

As Though We Were Dreaming

*As Though*  
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A Commentary on the Songs of Ascents for Lent

Keith Ruckhaus

RESOURCE *Publications* \* Eugene, Oregon

# AS THOUGH WE WERE DREAMING

## A Commentary on the Songs of Ascents for Lent

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An imprint of Wipf and Stock publications  
199 West 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 3  
Eugene, Oregon 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

ISBN 13:978-1-62564-422-0

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

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This book is dedicated to the SS Cyril and Methodius Russian Byzantine community at St Elizabeth of Hungary Roman Catholic parish in Denver, Colorado. We have sung the Songs of Ascents every year in the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts on our journey of repentance.

*Open to me, the doors of repentance, O Lifegiver,  
For my soul rises early, to pray toward your holy  
temple . . .  
But trusting in Thy loving kindness, like David I cry to Thee,  
Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great  
mercy.*

—THE OPENING AND CLOSING LINES OF  
THE EASTERN TROPARIA OF LENT.

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## Foreword

When Keith Ruckhaus asked me to review his book on Songs of Ascents (120-134), I imagined just one more book on the Psalter. As I read, however, I became delighted by its content, and I am honored to write the forward.

Ruckhaus vividly paints pictures in readable prose of the post-exilic settings from which these “Songs” emerge. He transports the readers into the devastating and harsh conditions of exile where a people never lose sight of their home, Jerusalem. Ruckhaus not only teaches us how these returned-exiles, beleaguered by all sorts of devastation, could sing these Songs of Ascents from hearts filled with joy, but how we the Church might also claim them as our own.

Profound repentance precipitates the return home and anticipates how hopes and dreams arising from the darkness of exile might inspire contemplation and self-examination. Ruckhaus beautifully paints a picture of Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s rebuke whereby Israel’s tears and radical repentance grant their *going up* to Jerusalem from far off Babylon (Ezra 1:11, 7:9). Their disregard for Torah and the prophets as well as forgetting the bitterness of exile nullifies restoration and covenant renewal, especially against the backdrop of the Songs of Ascents. It was in this situation that David prophetically models repentance for the people of God for all generations to come.

Drawing on Eastern Orthodox traditions, Ruckhaus links this scenario undergirding the Songs of Ascents to the Lenten season. While Christians in the Western hemisphere often ignore the richness of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, they lose sight of each Song of Ascents’ full beauty and rich heritage that the Eastern Church fathers and mothers have preserved by embedding these premier Hebrew texts into the liturgy of penitence leading to the Paschal feast. This Easter drama and the repeated Orthodox litany of intercession affirms God’s loving-kindness in each Song of Ascents: “for You are the Lover of [hu]mankind.” Vivid similarities unite the Songs of Ascents and the Sermon on the Mount, as the reader ascends

to the house of the Lord, to the holy mountain (Zion), and even mystical staircases ascending to the realm of God.

By candidly relating his own experiences with these psalms, Ruckhaus connects the believer to the rich tradition of lamentation and repentance. Living in the “Front Range” of the Rocky Mountains, Ruckhaus compares mountain climbing with these “ascents” beginning at the base and hoping to summit the mountain: “only one mountain, Mount Zion, looms over and pervades every verse.” The trail upward anticipates false summits but through a succession of victories, the sojourner methodically approaches the top.

Most likely, worshipers originally sang these psalms as they ascended up the road to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16) or as the priests *ascended* the fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem. Hence, scholars have called them Pilgrim Songs, Gradual Psalms, Songs of Degrees, or Songs of Steps. Later Christians sang these songs on their way to worship before they entered the door of the Church.

In this collection three idioms of revelation—Torah, Prophecy, and Wisdom—work together in successive ascents eventually becoming grounded in messianic hope vividly expressed in Psalm 132. Ruckhaus brilliantly suggests that “the Songs of Ascents have been climbing to this song, only to realize that this last pitch to the summit must be put on hold.”

Although the Songs of Ascents were originally anchored in the postexilic setting, how then can we as Christians apply them to Lent and our own deepest and most difficult hours? Bonhoeffer, who asks “how do the words of ordinary men and women become God’s word to me?”, illustrates this by how Jesus prays the Psalms with us. The Psalter does not preserve these prayers as isolated moments of antiquity, but transforms them to be read within the greater context of scripture. Therefore, within Christian scripture, the Psalter becomes the prayer book *of* Jesus Christ because these psalms are spoken *by* Jesus Christ, and the claim of the New Testament is that they are *about* Jesus Christ. Psalm 2:7, “You are my son; today I have begotten you,” is reiterated at Jesus’ Baptism. Within Christian Scripture, the Psalter, then, is the prayer



book of Jesus Christ because Jesus prays through the Psalter. Bonhoeffer's insight, identifies a new claim of Christianity that Jesus, the Messiah, prays these prayers *with* us, even the Songs of Ascents.

So when we as Christians pray the Psalter, we are not alone because Jesus Christ prays the Psalms with us. When Christ Jesus was on the cross, he prayed Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but he was not alone because within the inter-testimony of the Psalter, Moses, David, and Solomon are praying with him. Through the cross of Christ, these Psalms have been bestowed to the Church as our old self dies at the cross. The Psalter is then the vicarious prayer of Christ for his Church and with his Church. As members of the body of Christ, we can pray these psalms through Jesus Christ, from the heart of Jesus Christ.

Each Song of Ascents enhances the cultic drama, especially during Lent while participating within the greater Psalter and providing a vehicle for us to express our lamentations, either protesting our innocence as in Psalm 26 or confessing our sins as in Psalms 41 and 51. The living, breathing shape of the Psalter proclaims that Jews and Christians are not alone when praying because Moses, David, Solomon, Christ, and all the Saints pray with them. The Jewish Psalter testifies to Torah, prophecy, and wisdom, and for Christians, it bears witness to a revelation that is more fully revealed in the New Testament as fulfilled in the Gospel. Therefore, we read the Psalms both to cherish our rich heritage of the word of God in Judaism and to understand their new life in Jesus Christ. This is why the Songs of Ascents direct the Church's journey of repentance revisiting both the exile and the cross.

When you read this book, *As Though Dreaming*, allow it to lead you on a journey *upward* that has the power to touch the heart and mind of scholar, clergy, lay person, mystic and even skeptic. You are not alone!

Randall Heskett, Boulder Colorado

### *Acknowledgments*

I am indebted to and grateful for the many who have offered their time, energy, and resources to see this project to completion. My family endures the many times when my distraction disables me from being fully attentive to their needs. Thanks to my longtime friend John Narvaiz who faithfully supports me in all my endeavors and who provided financial help for publication costs. Also thanks to Kathy Emme for her energetic and positive editing. I am very grateful to Laurence Pierson Martin for her willingness to provide an original icon sketch of Abraham's "ascent" to Salem (Gen 12–14).

I am also deeply indebted to Father Chrysostom Frank whose faithful service to our parish has provided countless challenging exhortations that have helped to shape and stimulate my own thinking.

Finally, I greatly appreciated the work of René Girard and Raymond Schwager whose game-changing insight into human civilization permeates much of my own thinking.

## Introduction

In the liturgical tradition of the Eastern churches, there is a considerable amount of praying from the Psalms. One may not encounter this, however, if he or she only attended a Divine Liturgy because it is a resurrection liturgy. Little of the Old Testament is read then. But if one participated in any of the hours of the Church—matins, the third, sixth, and ninth hour, vespers and nocturns—one would be immersed in the chanting of not only the psalms, but much of the Hebrew Bible.

Listening to chanted scripture reading tends to, indeed almost inevitably leads to, a kind of a sing-songy lullness like singing “swing low sweet chariot” or “Jesus loves you this I know” to a child being held by a loving parent before bed. The words dance off the listener like rain on a roof, all the while the child is descending into a trance-like state of comfort and security just before dozing off. For some who attend Orthodox prayer services, the experience cannot be described in such poetic terms since one is required to stand through the whole thing. Tedious or even torturous may be a more apt description. Admittedly, a bit of austerity is intended. The supplicant ought to struggle a bit to draw near to the Almighty. All this to say that it is quite easy to miss a whole lot of the meaning and force of the text when it is sung as a prayer along with a whole lot of other prayers and combined with candlelight and smoky incense.

We find a similar problem expressed in Ezekiel who apparently sang his prophecies, a kind of Bob Dylan of Babylon as it were (Ez 33:30–33). God complains of Ezekiel’s popularity due to his skill as a musician: *My people...sit down before you and hear your words, but they will not obey them, for lies are on their lips and their desires are fixed on dishonest gain. For them you are only a ballad singer, with a pleasant voice and a clever touch. They listen to your words, but they will not obey them.* Indeed, some of the monastic Fathers objected to the chanting of prayers as more a distraction than a centering enterprise.

If one is called upon to chant the text, however, all of a sudden he must perk up and pay attention. I can best avoid

stammering over my words and the supplicants can best participate in the prayer if I actually read the text within the context of the whole. Even so, a good lot of things can get missed. The advantage of attending the Hours on a regular basis is that one can pick up nuances with each reading. As with most sermons, most of us only catch one or two thoughts that stick or strike a chord with our current experience. For me, this is true of the Divine Liturgy which even though I ritually go through this every Sunday, I still catch a glimpse of the mystery I am participating in.

Being a student of the Scriptures, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, my appreciation of the Psalms has deepened. A heightened awareness of this came during the Great Fast last year.<sup>1</sup> Then, I was able to chant the Third and Sixth Hours at our church. These services are packed with psalms, prayers, and readings from Isaiah. As I continued daily to read these for five weeks, I became more aware of the great struggle of the ancient Israelites to comprehend their relationship with the Lord and their own survival against massive odds. Equally apparent in those psalms was the guttural connection with the gospel.

After the terrible and amazing events of Jesus' passion, his followers struggled to understand the meaning of it especially in light of their growing separation from the Jews. The praying of the Psalms had always been a part of Jewish worship, but the early Christians found great comfort in them as they realized the extraordinary way in which the Psalms connected with the Passion of their Lord. This is so because the gospel story was already genetically encoded in the story of Israel. Everything that Jesus said and did, everything that happened to Jesus relates to that story. It relates not by way of comparison but by way of a continuum.

It is my desire in this book to explore and express some of that struggle of both Israel and Jesus into our experience of repentance. The hope is not just that a worshipper can connect one's own experiences with those of the ancient Israelites and

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<sup>1</sup> What is called *Lent* in the western tradition is called the *Great Fast* in the eastern.

Jews more readily. It is also to help us as the Church to ground our participation in the Great Story. We don't borrow the ancient psalms of the Jew's struggle to reconstitute a kingdom of God; we share in that struggle. That history is our history and that liturgy of penance, anguish and struggle incorporates us into God's ongoing encounter with His people and humanity.

The commentary on the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120—134) here is primarily designed to enhance our understanding of penance during the Great Fast, better known as Lent, and our experience of the Presanctified Liturgy.<sup>2</sup> The basic structure of this book simply follows the sequence of songs as they were written in the Psalms and sung in the Presanctified Liturgy. The liturgical setting in ancient Israel centered on the regional gathering of Jews in the land of Judah at a great festival, perhaps *yom kippur*, the day of atonement. The songs accompanied the pilgrims not just from the outskirts of Jerusalem to the *yulam*, the main courtyard of the Temple, but were also meant to walk us through the great "expedition" from Babylon to Zion. The commentary also connects the life events of the ancient Jews in liturgical celebration with the life events of Jesus and worship of the early church and finally to our corporate and personal journey in the Presanctified Liturgy and through the Great Fast.

Like the Psalms themselves or like being "on the road again," this book at times makes awkward or abrupt shifts in perspective without qualification. I may be talking about the ancient Jews and then shift to comments about personal repentance. I may switch from talking about "they" to "we" to "I" and back to "they" again. But most of all, it is meant to

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<sup>2</sup> The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is a special penitent service in the Eastern tradition. Most of the music and prayers, such as the Songs of Ascents, are unique to that liturgy. Worshippers participate in the Presanctified Liturgy twice a week during the six weeks of Lent along with fasting, acts of charity, and confession. My family and I have grown to cherish it as a contemplative and centering guide for the Lenten season.

transport us through the great expedition from far off foreign lands to “the city of the Great King.”

Even though the book was written primarily for those familiar with the Eastern Christian tradition of the Great Fast and the Lenten liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, it is my hope that the book is of value to many of other faith traditions including the Jewish tradition. With this in mind, I will at times explain certain aspects of the Eastern Christian worship.

# Introduction to the Psalms of Ascents

## The Historical Setting of the Songs of Ascents

(Pss 120 – 134)

The Psalms often directly relate to people of all times in history and in all kinds of different situations because they lack specific historical references. Because of this, it is challenging for biblical scholars to locate the historical situation that might have inspired the text. Even with the forensic tools available to modern research, one can only approximate the various “real life” situations alluded to in the text. Be that as it may, I agree with the consensus at this point that this particular collection of “songs” was composed, edited, and collected in order to encourage and inspire the people of Judah who were laying everything on the line to reconstitute the people of Israel after the great destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (587 B.C.E) and the rebuilding of the temple under Persian rule (515 B.C.E).

The Songs of Ascents fit well into the historical context of the early second temple period, some five hundred years before Jesus. At that time, many Jews had returned to the land, rebuilt the temple, and began the hard work of reconstituting a “land of Judea” under a common rule, without their own king, yet under the imperial oversight of Persia. This set of songs fits especially well into the time frame of Nehemiah and Ezra, over sixty years since the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem. One would do well, in fact, to read the books of Nehemiah and Ezra in conjunction with the Songs of Ascents.

A brief description of the social, economic and political situation in and around the time of Nehemiah goes far to illuminate many of the general statements found in the songs.

### **A Brief History from the Exile.**

The biblical history of the kings of Israel and Judah end when the Babylonians leveled Jerusalem and annihilated any remnants of the Davidic royalty in the land of Judah (2 Kings 25:7). For the writers of the books of Kings and Chronicles, there was nothing more to talk about. History as a story of a God and His people ceased at that point.

Ten years before the destruction of Jerusalem, the armies of Babylon seized Jerusalem, deported most of the aristocracy, temple personnel, and royal house, and set up a king from David's house who would supposedly cooperate with Babylonian rule. There was then, a large contingent of Judeans who lost their property, their place in society, and their primary point of reference, the temple in Jerusalem.

Conditions for the first exiles were no doubt devastating and harsh, but the biblical books such as Daniel, Esther, 2 Kings, Nehemiah and Ezra indicate that a good lot of them found places of importance and influence in Babylon. They weren't without resources, and they poured a good deal of them in two different directions: they collected, edited, and wrote scrolls of prophets, prayers, histories, and commandments and combined them into an epic remembrance of Israel that would serve as a foundational document for its reconstitution. What we know of today as "the Scriptures" took on its foundational shape at this time.

Second, they never lost sight of their home, Jerusalem, and devoted time and resources into networks of communication and involvement in the goings on there. This fact alone speaks of a profound sense of resurrection ingrained in the corporate psyche of this people. When Cyrus, the king of Persia, conquered Babylon and issued a decree that deported peoples could return to their lands and rebuild their cities and temples, the Jews in Babylon were ready to act. A primary concern of those with resources among the exiles was to reclaim property seized by others in their absence.

Among the deported, there were still plenty in Babylon who continued to experience a life of extreme poverty and struggle. They were essentially a slave class in Babylonian society subject to all kinds of abuse and maltreatment. Like many who left Europe's harsh conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the promise of America, so many Jews in Babylon saw in Cyrus' decree a chance at a new beginning and a flight from poverty and suffering.

Back in the land of Judea, what the Persians called *Yehud*, the region experienced an immense decline in population and resources during the exile. Most Israelites of resources were gone. Clusters of small farmers and merchants struggled to survive and to make sense of the devastation. Opportunistic neighbors from all sides plundered or seized control of small territories within the land. Of the Jews left in the land and outside the general vicinity of Jerusalem, they clustered in small communities reminiscent of the tribal days before



Israel had monarchies. There were attempts at establishing local worship centers, resuscitating the idea of local priests or Levites, and a council of Elders. This emphasis on local worship had both good and bad consequences. It compelled many still believing in Yahweh, the God of Israel, to take personal responsibility for maintenance of that relationship. A greater emphasis on personal piety and responsibility for one's neighbor emerged. On the downside, however, many blended their faith with local or foreign customs, many of which were eliminated by the official religion of Jerusalem under Hezekiah and Josiah. The problem of "high places," idols, and sacrificial abuses crept back in.

Similar to the opening up of the West in America, many saw the open unbridled territory as an opportunity for unabated exploitation and new found wealth. The land had always been a major corridor for trade to which one could expand personal estates through tax, tariff, and loan, given the right collaboration with Persia. Some people, both Judeans and foreigners simply took up residence in abandoned spacious condos or farm estates and with a little entrepreneurial drive became well off and influential. Jerusalem grew as a regional trade center unencumbered by any centralized religious influence, especially of the socially demanding kind found in the Torah and preached by the prophets.

At the time of the building of the temple (523–515 B.C.E), hopes of a resuscitated kingdom of Judah with a temple, a local Davidic king, and a penitent people living under Torah elevated. After Darius firmly establish Persian rule (518 B.C.E), however, nationalistic ideals of a Davidic king were snuffed out. Persia would be the undisputed imperial rule of the land and with that, the Jews in the land and dispersed throughout the empire would have to seriously reevaluate and reinterpret their traditions in order to reconstitute a "people of Israel" in the land of Judah. Many of the high hopes and idealism generated in the dark years of exile were cause for serious soul-searching.

Persia was not interested in regional kings in their provinces, but they were very keen to having loyal and thriving regions able to support imperial coffers. Unlike their predecessors, Assyria and Babylon, whose main tactic for loyal participation was merciless intimidation and cruel demonstrations of force, the Persians wanted provinces to enjoy a limited amount of autonomy and to return to local customs and control. They encouraged the rebuilding of temples and cities and the establishment of a regional "law of the

land,” as long as it was fashioned in cooperation with the empire and not in defiance of it. This policy was a driving force for the various Jewish groups to come together and establish a “law of the land” that would unite the area and create prosperity. The push to create a binding document for Judah, what we know as “the Scriptures” came partly from the demands of the Persian court.

The challenge of creating a government without local royal sponsorship fell to groups that had already gained respect during the exilic years for their ability to reinterpret Israel’s traditions in light of the tragedy. A group of priests inspired by Ezekiel had been formulating a temple and religious reform that would correct the abuses of the past. They placed a larger emphasis on the people being a “holy people” a nation of priests and envisioned how the temple could become the hub of unity and leadership in the land, taking over many functions once under royal administration.

Another group, which was more like a coalition of many groups, pressed harder than ever for the people to unite under the covenant that God had made with the people at Sinai. They believed Israel could reconstitute itself in a confederation of “tribes” similar to the time before Israel had kings and understood the binding force for Israel to be the Torah. As a counter-part to the Priestly slogan of: “You shall be holy as I am holy,” the covenant coalition’s motto was: “I am your God, and you are my people.” They organized a “council of Elders” who could help lead the newly forming province.<sup>3</sup>

After the temple dedication (515 B.C.E) and up until the time of Nehemiah (444 B.C.E), control of the land was divided into three groups: the two mentioned above and the Persian administrators— Jews, Persians, and non-Jewish regional leaders who assured that the interests of the empire were not undermined. The two Jewish groups had differing visions of how best to reconstitute Israel to which there was contention, but they did agree on some critical points. First, they both agreed that a Torah of Moses would be the binding law of the land and to which all Israelites must be subordinate to as a mark of citizenship. They strongly pushed for all Israelites, not just the leadership, to be responsible for covenant obedience.

Out of this partnership of leading Jewish groups a daring innovation was launched. No longer would Israel define itself by a

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<sup>3</sup> The covenant coalition was responsible for the writing of the book of Deuteronomy starting in the days of Hezekiah and Josiah. The book serves as a kind of manifesto or charter of the covenant coalition. Scholars refer to this coalition as the Deuteronomists.

king and his royal apparatus, but by faith. This innovation was not contrary to what Israel had been before, but rather it reflected the deepest longings and primary urges that had always worked its way into the psyche of those who remembered through song, story and liturgy Abraham's daring departure from Haran and his descendents miraculous escape from Egypt. It could perhaps be summed up in such lyrics as: *Some are strong in chariots; some in horses, but we are strong in the name of the LORD our God* (Ps 20:8); *My father was a wandering Aramean* (Deut 26:5); or *My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior* (Ex 15:2). Fundamentally, the newly constituted Israel would proclaim that "The LORD is King, He is robed in majesty." This declaration of faith, with its dangerously subversive undertones, dared to set the royal administration of Israel's God as the primary rule of not just the land but of all empires, monarchies, peoples, and tribes.

The agenda for Israel to primarily define itself in terms of devotion to the Lord inspired critical religious, political and economic changes. There was a strong sense of solidarity based on the remembrance of the "tribes of Israel" and perhaps by the Greek influence of voting citizens in a democracy. The temple was no longer the king's, but the people's temple. All the people were responsible for the maintenance and propagation of its functions. A "brotherhood ethic" where each Israelite was responsible for the well-being of his neighbor took deep root. Its primary expression was the gathering of Israel at the temple for festivals. There the assembly, heads of households, the Council of Elders, and the priests and Levites gathered as one to deliberate just and righteous laws under the watchful eye of the Lord.

Finally, and this is vitally important to the Songs of Ascents, they felt that repentance was the foundational posture for a reconstituted Israel. Not all remnants of the old Israel, however, were interested in such a posture. One such group refused even to the bitter end to give up on the dream of a Davidic kingdom which could rise to regional dominance and perhaps even replace Persia. They raised God's promise to David as the absolute standard to which all else was measured. Contrition was a sign of weak faith and even apostasy.

Others, both in the land or dispersed all the way to Babylon, sensed that God justly punished the wicked people—the royal house of David, the royal priesthood, and the aristocracy aligned with the royal house—and left the land to more worthy adherents. Parts of this

group were inhabitants of the northern part of Israel who saw their local customs and religious centers destroyed under the reigns of Davidic kings influenced by covenant theology.

But those in control of the government in the early post-exilic period insisted that affinity with the cruel reality of the exile was the only way forward. The bottom line of course was this—all of Israel had failed in their relationship with their God. Contrition over each party's responsibility in that failure was the new foundation to build on and not finger pointing or arrogant stances of superiority or privilege. God had done everything, especially giving the people true prophets to warn them and call them back. Israel did not listen, was recalcitrant and even belligerent. Humility was the new foundation for reformation, not hubris.

### **Diminishing Hope against Internal Strife**

By the time Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (444 B.C.E) the city and the region are experiencing a social crisis that threatens the very future of the Jewish people, especially in the land of Judea. Certainly, there were many within or close to Judah's borders who were not connected to Israel's past and saw the reoccupation of Jews in the land as just one more group vying for space in the land. They saw themselves as having just as much right to the land as the Jews and lobbied hard for Persian authority to protect their claims. They especially balked at any notion that land and properties forfeited over one hundred years ago were to be relinquished to some ethnic underclass in Mesopotamia claiming ancient rights to the land.

Although there were external forces at play, the crisis was mainly contested within the Jewish community. High hopes were turning into an abysmal situation. Bitter disappointment heightened the fracturing of rival groups vying for economic and political control and survival. Serious debates raged about the cause and meaning of the exile and its remedy and prevention.

Two deep fissures emerged mainly along economic lines. It can simply be described by the well known phrase: "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer." This situation, as usual, was grossly disproportionate. The poor class was increasing and the rich consolidated into tighter and tighter circles of prosperity and influence.

The semi-autonomous status of *Yehud* allowed the Jews the chance to experiment with an innovative approach to reconstitute Israel. But of course, empires want subjugated people for one main

reason—to fill the coffers of the Empire. Those in places of responsibility were obligated to insure that the rather steep imperial tax was paid no matter what. The demand that it be paid in silver, to which the land of *Yehud* had none of, meant that regional resources be exchanged for it. A lucrative exchange system developed to which most inhabitants were subject to “market fluctuations” that often under priced the value of goods produced.

But the newly formed ideal of a “people’s temple” also required every Israelite, even those of little means, to contribute to the ongoing maintenance of the temple. The upper tier priests were secure, but many of the secondary clergy, known as the Levites, were prone to underpayment and sometimes deplorable disparity due to competing notions of provision for them.

The primary driving force behind this disparity, however, was the common, yet ruthless system of usury. The small farmers’ livelihood was extremely vulnerable. All it took was one bad crop to cascade one’s whole family into the pit of slavery. A farmer or merchant could borrow money from a rich neighbor in hopes of turning one’s luck around. Of course, the terms were steep, and the consequences for default were extreme. First, one would hand over his children to slavery. The proprietor of the loan did not necessarily keep slaves on his own estate. The slave market in the Persian Empire was extensive and highly networked. To hand over a child to slavery often meant never seeing them again.

The irony of handing over children was that one’s own labor force was greatly diminished, only compounding the inability to repay. The next step was to conscript the owner and the rest of his family and seize ownership of the property. From this situation it is easy to see two things and go far to explain the polarity of “wicked” and “righteous” so evident in the Songs of Ascents.

First, this system of usury was a quick money proposition for those with wealth. It became the primary way one obtained wealth, expanded it, and bought influence with the Persian Empire. The primary vehicle for this system was the courts. It was with the elders in the gate where a lender would call his bill due and the debtor called to account. Only a few half contrived accusations jettisoned the process that could destroy a family and pad the pockets of the wealthy. The system was so profitable for some that a good deal of their business week was spent planning for the next default case. This explains the often repeated complaint in the Psalms and the prophets about the conniving, deceitful ways of the rich.

The biblical term for “wicked” is nearly synonymous with “rich,” and it was easy to see how explosive the situation could be between those struggling and the well-to-do. This picture is described in Nehemiah 5. Many regional and local families aiding Nehemiah in the building of Jerusalem’s walls complain bitterly of the manipulation of the usury system even by their fellow countrymen. Since Jerusalem was a mixed city, Nehemiah’s angry reaction to this abuse was targeted to rich Jews and others alike. But Nehemiah’s anger especially targeted his fellow countrymen because they ought to have known better. They had the Torah, the prophets, and the bitterness of the exile to radically inform them otherwise. The great vision of a reconstituted Israel was being greatly compromised by a “business as usual” mentality that superseded the demands of God’s covenant. Tensions within the Jewish community between those struggling to survive and those who were thriving under a heartless system of economic disparity were deep, often breaking into near riots during festivals.

It is no wonder how the covenant stipulations for social and economic equity took on an immense appeal for struggling farmers and merchants and even more so from those already marginalized by the system. For many of these, the hope of Israel focused on Jerusalem’s ability to unite under one temple, one God, and one Torah. Within the temple precinct, the faithful could renew their hope on a regular basis and the wavering and wealthy could possibly be exhorted by preaching from the Torah from gifted expositors like Ezra.

For many of the wealthy in Judea, both Jewish and foreign, the “Israel project” with its demand for equity was not welcomed. And for many of these, simply ignoring it was a workable strategy. Among the rich who were Jewish, one would simply give lip service to covenant talk merely as a vehicle to keep the current system operable. They still relied on the court system to exact payments and the temple to regulate monetary funds and generate revenue from pilgrims and festivals. Many argued that religion had nothing to do with economics and more aggressively resisted its intrusion in the market place. They could, if necessary, play the trump card against too much push toward the temple and Torah. They could warn Persia of rebellious “king” talk that always brooded among the faithful.

Not all the wealthy, however, were of such a mind. There were those, especially those who had returned from exile and still had regular contact with the exilic community, who sought solidarity

with their poorer brother's in the land. They believed in the reconstitution of Israel and put much of their own resources at risk for the project. They faced serious challenges on two fronts.

For one, they had to convince their poorer neighbors that they too were willing to come under Torah stipulations and advocate for economic justice. They had to persuade them away from rebellion and toward working with the system for change. At times, they even had to defend those being taken to court.

On the other front, those of the wealthy class who were in solidarity with the Torah and with their fellow covenant members faced bitter opposition and aggressive tactics to undermine their own wealth and influence in the region. Many saw solidarity with the poor as a recipe for economic ruin. It was folly and madness. The trouble was, this accusation proved to be a real possibility. The rich, both in Judea and Babylon, exposed their wealth to great loss in following through with aiding the poor and advocating for equity. Isaiah puts it succinctly: *The man who turns from evil is despoiled* (Isa 59:15).

At the time of the writing, editing, and compiling of the Songs of Ascents, those desiring to invest in the reconstitution of Israel lived in precarious and tense times. Both poor and rich willing to “trust in the Lord” would be easily tempted to give up on the project, simply concede to the way things are and denounce it as a silly pipe-dream. Visions of a “kingdom come” where justice, righteousness, and fidelity thrive under a loving, rescuing God too readily turned into heartbreaking nightmares.

## **Psalms, Songs, and Antiphons**

*He who sings well, prays twice.*—St. Augustine

The book of Psalms has spoken to, comforted, and taught people of all faiths. It is the foundational book of prayer for Judaism and Christianity. It has an incredible ability to connect with people in all kinds of conditions and human predicaments. It is especially tuned in to our troubles of all flavors. The book of Psalms is a masterful anthology of the prayers of ancient Israel. No book is more relied on to lead us into prayer and to teach us what prayer is than this book.

The word *psalm* sounds like *song* because it is simply a Greek word for song. In Hebrew, the collection is called *tehelim*, which is taken for the word for praise. The well-known word *hallelujah* derives from the same root word and simply means “praise the Lord.” Along with or even perhaps before understanding the Psalms as prayers we should understand them as songs. It has been that way

from the time when Miriam sang her song of victory on the shores of the Reed Sea (Ex 15) to our singing the psalms to folk tunes today.

However much we employ the prayers of ancient Israel into our liturgies and worship, we should understand that they were originally meant to be sung. They are lyrics. Those of us in the Eastern liturgical tradition perhaps get a better feel for this since all our liturgies and prayer services are sung or chanted from start to finish. Every prayer is a song and every song is a prayer.

### **From the Gut – the Origins of Prayer**

The origins of song/hymn/prayer come from two different directions. There is the top-down direction. These are public songs inspired by a great military victory and are sung at the victory parade (the origins of our procession). They employ boastful exaggerated language of conquest. This probably doesn't set well with us today, but we must remember that when a city's army leaves town for war, there will certainly be a returning army. The life and death question is always which army will return to the city. Theirs or ours? The relief of seeing the hometown boys coming back was cause for more than a casual "yippie." The hymns of victory were common throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, and Israel certainly experienced some of that.

What stands out about the prayers collected in the book of Psalms and scattered throughout the stories and writings of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures is the extent that the "bottom-up" prayers dominate. The Bible places the origins of prayer not in the boastful shouts of victory over an enemy but more in the deep guttural crying out in the darkness of night, whether that darkness refers to the time when there is no sunlight or to the dark experiences of human existence. The first mention of prayer in Genesis 4:26 gushes up from a deep anguish over two men bragging over how many people they have killed in revenge. It was "at that time" that people began to "cry out" to the Lord. As Walter Brueggemann explains, a prayer is first and foremost "sung up."<sup>4</sup>

King David is Israel's rock star of the prayer-song. The Bible witnesses to the basis of his fame. Yes, there were songs sung *of* David as he returned from battles having been one-hundred times more successful than Saul. But few of these songs make the "greatest hits" list. No, the songs remembered are the ones sung *by* David from

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 78.



his wilderness and wanderings collection, where he was a vulnerable and lonesome shepherd or a desperado on the run.

God loved David, and it is perhaps in that curious blend of human vulnerability encased in the mysterious combination of word, voice, tonal sound and rhythm that God so deeply connected with David. The song is open, bare, fragile, from the heart, bonding and transcendent. It is intensely private and public at the same time. The song time travels. It takes us back to sweet memories and calls us to future hopes. Probably like no other, the song infuses eternity in our hearts (Eccl.3:11).

The song can lull us to sleep, but it can also mobilize us. Dr. Roger Payne first recorded the “songs” of the humpback whales in the 1960s. These songs generated the modern conservancy movement, first with the “Save the Whales” campaign and then later the “Save the Earth” campaign. The songs raised the awareness of people around the globe as to the dangers experienced by species everywhere. Dr. Payne explains why this happened. “The humpback whales were the whales that could sing.”

The Songs of Ascents come together top-down and bottom-up prayers without us even noticing the switch. As we proceed through this book, we will encounter the abrupt shifts in perspective common to Israel’s songs. They change from first, to second, to third person with ease. They shift from praise to sermon to wisdom to complaint. They run the complete spectrum of human emotions from exuberant shouts of praise to guttural groans of despair eked through a curtain of tears.

The song, or *shir* in Hebrew, is mostly in the victory song genre. They are meant to be joyous and celebratory. They are party songs. With this in mind then, we might ask what songs of victory have to do with repentance. Or for that matter, the Israelites might have asked what they have to do with the intense internal conflict surrounding the gathering of Israelites at the Temple. Singing a song with a heavy heart is compared in Proverbs to taking away someone’s coat on a cold day (Prov 25:20). The *shir* is generally not associated with mourning, sadness, or melancholy.

Why are these joyous songs of victory and ascent incorporated into the time of repentance during the Great Fast? The response is best experienced as we proceed, on the trail upward rather than explained in the classroom, but it certainly is related to anticipating the victory of God. For the Christian, one always has a kind of cheater repentance. We already know the outcome. Even in Lent, the

resurrection is still present. Even as we usher in the Fast at the Vespers of Forgiveness with its shift of somber colors, minor tones, and sober prayers, the Easter songs are sung in anticipation.

Through the Fast and in the Antiphons of the Presacred Liturgy, however, we are jettisoned into the anguish of the Jewish people whose hope of God's kingdom came languished under four great empires over six hundred years. This speaks of one of the more profound mysteries of drawing near to the "Ineffable One." Part of ascending to God is a descent into our failure. The Jews who reentered the land and began rebuilding "a people" insisted on one bottom line foundation—identification with the exile. They insisted that those who had experienced exile best understood the failure of every group and individual involved. Lamentation was the cornerstone for Israel's reconstitution and not smug, finger-pointing exuberance. Israel didn't just fail; it failed completely. Something of this descent before ascent is found in the saying of the Eastern monk St. Silvanus: "Keep your mind in hell, but despair not."<sup>5</sup>

Repentance is not really putting on a sad face. It is a re-minding. It is asking us to re-shift our thinking and re-orientate our bearings. It is meant to remind us of our plight without God's mighty intervention, of God's own descent in the destruction of the temple and exile of his people and in Jesus' own descent into the plight of humanity and in his death on a cross.

Repentance is about recovering, returning, reminding our most essential hope, our most essential desire. It is about directing all desire toward the One true desire, to that one true authentic, real and lasting desire.

This is why we mix our songs of hope and joy with our songs of longing and sadness.

### **The Songs of Ascents as a Literary Set**

Palms 120–134 are among the relatively few sets of psalms found in the greater book of the Psalms.

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<sup>5</sup>Zacharias. *The Enlargement of the Heart*. 64.

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## Abbreviations

NJPS            The New Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh; the Holy Scriptures*