

Psalm 120: Living in an alien land



Psalms 120 - 134 : Songs of Pilgrimage

These fifteen psalms share the same title: 'A song of Ascents'. Some add 'of David'. They form a sub-group of Book Five, and a likely explanation of the title is that they were sung in the caravans by pilgrims who were making their way up to the mountainous regions of Judah, to Jerusalem and the temple.

Psalm 120 (119) (Mode 4. 3....4 / 2...171)

The psalmist is either living in a foreign land, or the behaviour of his neighbours makes it feel that way. He is complaining how hard it is to live as an alien among people who have no regard for truth or peace. In his distress he is crying out to the Lord.

In my distress I cry to you, Lord.

You respond to my cry.

Lord, save me from the people
whose words are deceitful.

The destructive power of speech is a common theme in the psalms, not only because of the general harm that lies cause, but also because of false witness given in court.

‘The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not as many as because of the tongue’(Sirach 28:17-18).

What do you expect to receive from God,
you who use words to deceive?

What appears here as a question is, in fact, a form of oath taking. It is the equivalent of saying: 'Let double be done to me if you are not punished!' The desired punishment follows.

The Lord's arrows are sharp,
red-hot coals are blazing!

The tongue that is attacking him is like a sharpened arrow. The caustic remarks are like a glowing coal. The psalmist prays that his attacker will get some of his own back.

‘He has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts. See how they conceive evil, are pregnant with mischief, and bring forth lies’(Psalm 7:13-14).

‘Scoundrels concoct evil, and their speech is like a scorching fire’(Proverbs 16:27).

Woe is me, that I live as an alien in Meshech, Southern Assyria
dwelling among the tents of Kedar! Northern Arabia

For too long I have dwelt
among those who hate peace.

I call for peace,
but they are for war.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called
children of God’(Matthew 5:9).

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth
peace among those whom he favours!’(Luke 2:14).

‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives’(John 14:27).

‘If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all’(Romans 12:18).

‘He is our peace’(Ephesians 2:14).

‘It is to peace that God has called you’(1Corinthians 7:15).

‘Live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be
with you’(2Corinthians 13:11).

‘Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without
which no one will see the Lord’(Hebrews 12:14)