

Psalm 120 - Psalms of Ascent

Psalm 120-123 are paired with **Deuteronomy 16-17** in the Torah readings.

"A song of degrees" - The title of **Psalms 120-134**.

"degrees" = *ma`alah* - "what comes up," used for thoughts that arise in your mind (**Ezekiel 11:5**), also stairs, steps, stories or levels of heaven, ascent; a lofty place or upper room.

In these psalms, the first or last words of the preceding sentence are often repeated at the beginning of those that follow.

The 15 Psalms of Ascent were sung by pilgrims going up to one of the three pilgrimage feasts in Jerusalem. Then the Levites sang them ascending the 15 steps between the court of women and the court of Israel in the Temple during those feasts. They are also associated with the Jews returning from exile in Babylon (**Ezra 7:9** - to "go up from Babylon").

Rashi - quoting Sukkah 53b - The musicians would stand on the fifteen stairs that descend from the Israelites' courtyard to the Women's Courtyard, corresponding to the fifteen Songs of the Ascents in Psalms. Rav H̄isda said to one of the Sages who was organizing *aggada* before him: Did you hear with regard to these fifteen Songs of Ascents in Psalms, corresponding to *what* did David say them? He said to him that this is what Rabbi Yoḥanan said: At the time that David dug the drainpipes in the foundation of the Temple, the waters of the depths rose and sought to inundate the world. Immediately, David recited the fifteen Songs of the Ascents and caused them to subside. Rav H̄isda asked: If so, should they be called fifteen Songs of the Ascents? They should have been called Songs of the *Descents*.

So, an alternate explanation was put forward: David said: Is there anyone who knows whether it is permitted to write the sacred name on an earthenware shard? If it is permitted, we will write it and throw it into the depths, and they will subside. There was no one who said anything to him. David said: Anyone who knows what to say and does not say anything may he be strangled in his throat. Then Ahithophel raised an *a fortiori* argument on his own and said: And just as in order to make peace between a man and his wife in the case of *sota*, when the husband suspects his wife of having committed adultery, the Torah said: My Name that was written in sanctity will be erased on the water to establish peace for the whole world in its entirety, all the more so it is permitted. He said to David: It is permitted.

He wrote the sacred name on an earthenware shard and cast it into the depths, and the waters in the depths subsided sixteen thousand cubits. When he saw that they subsided excessively, he said: The higher the waters in the aquifers, the moister and more fertile the soil of the world. He recited the fifteen Songs of the Ascents and elevated them fifteen thousand cubits, and established them at a depth of one thousand cubits. Ulla said: Learn from here that the thickness of the earth above the waters of the depths is

one thousand cubits.

Psalm 120:1-2 - "In my distress I cried unto the LORD, and he heard me. Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue."

Rashi - This refers to those who hunt people with their mouth with wicked accusations.

Likely composed during David's exile from the persecution of Saul, during which his name was slandered by "lying lips" - by Doeg the Edomite (**Psalm 52:2**), and Saul's counselors, who insinuated that David sought his hurt (**1 Samuel 24:9**).

Similarly, we hear Christ's prayer when the Scribes and Pharisees flattered Him to his face, but reproached him to the people; and when Judas betrayed him with "Hail, master" (**Matthew 26:49**); and of the false witnesses at His trial.

Even more, it becomes our prayer when Satan accuses us through the deceitful voices in our own mind.

Psalm 120:3-4 - "What shall be given unto thee? or what shall be done unto thee, thou false tongue? Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper."

"juniper" = *rethem* - the juniper tree, or more properly the Spanish broom plant. It had a bitter root that the poor were accustomed to eat. The wood of this plant was used to make the best charcoal, which in turn was used to fuel the extremely hot fires needed to forge arrowheads.

Coal of juniper had a reputation for burning a long time. The Midrash tells of two men, who had prepared food with coals of juniper, and at the end of a year returned and found them still burning, and warmed their feet at them. "These fitly express the lake of fire and brimstone, the portion of liars."

- **Mark 9:43-44** - "...to go into hell (Gehenna), into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

- **Isaiah 66:24** - "And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh."

Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, is located outside Jerusalem. Trash, refuse, animal carcasses and even the dead bodies of despised criminals were thrown there to be destroyed by the fires that burned perpetually on the valley floor. If some animal or vegetable matter fell on one of the ledges below the rim, escaping the fire, it would instead be devoured by ever-present maggots. It became a metaphor for hell and the fate of the wicked after death.

Slander was compared to arrows: **Jeremiah 9:8** - "Their tongue is a murderous arrow": its power of mischief is described as fire in **Proverbs 16:27** (and **James 3:6**). So God's

retribution would be in like manner:

Rashi - What is the Holy One, blessed be He, destined to decree upon you? Arrows of a mighty man with coals of brooms. His arrows from above [the lightning bolts of Divine wrath] and Gehinnom from below. (Babylonian Talmud, Eracin, c. 3. fol. 15. 2.)

Psalm 120:5 - "Woe is me, that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar!"

Meshek, was a son of Japheth, the grandson of Noah, whose descendants peopled the north regions of the earth. Kedar was a son of Ishmael and represents the Arab bedouins. Here these both could refer to the foreign nations where David took refuge from Saul. David feels like he is at the ends of the earth, separated from God's people. The "black tents of Kedar" were no substitute for the Tabernacle of the Lord.

Alternately, the Septuagint translates it as, "Woe is me, that my sojourning is protracted" because *meshek* actually means "drawing out and scattering seed along plowed furrows."

Psalm 120:6-7 - "My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace. I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war."

Targum: "my soul hath long dwelt with Edom, hating peace"

These last verses refer to Saul and his court, where David long dwelt until he had to flee. He sought peace continually, but they responded only with treachery and opposition.

Again we can see the foreshadowing of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and his relationship with Jewish authorities plotting to kill Him during His ministry.