; 56:10; Ps 76:6); it may be colloquial for *yšn*, 'sleep.'"⁴⁸ In the Song of the Vineyard, the phrase is employed against Israel, as a nation whose soldiers don't slip or "snooze off" runs toward Israel (Isa 5:27) and in Deutero-

⁴⁶ See Deut 32:35; Ps 13:4; Ps 16:8; Ps 17:5; Ps 38:16.

⁴⁷ Although in his discussion of empires in Book V Tucker addresses a selection of psalms in the Songs of Ascents, he does not discuss Ps 121.

⁴⁸ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 323.

Isaiah Israel's guards are charged with slumbering while wild animals come to devour them (56:10).

The second and third units, verses 5–6 and 7–8, are formulated as personal addresses and tied together by the *Leitwort* “keep.” As the first assurance opens with confidence in YHWH’s careful watch over the psalmist’s foot, the second assurance stresses YHWH’s protection over the psalmist’s right hand. The image of verse 5, of YHWH’s watchful care providing shadow over the right hand, is unique to this psalm. The image of the psalmist as in God’s shadow, under God’s wings, or under God’s hand are familiar, but the shadow over the right hand is distinctive. Gillmayr-Bucher argues that spatially this is an expression of the intimacy between the psalmist and YHWH. “The specific localization [sic] of the shadow focuses on one special aspect. In the body language of the psalms the right hand refers to a man’s deeds as well as power. God’s shadow is over his hand and thus his closeness guarantees the psalmist security and stability for his actions.”⁴⁹ The keeper of Israel is the keeper of the individual as well. The assurance continues the military associations even in the midst of creation language, as the supplicant is assured that the sun and moon will not “smite” him.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 495.

⁵⁰ While YHWH guarding the psalmist from the sun is a more common image, the addition of the moon has perplexed interpreters. Some have proposed that the danger of the moon introduces mythological associations, or that the dangers of night travel are acknowledged. It seems likely within this unit that the paired images of the sun and the moon represent YHWH’s complete protection. Even at night, YHWH will not doze off while standing guard.

Closing the psalm, in verses 7–8 the imperfect form of *šmr* appears three times at the center of blessings for the suppliant. The final assurance shares a certain structural formulation with the Aaronic blessing, invoking the divine name three times in three lines. Whereas the Aaronic blessing employs six different verbs “with two verbs in each line describing his gracious actions in favor of the community and its members,” this variation on the blessing focuses solely on YHWH’s guarding or keeping.⁵¹ Gerstenberger observes, “Our psalm text...dwells on *šmr* exclusively, puts Yahweh to the front, and introduces space and time as fundamental extensions of God’s personal care (v. 8).”⁵²

Summary

Spatially, Prinsloo situates Ps 121 as the middle psalm of a triad that moves from negative to positive space. Prinsloo argues for a general feeling of “ascent” and movement within Ps 121 that culminates with the arrival at Jerusalem, positive space, in the following psalm. The movement from negative to positive space also entails a movement from the private to public sphere, as the psalmist invokes protection over Israel.⁵³ In the previous psalm the suppliant is envisioned as dwelling in some sort of unsure social situation. The threat in Ps 121 is not explicitly social, but the threats of enemies loom large in the dialogue as the suppliant receives assurances of YHWH’s protection from threats framed in military terms. The psalmist takes the view that the all-sovereign creator is also the keeper of the

⁵¹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 324.

⁵² Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 324.

⁵³ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 464.

individual's path, both a wide-angle view of YHWH's "place" as maker of heaven and earth and guardian at the psalmist's right hand.

Psalm 120 opens with a recollection of YHWH's history of answering the psalmist's cry, followed by a description of the slanderous attack of enemies and the psalmist's yearning for peace despite being surrounded by violence. Psalm 121 opens similarly, with a pronouncement of the psalmist's trust in YHWH's response. Instead of words of violence spoken over the psalmist, this highly developed liturgical response pronounces words of peace and protection over the psalmist. YHWH does not speak the words, but the psalmist is, in this psalm, no longer threatened by alienation, but is joined into the community of Israel. The one who keeps the psalmist is the one who keeps Israel. Psalm 121 continues to address a perceived threat of the psalmist, as in Ps 120, with a vague notion of threat coming from "the hills" and in the danger of movement in open space.

Psalm 122

Moving from the "open space" of Ps 121, the psalmist turns toward Jerusalem. In Ps 120 the psalmist's plea for peace was at an individual level, and none could be found amidst the chaos of the wilderness. Psalm 122 is the first of four in the collection that includes an additional attribution to David and the first mention of David in this collection appears in the middle of this psalm.⁵⁴ Seybold divides the psalm into two parts: verses 1–5 and verses 6–9 as recollection and

⁵⁴ That the reference to David is a much later addition is apparent in the fact that this attribution is not witnessed in the LXX and in many Hebrew manuscripts.

wishes, while Weber identifies five strophes arranged chiastically (vv. 1–2; 3–4b; 4c–5; 6–7; 8–9).⁵⁵ Zenger argues for the three-part division after verse 2 on the basis of syntactic and thematic considerations. This threefold division is underscored by the threefold appearance of Jerusalem, the tetragrammaton, and a threefold wish for peace. The threefold movement of the psalm is also reinforced by three uses of *bayît*. The psalm is arranged around these three house references, beginning with the house of YHWH (v. 1c), the house of David (v. 5b), and concluding with the “house of YHWH our God,” (v. 9a) a final emphasis on communal identity.

Gerstenberger sees this psalm as an interplay between a person and a group, perhaps an officiant and the congregation, although the shifts in discourse are not easily identified through pronoun shifts.⁵⁶ Rolf Jacobson identifies the first quotation (“Let us go!”) as an instance of *spatial deixis*. “Even though the pronouns do not shift but stay in the first person plural, the end of the direct discourse is indicated by a different spatial reference—the psalmist is not *in* Jerusalem.”⁵⁷ The attention to the psalmist’s references to space move the psalm forward.

Following the superscription, the first section opens with the psalmist rejoicing at the recollection of an invitation to journey to the house of YHWH. The first verb, *smh*, “evokes the festal and theological dimensions of the pilgrimage to

⁵⁵ Seybold, *Der Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 480; Hossfeld and Zenger (*Psalms* 3, 335); quoting Beat Weber, *Werkbuch Psalmen*. 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 283.

⁵⁶ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 326.

⁵⁷ Rolf A. Jacobson, ‘Many are Saying’: *The Function of Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTSup 397 (T&T Clark: London, 2004), 21.

Jerusalem” and accordingly the psalm has often been a central psalm for the “pilgrim psalter” reading of the Songs of Ascents.⁵⁸ Gerstenberger notes that verse 1c, the quoted speech “Let us go to the house of YHWH!” takes its form probably from a familiar form of direct discourse, that when paired with the imagery of YHWH’s house, reinforces the household and familial aspects of community life (social). The psalm represents a shift toward a temple which “creates a home for human beings.”⁵⁹

The result of the joyful summons to go to the house of YHWH in verse 2 presents a dilemma in translation. The participial construction is variously translated in the present “Our feet are standing in your gates!” or as a recollection of past action, “Our feet stood/had stood in your gates!”⁶⁰ The translation of the participle is usually determined by one’s view of the psalm’s place in the collection; if one views the psalm as a song for the beginning of a pilgrimage as the collection moves toward arrival in Jerusalem, the past translation is chosen, as an indication that the psalmist has journeyed to Jerusalem before and is looking forward to the present pilgrimage. Alternatively, the psalm can be interpreted as a song for the joyful arrival following the approach of the city (the mountains) described in Ps 121. Seybold views the entire psalm as a memorial composed by a pilgrim departing the city.⁶¹ The translations are influenced by the identification of a dramatic moment:

⁵⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 337.

⁵⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 333.

⁶⁰ Goulder, *Psalms of the Return*, 45; Herbert Donner, ed. “Psalm 122,” in *Aufsätze zum Alten Testament aus vier Jahrzehnten*, BZAW 224 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 190.

⁶¹ Seybold, *Der Wallfahrstpsalmen*, 480.

the arrival, pilgrimage, procession, or departure. What seems more pressing than the dramatic moment, however, is the memorialization of place through speech.

The remaining sections of the psalm are dedicated to remembrance and blessing of Jerusalem. Section 2, verses 3–5, praises Jerusalem as the center of tribal life. The psalmist first speaks of Jerusalem, praising the city-aspect of this place. The short declaration “Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together!” (v. 3) is riddled with interpretive difficulties, primarily related to aspects of time and place. Jerusalem was directly addressed in the previous verse, but the discourse appears to shift away from direct address to speech *about* Jerusalem rather than speech *to* Jerusalem. The verb *BNH* can simply express the city’s original construction, but it can also express the concept of “rebuilding.”⁶² Hossfeld and Zenger note that the use of the *kî* is not a comparative (built like a city), but rather emphasizes that Jerusalem is truly a city, supported by the following description of the city as “bound firmly together,” a “place of protection, security, and community.”⁶³

In verse 4 of this section occurs one of two uses in the entire collection of the verb *LH* related to the superscription, *hamma’ălôt*, describing the “tribes of Yah” going up to Jerusalem.⁶⁴ The upward movement that is associated with the entire collection is here designated for the movement of the community in the past, making pilgrimage as commanded (v.4c). Psalm 122 is one of the few psalms that

⁶² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 333n.d. “After destruction; cf. Pss 51:20; 102:17; 147:2).”

⁶³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 333n.f.

⁶⁴ The second and final occurrence of the verb *LH* is in David’s vow in Ps 132, wherein he vows to not enter his house or “go up” to his bed until YHWH has a house (v.3).

has a connection to pilgrimage in its content, but it is notable that the psalm is connected to the memory of pilgrimage, the pilgrimage of “the tribes of Yah” to Jerusalem in the past. The formulation “tribes of Yah” is entirely unique to the Hebrew Bible, in contrast to the more customary “tribes of Israel.” The use is perhaps an archaizing form, intended to evoke the tribal past, but may also function as a disambiguation meant to reorient the community away from a geographic location to the person of YHWH.

In addition to the significance of Jerusalem as a gathering place for the tribes of Yah, the final praise of Jerusalem in this section begins with the assertion that “indeed there (*smh*) stood thrones for judgment, thrones for the house of David” (v. 5). The use of the place indicator reveals to the audience that the psalmist is not in Jerusalem, but is reminiscing about such a place. Just as the psalmist reminisces in the first section of his feet standing in the gates of Jerusalem, the psalmist reminisces about the thrones of judgment that stood in Jerusalem. Gillmayr-Bucher addresses the spatial significance of the references both to the house of David and the thrones of judgment in this section.

This city is the centre of the social and political space (vv. 4–5). The “thrones of the house of David”...further provide a link to Israel’s history. They are a symbol for the promised stability of the monarchy that remains beyond the destruction of the city. The ‘thrones of judgment’ emphasize another aspect of the centre. As royal residence it is Jerusalem’s duty to provide judgement and justice. These thrones furthermore refer to God’s dwelling place as well as the foundation of YHWH’s thrones.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 491.

The closing of the section, the reference to the house of David, creates a central point surrounded by the references to the house of YHWH in the opening and closing of the psalm. The thrones of David will be taken up again in Ps 132, but here the emphasis on justice reinforces the social aspect of the center.

The final section, verses 6–9, begins with a request, as the psalmist implores the congregation to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (v. 6). In a striking shift in discourse, the quoted prayer is addressed directly to Jerusalem as the psalmist lists out the spaces of the city, paralleling the opening section where the psalmist addressed Jerusalem, “Our feet stood in your gates, Jerusalem” (v. 2). The psalmist speaks peace upon the walls and palaces, moving outward from the “thrones of judgment” mentioned in the previous section. “Verses 8–9 of Psalm 122, in which, uniquely in the Songs of Ascents, Jerusalem is addressed in the second person singular, deliberately bring together the personal and historical/theological aspects.”⁶⁶ The personal/city-space are collapsed into a single concern, intertwining the individual ritual body with the fate of the center of cultic life. The sense of place is narrowed down specifically to this place. The worshippers give thanks not just for the place, or for YHWH in this place, but for the social purposes conducted from there. The psalm presents a plea for peace for this place as one of social justice and order.

⁶⁶ Philip E. Satterthwaite, “Zion in the Songs of Ascents,” in *Zion, City of Our God*, eds. Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 105–128, 119.

Summary

Psalm 122 presents an opportunity for the kind of comparative work that Smith postulates as part of the task of ritual theory, even between systems of hierarchy represented within the Hebrew Bible. Comparing Ps 122 with Ps 48, Hossfeld and Zenger recognize the different “city theology” that Ps 122 presents. Psalm 48 employs imagery of the city as standing on the mountain of Zion, the abode of King YHWH. The great architecture is an affirmation of the great King’s presence in the city. “This ‘visible’ presence of YHWH is interpreted as protection for the inhabitants of the city against hostile armies and as the real symbol of the power of the Great King YHWH.”⁶⁷ Psalm 122 presents a different city theology in its description of Jerusalem. The architecture of the city reminds the psalmist of the community of people there, in the household of YHWH. “Jerusalem is now not celebrated as the residential city of the Great King YHWH, but is remembered as the (former) gathering place of the tribes and the place of royal judgment and presented as the unifying center of the (widely scattered) Israelites.”⁶⁸ Zenger notes that this psalm stands out among the “pilgrim” collection because it does not draw imagery and themes from the familial or agrarian setting. It is akin to Ps 132 in that it “casts a historical-theological arc back to the time of David.”⁶⁹ Although agricultural imagery is not present, the psalm is framed with household references and presents an image of the city as one that is marked by familial relations. Approaching this

⁶⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 337.

⁶⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 337.

⁶⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 336.

text, the challenge of reading an account of the memorialization of topography in dream time of the ancestors that Smith discusses in relation to the Tjilpa myth is parallel to the difficulty presented by interpreting Psalm 122.⁷⁰ In this recollection, Jerusalem is (re)built for the readers, not upon the mythic mountain of YHWH, but on the peace of the community, the memory that brought the tribes of Yah to this place long before.

Memory and place come together in dramatic fashion in the closing psalm of the first triad. Psalm 122 opens with a memory of the psalmist's experience in community, "I was glad when they said to me 'Let us go to the house of YHWH!'" (v.1b). The psalmist's glad memory is twofold: the joy of community, and the joy of the place where YHWH dwells. The psalmist also recounts the journeys of the "tribes of Yah" to Jerusalem, connecting the individual experience of the house of YHWH to the communal experience of place.

In Ps 122, the psalmist describes the physical space of Jerusalem and celebrates the arrival in this space. The movement is also from personal reflection to collective experience, or as Prinsloo describes, private space to public space.⁷¹ Reading forward in the collection, we see in Ps 122 the positive aspects of one who longs for the peace of Jerusalem, who remembers the tribes going up to Jerusalem, remembers its place as one of political and social importance, and who recalls its walls and towers. Although the importance of the place, Jerusalem, is certainly at the forefront, this psalm does not hint at the cosmological significance of Jerusalem, but

⁷⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 13.

⁷¹ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 464.

rather the psalmist echoes the social implications of Jerusalem's peace. The flourishing of Jerusalem, in this instance, is not for the sake of the cosmos, but "for the sake of my relatives and friends," and "for the sake of the house of YHWH our God." The familial terms stand at the forefront. It is in the structure that the hierarchical relations of the replicable system related to Jerusalem. This psalm establishes the house of YHWH and the significance of its memorialization, then allows for the household imagery to be transferred spatially to individual households, as will be seen moving forward in the collection.

Psalms 120–122 Summary

Psalm 120 sets the psalmist at the margins, Ps 121 acknowledges the threats of the world in broad terms, while Ps 122 brings Jerusalem into clear focus. Gillmayr-Bucher identifies the first three psalms as setting out for the center.⁷² The first triad of psalms, which opens with the psalmist suffering alone under violent words, yearning to speak peace, closes with the psalmist speaking peace directly to Jerusalem, memorializing both the place and the communal experience of the house of YHWH.

The Second Triad: Psalms 123–125

The first triad closes with a memory and wish for Jerusalem, addressed in the first person. The second triad takes up the familial language and reinforces YHWH's role in the protection of this household. The process of systemic replication of what

⁷² Gillmayr-Bucher, "Images of Space," 498.

takes place in Jerusalem is expressed in the content of the collection moving forward as the house of YHWH is expanded to the houses of the community.

Psalm 123

Psalm 123 begins the second triad of the collection. Where Ps 120 begins “To YHWH,” recalling a direct cry for help, followed by Ps 121 which recounts the psalmist lifting up her eyes to the mountains, Ps 123 opens with the cry “To you have I lifted my eyes” (v.1b). Psalm 123 opens in similar fashion to Ps 121, with the psalmist lifting up her eyes, not to the hills, but to YHWH. The “place” that the psalmist looks is transformed to the person of YHWH.

The psalm falls in two sections, verses 1–2 and verses 3–4. The “eyes” focus the first section of the psalm, that artfully move the discourse forward as one follows the gaze of the psalmist. The first verse follows the eyes up to heaven, to the one “enthroned in heaven.” Gillmayr-Bucher writes:

Social distance and spatial distance are combined in the image of the eyes of the servants aiming at their mistress/master and the psalmist’s eyes aiming at God. Thus a well known schema of orientation, instruction, but also care and compassion is shown as a spatial orientation and applied to symbolic space.⁷³

The psalmist first looks to the deity, directly addressing the deity. Next, the psalmist turns the metaphor directed outward. “Behold! Like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their master, like the eyes of a slave woman on the hand of her mistress,” verse 2a–d employs both the singular and plural and male and female metaphors in this comparison. Hossfeld and Zenger make a distinction between the translation

⁷³ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 496.

“servant” and “slave woman” in verse 2d, noting the social implications of the term *šīpḥah* which corresponds to the relationship of master to slave. A slave woman is one who “has the lowest position in the community of house and family, who has no rights and is counted among the material possessions.”⁷⁴ The expression of trust and plea for mercy from the “one who is enthroned in heaven” comes from the broadest possible social distance in a household. In the relationship of slave to master, the hand can be an instrument of punishment or protection, and the hope expressed in this psalm is that YHWH will act in protection, a theme which is carried on in Ps 124.⁷⁵

After the two comparisons, the direction of discourse shifts to address YHWH in the third person and the speaker includes the community, “so are our eyes to YHWH, our God, until he has mercy on us.” The divine name is employed frequently and exclusively throughout the collection, and here is one of the few times that the addition “our God” is included in the epithet, emphasizing the communal turn and echoing the closing of the previous psalm where the psalmist prays for the good of the “house of YHWH, our God” (122:9a).

Although YHWH is not named until the end of the second verse, a “direct and obvious connection” is noted between the addressee and the deity.⁷⁶ This closeness is heard, or felt, in the request, yet spatially there is also a great distance envisioned, as the first address to the deity is “you who are enthroned in the heavens” (v.1b).

⁷⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 347.

⁷⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 347.

⁷⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 531.

The psalmist has already lifted eyes to the mountains, but in Ps 123 the psalmist's gaze extends beyond the mountains, which were acknowledged as the creation of YHWH, up to heaven.⁷⁷ Although the first verse establishes the distance between the psalmist and the deity by asserting that the psalmist is looking up from below to a deity above, the rest of the psalm envisions the closeness of someone within arm's reach, as the psalmist compares her position to that of a servant looking to a master's hand, a maidservant to her mistress's hand.

The second section of the psalm, verses 3–4, is a plea for mercy. In this psalm, YHWH is not the cause of the strife, but rather is the one who has power to stop the ones causing strife for the community. Brueggemann and Bellinger emphasize the socio-economic aspect of this cry for protection against this group of enemies described as the “self-assured” and the “proud” (v. 4). They write:

We may learn more about that contempt and scorn by noting the descriptive phrase “those who are at ease.” Reference to the same term in the more familiar passage of Amos 6:1 suggests that the reference is to the economically affluent who are arrogant, self-indulgent, and indifferent to those who have less.⁷⁸

Following the wish for Jerusalem as a place of peace and stability, the second triad opens with a recognition that the peace and security is not presently experienced by the community and that YHWH must directly respond to the plight of the people. Extending the household metaphor, Hossfeld and Zenger assert that “Since they [Israel] know themselves, as ‘YHWH’s male and female slaves,’ to be his property and household, the reasons given in verses 3–4 signify a special challenge to YHWH:

⁷⁷ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 465.

⁷⁸ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 532.

ultimately, this contempt and scorn fall on the ‘master of the house,’ YHWH himself!”⁷⁹ The social scorn of the alienated individual that was seen in the opening of the collection is now framed as a threat to the household of YHWH.

Summary

Brueggemann and Bellinger call this prayer one of the “loveliest prayers in all of Scripture,” because of its simple trust in YHWH. Alternatively, Benjamin Segal laments that “Here there is no expression of confidence. Instead, the final words of the psalm provide the lasting impression: ‘the ridicule of the complacent, the contempt of the arrogant,’ and that the psalmist’s place at the master’s hand is one of unknown result. Will the master punish, instruct, or protect?”⁸⁰ YHWH’s place is established, yet the place of the community in relation to YHWH is still uncertain as it awaits response from YHWH.

Psalm 123 does not present a straightforward discussion on place or memory. However, scholars have previously recognized the importance of place carrying forward in Ps 123. Prinsloo identifies the spatial storyline in Ps 123 as carrying forward the theme of public contempt from Ps 120, a negative experience in public space, ascending “above the level of geographical Jerusalem, to Yahweh in heaven.”⁸¹ Hossfeld and Zenger likewise relate Ps 123 to the previous psalms as a continuation of the idea of the house of YHWH. “The motif of the Temple as ‘the

⁷⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 348.

⁸⁰ Benjamin J. Segal, *A New Psalm: The Psalms as Literature*, (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2013), 600.

⁸¹ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 465.

house of YHWH' is taken up from Ps 122 and given social and political shape: the petitioners present themselves as members of the 'household' of YHWH."⁸² They submit as one to the master or mistress of the house, yet at the same time they expect the one in charge of the household to act as protector for the weak and vulnerable. Like Ps 120, as the opening of the first triad, Ps 123 recounts the verbal scorn of others, but instead of envisioning himself as one without place, the psalmist is now in a world where YHWH is enthroned above, yet within arm's reach in YHWH's household.

Psalms 124

This psalm is the second of four psalms with the additional superscription, "of David."⁸³ The psalm can be divided into two sections, verses 1–5 which lists the possibilities of the destruction of the household and thankfulness that this was not reality. The psalm begins with a call to the community to recall YHWH's faithfulness. The opening recounts the alternative to the actual outcome: What if YHWH had not been on our side? What would have happened then? And the answer is: nothing good. Without describing events in detail, but instead putting the attack of enemies in metaphorical terms, the community is called to recollect YHWH's salvation.

⁸² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 349.

⁸³ The attribution to David throughout the Songs of Ascents for these particular psalms does not have a clear answer. With regard to Ps 124, Hossfeld and Zenger suggest that the attribution was part of a final "Davidizing" redaction of the Psalter, which gave this particular psalm a historical bent. The victories described in the psalm become David's victories, and relate back to David's conquering of Jerusalem. I find this suggestion of the superscription relating the psalm to the conquering of Jerusalem untenable. The imagery of the psalm is clearly indicative of an oppressive force moving in on Israel as the victims, pressing in on them, not their conquering of a new territory.

Brueggemann and Bellinger offer that “the purpose of these verses is not to entertain such a dismal option but in fact to reject it as an empty risk because YHWH is faithful.”⁸⁴ If the previous psalm leaves the community waiting for response from YHWH, Ps 124 leaves no doubt that being in the household of YHWH is the place of security and protection and through the recollection of the communal experience they affirm YHWH’s place as maker of heaven and earth.

Psalm 124 begins with an invitation to recall and explore an alternative past with the declaration: “Were YHWH not for us,” then invites the community to join in the memory. Psalm 124 incorporates the liturgical phrase, “Let Israel say!” seen in Ps 118 and again in the collection in Ps 129. Psalm 124 is a raucous communal acknowledgement of YHWH’s protection from enemies (here described only as *ādām*, man) presented in dramatic mytho-poetic language. Jacobson, in examining the role of direct speech, sees this call to communal response as more than a call for repetition. He writes, “The community quotations can be described as functioning to second or affirm some belief that the psalmist wishes the community to adopt. By speaking the appropriate refrain, the community accepts the proffered belief and takes ownership of it.”⁸⁵ Through this communal memory, the community reaffirms YHWH’s help, echoing the language of the individual in Ps 121.

The psalmist again declares, “Were not YHWH for us,” presumably with the participation of the community now. There are multiple rhetorical possibilities open

⁸⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 534–5.

⁸⁵ Jacobson, *Many are Saying*, 136.

with the opening assertion, also rendered, “If it had not been YHWH who was on our side.” Brueggemann and Bellinger posit that the statement presents an impossibility, that the psalmist does not believe there is any other possible outcome. “The ‘if’ that is entertained and only by inference rejected is the prospect that YHWH would not have been actively in solidarity with Israel. It is scarcely a thinkable condition in Israel, but for rhetorical effect the psalm entertains that option.”⁸⁶ Alternatively, the rhetorical statement opens up several different alternate histories. The emphasis on YHWH opens the possibility for another deity in charge of Israel’s fate. Put positively, the psalmist could also have said, “If it had been Marduk/Molech/Baal on our side” and the consequences would stand. If it had been Marduk on our side, we would have been swallowed up by our enemies. It is first and foremost a recognition of YHWH’s sovereignty above the other deities, a statement that is solidified in the final proclamation as maker of heaven and earth. Additionally, if it had not been YHWH who was on our side acknowledges that YHWH could not have been on Israel’s side. Put positively “If it had been that the Lord was on their side”...these things would have happened. This opening and result (Israel’s protection and salvation) solidify YHWH’s place as sovereign creator and unchallenged by any other deity.

The world imagined without YHWH’s help is one of chaotic space, not the ordered world that YHWH’s household experiences. Two images are used to imagine the terrible alternate past, those of ravenous monster and raging waters.

⁸⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 535.

While “ascent” is generally represented as a move up toward positive space, the spatial imagery here is of a piling on: being swallowed up, swept over, risen over.

In the turn toward the positive, actual outcome in verses 6–8, the water imagery disappears and is replaced by a different image: the bird and hunter/predator. The bird imagery is reminiscent of Sennacherib’s claim regarding the siege on Jerusalem that the city was shut up “like a bird in a cage.” The psalm need not be referencing Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem to call to mind the image of a city under siege, in contrast to the peaceful city wished for in Ps 122. The psalmist blesses YHWH for not “giving over” the community to the teeth of the enemy. What is perhaps overlooked by blessing is that in the recounting of this blessing, it is revealed that YHWH did first give them as prey to the enemy (Heb: *ādām*). The psalmist declares “We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped” (v. 7).

In the final stanza, the recounting of the community’s rescue is structured in three parts. The first proclamation, the blessing expressed to YHWH, is of course, positive. But the implications are not protection, but relenting: YHWH “has not given us as prey to their teeth” when paired with the following proclamation: “We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.” Within the metaphor of deliverance from a threatening situation, Israel is the agent of action. The psalmist does not declare, “YHWH released us like a bird from a cage, YHWH broke the snare, YHWH released us!” This agency of Israel is followed by the final liturgical formula, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” As a restatement of the first blessing of YHWH in verse 6 it

is appropriate, however. The implication of YHWH not giving over Israel as prey is a recognition that YHWH could, in fact, do such a thing. Drawing from the reflections in the first stanza, the expression of the things that could happen if YHWH were not on Israel's side become all the more threatening.

Summary

In Ps 124 Israel speaks as a collective witness to YHWH's "keeping" of Israel. Like Ps 121, the middle Psalm of the first triad, Ps 124 concludes with the acknowledgment that help comes from YHWH, maker of heaven and earth. The Psalm explores the space of an alternate memory, and then the reality of YHWH's protection, while reasserting YHWH's role as maker of heaven and earth, sovereign not only over his household (see Ps 123) but over any chaotic threat.

Psalm 125

Similar to the first triad (Ps 120–122), this second triad concludes with a reflection on Jerusalem. In this triad, the psalmist's stability and the stability of Zion culminate with a reflection that extends beyond the Temple to the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. The ones faithful to YHWH and the city of Jerusalem are described as analogous, and consequently under the protection of YHWH.⁸⁷ "The psalm begins with two analogies that affirm the *known reality* of Jerusalem and then imagine the *less known reality* of the faithful. Jerusalem cannot be "moved" (see Ps

⁸⁷ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 536.

46); that is, destabilized and made insecure.”⁸⁸ The characteristics of place are transferred onto the people.

Psalms 124 falls into three sections, verses 1–2, 3, and 4–5. The first section of the psalm employs a similar analogical technique to that of Ps 123, using chiasm to express a hierarchical relationship between the people and YHWH. Hossfeld and Zenger map the relationship: “From a stylistic point of view there is a chiastic arrangement: ‘those who trust in YHWH’ (A)—comparison ‘like Mount Zion’ (B)—comparison ‘like the mountains round about Jerusalem’ (B’)—‘YHWH round about his people’ (A’).”⁸⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger do not include the references to time in the chiastic map, which add another dimension to the analogy. Just as Mt. Zion is stable and will be inhabited forever, so will YHWH surround the people “from this time on and forevermore.” (v. 2c)

The opening analogy imagines the ones who trust in YHWH as Mount Zion. And the trait that the psalmist uses to make the comparison is this: the mountain cannot be moved, and abides forever. Of the available vocabulary of Zion, the psalmist chooses this trait to compare the people and Zion. In a beautiful convergence, YHWH is imagined as the mountains all around Jerusalem. Here we have the fascinating image of the faithful ones at the “center” and YHWH surrounding the center, which requires a new mental map with the people taking place at the center. It is here in the closing psalm of the triad that the system is remapped.

⁸⁸ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 537.

⁸⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 361.

Verse 3 makes a statement about “the land allotted to the righteous” in another convergence. The “scepter of wickedness” will not be on the land of the righteous, and therefore the righteous will not do wicked things. The complexity of this assurance, paired with the images in the first two verses, are fascinating in light of the examination of place with a rich understanding of the depth of this concept and the social structures involved. In the opening stanzas, we have the flipping of the concept of the center with the people in the middle and YHWH envisioned as occupying the space around the people in a protective role. Then, in the center section of the psalm, verse 3, a new analogy is introduced describing the relationship between the “scepter of wickedness” and the righteous, or the king and the people. “The city is safe against intruders; as a consequence, the people of Israel will not do evil. Thus the reassurance is “like king, like people”: no bad kings, ergo, no destructive people. Verse 3 traces the practical result of the assurance of verses 1–2.”⁹⁰

In the final section, verses 4–5, Brueggemann and Bellinger’s assertion can be carried a step further—not only will the people act in righteousness if the king acts in righteousness, so will the people act in righteousness if YHWH acts in righteousness, i.e. holding up his end of the bargain, protecting the people and the city. This idea is emphasized verses 4–5 as the psalmist implores YHWH to act in accordance with the Torah just as the Torah-keepers are striving to do. The psalmist pleads, “Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in

⁹⁰ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 537.

their hearts. But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways the LORD will lead away with evildoers” (vv. 4–5ab). It is hard not to hear the echoes of those who were not dealt with according to their actions reverberating in this call. As Brueggemann and Bellinger note, “this is an odd rhetorical interface between petition and instruction.”⁹¹ The psalmist at the same time asks YHWH for assurance and holds YHWH to the same standard that is required of the people. This assurance is made all the more striking by the confluence of imagery in the opening of the psalm: the people, like YHWH, are mountains, unmovable.

Psalms 123–135 Summary

Prinsloo notes that Ps 125 parallels Ps 122 in that Jerusalem is mentioned at the closing of a triad.⁹² The imagery of Jerusalem as the place of kinship is extended in Ps 125; whereas in Ps 122 the psalmist wishes peace and safety upon the walls and towers of the city, in Ps 125, the imagery of Jerusalem is expanded out to the mountains surrounding Jerusalem and the city-center is transferred onto the body of the people who comprise the center. Much like the movement from mountains to heavens as the space of YHWH’s power and presence, in this psalm the kinship imagery is stretched from city to surrounding land so that the center can be mapped and memorialized in the people’s experience.

⁹¹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 538.

⁹² Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 466.

Conclusion

The protective presence of YHWH is explored and culminates with YHWH surrounding the people as the mountains surround Zion. Prinsloo writes “Psalms 123–125 echo the spatial orientation of Psalms 120–122, but interpret it on an abstract and emotional level.”⁹³ He writes

In Psalms 120–122 the movement was upwards. Here the starting point is YHWH who is enthroned in heaven (Psalm 123). He alone prevents Israel from plunging into the depths of *sheol* (Psalm 124). His protective presence, symbolised by Mount Zion and Jerusalem (Psalm 125), ensures the survival of his people in the midst of negative imagined and lived space, the experience of being off-centre, the target of proud and arrogant people.⁹⁴

What Prinsloo is identifying as the “abstract and emotional level,” this dissertation identifies as the remapping of a ritual system that stresses the centrality of Zion as the place where the community is built through memory.

⁹³ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 467.

⁹⁴ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 467.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transferring the Center

In the first two triads, this study has argued for the movement from personal to public space, negative to positive, with each triad culminating in an examination of Jerusalem. The first triad memorializes Jerusalem as the center of social and political life, while the second triad places the community, analogous to Jerusalem, in the center with YHWH's protective presence surrounding this household of YHWH. We see in the structure and content of the Songs of Ascents a reflection on emplacement, the replication of a hierarchical system in the everyday lives of the people of Israel. In this chapter, the center established at Jerusalem is transferred into the life of the individual and the community.

Psalms 126–128

The third triad extends the household of YHWH imagery to the reality of everyday life. Hossfeld and Zenger, who do not divide the Songs of Ascents into triads, make a compelling argument for the close relationship of Ps 126–128. They write,

Compositionally, Psalms 126–128 are chiastically related and are placed as a frame around Psalm 127 in the center: Ps 126:1–3 and Ps 128:5–6 have as their theme Zion as the place of God's caring concern; Psalm 126:4–6 and Ps 128:1–4 offer miniature portraits of everyday farm life. The result is a sequence of imaged worlds: Zion—family—family—Zion.¹

¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 378.

Prinsloo, examining the spatial aspects of the collection, frames it this way: “Psalm 128 ends where Psalm 126 started: in public space, with YHWH as the only source of blessing and prosperity, both for his people at large and for each of his individual members.”² Viewing the collection through the lens of Smith’s ritual theory, these observations about the images of space in the collection take on greater significance. The collection maps the ritual significance of Zion onto the community.

Psalms 126

The next triad opens with a wistful remembrance of Zion, recounting YHWH’s salvation and culminating with a cry for the restoration of the people expressed through agricultural imagery. Brueggemann and Bellinger divide the psalm into two parts: the first, where a “celebrative memory” is recounted, and the second, where the psalmist petitions YHWH to perform the same act in the present.³ Questions remain regarding the division of the psalm into two or three parts. Kraus, divides the psalm into three parts, verses 1–3, 4, and 5–6. The three-part division typically rests on the perspective of time in the psalm: verses 1–3 as past, verse 4 as present petition, and verses 5–6 as future.⁴ This study follows the more

² Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 469.

³ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 539.

⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 448.

common two-part division according to the shifts in the direction of discourse (vv. 1–3 about YHWH; vv. 4–6 addressed to YHWH).⁵

The first section opens with a cryptic description of YHWH's turning/returning to Zion along with the description of the people's response: "We were like dreamers." (v. 1c) Both parts of the verse (1b and 1c) contain difficult phrases theologically and linguistically. Gerstenberger writes of the opening phrase, "we are not too sure about the spelling and meaning of the key expression *sub sebut*, to 'restore fortune,' 'to bring back captives,' or similarly."⁶ Zenger translates the phrase simply "returned," emphasizing YHWH's movement and action in the past, as opposed to a possible eschatological interpretation.⁷ In this opening triad, we encounter a memory of YHWH taking place and the effect that it has not only on YHWH's people, but upon all people.

The return of YHWH to Zion evokes a threefold response in the psalm. "First, it seemed like a dream, so unreal, so impossible, so beyond explanation, even beyond anticipation."⁸ Dreaming does not consistently have a negative or positive

⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 374. Hossfeld and Zenger offer more evidence for the two-fold division by noting the chiasmic structure of vv. 1–3 and the difficulty of reading v. 4 as an individual unit. They note "The motif of sowing and reaping developed in vv. 5–6 is a concretizing explication of the wadi comparison in v. 4b...Without vv. 5–6, the comparison in v. 4b remains indeterminate," 374.

⁶ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 339.

⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 375. Walter Beyerlin is the most prominent advocate of the eschatological interpretation of Ps 126. In a monograph of Ps 126 he argues for a future, anticipated restoration of Zion that the community trusts will happen. The joy experienced in the present is in anticipation of an already-decided future restoration to come [Walter Beyerlin, *We Are Like Dreamers: Studies in Psalm 126*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978; repr.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982)].

⁸ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 539.

connotation, but to be a dreamer can be a negative quality as often as it can be a positive one. Within the prophets we see the false reports of “ones who dream dreams” in opposition to true prophets, whereas there is also a beautiful vision of the people of God joined in YHWH’s work in Joel 2. Together with laughing and rejoicing, the connotation of being “like ones who dream” is overwhelmingly positive.

The next response is laughter and joy by the people, and finally exclamation by the international community, among the nations, of YHWH’s great deed which Israel then reaffirms (v. 2). Although it is not uncommon for the nations to be invoked in praise of YHWH, here they offer unsolicited acknowledgement of YHWH’s goodness to Israel. “The formula placed in the mouth of the nations runs: ‘Yahweh has done great things’ ...This hymnic praise is taken up by the congregation — enemies provide Yahweh’s hymn! — and made into a victorious song (v. 3).”⁹ When YHWH takes place at Zion, the community experiences the acknowledgement of YHWH’s power by the nations rather than their scorn and wrath.

The second half of the psalm is a petition for another “great thing” to be done by YHWH. Agricultural and natural imagery is used to convey the psalmist’s desire for restoration and Zion is no longer strictly in view. After the celebrative memory of YHWH’s return to Zion, the community petitions YHWH to return “to us” (v. 4a). “The accent is no longer, as in the first section, on the demonstration of YHWH’s power before the world of the nations but on the effective power and nearness of

⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 340.

YHWH to be experienced in everyday life by the community reciting the psalm.”¹⁰ In the plea for YHWH’s return, the psalmist asks that YHWH “return to us like the watercourses in the Negeb.” The image is multifaceted and clarifies the analogy in verse 1 (we were like dreamers) as well as intensifies the spatial imagery of the collection. Considering the reality of the landscape of the Negev, it does not seem possible that there could be watercourses, that the land could flow with life-giving water. Yet, surprisingly, there are! In Ps 124 the images of water are of chaos and destruction, enemies imagined as water sweeping over Israel. “Like the waters of a torrent suddenly flow up and wash away every obstacle, so YHWH should return to his people.”¹¹ The power of the rushing water is used as a positive image emphasizing YHWH’s power. In Ps 126, the nations give praise to YHWH and YHWH is imagined as the water sweeping over the community.

Verses 5–6 draw imagery from the everyday experiences and emotions. Brueggemann and Bellinger propose that the imagery can be viewed as a triple pattern “sow/reap, weep/joy, go out/come home.”¹² One reading is that the plea for “YHWH’s return” is a cry for rain, that the sowing and reaping of the poem is imagined as just that—the planting and harvest of produce. An alternative understanding of the imagery connects “going out” to deportation and “coming home” to the return. This interpretation is strengthened by the double usage of “shavot” which Brueggemann and Bellinger identify as a technical term that “refers

¹⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 377.

¹¹ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 495.

¹² Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 540.

to the complete reversal of fortune that is wrought by the inscrutable power of God.”¹³ But more particularly, “the word is peculiarly utilized in exilic texts to refer to the homecoming of the Jews from deportation brought about by the power of God (see Jer 30:18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:11, 26).”¹⁴ The formulation *bo-yabo* is only used here and in Jer 36, when Jeremiah is in trouble for writing that the king of Babylon will “certainly come” and destroy Jerusalem. YHWH’s return to Zion is memorialized in the first stanza, and in the second stanza the everyday actions of fieldwork are related to the movement of the people in exile and return.

Summary

In Ps 126, the community speaks with one mouth, rejoicing over the remembrance of YHWH’s return to Zion. Following this remembrance, the community pleads for YHWH’s nearness to the community, drawing attention to the relationship between YHWH’s relationship to Zion and YHWH’s relationship to the everyday lives of the community. Following Ps 125, where the analogy is made that the people are like Mount Zion, surrounded by YHWH, the cry for YHWH’s return takes on special poignancy as the community is again mirrored in the fate of Zion.

Psalms 127

At this point in the examination of the collection, we have reached the traditional center point, Ps 127. This psalm is the only one of the collection to bear a

¹³ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 541.

¹⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 541.

Solomonic superscription, and centers on the house and city.¹⁵ Similar to the previous triad, in which the central psalm asks, “What would have happened?” (Ps 124:1b) this central psalm opens with the statement, “If YHWH does not build a house, in vain have the builders labored on it.” (v. 1bc, trans. Hossfeld and Zenger). The psalm first presents the vain effort of life without YHWH’s watch-care, then presents the blessings of care that YHWH provides for both the house and city.

Psalm 127 falls into two evenly divided sections, verses 1–2 and verses 3–5, “which are so clearly different in both language and motifs that not a few commentators have even interpreted them as two independent psalms.”¹⁶ The primary question in scholarship with regard to this psalm has been how to view the relationship between the two parts. The two sections, it appears, are guided by two unrelated themes. The first presents the futility of human effort without Yahweh’s guidance. The second section contains a series of proverbial statements about the blessing of children in one’s household and in the city. This psalm holds together the ideas of protection of a city and the blessing of many children by framing YHWH’s provision of “sons” to a father equivalent to YHWH’s protection, as they defend their father in the city gate.¹⁷ The psalm is a unified composition that maps YHWH’s

¹⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger set forth a series of possible connections between the Solomonic superscription and the content of Ps 127. The wisdom attributes of the psalm (sayings about the home and family life) place the psalm within the “Solomonic” tradition, while the reference to “house building” prompts association with Solomon’s building projects and blessing by YHWH (*Psalms* 3, 385–6).

¹⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 381.

¹⁷ Dahood, *Psalms 101–150*, 222.

blessing and protection of Jerusalem onto the establishment and protection of the individual household.

John Goldingay frames the opening of the psalm as a call to remember. The first section, verses 1–2, opens with a “reflection on the ‘vanity’ of our activities if Yhwh is not involved or if we forget that Yhwh is involved.”¹⁸ A twofold proverbial statement first establishes the “vanity” of building a house without YHWH. The expression *bnh byt* can have both physical and metaphorical connotations. It can denote “building a house of stones and clay (Gen 33:17, and frequently), founding a household (Prov 24:27), begetting progeny (Deut 25:9), building up or expanding a dynasty (2 Sam 7:27), or a nation (Ruth 4:11), in short creating a sphere in which one is at home.”¹⁹ Elie Assis makes a case for the “house” to refer not to any house but to the house of God, the Temple.²⁰ Assis points to the fact that this psalm is the lone psalm of the collection with a designation *leslomo*. Greek textual witnesses in which the superscription is absent (LXXS and LXXA) suggest that the superscription is a later addition, but it remains that the first interpreters of the text attributed the psalm in some way as having to do with Solomon.

With the entire collection of the Songs of Ascents in view, Assis’ proposal may be considered further. In the Songs of Ascents the preferred term to speak of

¹⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 499.

¹⁹ Othmar Keel, “Psalm 127: Ein Lobpreis auf den, der Schalf und Kinder gibt,” in Friedrich V. Reiterer, ed., *Ein Gott, eine Offenbarung: Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese, Theologie, und Spiritualität. Festschrift für Notker Füglistner, OSB zum 60. Geburtstag* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1991), 155–63, 159. Above quote translated by Linda Maloney (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 381).

²⁰ Elie Assis, “Psalm 127 and the Polemic of the Rebuilding of the Temple in the Second Temple Period,” *ZAW* 121 (2009): 256–272, 262.

the Temple in Jerusalem is the term *bêt YHWH*. In Ps 122 the house is mentioned three times, first as an exclamation of joy at the prospect of arriving at the Temple (v.1), called the House of YHWH. This first mention is followed by a pronouncement of Jerusalem built as a city. Secondly, the term house is used to refer to the Davidic dynasty (v.5) and in the third instance the blessing that closes out the psalm pronounces peace over the hearer “For the sake of the house of Yahweh, our God” (v.9). A reference to the *bêt YHWH* frames the psalm, as discussed above. Psalm 132, the psalm of the collection with the clearest cultic ties, references David’s house in his vow to YHWH to build a Temple for the deity. The collection ends with a reference to worshippers gathered in the House of YHWH at night.

Goldingay suggests that the open-ended nature of proverbial sayings does not restrict to one meaning, and allows for multiple associations with YHWH’s “house building” actions.

Yhwh built a house in the heavens (Amos 9:6) and built ‘his sanctuary’ in Jerusalem (Ps 78:69). The OT often speaks of Yhwh’s building a household (e.g., 1 Sam 2:35; 2 Sam 7:27; 1 Kings 11:38) and also of Yhwh’s (re)building David’s fallen shelter (Amos 9:11)...Yhwh builds Zion (Ps 102: 16[17]), the cities of Judah (69: 35[36]), and Jerusalem (147:2, there referring to the building up of the community).²¹

Within the Psalter YHWH is also asked to build the walls of Jerusalem (51:20) and reminded of the promise to build a throne for David (89:5).²² Within the collection, the house of YHWH is a significant concept. Previous psalms establish Jerusalem as the location of the house of YHWH. At the center point of the collection, however, it

²¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 499.

²² Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 499.

is made clear that YHWH's building activity does not only apply to the Temple. YHWH is also concerned with the care of other cities besides Jerusalem, as the second half of the proverb declares, "If YHWH does not guard a city, in vain do the guards keep watch."

After the initial comparison (building and guarding), verse 2 expands on the idea of toil apart from the remembrance of YHWH's guidance. Crow's translation "It is useless for you who rise up early/ Who go to bed late/Who eat bread much toiled for...For God gives sleep to God's beloved ones" reflects the threefold participial construction that culminates in YHWH's action of "giving sleep."²³ The intensity of the saying is noted by Jan Fokkelman, who describes the abrupt declaration, "Vanity to you!" as approaching curse-language in its forcefulness.²⁴ The saying does not condemn work, but rather toil, which consistently carries a negative connotation. Just as it is futile to build a house or city without YHWH, it is futile to expect to provide for oneself without YHWH. Leslie Allen writes "The damning of a man's efforts in the fields from dawn to dusk by attack (Lev 26:16) or drought (Lev 26:19–20) or pestilence (Deut 28:38) haunted the farmer. It was blessing indeed to eat the fruit of one's labors instead of laboring in vain."²⁵

The second section of the psalm, verses 3–5, is marked as a new section by the particle *hinnēh* and a shift in content to focus exclusively on children as YHWH's

²³ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 66.

²⁴ Jan Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis, Volume II: 85 Psalms and Job 4–14*, SSN 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 284.

²⁵ Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 180.

blessing. Continuing the implementation of proverbial sayings, the focus of the psalm turns explicitly to the individual household. Brueggemann and Bellinger note that “Verses 3–4 are in the form of a proverb and speak of sons as rewarding blessings, ‘a heritage from the Lord.’ ‘Heritage’ often refers to the land as a gift from YHWH. The sons provide a future for the family or house.”²⁶ The primary uses of the phrase *nhlt yhwh* are in reference to Israel collectively (Deut 4:20; 9:26, 29; Pss 28:9; 33:12; Josh 13:23) in a covenant relationship with YHWH or to the land of Israel itself (1 Sam 26:19; II Sam 14:16; 20:19; 21:3). The heritage, in this psalm, is spoken of in terms of the household and its protection.

Imagery of city and social life in the psalm culminates with a declaration of the happiness/blessedness (*’ašrê*) of “the man with many sons” (v.5a). The man with many sons has not only received the heritage of YHWH, but will be an influential part of the life of the city.²⁷ Crow addresses the puzzling ending of the psalm:

The verbs of the last line have the sons (not the father) as the subject. This fact is puzzling, until it becomes apparent that the poem is returning to the theme of God as the provider of a person’s security: the sons, as God’s gift, are the ones who are not ‘ashamed’ in the gate, but rather are successful in providing the necessary protection for the father and for the rest of the city.”²⁸

The concluding line of this pivot psalm and the war metaphors draw our attention back to the opening of the collection, where the psalmist laments the violent words

²⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 543.

²⁷ Brueggemann and Bellinger interpret the cause-and-effect of many sons and blessing life/in conflict with influence and importance. The man who has many sons is more likely to be seen as influential and important in a social conflict.

²⁸ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 70.

spoken against him and wishes sharpened arrows upon his deceitful-tongued enemies. In this psalm, the alienation of that experience is reversed, in the vision of a man armed with sons (arrows) who speak with enemies at the gate of the city.

Summary

In Ps 127, the spaces of the house and city are explored as both public and private spaces. The psalm opens with sayings about the house and city, and concludes with observations about the blessing of many children (more particularly, sons). This psalm, like the following one, is an interesting blend of household and temple or political imagery. The superscription “of Solomon” adds another complex dimension to this strange mixture of imagery. “House” and “city” can very likely be references, as they are throughout the collection, to the line of David and Jerusalem.²⁹ The house, is not only a house, but is built by YHWH like Solomon’s Temple, the House of YHWH. Your city is not just a city, it exists only under the watch-care of YHWH like Jerusalem. The fruit of your body is the inheritance of YHWH. Sons are compared to the arrows of a warrior, making unmistakable ties to the social and political bodies of which these individual bodies are a part. Gillmayr-Bucher describes this as transference of the center. She writes

Beside[s] [sic] Zion and Jerusalem, the city and the house form images for centres as well. Thereby the dynamic that makes Zion the centre is transferred to individual houses and an exemplary city...Although Jerusalem does not lose its exceptional status, the building of an exemplary city shows that every city is able to receive a share in Jerusalem’s characteristic.”³⁰

²⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 542.

³⁰ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 493.

What Gillmayr-Bucher does not explore are the implications of this transferred center in the context of ritual theory. Gillmayr-Bucher describes in similar language the concept of the transference of ritual system explored in Smith's notion of "taking place."

Psalms 128

Psalms 128, like the previous psalm, contains a blending of familial, city, and cultic imagery, although this psalm specifically mentions Jerusalem and asks for a blessing upon the city. Psalms 127 and 128 share similarities in content and theme, with both describing the blessing of children and YHWH's provision for the family. Similar to the first two triads, this third triad closes with a meditation upon Jerusalem. However, in this closing psalm the psalmist envisions blessing flowing out from Jerusalem and wishes peace upon the people of Israel. YHWH's place is in Jerusalem, which the psalmist is assured will be prosperous, and this prosperity will flow out through Israel's generations.

The structural division of this psalm is difficult to determine, and the psalm is often attributed to the loosely classified (and loosely recognized category) of wisdom psalms.³¹ Various proposals for the division of the psalm include: a tripartite division (as seen in the NRSV setting) of work, family, and sanctuary or a two-part division of verses 1–4 and a final blessing of two verses (vv. 5–6).

³¹ Kuntz considers this psalm one of 9 authentic wisdom psalms, along with Ps 127. Kuntz modifies Crenshaw's list of seven (1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 128). Kuntz adds 127 and 133, interestingly both Songs of Ascents (J. Kenneth Kuntz, "The Retribution Motif in Psalmic Wisdom," *ZAW* 89 (1977): 223–233, 224.

Brueggemann and Bellinger propose that the phrase “who fears the LORD,” repeated in verses 1 and 4 provides the key to discerning the literary structure. The wisdom phrase frames the stanza, and the psalm concludes with a benediction (vv. 5–6).³² The division into two sections with verses 1–4 composing a unified section is additionally supported by the use of *’ašrê* in verse 1 and *bārak* in verse 4 alongside the formula “the one who fears YHWH.” “That these two verses surround a threefold blessing of the God-fearing man (*gāber*) provides a stable basis for affirming the fact of an envelope structure in vv. 1–4.”³³ Like Ps 127 before it that employs proverbial sayings, Ps 128 also uses the form of the “beatitude” and considers work and family the outpouring of YHWH’s blessing, while at the same time referencing the peace of Zion.

The first section, verses 1–4, opens with a beatitude, “Happy is the one who fears YHWH, who walks in his ways” (v. 1bc). The frequent descriptor outside of the Songs of Ascents, the one who fears YHWH, is only used in this stanza and does not occur in the rest of the collection.³⁴ In the typical style of the beatitude, the formula is spoken as a generalization, which is then turned in verses 2–3 to direct address, first with the assurance that the one who fears YHWH/walks in his ways will eat the produce of his labor. Goldingay observes that Ps 128 “has started from reverence for

³² Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 546.

³³ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 74.

³⁴ The next occurrence is in Ps 135. This study proposes that the use in Ps 135 is one of the many ties to the collection, as Ps 135 appears to be stitched together from many concepts in the Songs of Ascents.

Yhwh, which is a very different starting point to the one Ps. 127 made.”³⁵ Whereas Ps 127 warns about the futility of working too hard without acknowledging the ultimate control of YHWH, Ps 128 starts by acknowledging YHWH’s guidance. “We can have confidence about eating the ‘fruit of our labors (lit. eating ‘the labor of your hands’) if we revere Yhwh rather than assuming everything depends on us. This attitude means Yhwh gets involved with us.”³⁶ Psalm 128 continues the theme of orienting one’s life, one’s household, like Zion, surrounded by YHWH.

Hossfeld and Zenger draw attention to the use of the uncommon phrase, literally the “labor of your hands,” which also appears in Haggai 1. They note in Haggai 1 that the absence of “the labor your hands” is presented as a “consequence of lack of engagement of building the Temple or for Zion.”³⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger propose that the promise of a fruitful harvest in everyday life in this psalm, by employing the same language, suggests that proper love for Zion is fulfilled through pilgrimage.³⁸ Within the horizon of this psalm, and indeed the entire collection, it is less convincing that pilgrimage to Zion is the goal than that properly engaging in the love of Zion means properly remembering Zion.

The second component of the “blessed” life of the one who fears YHWH is the promise of a ‘fruitful’ body within the house. Verse 3 presents two parallel images, the wife as a fruitful vine and sons as olive shoots. The application of the vine

³⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 509.

³⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 509.

³⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 401.

³⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 401.

imagery to a woman within the house is a poignant transference of imagery. In the very center of the house, in the inner rooms, the psalmist plants the flowering vine of Israel. Within the horizons of the psalms, the image of the vine is employed (Ps 80) to imagine Israel as a vine planted and kept by YHWH.³⁹ The image is transferred to the woman's body. Additionally, the vine as an image of peace maps the peace of Jerusalem within the house. Hossfeld and Zenger write

And above all, the vine, which, planted on the outer wall of the house, grew over the flat roof of the house and thus over the inner courtyard so that it gave wonderful shade and at the same time literally offered its grapes to be enjoyed in one's leisure, became an impressive image of shalom (cf. 1 Kgs 5:5; Mic 4:4).⁴⁰

The image of the lush vine within the house stands in stark contrast to the image of withering grass growing unwanted and unsuccessfully on the rooftop, the image wished on the enemies in the following Psalm (129:6). Whereas the latter image is one of total obliteration, the image of the vine within the house is one of fecundity and perpetuity blooming within the household.

The imagery of olive shoots is taken up for the family's sons. In Ps 127 they are compared to arrows and defenders in the city gate. In Ps 128 they are budding plants within the house. Weippert discusses the imagery of the olive shoots, or slips, as Goldingay translates.⁴¹ The continuation of the family line is represented by the olive tree. Rather than sprout new trees from seeds, a common practice was to

³⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 401.

⁴⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 401. The best known image of Israel as the vine of YHWH is Isa 5.

⁴¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 510.

transplant the seedlings that sprouted around existing, older trees. Even when the older tree was removed, leaving a stump, the ring of sprouts represented the continuing life of the tree.⁴² This image is also used to symbolize hope for Israel, sprouting from the stump, and is transplanted in the middle of the household.⁴³ Zenger writes that verses 2 and 3 specify the principle of verse 1, illuminating the 'ordinary people' who are the principal actors of Ps 126–128. "Their [*ordinary people's*] agricultural labor and their everyday family life together are celebrated as the places where the God of Zion is present and as situations in which life is real and successful."⁴⁴ The section closes with the *inclusio*, repetition of the assurance of blessing for the one who fears YHWH.

Section 2, the closing benediction, offers blessing for both the individual and community, bringing Jerusalem into view alongside family life. The two closing verses, 5–6, parallel the good fortune of Zion and the good fortune of the individual. The blessing is spoken over the individual in terms of receiving a blessing *from* Zion and seeing the blessing of Zion. Likewise, Goldingay says it well, that "experiencing Yhwh's blessing from Zion is re-expressed as looking upon the good things of Jerusalem....In turn, 'all the days of your life' is re-expressed as the opportunity to 'look at your grandchildren.'"⁴⁶ The parallel relationship of Zion and the individual is

⁴² Helga Weippert, "Deine Kinder seien wie Schösslinge von Ölbäumen rund um deinen Tisch! Zur Bildsprache in Psalm 128,3," in *Prophetie und Psalmen: Festschrift für Klaus Seybold zum 65. ed. Beat Huwylar, AOAT 280* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001), 163–174, 172.

⁴³ Isa 6; 11:1; 27:6; Hosea 14:6.

⁴⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 400.

⁴⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 512.

related back to the fruitful household. Crow views verses 5–6 as strong evidence of redactional activity. He writes “It is probable that a redactor has added vv. 5–6 in order to put that fear (and its consequent blessing) in the context of loyalty to the cultus centered in Jerusalem.”⁴⁷ Whether or not the blessing was original to the psalm, the effect is the same, in joining the center of the household to the center of cultic life.

Summary

Like the previous triad, the closing psalm of this triad concludes with a wish for the well-being of Israel. Closely connected to Ps 127 in content, Ps 128 presents a unified vision of life blessed by YHWH from Zion. The images of fertility in Ps 128 strengthen the close relationship with Ps 127. Gillmayr-Bucher frames the vision of Ps 128 as that of the “sprouting center.”⁴⁸ Goldingay speaks of the images of household and cultic life spatially as a ‘broadened horizon’ from “the individual who reveres Yhwh, to his marriage, to his household, to his relationship with Zion/Jerusalem. It eventually widens to become a prayer for the well-being of the whole people that meets there.”⁴⁹ Zenger argues that this psalm extends a thematic arc back to 125:5 as the opening psalm of the group, Ps 125–129.⁵⁰ This study proposes that the psalm extends a thematic arc back to the previous closing psalms

⁴⁷ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 76.

⁴⁸ Gillmayr-Bucher, *Images of Space*, 500.

⁴⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 512.

⁵⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 404.

(122; 125), which all end with expressions of Zion's fate connected to the life of the individual. The center is established and transferred throughout the collection.

Psalms 126–128 Summary

This third triad, the center triad of the collection, extends the analogy expressed in Ps 125 that the ones who trust in YHWH are like Mount Zion (v. 1b). Zion is the center of life and the place where YHWH dwells, but the center is also mapped onto the bodies of the community. Daily life "is set in the context of the trials and tribulations of Zion (Ps 126, 1–3; Ps 128, 5–6). These three poems describe a life at-centre in the presence of Yahweh."⁵¹ In the experience of joy and sorrow, planting and reaping, building and raising children, working and sleeping, the community experiences YHWH's blessing, through being well-placed in YHWH's presence.

Psalms 129–131

The fourth triad of the collection, Psalms 129–131, opens with an invitation to recollect Israel's past trouble with enemies, with Israel personified as a young man. The three psalms of this group have tended to be problematic in constructing a Pilgrim Psalter storyline, when, as one moves closer to Zion, one increasingly encounters distress. Hossfeld and Zenger separate Ps 129 from Ps 130–131, claiming that 130 and 131 are united by the image of a distressed soul but does not employ pictures of agricultural life. Thus, Ps 129, which employs imagery of the land and plow, should belong to a different subgroup. This study, however, finds a great

⁵¹ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 469.

deal of correspondence between Ps 129, 130 and 131, as Ps 129 introduces the soul in distress, Israel, that culminates in a cry for Israel to look to YHWH, as do Ps 130 and 131. Psalm 129 begins by looking back on Israel's past distress, even from youth, and Ps 131 closes with the tender image of mother and child.

Psalm 129

Psalm 129 is a peculiar psalm in its imagery and possibilities for interpretation. The psalm appears to recount the trials of an individual, but in a communal, congregational setting. The idea of attack from enemies, present from the opening of the collection, is in full view in this psalm. The psalm also employs agricultural imagery. In contrast to the previous psalms where such imagery is employed to discuss blessing from YHWH, in this psalm the agricultural imagery conveys distress and curse. Goldingay observes that Ps 129 continues the pattern of speaking *of* YHWH in the opening rather than addressing YHWH directly.⁵² Psalm 129 also shares a certain symmetry with Ps 126, the opening psalm of the previous triad. Both psalms open with a recollection of trouble from the past and the corresponding action by YHWH, (vv. 1–4) and conclude with a vision of deliverance based on YHWH's past faithfulness (vv. 5–8).⁵³

The psalm is divided into two sections, verses 1–4 and verses 5–8. The first section opens with an invitation for "Israel" to join in the recollection of past trauma. With a collective voice, "Let Israel say so!" (v. 1b). The people are called to join in the

⁵² Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 515.

⁵³ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 515.

recollection of trauma that has been ongoing “from youth.” The call is framed as a generalization “often have people attacked,” but the use of the phrase “from my youth” is conspicuous within the HB. Drawn from the language of individual biography, the reference also evokes the descriptions of Israel as a youth under YHWH’s care. Aran Persaud confirms, “*Youth...here is used as a metaphor which refers to the early stages of the nation (cf. Hos 2:15; Jer 2:2), to the time of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings.*”⁵⁴ The phrase is also an indication of the duration of the “individual’s” suffering. This psalm does not recount a single instance of oppression but a history of ongoing burden.⁵⁵

The first psalm also employs agricultural imagery to describe the history of suffering. Goldingay reads the first two verses describing the continual attacks in continuity with the metaphors of verses 3–4. “The personified Israel is now lying on the ground. Figuratively what happened to that person is that they were like the ground itself when it was being plowed before sowing.”⁵⁶ The psalm shares the language of Mic 3, which threatens Zion with being plowed up because of injustice and corruption. The imagery is made even more striking in the psalm as the tortuous image is applied to the body. Gillmayr-Bucher writes,

The body becomes the space in which history unfolds. Israel’s history as a tormented land is shown in the image of a tormented body. Taking the land in possession is shown as ploughing on the back of the psalmist. Contrary to other images of ploughing this comparison is unique. The psalmist/Israel in

⁵⁴ Aran J. E. Persaud, *Praying the Language of Enmity in the Psalter: A Study of Psalms 110, 119, 129, 137, 139, and 149* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 88.

⁵⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 411.

⁵⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 517.

not shown as a draught animal which is enslaved but as the field being ploughed.⁵⁷

The expression of unbearable oppression is followed by the abrupt declaration, “YHWH is faithful!” without transition (v. 4a). “Yhwh has been rhetorically and practically missing, but now bursts onto the scene. There is not even a ‘but’ to announce that another factor is about to intervene.”⁵⁸ Additionally in this line we have a rare expression within the collection of the character of YHWH. YHWH’s faithful character is demonstrated in his cutting the rope of the wicked, the rope that holds together the plow shaft and the yoke. Hossfeld and Zenger note the unique nature of this metaphor. Rather than loosen or lift the yoke of oppression, the psalm “chooses the image aspect of a violent action against the plowing exploiters.”⁵⁹ The language is that of empires that can only be stopped by YHWH’s action.

The first section of the psalm invites remembrance from the community of its long history of oppression and deliverance, and in the next section situates that experience alongside a desire for the destruction of those who “hate Zion” (v. 5). Verses 5–8 commence a series of three imprecations against enemies of Zion that continue the agricultural metaphor. Rather than the wicked plowing the back of the individual, the individual envisions the “ones who hate Zion,” as unsuccessful crops.

⁵⁷ Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 494.

⁵⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 517.

⁵⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 416.

The wish “let them be like grass on housetops, that withers before it is pulled up,” (v.6) is “associated with that of divine judgment with all its nuances.”⁶⁰ Grass on the roof, additionally, envisions the enemy in a place they will not flourish. The oppressed (Israel) is ploughed land, but the attacker will be like grass with shallow roots. The roots of the enemy will not take root in the ploughed, fertile land, but rather in the shallow, earthen roofs, where it will wither and die. The metaphor continues with the wish that the ones who hate Zion, as withered grass, be like grass on a rooftop “with which a reaper does not fill his hand, nor a grain gatherer the fold of his cloak, and where the passersby do not say “The blessing of YHWH to you! We bless you in the name of YHWH!” (vv. 7–8).

Spatially the psalm presents an interesting movement, from Israel being laid low in the ground to the enemies being turned back and planted in a useless space, the top of a roof. Whereas the harvest should be a joyful occasion with harvesters calling blessings upon one another in the name of YHWH (see Ruth 2:4), the ones who hate Zion will not warrant such joy. Persaud writes of the strange image of harvesters coming to reap on a rooftop “the metaphor is not implying that harvesting occurs on the roof, but rather by degree of comparison, indicating the utter uselessness of withered grass on the roof.”⁶¹ The first section is a retrospective of Israel’s past oppression; the second envisions an alternate future for the enemies of Israel as one of non-existence.

⁶⁰ Persaud, *Praying the Language of Enmity*, 91. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the image of withering grass is applied numerous times as a description of the godless (Job 8:12), the wicked (Ps 37:2), the fleeting nature of life (Isa 40:8), etc.

⁶¹ Persaud, *Praying the Language of Enmity*, 91.

Summary

Gillmayr-Bucher draws attention to the loss of place in this psalm. She writes, “While the psalmists fear the loss of space for themselves, they hope that their adversaries get lost. Psalm 129 vividly depicts the desired fate for the enemies of Zion (vv.6–8) in images that show that they are not able to dwell permanently.”⁶² Persaud frames the imprecatory language this way: “the image of this imprecation goes beyond the mere wish for physical death. The scope of the metaphor is the complete destruction of the enemy in manner, space and time.”⁶³ Moving from the fruitful, blessed household life of the one who fears YHWH in Ps 128, Ps 129 moves into public space where one encounters enemies and empires, presented as the personified individual, Israel.⁶⁴

Psalm 130

From this wish for non-existence upon the ones who hate Zion, we move immediately to Ps 130, which begins “Out of the depths!” Psalm 130 is another example of an individual crisis. David Mitchell presents a threefold argument for the psalm as a “reminiscence of deliverance.”⁶⁵ Mitchell likens the opening of Ps 130 to the opening verses of Ps 120. The psalm opens “Out of the depths I cried to you, YHWH: ‘My Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the sound of my

⁶² Gillmayr-Bucher, “Images of Space,” 496.

⁶³ Persaud, *Praying the Language of Enmity*, 93.

⁶⁴ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 469.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter*, 122. This psalm is counted among the “Seven Penitential Songs” in Christian liturgy, a practice that dates back to the sixth century.

supplications!” (vv.1–2). Similar to the opening verses of Ps 120, the psalmist opens with a recollection of YHWH’s deliverance as a basis for petition. Mitchell argues,

First, LXX renders קראתִיךָ as aorist ἐκεκπαζα σε. Secondly, citation of significant past speech is a stylistic feature elsewhere in the Ascents. Third, the cry is from מעמקים *the depths*, precisely the opposite place to the present location, המעלות, *the ascents/heights*. Presumably then, the cry does not originate from the present situation, but is a reminiscence from a former one.⁶⁶

Mitchell also notes the flexibility of the reminiscence to apply to multiple situations. Like the middle psalm of the second triad, Ps 124, that describes YHWH’s deliverance from crisis, Mitchell suggests a myriad of situations which this psalm could recall. He writes, “this psalm could recall the deliverance from the attack of the hostile nations...Or it could recall the former exile as represented in Ps 120. Or it might represent all Israel’s former troubles. The point is that YHWH has redeemed.”⁶⁷ The flexible time frame allows for the crisis to be recounted repeatedly. The psalm also reflects an interesting individual/corporate stance. The voice is one of an individual petitioning YHWH and individual waiting for YHWH’s response. The final refrain, however, speaks to all of Israel, and assures that this redemption is for the collective, ending with the assurance that “It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” (v. 8).

The psalm “divides neatly into four two-line sections,” beginning with one of the most famous cries of the Psalter, “Out of the depths I called to you, YHWH!”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 122.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *Message of the Psalter*, 122.

⁶⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 523.

The spatial imagery at the opening conveys that the depths are a place of distress and need for rescue. The language of “depths” is echoed elsewhere as the place of cosmic upheaval (Ezek 27:34; Isa 51:10), but in this psalm the space is not one of cosmic significance but of individual need. The network of associations conjured up by mention of “the depths” is wide-ranging, from primeval chaos to a cistern/prison, to the depths of the sea.⁶⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger write “Only here is the word found as an unqualified substantive, which may be grounds enough to regard it as having a special reference to the sense of sinfulness, which is taken up in verse 3.”⁷⁰ In spite of the distance imagined between the speaker and YHWH, the speaker expects the prayer to reach YHWH’s ears.

The second section, verses 3–4, opens with a rhetorical question, “If you kept track of wrongs, O Yah, O Lord, who could stand?”⁷¹ (v. 3). The implied answer is that no one could stand. The psalm does not directly ask for forgiveness, but instead implies that the answer is “no one” can stand before YHWH, righteous, wicked, Israelite or not.⁷² J. Clinton McCann calls this the fundamental acknowledgment that “life isn’t right,” yet the psalmist is able to cry out anyway.⁷³ This idea will be developed further in the concluding chapter, but the language of this psalm relates to the task of ritual, of “performing the way things ought to be in spite of the way

⁶⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 428.

⁷⁰ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 551.

⁷¹ Translation from Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 84.

⁷² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 432.

⁷³ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 88.

things are.”⁷⁴ Verse 4 pairs together the concept of “forgiveness” and “fearing YHWH.” Crow expresses the theological statement in this way: “The suppliant makes no attempt to justify his or her own right to a hearing, but rather acknowledges that the opportunity to pray and be heard by God is solely based on God’s mercy.”⁷⁵ As previous psalms have expressed absolute dependence on YHWH for provision and protection, this psalm expresses a similar dependence for mercy, not only from enemies, but from YHWH.

Verses 5–6 express the individual’s “waiting” on YHWH, a theme that will be carried through the following psalm. Turning from direct address to YHWH, this stanza speaks to an audience other than YHWH. Both Zenger and Crow express the possibility of the expression of “waiting on YHWH” as a ritual expression, a waiting on a “word” to be delivered. Zenger supports Seybold’s thesis that the phrase is either a repetition or reimagining of a priestly salvation oracle or cultic atonement ritual, in which one waits for a response from the deity.⁷⁶ Gerstenberger, despite his consistent emphasis on ritual forms of speech throughout his commentary, instead places the expression in this psalm of “waiting on YHWH” as a late theological development, a particular waiting expressed in exilic and postexilic theology.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*,

⁷⁵ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 88.

⁷⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 437; Seybold, *Der Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 82; Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 89.

⁷⁷ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 357.

Verse 6 continues the concept of waiting, with this psalmist declaring “my soul waited for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” The repeated comparison is not out of place, as the expression of “waiting” has been repeated three times in this stanza.

Rhetorically the repetitive nature emphasizes the condition of the psalmist; it gives the sense of one rocking in place, waiting for response. In the horizon of the collection, the repetition of “watching for the morning,” draws one’s memory back to YHWH’s watch-care over a city (Ps 127: 1b) and the assurance that YHWH watches over Israel day and night (Ps 121).

The final section, verses 7–8, frames the individual reflection as a cry for Israel to wait for YHWH’s redemption. Gerstenberger describes the psalm as both an individual and communal complaint, one that holds together the concern of the individual and community.⁷⁸ This closing section also provides a description of YHWH’s character, as did Ps 129. Psalm 129 describes YHWH’s faithfulness, Ps 130 YHWH’s *hesed* and great power. The final expression that Israel will be “freed,” *pdh*, carries the connotation of being freed from slavery and is frequently applied to Israel’s release from bondage in Egypt.⁷⁹ In light of the previous psalm, that employs imagery of Israel as the long-oppressed youth, the merging of the individual and collective voice in the following psalm invites a continued reading of Israel as the “voice” of the individual, followed by an assurance. Rather than being redeemed out of the bondage of slavery, the experience of dis-placement, the focus is on Israel’s

⁷⁸ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 357.

⁷⁹ Exod 21:8; 13:6; 15:15; 21:8; 24:18; 2 Sam 7:23; Mic 6:4; Pss 78:42; 111:9; Neh 1:10.

redemption from sin. The center is transferred from the experience of place to an abstract experience of YHWH's redemption.

Summary

Prinsloo concludes, of the spatial storyline of Psalms 130, that

Psalm 130 turns to the emotional experience of being estranged from Yahweh. It amounts to no less than being in the "depths," in the clutches of *sheol* (1a). Psalm 130 plunges into the Depth, a theme also present in Psalm 124. The experience of being off-centre, far from Yahweh, estranged and unprotected, lies in the devastating influence of sin. But because Yahweh does not keep "a record of sins" (3a) there is hope for the individual petitioner (5ab, 6ab) and indeed for Israel at large (7ab, 8ab)."⁸⁰

Absent from this psalm is any mention of Jerusalem, Zion or the sanctuary. The only "place" of the psalm is that of "the depths," which turns out to be a place where one, in this psalm, still has access to YHWH and knows of YHWH's great character. In the "waiting" of the psalm, the psalmist is placed in YHWH's mercy. This is a theological reflection on place as the collection transfers the center of cultic life in theological terms. The action of the psalmist is not of longing, but rather of an experience of waiting in hope, not of a renewed center but of a transferred center of life with YHWH.

Psalm 131

Psalms 130 and 131 "are so strikingly interrelated that one can call them 'twin psalms,' works that mutually interpret and deepen each other."⁸¹ Both psalms

⁸⁰ Prinsloo, "Role of Space," 469–470.

⁸¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452.

open with individual experience and conclude with a call for the collective “Israel.” Both reference the *nephesh* in crisis, and both provide intense imagery of the intimacy between YHWH and Israel, Ps 130 through master-servant imagery and 131 through mother-child imagery.⁸² Hossfeld and Zenger suggest that the two psalms can be interpreted as a sequence of metaphors “God as father” and “God as mother.”⁸³ Hossfeld and Zenger understand Ps 130 as the opening psalm of the final sequence of five psalms to close the Songs of Ascents. However, when read as part of a triad (Pss 129–131) the metaphors are strengthened. Psalm 129 calls Israel into the collective identity as the child in need of deliverance (often have they attacked me from my youth, let Israel say! v. 1b). The psalm invites the association of Israel personified in her youth (cf. Jer 2:2; Ezek 23:3, 8, 19, 21; Hos 2:17, or as a young boy in Hos 11). The opening psalm of the triad evokes the familial relationship between YHWH and Israel (parent-child) which is then extended in Pss 130 and 131.

Psalm 131 is the third of four psalms in the Songs of Ascents that contain the additional attribution “to David.” Hossfeld and Zenger note that it is surprising, within the collection, “that the speaking ‘I’ of Ps 131 is a woman/mother” considering the association with David.⁸⁴ Viewing Ps 120–137 as triads, there is a certain symmetry in the Davidic superscriptions. The first triad (Pss 120–122)

⁸² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452.

⁸³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452. If one may understand the ‘forgiveness’ implored in Psalm 130 within the horizon of Psalm 103 as an outstanding proof of YHWH’s fatherhood, the sequence of Psalms 130–131 even presents a sequence of metaphors “God as father” (Psalm 130) and “God as mother” (Psalm 131).

⁸⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 449.

concludes with a Davidic superscription, followed by a triad with a Davidic attribution in the center (Ps 124). The next triad contains no Davidic superscription (Pss 126–128), the center psalm instead is associated with Solomon. The pattern continues in the following triads. Psalms 129–131 conclude with a Davidic superscription, Pss 123–134 contain a Davidic attribution in the center (Ps 133) and the following triad does not mention David. In the movement of the collection, David is associated with all of the key aspects. In Psalm 122, the importance of Jerusalem as the place at the center of communal life is established and remembered, with David's name attached to it. In Ps 124 David's name is part of the great remembrance of Israel's deliverance from enemies. Psalm 131, discussed below, associates David with the inner life, the contentment of the soul, and in Ps 133 David is associated with the joys of communal life. The memory of David is attached to place and household.

The psalm is divided into three brief sections.⁸⁵ The first section, verses 1–2b, opens with the pointed cry to YHWH. “YHWH, my heart is not lifted high, my eyes are not lifted up!” Spatially, the inclusion of Ps 131 immediately following Ps 130 provides an interesting contrast. In Ps 130, the psalmist is crying out from the depths in the opening verse (1a). In the opening verse of Ps 131, the psalmist assures YHWH that “my heart is not lifted up” and “my eyes are not lifted up” (v. 1bc). Within the collection, the motif of lifting up one's eyes is well established. In Ps 121, the psalmist lifts his eyes to the hills, searching for help from YHWH (v. 1b). In

⁸⁵ Zenger claims that this psalm is “the second-shortest psalm in the Psalter, after Psalm 117.” (*Psalms* 3, 446). He seems to have forgotten Psalm 134, which, at twenty-two words, is even shorter than Psalm 131 at thirty-three words.

Ps 123, the psalmist lifts his eyes to YHWH in the opening verse, (v. 1b) then extends the analogy of a servant looking to his master, and a maid to her mistress, (v. 2) establishing that the direction of one's gaze is an indicator of one's status. Up to this point in the collection, lifting one's eyes has been an indication of reverence and obeisance. In this psalm, lifting one's eyes is a potential indication of defiance; the inclusion of the two assertions along with the second half of the verse "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me" (v. 2b).

The second verse remains one of the most enigmatic phrases of the Psalter, and difficult to interpret. Brueggemann and Bellinger translate it "But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me" (v. 2).⁸⁶ The end of verse 2 has been translated variously as "like the weaned child upon me is my life," (NRSV) "like a weaned child is my soul within me" (ESV) "I am content like the young child I carry" (NET). While the translation is difficult, the interpretation may be more so. The more common interpretation of the image of mother and weaned child is that of peace and contentment, with a child resting peacefully upon her mother's shoulder. The weaned child, as opposed to a "fed" or "feeding" child is problematic in the context of the psalm, however. Hunter proposes a contrary interpretation, where the image reflects instead the weaned child as a fussy child, indicating that the soul is not content, but rather anxious and fretful.⁸⁷ As Brueggemann and Bellinger point out,

⁸⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 552.

⁸⁷ Alastair G. Hunter, *Psalms*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 219.

however, this interpretation does not hang together with other indications in the psalm that the psalmist is indeed at rest, contented. Hossfeld and Zenger uphold the thesis that the intimate reflection in this psalm is an updated, literary version of a temple ritual, which suggests the transference of a ritual in the place of the temple to a text. They write,

If, from a form-critical point of view, the thesis suggested by a number of authors is correct—namely that Ps 131:1–2b is the (literary) imitation of a renunciation ritual at the entrance to the Temple precincts or an ‘examination of conscience’ and ‘vow of purification’ in combination with a confession of trust in YHWH as the giver of inner calm and security...then it is obvious that Psalm 131 is a highly theological text that describes the way out of ‘distance from God’ to a ‘rest’ for the ‘soul’ experienced as God’s gift.⁸⁸

Hossfeld and Zenger also draw attention to the spatial aspects of the psalm, stating that “the psalm evokes the child’s *twofold experience* of receiving from its mother everything necessary for and promoting life *and thereby* learning the personal care and closeness of the mother as literally a ‘space to live in.’⁸⁹ Mary R. Huie-Jolly provides a theoretical basis from critical spatiality for Hossfeld and Zenger’s analysis of the space of the psalm.⁹⁰ Interacting both with Lefebvre, one of the forefathers of modern critical spatial theory, and British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott to “frame critical spatiality within a theory of the self,” Huie-Jolly

⁸⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 450–1.

⁸⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 452.

⁹⁰ Huie-Jolly is not the first to make the connection between Winnicott and the application to biblical texts. In fact, Strawn argues that Brueggemann’s influential typology of the Psalms is rooted in attachment theory. Brueggemann does not address psychoanalysis or attachment theory directly, but Strawn notes that in a later study he cites Winnicott explicitly. Brent Strawn, “Poetic Attachment: Psychology, Psycholinguistics, and the Psalms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, pages 404–423 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 412.

demonstrates how a developed spatiality aids in the interpretation of the psalm.⁹¹ Winnicott's developmental psychology proposes that the "self" is developed through the "back and forth movement of distance and nearness to the mother who preoccupies herself with responding to the demands, cries, and instinctual needs of the infant. On the basis of her responsiveness, the infant establishes trust."⁹² The dynamic of presence/absence is fundamental to the infant's development. A good mother is not one who is always present, but one who is responsive. Huie-Jolly summarizes,

A mother who is reliable in providing a safe space for the infant to rest and grow is, in fact, not constantly physically present; she goes out, she leaves the room. Trust enables the infant to compensate for her absence by hypothesizing her return. The ability to imagine her presence provides comfort, through the illusion of presence even in the event of absence. The ability to use illusion in order to endure the necessity of waiting to meet one's need is the basis for emerging consciousness of the difference between the child and the mother.⁹³

Through the lens of critical spatiality, this psalm, and indeed the collection, presents a developing identity of YHWH's child, Israel. Even removed from the physical place of Jerusalem where YHWH's "presence" is located, the community can imagine YHWH's presence, which will be remembered in the closing of the collection.

Similar to the previous psalms of the triad, the closing verse, verse 3, shifts the direction of discourse out to "Israel" as the psalmist declares "Wait, Israel, for YHWH, from this time on and forevermore!" Psalm 131 repeats a phrase from Ps

⁹¹ Huie-Jolly, "Formation of Self," 51.

⁹² Huie-Jolly, "Formation of Self," 61.

⁹³ Huie-Jolly, "Formation of Self," 61.

130, “Israel, hope in YHWH” as its closing and gives an indication of time rather than space. In these two psalms we see the tension of presence and absence, and the representation of self through this elastic relationship with the “parent,” YHWH, and the development of the self and the trust relationship. Psalm 130 begins with an expression of anguish and absence, yet calls for hope in YHWH. The image of the weaned child in Ps 131 expresses in poetic language an idea of spatial theory: that waiting in YHWH’s absence with the assurance of his presence is part of the developmental process. “The self grows through the spatial interplay of presence with absence in the relationship, in constant tension and testing between inner (idealized) and outer (imperfect) reality.”⁹⁴ The place YHWH has chosen to dwell, Jerusalem, exists as an imperfect reality; in the experience of the Songs of Ascents the psalmist comes to terms with this imperfect reality by remembering.

Summary

The psalm does not make mention of space and place in the same manner as other psalms of the collection, but the psalm seems to be located in the body of the psalmist, concerned with the eyes, heart, mind, soul of the psalmist, the inner life of the psalmist. The inner life is expressed through the analogy of the mother and child, then moves out to YHWH and Israel.

⁹⁴ Huie-Jolly, “Formation of Self,” 62.

Psalms 129–131 Summary

Prinsloo defines the spatial storyline of this triad as one of abstract space. “The experience of oppression (Ps 129) is nothing short of residing in the realm of death (Ps 130). The only escape lies in the mercy of Yahweh (Ps 130) who grants a sinner tranquility and security (Ps 131).”⁹⁵ Prinsloo emphasizes the spatial storyline of the individual, but the interesting ‘storyline’ of this triad is that of the relationship between the individual and the community, the personified Israel. This triad dramatically reflects on the relationship between YHWH and the community and establishes the rich experience of being placed with YHWH through the inner life of the community.

Conclusion

Psalms 126–128 present a life “at center” with YHWH in the life of the family. Psalms 129–131 express life at center with YHWH in the life of the individual, but at the same time express that individual identity through the personified Israel. “Taking place,” as the collection moves forward, transfers from placing one’s feet in the gates of Jerusalem, to placing oneself in the body of Israel, which is nestled close to YHWH. This does not preclude the importance of place, as the following triad picks up with a rousing memory of the significance of Jerusalem, but rather transfers the experience of that place.

⁹⁵ Prinsloo, “Role of Space,” 470.

CHAPTER FIVE

Remembering the Center

The final exegetical chapter will discuss the closing triad of the superscripted Songs of Ascents in conjunction with Pss 135, 136 and 137. The final triad of the superscripted Songs of Ascents (132, 133, 134) are tightly connected. Hossfeld and Zenger, who propose a trifold division of the collection, (three groups of five psalms rather than triads) write of the final three psalms that they are connected by a strong emphasis on priesthood. Psalm 132 mentions the priests twice, Ps 133 mentions Aaron, and Ps 134 is framed as a priestly blessing of the people.¹ The priestly images, however, are interwoven with images of the everyday lives of the people of God. Gillmayr-Bucher writes,

Parallel to the beginning, the last three psalms provide a fulminate finale. After Ps 131 has closed itself in the conten[t] [sic] space of its body, Psalm 132 once more breaks out into memory. It remembers the great challenges of establishing a centre for God and his people and it emphasises the promises derived therefrom. The merging of natural, historical, and symbolic space in this memory still constitutes the center.²

This merging is carried through with the addition of Ps 135–137, as the triad concludes with a rousing cry to remember Jerusalem and remember the enemies of Israel after rehearsing a history of YHWH's faithfulness to the people.

¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 294.

² Gillmayr-Bucher, "Images of Space," 498.

Psalms 132–134

The closing triad of the superscripted psalms brings memory and place into focus. The opening psalm, Psalm 132 is critical to the Levitical project, as the psalm remembers David, as vulnerable servant, bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. David's action is memorialized in song and in the cry to YHWH to remember. The triad progresses to the inner court of the Temple, placing the singers in the house of YHWH.

Psalm 132

Following the tender psalm of David of inward reflection and familial relationships is the rousing cry of kingship and the particular place that will endure to close the collection. Leslie Allen proposes that the calls for Israel to place their hope in YHWH in Pss 130 and 131 are fulfilled in Ps 132 in the connection between David's line and the sacred presence of YHWH at Zion.³ Place is a critical aspect of this psalm and directly tied to memory; the first word is the imperative "Remember!" directed to YHWH and to David's determination to find a place for YHWH. David vows to be dis-located as long as YHWH remains without place, but by the conclusion of the psalm YHWH has been located at Zion and dispenses from there the blessings of place: bread, salvation, and elevation over enemies. Psalm 132:11–18 is the only occurrence of direct speech by YHWH in the collection; the speech is related to place and blessing and culminates in blessings for the servants of YHWH and Zion.

³ Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 2nd ed., WBC 12 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 275.

Psalm 132 deviates from the other psalms of the collection in several aspects. The most noticeable differences are the length of the psalm compared to the other fourteen of the collection, and that it does not incorporate any of the common poetic techniques (anadiplosis, stair-step parallelism).⁴ Additionally, this psalm espouses a royal theology and specific connections to Israel's history noticeably absent throughout the previous psalms of the collection. Unlike other royal psalms, however, Ps 132 does not speak of a king in general terms, so that the psalm can be applied across kingships; this psalm is about David and Zion. Gillingham describes the psalm as the "Ark psalm," and a psalm that was of critical importance for the Levites.⁵

The structural division of Ps 132 is a matter of great debate. Terence Fretheim opens his study of Ps 132 with disconcerting words for the form critic: "The judgment of commentators with regard to the form of Ps 132 is unanimous; it is 'strange,' 'peculiar,' and 'difficult to recognize' variously classified as a Zion Song, Royal Psalm, or under the broad category of 'liturgy.'"⁶ Kraus also points to the particularly difficult form of the psalm, stating

⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 460

⁵ Gillingham, "The Levitical Singers and the Compilation of the Psalter," in *Trägerkreise in den Psalmen*, eds. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Johannes Bremer, and Till Magnus Steiner, BBB 178 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2017), 41.

⁶ Terence Fretheim, "Psalm 132: A Form-Critical Study," *JBL* 86 (1967): 389-300, 289.

Psalm 132 contains characteristic elements of songs of Zion...but likewise also the dominating thematics that establish the category “royal psalms.” But with this discovery the real question is only stated: Into which situation should this psalm, with all its changing citations, explanations, and exclamations, be placed? Only from its (surely obviously cultic) connections will this peculiar, multi-layered psalm be intelligible.⁷

The two majority positions disagree over dividing the psalm after verse 9 or after verse 10. Fretheim reads verses 1–5 and verses 10–12 as parallel strophes, with the latter occurring in response to the former, a “declaration following supplication.”⁸ David’s oath is spoken of as a past event to be remembered by YHWH, while YHWH’s oath is made present and conditional. Identifying correspondence between verses 6–9 and verses 13–16, Fretheim identifies the strophe pattern as *abab* with the final two verses, 17–18 functioning as the conclusion. “Thus the reality of the presence of Yahweh is effectuated through the actualization of the past event. The presence of the ark in procession serves to mediate the presence of Yahweh to his people with the resultant blessing.”⁹ Hossfeld defends Fretheim’s division after verse 9. “If we survey these indications of the structure and content of Psalm 132, one can describe it, from a form- and genre-critical point of view, as a *petition for a king* that looks back to the history of the nation and the king and places special value on legitimating divine speech.”¹⁰

Terrien divides the psalm into three strophes: strophe I (vv.1–5b), strophe II (vv.6–10b), strophe III (vv.11–14b) with a closing envoi composed of four bicola

⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 474.

⁸ Fretheim, “Psalm 132,” 292.

⁹ Fretheim, “Psalm 132,” 294.

¹⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 498.

(vv.14–18). He proposes that each strophe is made up of two substrophes, with the exception of a tricolon in v.11 which stresses YHWH's oath to David. "The meter is generally regular (3+3), with one emphatic tricolon (the oath to David, v.11) and the promise to cause a horn, symbol of success, to flourish upon David and his dynasty (v.17:4+3)."¹¹

Zenger, in opposition to his writing partner, defends the traditional division after verse 10 and, on the basis of this division, categorizes the psalm as a *promise for Zion*.¹² Brueggemann and Bellinger also support the division of the poem after verse 10, with the first section framed in verses 1 and 10 by petitions.¹³ Reid discusses the psalm as a structural unity, composed of two vows, David's and then YHWH's.¹⁴ Gianni Barbiero's literary analysis emphasizes the unity and coherence of Psalm 132. He concludes, based on study of the parallels that the psalm is "not ancient: it is certainly postexilic and is close to the theology of the Chronicler. As a result, any interpretations bound up with the monarchy and cultic *Sitz im Leben* connected with the ark of the covenant are to be given up."¹⁵

The psalm begins with a petition in direct address to YHWH to remember how hard David worked to find YHWH a resting place. The first word of the psalm is

¹¹ Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 851.

¹² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 498.

¹³ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 556.

¹⁴ Stephen Breck Reid, "David," 55.

¹⁵ Gianni Barbiero, "Psalm 132: A Prayer of Solomon," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 239-258, 258.

YHWH, followed by the plea to “Remember David” (v. 1b). The call to YHWH to remember someone is “an idiom pointing to pious initiatives of individuals.”¹⁶ The “imperative ‘remember!’ that gives the entire psalm its fundamental perspective not only implies, in biblical usage, a making-present through recollection but also demands a resulting action.”¹⁷ David’s commitment is described as hardship or suffering, establishing David as the long-suffering humble leader.

In verse 2 the description of David’s oath begins with a shift in the direction of discourse from direct address to YHWH to speaking about YHWH and describing the vow David made to find the ark and secure a “place” for YHWH. As YHWH will not sleep while watching over Israel, so David will not close his eyes until YHWH has a place to dwell (vv. 4–5). In verse 6 a “we” group speaks up. The vow was heard in Ephrath, and the ark was found in the fields of Jaar.¹⁸

Psalm 132:6 is a problematic line for the interpretation of the psalm. A. Robinson explores several possibilities for the meaning of *bə’eprātā*, where “it,” David’s vow was heard. One interpretation is that Ephrathah refers to Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16.19, 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Mic 5:1), which would indicate that David first heard of the ark’s existence in Bethlelem. A second line of reasoning posits that Ephrathah refers to Kireath-jearim, drawing from I Chron 2:50. A third possibility connects Ephrathah with Shiloh, where the ark was housed earlier. A fourth

¹⁶ Reid, “David,” 55. See Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31; 2 Chr 6:42.

¹⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 460.

¹⁸ In Hieronymus, the suffix is changed on both verbs “heard” and “found” from third feminine singular to third masculine singular, we heard him, referring to David rather than the vow.

interpretation is that the word refers generally to “fertile plains” or “cornfields” in parallel with Jaar, which can be likewise rendered “fields of the forest.”¹⁹ In verse 7, the “we” group is invited to enter the abode” and to bow at YHWH’s footstool, where they then petition YHWH to take place and rest in the presence of priests and loyal ones. The phrase (v. 9) “your priests are clothed in righteousness, your loyal ones sing for you” is echoed later in YHWH’s vow to Zion (v. 16), with a change of “righteousness” to “salvation.” The command for YHWH to come to the dwelling place in the presence of the priests and loyal ones seems to be linked to the petition in verse 10. In this first section of the Psalm, while David’s search for YHWH’s resting place is key, the participation of the “we” group, the speakers or singers of the psalm, is also emphasized. “It seems we should posit that the psalm here deliberately allows the ‘we’ group to act, so that the Jerusalem Temple can be traced both to David’s initiative (vv. 1–5) and also to that of the people.”²⁰ Gillingham frames the importance of the description of the process in this way:

[I]t seems that Ps 132 would have also been most important for the Levitical singers: this composite psalm not only supported their own ancient authority, as bearers of the Ark, in laws established by Moses (e.g. Deut 10:8ff; Deut 31:25–26), but it was that vital link between the Mosaic cult emanating from Mount Horeb and the Davidic cult from Mount Zion. Hence the inclusion of Ps 132 into the Songs of Ascents (Ps 120–134) is not so much about *David* bringing the Ark to Jerusalem as about David bringing the *Ark* to that city, tracing back the worship at Zion to the time of Moses as well as David. In this way we are able to understand those references to David as the founder of the Temple cult and paragon of piety in a different light: the figure of David supported the status of the Levites extremely well.”²¹

¹⁹ A. Robinson, “Do Ephrathah and Jaar Really Appear in Psalm 132?” *ZAW* 86 (1974): 220–222, 220.

²⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 461.

²¹ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers and the Compilation of the Psalter,” 41.

Verse 11 introduces the oath YHWH swears to David, echoing the third person narration of verse 2. The oath from YHWH is spoken as if directly to David, promising the continuation of the Davidic line on the throne. Verse 12 supplies the conditional terms of the oath, the sons must “keep my covenant and my decrees” (v. 12). It is YHWH who is the teacher of the covenant and decrees, and the teaching is placed in a temple context in the presence of the priests. Tension exists between this firm oath that YHWH “will not renounce” that will endure to the end of time and the conditional nature of the terms—if David and his sons, and their sons are obedient they will keep the throne, reminiscent of the “priestly language of Exod 25–31 and the Sinai Torah.”²²

Verse 13 announces YHWH’s choice of Zion as his seat. Gerstenberger writes:

It may seem strange that Yahweh speaks so positively about dwelling at a specific place on earth, *’wh*, Piel, “want,” “desire,” being a strong expression (vv. 13b, 14b; nowhere else in connection with God). In other layers of OT tradition there are equally strong reservations about God’s habitation in a humanmade building (cf. 1 Kgs 8:27; Isa 66:1). This positive attitude over against Zion-Jerusalem links our psalm with Zion hymns like Psalms 46; 48.²³

The picture of Zion as YHWH’s place differs from the election of Zion described in Pss 42–44.²⁴ YHWH has chosen Zion simply because he desires her—no reasoning, cosmic significance or legitimation is necessary. In the previous stanza, in verse 8, the “we” group summoned YHWH to come to the resting-place, and in verse 14 YHWH responds with action. In verse 16, the echoed phrase from verse 9 is

²² Reid, “David,” 58.

²³ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 367.

²⁴ Reid, “David,” 58.

repeated with slight changes. The passive “priests are clothed” is attributed directly to YHWH, “I will clothe her priests” (v. 16). “Righteousness” of the priests is changed to “salvation.” And most interestingly, perhaps, is that YHWH declares the “devoted ones” the “devoted ones of Zion,” not the “devoted ones of YHWH” (v. 16). An aspect of Ps 132 that has been underemphasized is the address in the closing to Zion personified. The familial imagery, so well-developed in previous psalms, is not interrupted, but transformed as YHWH as the head of household addresses his ‘family.’ YHWH vows to teach David’s/his sons, then turns to Zion. Zenger’s translation captures the feminine imagery well: “Indeed, YHWH has chosen Zion; he has desired her as his habitation: “This is the place of my rest forever; here will I dwell, for I have desired her”” (vv. 13–14).

Verses 17–18 describe the promise to the Davidic line that remains obedient to YHWH’s covenant and teaching that is framed as victory over enemies. In contrast to the priests, whom YHWH clothes with salvation, the enemies of the anointed one YHWH clothes in disgrace while the anointed one bears a “glowing circlet” (v. 18). The final verse moves from the opening line reminding YHWH of David’s hardship, his “extreme self-denial” to the concluding line where the final picture left with the audience is that of the anointed one’s enemies clothed in disgrace and the anointed one with a sparkling crown on his head. “Since the glowing circlet is found in Exod 28:36–38; 29:6 as an element of the clothing of the high priestly office, it is possible that Psalm 132 here attributes Priestly features to the Davidic king.”²⁵

²⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 466.

Summary

In the opening of the final triad, memory and place come together as YHWH and people take place in Zion. As Tucker notes, “By emphasizing Zion as the ‘dispenser’ of God’s good gifts, the psalmists reinforce the role of Zion in sustaining the people of God amid a hostile environment.”²⁶ In this critical psalm, the role of the speakers, the “we” group comes to the fore. The ones who preserve and pass on the memories of the people, and the knowledge of Zion as the chosen dwelling of YHWH are in view and speak directly for YHWH.

The fact that four other divine speeches occur in royal psalms fits with the Chronicler’s view of prophetic inspiration ratifying the king’s role in the cult and the Levites’ role, imbued with the spirit of prophecy, within it. So the preservation of prophetically inspired “divine speech” from the past gives authority to present practice — even when neither prophecy nor monarchy is present. And those who communicate this through “prophetic song” are of course the Levites.”²⁷

As YHWH’s place is established, so is the identity of the Levitical singers.

Psalms 133

The second song of the closing triad is a beautiful reflection on communal life that weaves together images of ritual and place in a simple psalm. Although simple, this small song has caused difficulty in interpretation throughout the history of scholarship. Zenger identifies the two primary difficulties in the interpretation of Psalm 133: “1) the complexity of the world of imagery and 2) the polyvalence of the

²⁶ Tucker, “The God of Heaven in Book 5 of the Psalter,” in *The Psalter as Witness: Theology, Poetry, and Genre*, ed. Dennis W. Tucker and W. H. Bellinger Jr. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 87-100, 97.

²⁷ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter,” 118.

thematic statement in v. 1.”²⁸ The difficulty of the imagery is not just a problem of interpreting metaphorical language. First, one of the primary issues of interpretation seems to be difficulty with the blending, borrowing, or redacting from different contexts so that the setting and genre are difficult to argue definitively. Many interpreters resort to cutting out elements as late additions so that an originally intended wisdom psalm is found beneath the cultic elements. Bellinger holds the two ideas, cultic and community, together methodologically.

The text of Ps 133 suggests that interpreters explore both interpretive traditions of the liturgical (cultic) with its emphasis on divine blessing and the contextual (post-cultic) with its emphasis on community, rather than choosing only one as the normative sense of the psalm. Such a both/and approach, rather than an either/or approach, holds promise.²⁹

The both/and of the psalm need not be an interpretive difficulty, but rather an indication of a new understanding of cult and community.

Psalm 133 is the final of four psalms to also include attribution to David. Zenger explains the presence of this attribution by linking it to Ps 132. “After Ps 132, where David was presented in the body of the psalm itself as the founder of the Temple and the ‘donor’ of the Temple cult, whose life-supportive nature and loveliness are sung in Ps 133, this makes sense both materially and intertextually.”³⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, the three additional Songs of Ascents that are attributed to David are Pss 122, 124, and 131. This final attribution situates David’s

²⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 472.

²⁹ W. H. Bellinger Jr., “Poetry and Theology in the Psalms,” in *The Psalter as Witness : Theology, Poetry, and Genre*, ed. Dennis W. Tucker and W. H. Bellinger Jr. (Waco: Baylor Press, 2017), 3–14, 12.

³⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 477.

legacy within the experience of unity and blessing from Zion. Terrien identifies the theme as “the beauty and sweetness of brotherhood” but the question remains, what kind of brotherhood?³¹

Kraus asserts that the psalm is related to everyday situations and originated with wisdom teachers. He considers the appearance of Mount Zion and Aaron as secondary attempts to bring the “secular” saying into the sacred realm.³² A second possibility of interpreting the fraternal community is that of national brotherhood. Adele Berlin moves the interpretation away from familial connotations and toward a call for the reunification of Israel and Judah.³³ Another variation suggests that this is a call for priestly unity, reflecting the situation of post-exilic cultic relations.³⁴ Following the great expression of priestly activity in the Temple in the previous psalm, Ps 133 as an expression of unity of priests is warranted.

The structure of the psalm seems to be influenced by various genres. Zenger relates the psalm to Ps 1 in that it is “both hymnic and didactic,” and identifies the structural plan for the psalm as an opening thematic statement (v.1), a middle section comprised of two comparisons (vv.2–3ab) and a closing thematic statement echoing the opening (v.3cd).³⁵ Loretz divides the psalm into two parts, an initial

³¹ Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 851.

³² Kraus, *Psalms* 2, 485.

³³ Adele Berlin, “On the Interpretation of Ps 133,” in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 141-148, 142.

³⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 475.

³⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 472.

song and a secondary Zion redaction.³⁶ Terrien allows for openness of interpretation of the structure of the psalm related to one's view of the genre of the psalm. Terrien associates the "sapiential style" with a single strophe, which seems to influence the psalm, but also recognizes that the psalm can be divided into two strophes.³⁷

The psalm begins with a demonstrative *hinnēh* followed by the sapiential saying, "How good and lovely it is when brothers dwell together in unity" (v. 1bc). The brief phrase, brothers dwelling in unity, is a phrase rich with interpretive possibility.

Terrien identifies two interpretations of the use of "brothers" in this psalm. A literal interpretation recognizes the reality of sibling disunity and its descriptions in scripture. This poem, then, would be a meditation upon the blessing of fraternal harmony. In almost identical words as the Deuteronomic Law on levirate marriage, Ps 133 references "dwelling together" (Deut 25:5). Kraus relates the psalm to the realm of family law, specifically the observation about dwelling together so as to avoid land quarrels. Additional references to familial relations "dwelling together" occur in the ancestral narratives (Abraham and Lot; Jacob and Esau). Gunkel identifies in these references Israelite inheritance customs of not dividing the family property and continuing to dwell together. Gunkel believes that the psalm is

³⁶ Oswald Loretz, ed, "Marziḥu im ugaritischen und biblischen Anhnenkult. Zu Ps 23; 133; Am 6, 1-7 und Jer 16,5-8," in *Mesopotamica-Ugaritica-Biblica*, ed. Manfred Dietrich, AOAT 232 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukrichener Verlag, 1993), 129.

³⁷ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 851.

composed at a time when the custom is fading and familial relationships are changing with regard to the land.³⁸

Also a possibility of interpretation is the figurative use of the word in sapiential contexts (examples Job 30:29; Prov 18:9).³⁹ “The comparison of fraternal unity among professional musicians may well be that of precious oil flowing down on the hem of Aaron’s robes.”⁴⁰ Zenger offers another figurative interpretation related to the city as a whole. “A particular variant of this type of interpretation is offered by Alfons Schulz, who understands the psalm, which he dates to the time of Nehemiah, as advocacy for a readiness to move to rebuilt Jerusalem in order to populate the city.”⁴¹ Also related to the experience in Jerusalem is Keel’s understanding of brotherhood as a religious fraternity. He holds that community or fraternal unity is not just a celebration of the family, but of the community that is experienced at the Temple. “It is with Psalm 133 as much as with Psalms 84 and 122, though with emphasis on a different aspect: a psalm that advocates pilgrimage to Zion.”⁴² Picking up on the household imagery throughout the collection, this psalm illustrates what it means to be part of the house of YHWH, using language of the family carefully interwoven with cultic imagery.

³⁸ Gunkel, “Psalm 133,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft*, ed. Karl Marti, BZAW 34 (Giessen: A. Topelmann, 1920), 69–74.

³⁹ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 851.

⁴⁰ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 852.

⁴¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 475.

⁴² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 476.

The pleasant image of brothers dwelling together in unity is then compared to oil and dew, “archaic elements in the Old Testament theology of blessing (cf. Gen 27:28, 39).”⁴³ Picking up on the closing imagery of the anointed one standing with a sparkling crown in Ps 132, this psalm envisions fraternal unity as an anointing. The psalmist declares, “Like good oil on the head it is, flowing down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, flowing down on the border of his robes” (v. 2). The general consensus among earlier scholarship was that the reference to Aaron was added at a later date, “sacralizing” a secular poem.⁴⁴ In the clever phrasing of H. Schmidt, the secular poem is “hauled in by the hair!” to the realm of worship.⁴⁵ This understanding of contexts and usage reflects a particular stance toward strong divisions in the sacred and secular, such that a household poem would not incorporate a reference to Aaron in any form. Othmar Keel pushed against this sharp division, quoting Gunkel’s own words against this form of argumentation. In a telling quip Gunkel argues that “such sacred images [were] used also for things that

⁴³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 477. Gunkel’s proposal is that three images have been combined into two images, thus causing the reference to Aaron to appear as an interruption when it is not. Instead of the addition of the phrase, Gunkel suggests that a preposition is missing. The comparative *ki* is missing before “the beard of Aaron”. Gunkel argues this on the basis of meter and the construction of the other two comparisons.

Gunkel’s rendering:

“like the precious oil on the head,
that flows down into the beard
like Aaron’s beard, that flows down
onto the hem of his robes
like the dew of Hermon that flows down
onto the mountains of Ijon.”

⁴⁴ See, for example, Kraus who separates the mention of oil from the cultic realm. Kraus identifies the reference to Aaron’s beard as a gloss based on what he sees as an interruption of parallelism of two comparisons (the oil on the head that runs onto the beard; the dew of Hermon that runs to the hill country). By removing the reference to Aaron, the pouring of oil reflects a cosmetic habit rather than a ritual act (2 Kings 20:13; Eccl. 7:1; Jer 6:20). [Kraus, *Psalms* 60-150, 486.

⁴⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 472.

in themselves are entirely secular; thus in Sir 26:17 a well-shaped woman is compared to the sacred lamps.”⁴⁶ Keel argues that the removal of the reference to Aaron’s beard does not add to the integrity of the psalm and identifies an identical meter in verses 2–3ab that is reinforced by alliteration when read aloud. The imagery of the oil running down from the head, to Aaron’s beard, to his robe offers a picture of the kind of community envisioned in the Songs of Ascents. Blessing, coming from YHWH who dwells at Zion, flows into the household of YHWH and the servants within that household, and outward to all households. When brothers dwell together in the Temple, the same unity can flow outward to all households.

The second metaphor in verse three continues the imagery of unity flowing down from a central location. The comparison continues, “Like the dew of Hermon it is, falling down on the mountains of Zion” (v. 2). The imagery of the “dew of Hermon” is not easy to identify within the biblical corpus, as there is no identifiable tradition of “the dew of Hermon.” Also difficult is the notion of dew flowing from Mt. Hermon to the mountains of Zion, as geographically this is not possible. Kraus relates the image to summer dew that refreshes the land, as the oil is a refreshing application to the face and beard.⁴⁷ References to dew (*tal*) are very unusual in the psalms (only in Ps 110:3) and Hermon is referenced only infrequently in the psalms (Ps 42:6; 89:12). In Ps 42 Hermon is referenced as a geographical marker indicating the feeling of distance or absence of YHWH, and in Ps 89 the psalmist declares “The

⁴⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 472.

⁴⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 2*, 486.

north and south (Zaphon and Yamin) you created them, Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name!" In this joyous creation, Hermon is part of a geographic pole indicating the power and extent of YHWH's creation. The imagery of this psalm, especially when paired with the phrase "mountains of Zion," seems to indicate metaphorical use. This is the only use in the Old Testament of the phrase "mountains of Zion." The form *hārê* (plural, construct form) only appears in poetic texts, and often in the context of blessing and cursing. In David's pronouncement of a curse on the mountains of Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan were killed, David invokes dew and oil (2 Sam 1:21).⁴⁸ The theological topography invoked in this psalm offers a complementary image to the first one of oil running down the beard and robes of Aaron, an image of unity flowing from the center of cultic life out. In this image, unity in the form of refreshing dew flows from the edges of the world in to Zion.

In the final declaration closing the psalm, the psalmist offers the assurance "From there YHWH has commanded the blessing; life forevermore!" (v. 3cd). Bellinger notes that the identification of the referent for "there," *šām*, is significant in the interpretation of the psalm. "The location is often named as Zion, the concluding word of the previous line. Schaefer takes the term in a more encompassing way as referring to Zion, the community, and the priestly vestments. Both are viable."⁴⁹ In the same way that unity flows out from the Temple and back to it, so has YHWH

⁴⁸ Other occurrences of the "mountains of": in Balaam's song in Numbers (23:7), in a blessing song in Deut (33:15), Hab 3:6, Pss 36:7, 50:10, 76:5, 87:1, and Song 4:8. The strangest use is in Song 4:8, "the mountains of Leopards."

⁴⁹ Bellinger, "Poetry and Theology," 9.

commanded the blessing to flow out from brotherly unity and out from Zion. Both are aspects of life with YHWH.

“Commanding the blessing,” with blessing including the definite article is also a unique phrase in the Psalter that is likely drawn from blessing and curse language. Lev 25:21 is framed as a speech of YHWH who declares that he will give “my blessing,” and in Deut 28:8 the extended section on blessings and curses uses the phrase “the blessing.” The concluding cry of the psalmist is “Life forevermore!,” literally “of life until the eternity!” Hossfeld and Zenger write,

“This formulation, with the definite article “the” before “eternity,” is unique: on the one hand, it takes up the longing for life in the face of death that echoes in the festal theology of vv. 2–3b, and emphasizes that YHWH will satisfy that longing *here*, on Zion (cf. Psalm 132). On the other hand, the time indicated by the article, “until the eternity,” lies within the horizon of this festal theology, according to which the human being, in enjoying the festival, transcends her or his limited ‘human time’ and participates in the ‘eternity of God’s time,’ while at the same time it corrects that ‘festal theology.’”

The ‘unique formulation’ reflects a dual conception of Zion, that the blessing of YHWH is experienced now in community, and it was experienced in the past in YHWH’s election of Zion, which remains in place forevermore.

Summary

Psalms 133 has plagued interpreters because of its multivalent imagery that weaves together ritual and household. Terrien holds that the poem is a work of a temple singer who is familiar with sapiential style and traditions.⁵⁰ The semantic links to Ps 132 and 134, as well as unique phrasing throughout the psalm, drawing

⁵⁰ Terrien, *Psalms* 2, 852.

from a wide range of traditions do suggest a composition that consciously brings together ideas of the collection. As the penultimate image in the Songs of Ascents, Ps 133 calls attention to the bi-directional movement of unity and blessing. It is declared good that the fraternal community not only dwell, but dwell together in unity.

Psalm 134

The final superscripted psalm of the collection is a brief psalm of only three verses, composed of twenty-five words including the superscription. Within the three verses, the Tetragrammaton is invoked five times, blessing is requested three times, and unique epithets are employed to describe the participants.

The division of Ps 134 is a debated matter. Gunkel divides the psalm into two sections, an exhortation and a “little liturgy.” The first section, verses 1b–2b, is framed by the exhortation to “Bless YHWH!” The second section (v. 3) combines two liturgical formulae and invokes a blessing from YHWH toward the audience.⁵¹ Following Gunkel in the issue of division and textual emendations, Kraus divides the psalm into two pieces. Kraus agrees with Gunkel that the opening interjection *hinnēh* is a late addition and therefore divides the psalm into two sections according to a 3+3+3 meter, the first section an exhortation and the second a priestly blessing, which were then combined to form an independent hymn.⁵² Both Gunkel and Kraus

⁵¹ Kraus, *Psalms* 2, 488.

⁵² Kraus, *Psalms* 2, 488.

acknowledge that the hymn does not operate according to a more typical hymnic formula with an exhortation followed by praise.

Gerstenberger divides the psalm into three parts, the Superscription, Summons to Praise, and Blessing and identifies the phrase “Bless YHWH, servants of YHWH” as the center and theme of section two. Gerstenberger’s discussion highlights the difference in philosophies about the role of the superscription. While some form critics dismiss the superscriptions as late additions that have little to no bearing on the interpretation or division of the hymn, Gerstenberger regards the superscription as critical information, even if it is a later addition. Gerstenberger locates the central theme of the psalm in the action of pilgrims, the assumed participants, and their part in pilgrimage worship.⁵³

In an analysis that relies on the role of the participants in a discussion of structure, Pierre Auffret distinguishes between verses 1–2 where a single person addresses a group of participants and verse 3 where a single participant is addressed.⁵⁴ Auffret identifies two groups of participants in the psalm. The first participant, present in verses 1–2, is a pilgrim who addresses the servants of YHWH. In verse 3 the servants of YHWH respond, announcing a blessing upon the pilgrim.⁵⁵ Auffret comes to this conclusion based on the identification of the literary device, chiasmus, organizing the opening strophe (See Figure 5.1).

⁵³ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 374.

⁵⁴ Pierre Auffret, “Note on the Literary Structure of Psalm 134,” *JSOT* 45 (1989) 87–89.

⁵⁵ Pierre Auffret, “Psalm 134,” 87.

- | | | | | |
|----|--|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| a. | Behold | | | |
| | Bless | Yahweh | | |
| | | b. all the servants | | of Yahweh |
| | | B. who stand in the house | | of Yahweh |
| | | | All night long | |
| A. | Lift up your hands towards the sanctuary | | | |
| | and bless Yahweh ⁵⁶ | | | |

Figure 5.1. Chiastic structure of verses 1–2.

The second half of the chiasm, A, contains two imperatives whereas (a) contains the single imperative, *brk*. A and B specify the location and time, whereas b identifies the participants. The name YHWH is used four times, at the end of a, b, B, and A.

Auffret also identifies a chiasm in vv. 2–3 (See Figure 5.2).

- | | | | | |
|----|--|-----------|----------------|---------|
| A. | Lift up your hands | | | |
| | B. Towards the sanctuary | | | |
| | | C. And | bless | Yahweh |
| | | C' May he | bless you, may | Yahweh, |
| | B' From Zion, | | | |
| A' | -He who made heaven and earth. ⁵⁷ | | | |

Figure 5.2. Chiastic structure of verses 2–3.

Auffret identifies parallelism in the phrases “bless YHWH” and “May YHWH bless you” despite the inverted subjects and objects. Sanctuary and Zion also create uniform correspondence. The only remaining parallelism is that of the hands of the worshipper and YHWH, maker of heaven and earth. Auffret’s creative solution is that the psalmist makes implicit reference to the phrase “the works of his hands” in relation^{ed} to YHWH’s mighty, creative deeds. Auffret identifies several common

⁵⁶ Auffret, “Psalm 134,” 87.

⁵⁷ Auffret, “Psalm 134,” 88.

images employing reference to YHWH's hands such as "the works of his hands,"⁵⁸ "the work of his fingers,"⁵⁹ and frequent references to YHWH's right hand.⁶⁰

In order to make the correspondence of YHWH's, maker of heaven and earth, and the worshipper's hands hang together, Auffret returns to a discussion of the literary structure of the psalm. The inversion of the subject/object in C/C', the inversion of the direction of action (toward the sanctuary/from Zion) in B/B' leads Auffret to propose an inversion of the direction of action in A/A' from the hands of the servants as an echo of the hands of YHWH as maker of heaven and earth, creating a mirror in verses 2–3.⁶¹

But what of the two parts, and the overlapping use of chiasm? Auffret identifies two links between the pieces of the psalm. First, he links the opening call for blessing with the call to bless YHWH at the end of verse 2, and then from the servants standing in the house of YHWH "all night long" to the phrase "who made heaven and earth." Auffret concludes "At each point reference is made to Yahweh as creator—which is evident for the final expression, and at least is hinted at the end of verse 1. The blessing of the servants forms part of the grand rhythm of nights and days. The blessing of Yahweh comes from him who made heaven and earth. He who chose Zion is none other than the creator of heaven and earth."⁶² The chiastic

⁵⁸ Ps 8:6 (your); 92:4 (your); 111:7.

⁵⁹ Ps 8:3 (your).

⁶⁰ Ps 16:11; 17:7; 18:35; 20:6; 21:8; 44:3, etc.

⁶¹ Auffret, "Psalm 134," 88.

⁶² Auffret, "Psalm 134," 89.

structures are helpful for illuminating the correspondence between the verses throughout the psalm.

Terrien divides the psalm into 2 strophes, but begins the second strophe with verse two, rather than placing verses 1–2 in the first strophe and dividing the psalm as the discourse shifts from the summons to bless YHWH to a summons of blessing from YHWH.⁶³ The division in this manner effects Terrien’s identification of the participants. Terrien identifies three parties involved.

- 1) The speaker; Terrien discusses the speaker only as “the psalmist” and makes no attempt at further identifying the speaker.
- 2) The servants of YHWH; Terrien proposes priests or Levitical musicians, standing in the sanctuary at night.
- 3) “outsiders, pilgrims within sight of the temple”; by dividing the psalm at verse 2, Terrien envisions a third party involved in the hymn. Terrien envisions the servants of YHWH and the ones instructed to lift their hands to the sanctuary and bless YHWH as two different groups.

Whether or not a third party is involved, the likely audience for this psalm is the Levitical musicians as the servants of YHWH. Celebrated throughout the triad, the final expression of the priestly group is that of giving and receiving blessing at the Temple.

The psalm opens with the interjection *hinnēh*, which is not a typical hymnic introductory word. Psalm 134 begins with a unique combination of the interjection *hinnēh* plus the imperative *bārăkû*. Gunkel discounted the inclusion of the interjection as a scribal error and did not include it as part of the psalm, but redaction critics argued for the presence of the interjection as a connecting marker

⁶³ Terrien, *Psalms* 2, 853.

to the previous psalm, Ps 133, which also begins with the interjection.⁶⁴

Gerstenberger also notes the oddity of the *hinnēh* preceding this blessing summons, stating that the expected context is one of instruction, not summons. Almost all commentators discuss the psalm beginning with *hinnēh* as a linking device or scribal error following Ps 133.⁶⁵ The context described by the psalm, at first glance, is one of nightly worship at the house of YHWH. Older form-critical work made direct connections with a cultic situation, such as H.J. Kraus' suggestion that the psalm served as the concluding benediction of nightly worship services, spoken in alternation by two priests to a congregation.⁶⁶ In the psalm as preserved in the MT, Kraus envisions the priests exhorting and blessing a community of nocturnal worshippers. Kraus looks to interbiblical references to support the nocturnal worship setting, particularly Isaiah 30:29, "You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel," but Kraus is hesitant to attribute this song of praise to one particular festival or cultic event. Like the psalm before it, to which it is linked by the opening phrase, the liturgical setting is less prominent.

In verses 1–2 Hossfeld and Zenger identify the 'speaker' as the congregation collectively speaking to the priests who are the 'servants of YHWH.'⁶⁷ Throughout

⁶⁴ Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 573.

⁶⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 375.

⁶⁶ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 488.

⁶⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 488.

the collection, the image of the servant and master as part of the range of household metaphors has been employed to describe the relationship between YHWH and the community. Likewise, in the conclusion of the collection, the title “servants of YHWH” is paired with the image of the servants standing at the “house of YHWH,” bringing the imagery of the household of YHWH to its conclusion with worshippers lifting their hands to bless YHWH. In the closing of the previous triad, Ps 131, the psalmist, like a servant, declares that her eyes are not lifted up and she experiences contentment waiting on YHWH. Here the household is invited to stand with hands lifted and bless YHWH, in active participation with a clear identity and purpose. Although Kraus describes the worshippers in the psalm as “a community that knows that it is sheltered in an area of *barakah* and praises God, conscious of dependence.”⁶⁸

In verse 3 the discourse shifts to address a singular “you” as the recipient of the blessing from YHWH. Zenger attributes speech in verse 3 to the priests, who speak to the people of the congregation. Zenger imagines a shift in the physical position of the priests, who, in the first stanza are instructed to lift their hand toward the sanctuary, but as they speak a blessing would turn and lift their hands over the congregation. (Lev 9:22; Sira 50:20) In the concluding blessing, verse 3, Kraus associates blessing with Zion as source of life preserving power because of YHWH’s presence. Gerstenberger discusses the choice of *brk* as the same word that is used to describe both the summons to the people to praise and to articulate

⁶⁸ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 489.

blessing from YHWH upon the people, calling it “an important and conscious coincidence.”⁶⁹ From human beings to God, Terrien identifies “blessing” as “saying good things.”⁷⁰ Whereas Gerstenberger associates the blessing of human beings to the deity as a granting of authority and a building of the deity in the ancient world, Terrien softens this language. The responsibility of the servants of YHWH is to say good things and to request blessing from YHWH, from Zion.

Summary

Psalm 134, as the closing psalm of the superscripted Songs of Ascents, positions the worshipper in the house of YHWH, a culmination of the imagery throughout the collection establishing the servants of YHWH and their relationship to Zion. Hebert Levine, who produced a ritual analysis of select Psalms, provides a brief example of employing ritual analysis for Ps 134. Working through the brief text from a ritual perspective, he concludes “The specialness of place, time, action, and performer of the action are all inscribed in this psalm, which bespeaks the way in which ritual creates ritualized agents, who internalize their people’s sociology, theology, and cosmology in their own bodily actions.”⁷¹ The bodies of the servants of

⁶⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 374.

⁷⁰ Terrien, *The Psalms 2*, 854.

⁷¹ Herbert J. Levine, *Sing unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 28. Levine recognizes the contributions that ritual theory can bring to Psalms scholarship, but his work suffers from methodological inconsistency, and although he claims his work is a commentary, he spends very little space to critical analysis of individual Psalms.

YHWH are positioned in the house of YHWH and their role is to speak blessing to YHWH, even as they experience YHWH's blessing.

Psalms 132–134 Summary

Psalm 132 describes Zion specifically as YHWH's dwelling place, and Ps 133 speaks of the blessing of Zion in metaphorical terms. In Ps 134, Zion is designated as the location from which YHWH's blessing proceeds. Zenger holds that Ps 132–134 are a final triad of the Songs of Ascents that are united thematically and work together as a cohesive narrative, beginning with Yahweh and David in Ps 132 and moving toward the culmination of blessing at Zion in Psalm 134. They write,

To the extent that "Zion," in terms of Psalms 132–133, is the place where YHWH has "commanded" fullness of life as his blessing "forevermore," the Pilgrim Psalter can end with the hope "May YHWH bless you from Zion" (Ps 134:3a), that is, from Zion, the city of *šalôm* (Psalm 122), and from righteousness (Psalm 132), but above all: from Zion as the place of household community in the service of YHWH (Psalm 123) and of liturgical festal community.⁷²

In this final triad, however, the presence of the priests is conspicuous. As the collection moves to its close, the psalms move toward an emphasis on the ones who are serving in the house of YHWH. This study has briefly put forward the possibility of the Levitical singers involved in the collecting and even writing of the collection, a possibility that will be explored further in the discussion of Pss 135–137 and the conclusion.

⁷² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 482.

An Additional Triad: Psalms 135–137

Psalms 135 to 137 contain no superscription, and the three psalms differ dramatically from the length of the previous collection of psalms. The placement of the three psalms as an additional triad concluding the Songs of Ascents before the “Fifth Davidic Psalter” (Pss 138–145) begins is helpful for the interpretation not only of the Songs of Ascents but to these three enigmatic psalms. James M. Todd III observes that even with increased attention to the literary context of the psalms, over the past three decades “every psalm group in Book V has been the object of a detailed study except for four psalms: 119, 135, 136, and 137.”⁷³

The theme of remembrance is evident as a guiding idea for Psalms 135–137. The *root ZKR* occurs three times in Ps 137, and once in each of the previous psalms, alongside calls to mind YHWH’s specific actions on Israel’s behalf. In addition to the theme of remembrance, Gillingham identifies the importance of place as a key concern. She writes, “Ps 135–137 as a whole serve a similar purpose in Book V as Ps 35–41 in Book I: These psalms are concerned with the theme of physical and spiritual poverty and the plight of being landless – again, another typically Levitical theme.”⁷⁴ The following exegesis will present Psalms 135–137 as a continuation and conclusion of the Songs of Ascents, particularly with the interest of the Levitical singers in mind, as the collection ends by stressing the importance of remembering place through song.

⁷³ James M Todd III, *Remember, O Yahweh: The Poetry and Context of Psalms 135–137*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 1. Todd excludes the final five psalms (146–150) from this assessment, as there is widespread agreement about the function of these psalms as the concluding benediction to the collection.

⁷⁴ Gillingham, “The Levitical Singers and the Compilation of the Psalter,” 55.

Psalms 135

Psalms 135 has been compared to a mosaic—a psalm made up of pieces of other psalms, of references to psalms and other biblical texts.⁷⁵ The connections between Ps 135 and the previous psalm are widely acknowledged.⁷⁶ Todd observes that, apart from the superscription of Ps 134, “14 of the 23 words of Psalm 134 reappear in Ps 135 (61 percent).”⁷⁷ Key phrases are repeated throughout the psalm, framing key parts of the psalm.⁷⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger identify intertextual activity, either through direct quotation or allusion in almost every verse of the psalm.⁷⁹ The connections to the Songs of Ascents do not end with Ps 134, but extend back to Ps 133 as well. The word pair “good” and “pleasant” appears only in Pss 133 and 135, both psalms mention Aaron, and establish Zion as the place of Yahweh’s eternal blessing.⁸⁰

Unlike the Songs of Ascents, however, Ps 135 recounts in detail the saving acts of Yahweh’s deliverance in Israel’s history. Passing references in the Songs of Ascents to Aaron, David, the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple stand in stark contrast to the vivid recounting of Yahweh’s creation and deliverance of the people

⁷⁵ Fokkelmann, *Major Poems*, writes “If ever the term ‘mosaic’ applied to a psalm, then it is to Ps. 135,” 298

⁷⁶ See, for example, Hossfeld and Zenger’s analysis of the semantic links between 134 and 135 in *Psalms 101–150*, 500; Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 578.

⁷⁷ Todd, *Remember O Yahweh*, 100.

⁷⁸ Todd, *Remember O Yahweh*, 100.

⁷⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 494. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 495 for the complete list.

⁸⁰ Todd, *Remember O Yahweh*, 102.

of Israel. This psalm implores the servants of YHWH to stand in the house of YHWH and praise YHWH, which entails memorializing the deeds of YHWH in song.

Comprised of twenty-one verses, Ps 135 contains an opening exhortation (vv. 1–4, a body section (vv. 5–18) and a benediction (vv. 19–21). The psalm ends and begins with the cry, “Hallelujah!” (vv. 1a; 21c) The opening exhortation (vv. 1–4) calls for praising “the name of YHWH.” While the stanza does not follow the exact stair-step parallelism of the Songs of Ascents, the psalm opens with the imperative to praise addressed directly to the “servants of YHWH” (v. 1c) and extends the exclamation:

Praise the name of YHWH
Praise, you servants of YHWH,
You who stand in the house of YHWH
In the courts of the house of our God! (vv.1–2)

Figure 5.3. Stair-step parallelism of verses 1–2.

In the opening call for praise, we are drawn to the continued use of the imagery of household of YHWH, primarily the servants of YHWH, who are placed in the house of YHWH. Goldingay writes, “The expression ‘our God’s house’ recurs especially in Ezra 8:17–33; Neh. 10:32–39 [33–40]. The court is the heart of the design of a house, and therefore of a temple.”⁸¹ The servants of YHWH are placed, in this psalm, in the heart of the house of God. They are exhorted not only to praise YHWH, but also to “make music to his name for he is lovely!”⁸² (v. 3). Verse 4 gives the reason

⁸¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 578–579.

⁸² Translation Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 579.

for praise and song, “because YH chose Jacob, Israel as his treasure.” Goldingay writes, “The reality of Yhwh’s choice is given a vivid alternative formulation in the parallelism by speaking of Israel as a possession that is especially valuable to Yhwh (a *sĕgullâ*; for the down-to-earth sense, see 1 Chron. 29:3 Eccles. 2:8).”⁸³ As YHWH chose Zion to be his dwelling place (Ps 132:13), YHWH has also chosen Israel as an inheritance.

Verses 5–18 are an artfully arranged historical recital.⁸⁴ Between the summons to praise (vv. 1–4) and the summons to bless (vv. 19–21), two rhetorical units are arranged around a central affirmation of YHWH’s name (vv.13–14). The first body section, verses 5–12, recounts YHWH’s actions as creator and as deliverer, and the closing of the body section, verses 15–18, establishes idols and the ones who worship them as bound to the same fate.⁸⁵

The first body section opens with a first person singular speaker, who then beings the recital of history. Brueggemann and Bellinger postulate that this is a recital for the leading priest, or an invitation for the singular “I” to join in the collective identity of Israel.⁸⁶ Goldingay draws the comparison to Joshua in declaration in Josh 24, whereby in a superficial sense Joshua distinguished himself from the people with some emphasis, but in a deeper sense this was designed to draw them into making the same, individual personal commitment that he was

⁸³ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 579.

⁸⁴ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 563.

⁸⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 564.

⁸⁶ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 564.

making.”⁸⁷ Verses 5–7 establish YHWH as superior before exploring the specific acts of YHWH’s greatness related to creation. Todd notes that the opening line of verse 5 is nearly a direct quotation of Jethro’s blessing of YHWH after delivering the people from the Egyptians (Exod 18:11).⁸⁸ Verse 5 also establishes YHWH as “above all gods.” Within the horizon of the Songs of Ascents the topic of “other gods” does not appear. The focus throughout the collection is on the establishment of the household of YHWH, and only in this new triad is there a recognition of a realm where other gods might challenge YHWH’s place. But it is established easily that there is no challenge to YHWH’s position. YHWH is above other gods, and with relation to creation YHWH has the freedom to do as he pleases. (v. 6a) Listing out the spaces of creation from “the highest to the lowest regions of the world (heavens → earth → sea → the depths).”⁸⁹ In this psalm the complete expanse of YHWH’s dominion is expressed, from YHWH’s abode to the spaces beyond imagination.⁹⁰

Verse 7 describing what YHWH “is pleased to do” is a dramatic representation of YHWH’s various power over creation. In language reminiscent of Jeremiah and Exodus-event language, the psalm describes YHWH summoning a storm using “three different models for the divine causality involved in the event.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 580.

⁸⁸ Todd, *O YHWH, Remember*, 16.

⁸⁹ Todd, *O YHWH, Remember*, 18.

⁹⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 498.

⁹¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 581. Verse 7 is a close parallel to Jer 10:13, but also reflects the language of Job describing the storehouses of precipitation, Job 38:22.

YHWH is “one who makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth, who made flashes out of lightning for the rain, who brings out wind from his storehouse” (v. 7).

Goldingay observes that the first colon “suggests Yhwh working through natural processes...The second has Yhwh specially bringing into being each natural phenomenon...The third uses a metaphor, Yhwh as the householder who keeps a multiplicity of resources in storage already in being.”⁹² The picture of YHWH as storm-god or creator-god is more than a generic expression of YHWH’s power; Hossfeld and Zenger note that the verse is an adapted quotation from both Jer 10:13 and Jer 51:16. In the Jeremiah 10 passage the speech about YHWH’s power is part of a polemic against false gods, similar to the final stanza of this psalm. In the Jeremiah 51 passage the pronouncement of YHWH’s power is part of the “disempowerment of the world power, Babylon.”⁹³

Verses 8–12 transition from creation language to a retrospective on Egypt and possession of the land. Verses 8 and shift recount YHWH’s actions in Egypt. The abbreviated summary includes only the plague of the firstborn (v. 8) and mention of the “signs and wonders” in the midst of the people, addressed directly to Egypt (v. 9). As Babylon is directly addressed in Ps 137, so Egypt is directly told of YHWH’s power. The power of remembering YHWH’s power in liturgy is that the congregation experiences the actualization and defeat of the enemies of YHWH in each retelling. The defeat of Pharaoh and “all his servants” by YHWH establishes

⁹² Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 581.

⁹³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 498.

contrast with the “servants of YHWH” in verse 1.⁹⁴ Of what use is it to be a servant of Pharaoh, when YHWH is the greatest ruler? The servants of Pharaoh suffer defeat, and the servants of YHWH are tasked with memorializing the defeat of empires and enemies. This section also remembers and reaffirms the defeat of the kings of the land and the granting of possession to the Israelites. Verses 10–11 do not recount the Exodus event or Sinai, but move on to YHWH’s defeat of nations and kings, framed first as “many nations and kings,” then mentioned specifically as “Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan (v. 11). Brueggemann and Bellinger write, “The outcome of land entry, echoing verse 4, is that Israel receives the land of promise. This is the culmination of the entire account from creation on...As Israel is YHWH’s treasured possession, so is the land of promise now Israel’s great gift and treasure.”⁹⁵

The central panel of the composition, verses 13–14, emphasizes the greatness of YHWH’s name and goodness to his servants. Todd notes that several features mark this point as a “crevice” in the psalm.⁹⁶ In this section, the direction of discourse shifts to direct speech to YHWH, the only point in the psalm that YHWH is directly addressed. In verse 13 the divine name appears twice, with the psalmist calling, “YHWH your name endures forever,” and in the second parallel line “YHWH, your remembrance (*zikerka*) endures from generation to generation.” At the center of the psalm the historical recital is turned toward “consequences for present and

⁹⁴ Todd, *Remember, O YHWH*, 22.

⁹⁵ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 565.

⁹⁶ Todd, *Remember, O YHWH*, 26.

future from the retrospective of memory.”⁹⁷ In verse 14 the servants of YHWH appear again; in contrast to the servants of Pharaoh who are destroyed, the servants of YHWH will receive justice and compassion.

The final section of the body, verses 15–18 reflects on the “idols of the nations” and their makers, only the second mention of idols so far in Book V of the Psalter, paralleling the verses in Ps 115:5–7. Hossfeld and Zenger note that the theological horizon of Ps 135 accords with that of Pss 113–18, the Passover Hallel, combined by Temple singers.⁹⁸ The section is not a polemic against other gods; the section is an assertion that there are no other gods. The gods of the nations are nothing but idols made by human hands. A stark contrast is established between YHWH, the maker of heaven and earth, and the makers of idols. YHWH’s name will endure forever; the makers of idols will be like the idols they make, unable to speak, hear, see, or breathe. YHWH’s name, remembrance of YHWH, lives on in the praise of the servants of YHWH and their songs.

Verses 19–21 provide a final summons to bless YHWH. Verses 19–20 are a fourfold call to blessing, listing four parties: Israel, the priests of Aaron, the priests of Levi, and the ones who fear YHWH. Brueggemann and Bellinger propose that the summons is arranged chiastically, with Israel, as the ones who fear YHWH, enveloping the Aaronide and Levitical priests in the center.⁹⁹ The appearance of the

⁹⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 499.

⁹⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 498.

⁹⁹ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 566.

house of Aaron is the only reference in the entire Psalter.¹⁰⁰ In a psalm “stitched together,” from a myriad of texts and songs, this addition is conspicuous. Who would have included a reference to this group, if not a member of the group? The closing verse is an exhortation to bless YHWH from Zion, and an affirmation that YHWH indeed dwells in Jerusalem (v. 21). Todd notes that in the final verse “Both cola end with the name of a place, the first designating the place of the worshippers...and the second designating the place of Yahweh’s dwelling.”¹⁰¹ The dual assertion of place underscores “Yahweh’s presence with his people.”¹⁰²

Summary

In this new triad, Ps 135 picks up themes from the Songs of Ascents while introducing a robust example of memory through praise.¹⁰³ The land, as the place given as an inheritance, is central, but is also reinforced by the assertion that the people are YHWH’s inheritance. In the preservation of YHWH’s name, the inheritance exists into eternity. The psalm also gives a full picture of what it means for YHWH to be the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the closing title given to YHWH in Ps 134. In contrast to the makers of idols and the servants of Pharaoh, the psalmist

¹⁰⁰ Terrien, *Psalms*, 858.

¹⁰¹ Todd, *Remember, O YHWH*, 36.

¹⁰² Todd, *Remember, O YHWH*, 36.

¹⁰³ See the recent chapter by Judith Gärtner, “Rückblick als Ausblick in Ps 135, Psalmentheologisch und psalterkompositorische Überlegungen zur Funktion von Geschichte im 4. und 5. Psalmenbuch,” in *Trägerkreise in den Psalmen* eds. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Johannes Bremer, and Till Magnus Steiner; BBB 178 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2017), 207–222.

affirms that it is good to be a servant of the Maker of Heaven and Earth enacted in praise.

Psalms 136

Psalms 136 is a resounding call for thanks to YHWH, detailing YHWH's goodness to Israel from creation and liberation, and through YHWH's continuing guidance and life-giving provision in the present. Psalms 136 is a twin psalm to Ps 135 in that it also recounts the history of Israel from creation through the Exodus, up to the conquering of the land. Psalms 136 stops short of the conquering of Canaan, ending with the land east of the Jordan. Heidi Baxter writes that "the synopsis in Ps 136 is comprised of select and limited pieces of foundational Torah stories, artfully and purposefully arranged to construct an identity-forming belief statement."¹⁰⁴ Despite the similarities to Ps 135, Ps 136 is entirely unique in its repeated-refrain structure.

Form critically, Gerstenberger identifies six sections of this psalm. Opening with a refrain summoning the community to give thanks, (vv. 1–3) followed by three stanzas expounding on an example of YHWH's goodness (vv. 4–25). The psalm concludes with a renewed summons to give thanks, mirroring the opening lines (v. 26). The three stanzas of the body are a twenty-two line composition warranting consideration of the literary nature of the composition.¹⁰⁵

The opening summons (vv. 1–3) is a tri-fold repetition of the call to give

¹⁰⁴ Heidi L. Baxter, *Psalms 136: A National Story for Israel*, (Ph.D. Diss., TCU, 2014), 3.

¹⁰⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms 2*, 385.

thanks that opens with the name YHWH (*hōdû laYHWH*) and the liturgical formula, “good he is, indeed, his solidarity forever!”¹⁰⁶ The opening summons ties the psalm together with similar exhortations in Pss 134 and 135, but in this psalm “the verb is confess rather than praise or worship.”¹⁰⁷ “Psalm 136:1, the ‘first line formula,’ is identical to 1 Chr 16:34 and thus binds together these two texts.”¹⁰⁸ Baxter proposes that the opening of the psalm evokes the liturgical setting of the ark procession in Chronicles, which draws attention to the appointment of the Levites by YHWH.¹⁰⁹ The psalm then proceeds in story, retelling the history of Israel alternated with the formula “Because his *hesed* is forever!”

The body of the psalm proceeds in three stanzas related to creation, exodus, and land possession. The first stanza of the body (vv. 4–9) is a reflection on creation. Verses 4, 5, and 7 begin with the participle, *’ōsēh*. Gerstenberger notes that the psalmist chooses to repeat the participle *’ōsēh* rather than make use of the wide range of creation-related vocabulary available.¹¹⁰ The rhetorical choice connects the psalm to the previous psalm, Ps 135, which emphasizes YHWH’s status over the maker of idols, as well as draws a line back to the Songs of Ascents that continually employs the epithet “Maker of Heaven and Earth.”

¹⁰⁶ Translation, Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 384.

¹⁰⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 590.

¹⁰⁸ Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 202. The line also serves as the opening line for Pss 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; and 136:1 and the concluding line of Ps 118:29. All of the Psalms serve redactional functions in Books IV and V of the Psalter. Psalm 106 closes Book IV, Ps 107 opens Book V, and Ps 118 closes the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 115–118).

¹⁰⁹ Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 9.

¹¹⁰ Gerstenberger, *Psalms* 2, 386.

The emphasis of YHWH's power in Ps 136 differs from the emphasis in 135; in Ps 136 the creation stanza draws imagery from the Gen 1:1–2:4a creation account by evoking the “spirit, structure, and organization of the first creation story.”¹¹¹ Verses 4–6 describes YHWH's creation of the expanse of the heavens and the earth as an expanse of land above the waters. The psalm employs unique imagery of YHWH's work in creation, while using much of the same language of Gen 1. The verses express YHWH's action in creating the earth as putting it upon the waters. Baxter observes that the verb *rq'* differs from the action in Gen 1 where God gathers together the earth under the expanse of the dome. “The Hebrew verb of this verse is in the form of a *qal* active participle and means to “beat out” (*rq*). This verb personifies the deity at work. In bringing earth to be, the verb in verse 6a illustrates that YHWH forges land by beating it out, possibly with hands and tools.”¹¹² YHWH also “beats out the sky” in Job 37:18.¹¹³ In verse 7–9 the sun, moon and stars are commissioned to rule over the day and night, respectively. This creation account shares the vocabulary of “ruling” with Gen 1, but names the sun, moon and stars, rather than calling the entities “greater” and “lesser lights.” “Genesis 1 keeps sun and moon in their place (Babylonian religion turned them into deities) by not naming them...The psalm (not needing to safeguard against that error?) calls them by their familiar names.”¹¹⁴ Psalm 136 commences the purposeful retelling of

¹¹¹ Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 36.

¹¹² Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 33.

¹¹³ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 591.

¹¹⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 592.

Israel's story with a recalling of the first creation story that emphasizes YHWH's active work in creation and orchestration of night and day so that "not only space but time is God's gift."¹¹⁵

Verses 10–15 recall the Exodus narrative in dense poetic form.¹¹⁶ Baxter identifies a chiasmic structure of the six verses. Verses 10a (A) and 15a (A') frame the section, in which Egypt's firstborn are struck down and Pharaoh (who presumably would have been a firstborn) are shaken into the Reed Sea.¹¹⁷ In verses 11a (B) and 14a (B') YHWH brings out Israel from the midst of Egypt and lets Israel pass through the midst of the Reed Sea. In the central panel YHWH stretches out hand and arm (v. 12a) and divides the Reed Sea (v. 13a).

Thus, the chiasm is structured as one might expect: YHWH is central. YHWH is the initiator of the actions that buttress Israel and its future (C and C'). Egypt is farthest from YHWH—pushed to the outer limit of the chiasm (A and A'); and Israel, though more closely aligned with YHWH, still is influenced and "in the midst of" Egypt (B and B').¹¹⁸

Verses 10–15 are a recounting of the Exodus in brief.¹¹⁹ "Psalm 136 contains a synopsis of events in Exod 11–14. The synopsis then prompts memories of the

¹¹⁵ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 297.

¹¹⁶ Gerstenberger's division of the stanzas differs from Hossfeld and Zenger, who include v. 16 in the Exodus narrative. Gerstenberger views v. 16 as a general opening statement of Yahweh's leadership in the wilderness followed by his specific deeds, similar to the reports of victories over kings in Josh 10–12. (*Psalms* 2, 387) The chiasm noted by Baxter in verses 10–15 is also a persuasive argument for verse 16 belonging to the following section.

¹¹⁷ Baxter, "Psalm 136," 39.

¹¹⁸ Baxter, "Psalm 136," 40.

¹¹⁹ See Gillingham, "The Exodus Tradition and Israelite Psalmody," 27, for an examination of the criteria necessary for an "exodus story" in a psalm. Gillingham presents three core criteria 1) escape from Egypt, 2) mention of Moses leading the people out of Egypt and 3) a Reed Sea crossing. In both Ps 135 and 136 we have clear exodus story references without mention of Moses. [Gillingham, "The Exodus Tradition and Israelite Psalmody," *SJOT* 52 (1999): 19-46].

exodus story in order that the overall intent of the story—the rescue of the Israelites by YHWH and the forming of a nation with those rescued—is reaffirmed.”¹²⁰

Verses 16–25 shift to the wilderness experience and occupation of the land. The section opens with YHWH taking the people through the wilderness. As Goldingay notes, the wilderness emphasis is “curiously understated.”¹²¹ The Septuagint inserts an extra line “extending the recollection of Deut. 8:15, ‘the bringer out of water from the basalt rock...’” But this does draw attention to the fact that Yhwh is ‘taking them.’¹²² The retelling of YHWH striking down great kings mirrors the language of striking down the Egyptians in the previous stanza. “YHWH’s violent acts against the kings of the land east of the Jordan (cf. Num 21) have as their purpose that YHWH can hand over their land to Israel, ‘his servant,’ as an inheritance.”¹²³ The servant language of Ps 135 is emphasized in this closing verse of the retelling of Israel’s history, establishing the relationship between Israel and YHWH as that of ruling king and servant.

In verses 23–24 a shift in discourse takes place. Tucker notes, “the subtle shift in person and number suggests the hermeneutical move being made by the psalmist. The story of a people plagued by kings and political powers becomes, for the present community, the operative lens through which to view its own history.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 52.

¹²¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 594.

¹²² Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 594.

¹²³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 508.

¹²⁴ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power*, 118.

It is also notable that the psalmist shifts to first person discourse when praise turns to YHWH as “one who remembered us in our low estate” (v. 23a).

The body of the psalm, the recollection of Israel’s history, is a carefully constructed piece of literature inviting the community to join in the affirmation of the past as the present condition. The repeated key words “rule,” “Reed Sea,” “king/kings,” and “heritage,” not only draw attention to the main point of each subsection but also give an overall synopsis of Ps 136 to a careful reader/hearer—where YHWH “rules” over creation, the “Reed Sea,” “king/kings,” and Israel’s “heritage.”¹²⁵ The themes of Ps 136 reflect the concern of Ps 135 as well; YHWH’s power is over all creation and nations, and gives Israel a heritage that will endure.

The final exhortation calls the community to “Confess the God of the heavens” along with the final repetition of the refrain, “Because his solidarity is forever!” (v. 26). The closing epithet establishes YHWH as the God of the heavens. “Yhwh is not merely the God of Israel but the God of the heavens who is the God of all flesh. The title recurs in the Persian period, a context in which it affirmed that Yhwh is not merely a little local Judean deity but the one God of all the world.”¹²⁶

Summary

Psalms 136 is a liturgically shaped retelling of Israel’s history. With each event and account of YHWH’s power, the Levitical expression is repeated: “Because his *hesed* endures forever!” Baxter concludes that

¹²⁵ Baxter, “Psalm 136,” 22.

¹²⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 596. See Ezra 1:2; Neh 1:4; Dan 2:18

The editors of Ps 136 in a political and religious act affect and manipulate the content of the counterstory that indoctrinates the people to their past; thus, Ps 136 becomes a Levitically-approved national story. A common, national, or shared story about how the group and its deity functioned in the past, like Ps 136, informs the present impressions and manifestation of their collective identity; that is, who they are and what they think about themselves. The present reality, then, dictates the characteristics expressed in group norms and options, which that group perceives are (or are not) available for the future. Thus, the Levitical editors in Ps 136 craft a religiously-and politically-idealized psalm, encompassing an embedded and remembered understanding of YHWH, Israel, and the relationship between the two.¹²⁷

Psalms 137

Psalms 137 remains one of the most evocative and emotional songs in the Psalter. As it is placed in the Psalter, Psalms 137 stands out as a communal lament in a collection that is moving toward praise. Psalms 137 unfolds in three strophes, each reflecting on memory and place.

In the first strophe, verses 1-3, the psalmist directs attention to place and memory. The psalm famously opens “By the rivers of Babylon, there we dwelled and we wept when we remembered Zion” (v.1). The specific location, Babylon, is the location of a recollection of another place, Zion. The psalm offers many layers of remembrance, however. Although early critical interpretation liked to locate the origination of the psalm in Babylon, subsequent commentators have noted that even purely based on content the psalm does not indicate a location in Babylon. The community is recounting the exilic situation, but is not necessarily located in Babylon. “More recently, however, a growing numbers of interpreters have argued that the psalm was likely written as a retrospective, reflecting upon an event in

¹²⁷ Baxter, “Psalms 136,” 206–207.

exile, yet done at some distance, both chronologically and physically, from the original event.”¹²⁸ The psalm is framed as a layered memory. “Remember when we wept when we remembered Jerusalem?!”

In the memory of distance from Jerusalem, the psalmists recount the trauma of being asked to sing songs of Zion in a foreign land. (vv. 2-3) Read as a closing addendum to the Songs of Ascents, the lament takes on an especially poignant cry. The description “songs of Zion” draws attention back to the preceding collection, which are labeled as songs and have Zion as their focus.

In the second strophe, verses 4-6, the lament over singing songs in a foreign land expresses an interesting ritual situation. While surely the anguish of singing in a foreign land is in the first place a tragedy because of the condition of exile, the psalm also recognizes the importance of place for the singing of songs. It is difficult to sing songs when one is in the wrong place, especially a song of Zion, which is meant to be sung in Jerusalem. Whereas in the middle of Psalm 120 the psalmist turns a self-directed conditional oath against the envisioned enemies, in Psalm 137 the traditional form of the oath is employed as the psalmist asks for harm if he forgets Jerusalem, if he does not remember her.

In the final strophe (vv.7-9), the psalmist calls to mind the violent speech of Edomites against Jerusalem as they called mockingly for Zion to be exposed. Whereas in the middle of Psalm 120 the psalmist turns a self-directed conditional oath against the envisioned enemies, in Psalm 137 the traditional form of the oath is employed as the psalmist asks for harm if he forgets Jerusalem, if he does not

¹²⁸ Tucker, *Constructing and Deconstructing Power*, 121.

remember her. The language used here evokes imagery of the abuse and humiliation of Daughter Zion, as the Edomites call, “Lay bare! Lay bare her foundations!” (v. 7b)

Daughter Babylon is address in the final strophe: “O Babylon you devastator, Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!” (v. 8) The family imagery throughout the Psalms of Ascents, which has served as reassurance of the blessing of family and home throughout the collection, which has been employed to speak of the quieted soul resting with one’s mother, of a happy quiver of sons, of a beatitude over a household, are co-opted into a curse over a mother. Whereas Psalm 127 declares, “Happy is the man who has his quiver full of [children],” (v.5), Psalm 137 declares blessing over the ones who dash Daughter Babylon’s children against the rocks. The helpless condition of the psalmist in Psalm 120, surrounded by violent speech and crying out to YHWH, comes forth in powerful song as the psalmist holds together the memory of exile, the place, Jerusalem, and the community.

Summary

When viewed as an answer to Psalm 120 and closing reflection on the Songs of Ascents, Psalm 137 brings memory and place to the fore. Much like in Psalm 120, the psalmist expresses a situation of distress caused by dis-locating and violent speech. In the first strophe (vv.1-4), the anguish of the community is caused by demands from oppressors, captors to sing the songs of Zion. Herbert Levine, in his ritual-critical commentary on the Psalms, gives primary importance to Psalm 137. He writes, that Psalm 137 “is preeminently a song of the Levitical guilds entrusted

with the nation's ritual memory, their task made more momentous because that memory is threatened as never before."¹²⁹ The duty of singing songs in spite of distress, to remember a place, is held up as an act of faith.

Psalms 135-137 Summary

Psalms 135-137 function as a closing triad to the Songs of Ascents, as a triad of ritualized memory culminating with the importance of place. Levine's statement regarding 137 can be applied to the whole triad, that "In these lines, we see how ritualizing memory, rather than chronicling history, responds to the exigencies of exile, promising to keep memory alive for future generations."¹³⁰ The ritualized memory of the triad culminates in the remembrance of Jerusalem and the remembrance of the enemies of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

At the end of the additional triad, the situation of the psalmist is essentially the same as that envisioned by the psalmist in Psalm 120. The psalmist describes a foreign land and violent speech directed against the psalmist. What has changed for the psalmist is his experience of community, the move from isolation to a unified experience, even if that experience is one of tragedy. The enemy is clearly identified, the place is established, and the community is tasked with remembering the chosen place. With the final triad, YHWH, Daughter Zion and Daughter Babylon come to life in the memory of the psalmist.

¹²⁹ Levine, *Sing unto God*, 184.

¹³⁰ Levine, *Sing unto God*, 184-5.

Todd's detailed poetic and lexical analysis of the triad, Psalms 135-137, and their connection to the Songs of Ascents is a helpful study illuminating the centrality of the theme of remembrance, but this study refutes the fundamental conclusion of the nature of the connection. Todd argues that the call to remember, seen in Psalm 132 and culminating in Psalm 137 with the call for Yahweh to remember Israel's enemies, points to an eschatological judgment on Israel's enemies and a future messianic figure. Thus, the remembrance is a call for future remembrance. This dissertation holds that the additional triad holds a different function than prompting the community to look to the future. Remembering is about identity formation for the present, in spite of current appearance.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Smith writes that “Ritual is the act of performing the way things ought to be in spite of the ways things are.”¹ This is the essence of psalmody: that in spite of current circumstances, and all outward appearances, the psalms perform the world as YHWH’s, the maker of heaven and earth, where enemies are brought low and the righteous raised. The psalmist declares that she is lost and in trouble, and at the same time that YHWH is faithful and she is sure of salvation. The psalmist is not double-minded or disingenuous when she cries out in both despair and trust, she is performing the way things ought to be; she is taking place.

The Songs of Ascents, long recognized for their ties to the performance of ritual acts (pilgrimage, walking up the temple steps, the receiving of a priestly blessing, meditation literature after the destruction of the temple), have drawn our attention to ritual because of the connection between ritual and place. The Songs of Ascents are an act in “taking place,” which may even be situated in the larger project of Book V and indeed the Psalms as a whole which draw our attention to the importance of place.

This dissertation presented the exegetical portions of Psalms 120-137 in three parts: establishing the center (Pss 120-125), transferring the center (Pss 126-131) and remembering the center (132-137). In the first section, Jerusalem is in

¹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

view and celebrated as the place of communal joy and peace. Beginning alone in alienation, the psalmist is joined to the community and brought to the gates of Jerusalem by the conclusion of the first triad. The specific architectural features of Jerusalem as a city are celebrated, and the history of tribes uniting the worship within the house of YHWH is recalled. In the second triad, threats to the stability and peace of Jerusalem are explored and placed under the protective power of YHWH.

In Psalms 126-131 life outside of Jerusalem is explored. The “household of YHWH,” established in Jerusalem in the outset of the Songs of Ascents, is mapped onto the individual household. The fate of the individual, however, is seen in view of the fate of Israel, often personified in this group of psalms. Even in the perceived distance from Jerusalem, an intimacy and presence between YHWH and the people is expressed.

Psalms 132-137 begin and end with memory. The cry of the psalmist to YHWH to “Remember David!” at the outset of Psalm 132 sets the theme for the following psalms. The dramatic event, David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, is memorialized as the priests look on. Priestly imagery pervades the final superscripted triad, and Psalms 135-137 move further into memory by recollecting the history of Israel from creation to their placement in the land. The collection ends, however, with a memory of removal from the land and expresses the importance of place.

Whereas Psalm 120 begins in isolation in a faraway land, Psalm 137 ends in community with the memory of both Babylon and Zion binding the community together. Although the situation has not improved, it has improved in that the

community is united in place, memory and speech. This dissertation proposes that in the final arrangement of Book V the connections of place and memory are recognized and continued with the addition of an additional triad, Psalms 135-137, which culminates with memory of Zion.

The concluding chapter will explore Psalms 120-137 as a product of Levitical editing based on the representation of place and memory in the collection. The chapter will proceed by first reviewing the evidence for reading Psalms 135-137 as a triad, followed by a review of the cohesion of 120-137. After reviewing the orientation of the collection, this study will discuss the evidence for Levitical editing and possibilities for further study.

Reading Psalms 120-137

While there has been very little debate about the cohesion of the Songs of Ascents, less clear has been the place of Psalms 135-137 in Book V and in the Psalter. Michael Snearly builds a compelling argument for the cohesion of Psalms 120-137. Although this study disagrees with the conclusion of the eschatological interpretation of Snearly's project, the exegetical work of Snearly provides a textual basis for reading the triad.²

² Michael K. Snearly *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter* LHS/OTS 264 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016).

The Cohesion of Psalms 135-137

The links between Psalms 135-136 are readily apparent.³ The “twin psalms” both celebrate the great power of YHWH and recount the history of Israel from creation to gaining entry to the land. The monotheistic outlook of both psalms comes to the fore.

In the history of scholarship looking at the shape of the Psalter 137 has been the ‘problem’ psalm. Hossfeld and Zenger write, “At first sight, Psalm 137 stands in isolation in the context of its neighboring songs.”⁴ Next to the “twin psalms” of 135-136, 137 breaks in with a memory of exile. Within the horizons of a collection that focuses on place that is given by YHWH, the loss of place or change to its status is a logical progression for the triad. The psalms share the key words *Zion*, *tok*, and *Jerusalem*, but the strongest lexical link between the three psalms is the verb *ZKR*, which occurs once each in Psalms 135 and 136, and three times in 137. Hossfeld and Zenger suggest that Psalm 137 serves as a connecting bridge between Psalms 135-136 and the Fifth Davidic Psalter (Pss 138-139).⁵ Gillingham reads the group as a triad lamenting the loss of land. Although Psalms 135-136 celebrate the inheritance given to Israel, the psalms also reinforce the idea of spiritual and material poverty.⁶ The land is rebuilt and mourned in memory.

³ See for example, Christoph Levin, “Psalm 136 als zeitweilige Schlussdoxologie des Psalters,” *SJOT* 14 (2000): 17-27, 23-6.

⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 520.

⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 4-6.

⁶ Susan Gillingham, “The Levitical Singers and the Compilation of the Psalter,” 55.

A note of cohesion between the psalms that is uncomfortable to mention is the portrayal of YHWH as a violent God. The recitals of history use imagery of YHWH smiting and striking, and of conquering in battle. When read with Psalms 135 and 136, Psalm 137 confirms this picture. Although the psalmist does not describe YHWH as violent, the psalmist assumes that it is in YHWH's purview to strike violently against the enemies of Zion. The foes loom large throughout the Songs of Ascents, and in Psalms 135-137 they are given names in the form of former kings and empires.

The Cohesion of the Songs of Ascents and Psalms 135-137

Psalms 135-137, as demonstrated above, constitute a thematic unity. Although the collection of superscripted psalms ends with 134, scholars have long noted the connections between 134 and 135. David Emanuel observes that Psalms 134 and 135 "share a sequence of common words...(servants of YHWH who are standing in the house of YHWH) that does not appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible."⁷ We have already identified both the house of YHWH and emphasis on the servants of YHWH as key for the collection.

Snearly demonstrates the cohesion of the group by examining key word links and comparing their occurrence in Book V and throughout the Psalter.⁸ He identifies five key word links for Psalms 120-137: *song, Zion, Israel, Jerusalem, and ascent*. Across Psalms 120-137, the five key words occur 69 times. In the following group of

⁷ David Emanuel, "The Diachronic Order of Psalms 134-136," *HS* 54 (2013): 79-92, 83.

⁸ Snearly, *The Return of the King*, 145.

psalms, Psalms 138-145, only the word “*song*” appears, and only three times.⁹ Throughout Book V, the majority of occurrences of the key words are primarily located within the group 120-137. Additionally, the key words are distributed throughout the group. Snearly writes that at least one key word appears in every psalm of the group.

The use of the relative pronoun *še* is also a linking element between Psalms 120-137. As Snearly observes, the relative pronoun “occurs twenty-one times in the entire Psalter, all of which are in Book V. Seventeen occurrences are in Psalms 120-137. Of those seventeen occurrences, ten are in Psalms 120-134 and seven are in Psalms 135-137.”¹⁰

Significant for this dissertation, Snearly identifies “place” as a key idea for Psalms 120-137. Building on the observations of Ballhorn, Snearly draws attention to the emphasis on place throughout the collection that is continued in Psalms 135-137. The additional placement of the triad Psalms 135-137 augments the reading of the collection and illuminates the movement of the system toward memory. The final triad of the superscripted collection (Psalms 132-134) is supplemented with the addition of Psalms 135-137. Psalm 132 begins with a cry for YHWH to remember David providing a place for YHWH, and Psalm 137 with a call for the people to remember Jerusalem.

In the shaping of Psalms 120-137, we see a movement toward memory. In the final psalm of the group, Psalm 137, YHWH and the people are joined in the task

⁹ Snearly, *Return of the King*, 145.

¹⁰ Snearly, *Return of the King*, 149.

of remembering. For the people, the task is to remember Zion. For YHWH, it is to remember the enemies of Zion. The image of the servant, situated in the household of YHWH, moves from the periphery to the center, from the margins to the place of worship. The height of collection is in the remembrance of place, done most effectively through song.

The Editing of Psalms 120-127

Susan Gillingham asks of the entire Psalter, “Who might have been responsible for compiling such a miscellaneous collection?”¹¹ Although there are certainly psalms with didactic and prophetic interest, Gillingham argues that the liturgical superscriptions provide a clue to the identity of the compilers.¹² This final section will explore the Levitical editing of Psalms 120-137 from the perspective of ritual theory.

Ritual systems are perceived differently by people at different places in the hierarchy. Recalling Smith’s discussion of the Winnebago moieties, the “maps” of the ritual space described by participants can indicate one’s role in the system.¹³ Smith’s analysis provides a framework for addressing the significance of memory and place in relation to ritual that shifts the discussion from the necessity of an eschatological interpretation and provides a theoretical background for the editorial hypothesis of Levitical editing promoted most notably by Susan Gillingham.

¹¹ Susan Gillingham, “The Levitical Singers and the Compilation of the Psalter,” in *Trägerkriese in den Psalmen* eds. Hosffeld, Bremer, Steiner; BBB 178 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2017), 35.

¹² Gillingham, “Levitical Singers,” 36.

¹³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 42-46. See the discussion in Chapter Two.

Returning to Smith's discussion of the Winnebago's conceptual maps of the ideal village, Smith determines that the group from the perspective of power (Group A) describes the village as symmetrical and reciprocal; the roles of Group A are clearly defined and thus the Group describes the relationship between Group A and Group B as mirror-image.¹⁴ Group B does not have leadership functions within the tribe, and additionally consists of eight clans associated with both land and water animals (Group A is composed of four clans, all associated with birds, unambiguously linking the group to the sky).¹⁵ The classificatory "fuzziness" and subordination "leads it to perceive the relations between the moieties as hierarchical and symmetrical. These opposing positions give rise to two discordant ideological maps of geographical and social space."¹⁶ Group B describes the ideal village as organized into concentric circles, with the leading clans in the center. Group B, in their map descriptions, did not distinguish between the two groups (i.e., placing them in separate but mirrored territories), but instead described centralized power with all other clans placed around the leading clans. Their understanding of the ritual system is hierarchical and concentric. The subordinate group, Group B, also was the only group to describe the margins, the difference between cultivated land and uncultivated space.¹⁷

¹⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 44.

¹⁵ Smith, *To Take Place*, 45.

¹⁶ Smith, *To Take Place*, 45.

¹⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 42-3.

Smith's enterprise is comparative and illustrative, and allows this study to ask the same questions of the geographical and social space mapped in Psalms 120-137, and also ask "Who would draw this map?" Regarding the Songs of Ascents, Loren Crow argues that folk songs underwent a "nationalizing" redaction as a collection that implicitly argues for the significance of pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁸ Crow's analysis imagines an adapted ritual system by someone in power, who transforms the 'work of the people' into a nationalizing propaganda that encourages loyalty to the center. Zenger's interpretation of the purpose of the entire collection is that it "is intended precisely to convey to 'ordinary people' that they stand under the special blessing of the God of Zion—and that they, their families, and their daily work have a constitutive significance for Zion as the center of Israel."¹⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger propose that the collection originated in priestly circles but "does not come from the milieu of the (Korahite/Levitical) Temple singers ("Temple music academy"), but from priestly circles."²⁰ Arising from popular songs around the Temple, a collection of songs was ordered, linked together, and a selection of new psalms was inserted into the composition, which was "created in Jerusalem around 400 BCE, as a book of prayers and songs to be used both in organized pilgrimages in the context of the annual pilgrimage feasts and also for recitation," for communities outside of Jerusalem, and for family devotions.²¹

¹⁸ Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 187.

¹⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 394.

²⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 294.

²¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 294.

Prinsloo concludes from his spatial analysis that the movement from a sad story to a happy end in the Songs of Ascents reflects a messianic and eschatological future expressed by those who have lost power, the Levites expelled from the Jerusalem aristocracy in the beginning of the 4th century. Their hope, therefore, is transformed into a hope for YHWH's ascent with the people.²² This study concurs that ideology is reflected in the spaces represented in the collection (and, in any text). The movement also generally moves from sad story to happy end (much like the overall movement of the Psalter), but the case for eschatological hope is lacking for the Songs of Ascents. Prinsloo's analysis of the ideology presented in the spatial storyline leads him to the Levites. His understanding of this particular group of Levites is a group that is expelled from the Jerusalem.

Gillingham's description of the Levites as a group that has not lost power, but rather has gained a specific kind of ritual role is more fitting with the ideological map of Psalms 120-137. Gillingham writes,

The Chronicler depicts the Levites not only singing but also preaching and teaching the people...For the Chronicler, teaching and singing were mutually dependent aspects of ministry in the Temple, and they were frequently performed by the Levites (for example 1 Chron 34.12-13)...If the role of the Levites was both to teach the laws of Moses and to sing the psalms of David, it might explain why didactic psalms such as Ps 49, 73 and 78 have specific Levitical superscriptions and why other so-called wisdom psalms, such as Ps 127, 128 and 139, also have liturgical titles.²³

The spatial movement of the collection alternates between private and public, and between household and house of YHWH. The collection also starts at the margins

²² Prinsloo, *Role of Space*, 477.

²³ Gillingham, "Levitical Singers," 42-3.

and moves to the center, Jerusalem, recognized in Psalm 122 as a place of tribal allegiance and where the thrones of the house of David are established. (vv. 3-5) In the first triad, the psalmist maps all of the tribes around the house of David as the place of peace and security. The collection establishes the center as the psalmist moves from the margin to the place where the thrones of the house of David stand. “The once marginalized Levitical singers, by claiming the authority of David as well as Moses, would have been able to maintain their own position in the Temple courts.”²⁴

Throughout the Songs of Ascents, the household is held up alongside the Zion-center. The image of the household as the house of YHWH in miniature (Pss 126-128) that is mapped in the center of the Songs of Ascents provides an ideological connection to the Levites. Reid affirms that

Levitical priests began as specialists in regional and super-regional sanctuaries. Here I am following the typologies of Schmitt. Just as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (who were in some ways early librarians) gathered folk or popular stories, the Levitical priests collected psalms of family and household religion, adapted them, and added psalms of the regional and super-regional sanctuaries. The heirs of these priests in the Persian and Hellenistic eras harnessed the old traditions in order to subvert a new religious reality, a new style of imperial ideology.²⁵

The emphasis throughout the collection on the spatial lowliness of the psalmist—the servant waiting at YHWH’s hand—even as the collection progresses is not a departure from the spatial storyline. The psalmist takes on the identity of the vulnerable servant (Psalms 129-131) as part and parcel of the nearness to the

²⁴ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers,” 56.

²⁵ Reid, “David and the Political Theology,” 62.

center of life with YHWH. Reid views this as a connection on the part of the Levitical scribes and singers “between a theology of the poor and a co-option of David traditions with the depiction of the vulnerable David in order to subvert the colonial impulses of Persian and later Hellenistic threats.”²⁶

Contra Prinsloo, Gillingham does not think that the Levites that described themselves as poor must have been removed from the Temple. She states that the terminology of the “poor” is an “appropriate term adopted by the Levitical singers, who had been divested of any priestly privileges, and hence of the opportunity to live off the offerings brought to the Temple.”²⁷ In the Songs of Ascents, the only mention of the poor in is Psalm 132:15b where YHWH declares of Zion, “I will give her poor their fill of bread.” Bremer writes “This satiation shows the temple as a place where YHWH provides for the poor, thus combining the theology of Zion with the theology of the poor in the Psalms of Ascents.”²⁸

Psalm 132 is of critical importance for the Levitical singers. The psalm remembering David “not only supported their own ancient authority, as bearers of the Ark, in laws established by Moses (e.g., Deut 10:8ff; Deut 31:25-26), but it was that vital link between the Mosaic cult emanating from Mount Horeb and the Davidic cult from Mount Zion.”²⁹ In the triad of Psalm 132-134, David is presented as humble servant of YHWH, following on the tender psalm of ultimate vulnerability

²⁶ Reid, “David,” 62.

²⁷ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers,” 44.

²⁸ Johannes Bremer, “The Theology of the Poor in the Psalter,” in *The Psalter as Witness*, 111.

²⁹ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers,” 41.

and trust, Psalm 131, which is given a Davidic superscription. "In this way we are able to understand those references to David as the founder of the Temple cult and paragon of piety in a different light: the figure of David supported the status of the Levites extremely well."³⁰

Psalms 132-137 turn toward memory, particularly the memory of Jerusalem as the center where praise of YHWH issues forth. Regarding Psalms 135-137, Gillingham sees the common theme of the triad as "longing for security in the land."³¹ She writes,

Psalm 135:20 is one of the few specific references to the Levites ('the house of Levi') in the body of a psalm. Ps 136.14 ('For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever') is a refrain which in Ezra 3.10-11 is ascribed to both the Levites (the 'sons of Asaph') and the priests at the time of the laying of the foundations of the second Temple. And Ps 137, with its longing for Jerusalem, has many affinities with the beginning and ending of the more obvious liturgical collection, the Songs of Ascents.³²

"Through 'Temple song' an immediate link was made with the first Temple, founded by Solomon but whose roots went back to David. And through teaching the Torah through the Temple songs this bond went back beyond David to Moses."³³ The Songs of Ascents collection is a prime example of a decentered ritual system.

The Psalter's interest in liturgy, in stark contrast with the priestly laws in the Pentateuch, is not so much in what is done by way of ritual and sacrifice as in what is said and sung. And although some psalms do speak of God directly offering forgiveness...the means of attaining it are rarely described. But this does not mean, as some have suggested, that the Psalter is not interested in

³⁰ Gillingham, "Levitical Singers," 41.

³¹ Gillingham, "Levitical Singers," 44.

³² Gillingham, "Levitical Singers," 45.

³³ Gillingham, "Levitical Singers," 43.

liturgy: it is, but it has a different perspective, namely that of *singing and teaching* rather than *sacrifice*.³⁴

Psalms 120-137 are a “map” to Jerusalem drawn by the Levites. Like the power of the Levites, the power throughout the collection moves from the margins to the center through the household and culminating in the power of memory through song.

The Sanctuary of Memory

The question, “Who would draw this map?” can be applied to the entire Psalter. Maps can, and must be, redrawn according to the changing landscape and geo-political realities.³⁵ The Psalter opens with a dual introduction of the importance of place.³⁶ Psalm 1 opens with an announcement of the importance of place. The righteous are called to be like trees planted by streams of water, rooted and established in the law, contrasted with the wicked blowing in the wind. The “place” of the righteous is planted in the law. Psalm 2 deals not with the righteous individual but with the fate of kings and nations. The audience witnesses a conversation between the enemies of the king and YHWH, where YHWH speaks directly to the enemies, declaring “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.” (2:6). The first speech act of YHWH in the Psalter is to declare a place for his anointed one. The psalm consists of a series of speeches, first from the enemies, second from

³⁴ Gillingham, “Levitical Singers,” 43.

³⁵ See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

³⁶ On the double introduction of the Psalter see Robert Alan Cole, “An Integrated Reading of Psalms 1 and 2,” *JSOT* 98 (2002): 75-88.

YHWH, and then from YHWH's anointed reporting YHWH's speech to him. YHWH's anointed reports YHWH's declaration to give him all nations and all of the earth as an inheritance. Zion is the place YHWH has chosen, yet from this place out to the ends of the earth is YHWH's domain. The double introduction of the Psalter ends with the declaration: "Happy are those who take refuge in him!" (2:11c)

The dual introduction holds together the individual life and religio-political life as two intertwined realities, wherein both the importance of being placed is stressed.³⁷ Just as in the Songs of Ascents, the individual, the home, and the family are constantly interwoven with the fate of Zion, Israel, and indeed the whole world. The idea of taking refuge is a constant throughout the Psalter and indeed throughout the Hebrew Bible. Jerome Creach declares it the guiding metaphor for the editorial process of the Psalter.³⁸ The faithful, the righteous are encouraged to take refuge in YHWH, or declare their trust that YHWH is a refuge. This guiding metaphor is a metaphor of place. The idea of YHWH as a refuge expresses a longing for place; declares that to be with YHWH is to be placed well, that to be righteous is to take place.

In a 2016 monograph Steven Dunn expands the concept of sanctuary as a theological metaphor for the "space" created in the psalms. His title, "The Sanctuary in the Psalms," is a play on the scope of the study of the book, instances where the sanctuary is mentioned and other places where ritual objects, places, and concepts

³⁷ Jerome D. Creach, 'Like a Tree Planted by the Temple Stream: The Portrait of the Righteous in Psalm 1.3', *CBQ* 61 (1999), 34-46.

³⁸ Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

for YHWH create a sanctuary, together with his argument that the psalms create a sanctuary for the reader.³⁹ Sanctuary is a place, sanctuary is YHWH, and sanctuary is experienced by those who follow the map to the sanctuary of the Psalms.

³⁹ Steven Dunn, *The Sanctuary in the Psalms: Exploring the Paradox of God's Transcendence and Immanence* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 93.

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