

## The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem as Depicted in Psalm 122 (121)

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Movement is the essence of a pilgrimage, a journey to holy sites undertaken for religious reasons. It includes “the difficulty of traveling the distances that separate one’s place of residence from a shrine, which is offered up to God with the intention of giving Him praise, asking for forgiveness for one’s sins, giving thanks for the graces one has received, and asking for graces.”<sup>1</sup> In the Israel of Old Testament times, the phenomenon of pilgrimage was “closely tied to the Chosen People’s recognition, acceptance, commemoration, and renewed experience of God’s presence and activity.”<sup>2</sup>

Pilgrims who traveled to the Jerusalem Temple recited (sang) certain Psalms during the journey or during the temple liturgy. Psalms 120–134 have been called שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת *šīr ḥāṣṣā*, ὠδὴ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν<sup>3</sup>, *canticum graduum*<sup>4</sup>: degree songs or pilgrims’ songs.<sup>5</sup> In terms of genre, they are not uniform. Their shared trait is broadly conceived devotion to the temple.

Psalm 122, which I have proposed to be the subject of this study, is among them and probably is one of the best-known Psalms of this collection. It is still used during pilgrimages to Jerusalem today.

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1 E. Sakowicz, *Pielgrzymka*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, red. nac. E. Gigilewicz, vol. 15, Lublin 2011, col. 480.

2 W. Chrostowski, *Pielgrzymka w Biblii*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, op. cit., vol. 15, col. 482. Cf. J. Kozyra, *Pielgrzymki w Biblii*, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 21 (1988), p. 5–18; T. Brzegowy, *Izrael pielgrzymujący*, „Tarnowskie Studia Teologiczne” 9 (1983), p. 37–51.

3 *Septuaginta. Id est Vetus Testamentum graecae iuxta LXX interpretes*, edidit A. Rahlfs, vol. 1–2, Stuttgart 1979.

4 *Biblia Sacra. Iuxta vulgatam versionem*, adiuvantibus B. Fischer [et al.], Stuttgart 1994.

5 St. Augustine interprets this header (as well as the entire Psalm) in an allegorical way, believing it to not refer to the earthly Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, but to the “eternal Jerusalem” in heaven – see: idem., *Objaśnienie psalmów. Iuxta vulgatam versionem*, adiuvantibus B. Fischer [et al.], Stuttgart 1994. J. Sulowski, oprac. E. Stanula, Warszawa 1986, p. 371 (Pisma Starożytości Piarzy, 41).

## 1. A Proposed Translation of Psalm 122 (121)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A song of ascents. Of David.

I rejoiced when they said to me,  
“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”

<sup>2</sup> And now our feet are standing  
within your gates, Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem, built as a city,  
walled round about.

<sup>4</sup> There the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the Lord,  
As it was decreed for Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> There are the thrones of justice,  
the thrones of the house of David.

<sup>6</sup> For the peace of Jerusalem pray:  
“May those who love you prosper!

<sup>7</sup> May peace be within your ramparts,  
prosperity within your towers.”

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my brothers and friends I say,  
“Peace be with you.”

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the Lord, our God,  
I pray for your good.

## 2. Structure

Three stanzas that thematically refer to Jerusalem are clearly visible in the Psalm. The name of the holy city (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) is in each of them (verses 2, 3, and 6). Two phrases strictly related to the city correspond to it: בַּיִת יְהוָה – “House of

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<sup>6</sup> Translation from the *New American Bible*. Translated from the *Original Languages with Critical Use of All the Ancient Sources*. Including the *Revised Psalms* and the *Revised New Testament*, authorized by the Board of Trustees of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and approved by the Administrative Committee/Board of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference, Oxford–New York 2011.

the Lord” (verses 1 and 9) and *בֵּית דָּוִד* “the house of David” (verse 5). Apart from “Jerusalem” and “house,” two other words are repeated three times in the text: the name *יְרוּשָׁה* (verse 1, 4, and 9) and *שָׁלוֹם* (“peace;” verses 6, 7, and 8). This triple repetition appears to be intended by the inspired author, who, like the orans of Psalm 99, repeats the term *קְדוֹשׁ* (“holy;” Psalm 99 : 3, 5, 9; Isaiah 6 : 3) three times in order to emphasize one of God’s qualities, just as the hagiographer of Psalm 122 refers to the most important aspects of his life (Yahweh, Jerusalem, house, peace) three times.<sup>7</sup>

Due to its subject matter, this Psalm is among the “songs of Zion,” in which the subject of devotion is Zion, the capital of David’s kingdom and the place where the Ark of the Covenant is stored.<sup>8</sup> He proclaims three aspects of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem:

Lines	Subject matter
1bc–2	The organization of the pilgrimage and arrival in Jerusalem
3–5	The praise of Jerusalem
6–9	Wishes for Jerusalem and its inhabitants

The Psalm is marked by internal cohesion, creating a structure of chiasmic symmetry:

A	verse 1.	Reference to “the house of the Lord”
B	verses 2–5	Jerusalem’s characteristics
B’	verses 6–8	Wishes for Jerusalem and its inhabitants
A’	verse 9	Reference to “the house of the Lord”

The notion of “the house of the Lord” integrates the text, directing its entire reflection towards the most important place in Jerusalem: the temple (A–A’). An expression of everything that surrounds the temple, the activity of future generations of pilgrims (B), and zealous concern for the fate of both the city itself, its inhabitants, and people who were in it temporarily are all discernible in the text.

7 Cf. *Salmos*, traducción, introducciones y comentario L. Alonso Schökel, C. Carntni, Estella 2009, vol. 2: *Salmos 73–150*, p. 1478–1479. For a detailed study of the composition of Psalm 122, see: L. Alonso Schökel, *Salmo 122: Canto al nombre de Jerusalén*, „Biblica” 61 (1980) No. 2, p. 236–240.

8 Cf. S. Łach, *Próba nowej interpretacji hymnów o Syjonie*, „Studia Warmińskie” 12 (1975), p. 395–397. Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122 make up the compilation of these hymns.

### 3. Dating the Writing of the Song

The information contained in the header of this text identifies it with the figure of King David (דָּוִד). However, it is not credible, because the orans exposes the existence of the Jerusalem temple and the large number of pilgrimages leading to it; in David's time, the temple had not yet been built. The linking of this psalm to David could have been the hagiographer's indirect support for the dynasty whose patriarch was David (see also verse 5: "the house of David").<sup>9</sup>

Two Hebrew manuscripts, the oldest text of the Septuagint and in the targumin, lack this annotation.<sup>10</sup> Currently, hypotheses on the date when this text was written range from the times of Salomon to the time of the Maccabees.<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Stages of the Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Although we cannot determine either the author or the time when this text was written, we can assume that its writing had been influenced by the pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem the orans had gone on along with those close to him (perhaps the inhabitants of his city or region). In order to immortalize his inspired thoughts, he wrote a text that would ultimately become Psalm 122 for himself and for his descendants.<sup>12</sup> It was (and still is) a kind of commentary on undertaking a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The universality and timelessness of these words allow us to identify three aspects of this journey.

9 Cf. J. H. Eaton, *Psalms. Introduction and Commentary*, London 1967, p. 281 (Torch Bible Commentaries).

10 Cf. the critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

11 Cf. the presentation of contemporary authors who support a specific time when this psalm was written – S. Gądecki, „Proście o pokój dla Jeruzalem” (Ps 122, 6), [in:] *Problematyka pokoju u papieży Jana XXIII i Jana Pawła II. Sympozjum zorganizowane przez Katedrę Teologii Współczesnej Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego. Warszawa, 15 października 2003 r.*, pod red. J. Lewandowskiego, Ząbki 2004, p. 74–75. An eloquent and graphic comment on the time of the writing of this psalm was proposed by Izaak Cylkow (who argues that this song was written during the Babylonian exile): “The elders in exile bade farewell to the rebuilt Jerusalem of the Israelites, recalling with nostalgia their first youth, when along with their fathers they went on pilgrimage to this wonderful capital, which had been the central point of the nation's religious and political life” – *Psalmy*, tł. I. Cylkow, Kraków–Budapeszt 2008, p. 369.

12 Cf. *Psalms III. 101–150*, introduction, translation and notes with an appendix, the grammar of the psalter by M. Dahood, Garden City 1970, p. 203 (The Anchor Bible, 17A).

#### 4.1. The Organization of the Pilgrimage and the Arrival in Jerusalem (verses 1bc–2)

The first part of Psalm 122 refers to the central moments of a pilgrimage: the announcement of embarking (verse 1bc) and the moment of arrival at the destination (verse 2). The Psalmist has omitted the description of the difficulties of the journey, as if he wants to show that the road itself did not require additional reflection. Instead, the destination, Jerusalem and the “house of the Lord” (בֵּית יְהוָה) found in it, are important. The mere thought of it brings joy to the orans (שמח, verse 1b). In this way of perceiving reality, the demanding, engaging journey will bring joy to the pilgrim (see: Isaiah 30 : 29).

The hagiographer presents the zeal of his faith in this attitude of joy. His joy is not something transitory (like satisfaction or pleasure), but instead it is something permanent, related not so much to the sphere of possessing as being.<sup>13</sup> He probably belonged to the group of Yahweh’s worshipers who always felt this spiritual state whenever they went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where He lives. Thus verse 1bc can be translated as: “Always rejoice when they speak to me.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the distance to the holy city (for example, from Galilee) did not allow the hagiographer to visit it more often.

The orans does not specify on which great holiday (Passover, Shavuot, or Sukkot)<sup>15</sup> local religious leaders organized pilgrimages, but he emphasizes the communal nature of this undertaking (see also: Isaiah 2 : 3; Jeremiah 31 : 6; Micah 4 : 2). First, he speaks in his own name, presenting his reaction to news about a planned journey to Jerusalem (verse 1b). Shortly thereafter, he becomes the mouthpiece of the whole community that had arrived in Jerusalem (verse 1c–2). Language selected in this way does not glorify the inspired author; instead, it emphasizes his bond with his co-religionists. The community in which the individual person becomes blurred; it stresses that this time it is easier not only to bear the burdens of the journey, but to

13 Cf. M. Laetitia, *Tajemnica radości*, przekł. T. Jania, Kraków 1993, p. 13–14.

14 W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, [in:] *The Expositor’s Bible commentary. With The New international version of the Holy Bible*, general editor F. E. Gaebelin, associate editor R. P. Polcyn, consulting editors W. C. Kaiser [et al.], vol. 5: *Psalms–Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids 1991, p. 775.

15 Cf. A. Paciorek, *Najstarsze święta w Izraelu*, [in:] *Życie religijne w Biblii*, red. G. Witaszek, Lublin 1999, p. 307–329; T. Brzegowy, *Doroczne święta pielgrzymkowe Izraela*, „Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny” 36 (1983) No. 2, p. 98–115, <https://doi.org/10.21906/rbl.904>.

experience the gift of faith as well. Individualism in faith is just as dangerous as egotism in love.<sup>16</sup>

Arrival at the city gates (verse 2; see: Psalm 84 : 3, 8) and looking at Jerusalem, which was both the religious and the political as well as cultural capital of the Chosen People, transforms the orans' joy into awe, which gave birth to the song praising Zion. The voices of the pilgrims at the gates of the city<sup>17</sup> fused into a choir praising Zion. This was not only joy upon arrival, but above all the joy of encounter.

#### 4.2. The Praise of Jerusalem 3–5)

In the song under analysis, the Psalmist praises the city's characteristic traits. The first of these is the urban beauty expressed in the durability of the buildings and the harmony of their location (verse 3).<sup>18</sup> In its grandeur, Jerusalem was a fortress that offered safety and refuge (see, for example: Psalms 48 and 87). In its subtlety and beauty, it personified a girl who charmed and attracted the people to her (see: Psalm 84).<sup>19</sup> As a result of all this, pilgrims who came to the city for the first time could be thrilled, while those whose visit to Jerusalem was not their first consolidated in themselves its beauty and majesty. The Psalmist was among them.

Jerusalem's second characteristic is its status as a center of religious life of all the generations of Israel (verse 4). This was the only city known as גֵּיר אֱלֹהֵינוּ ("the city of our God" – Psalm 48 : 2). Despite their diverse ages and places of residence, individual generations (tribes) of the Chosen People were aware (and are aware) that they are הַטְּרֵי יְיָ ("the tribes of the Lord" – verse 4), who should praise Yahweh in Zion (see: Psalm 65 : 2).

It is evident from the Psalmist's words that he feels both a strong connection to all who have throughout the ages been individual "tribes of the Lord" and religious pride. He loves this city, because it is Yahewh's beloved place and, at

16 Cf. J. Wilk, *Psalm 122. O pielgrzymce do świętego miasta Jeruzalem*, „Apostolstwo Chorych” 2015 nr 2, p. 16.

17 During the time of the first temple (known as Solomon's Temple), the temple gates were also the city gates – see: S. Gądecki, „Proście o pokój dla Jeruzalem” (*Ps 122, 6*), op. cit., p. 77; T. Jelonek, *Dzieje świętyni jerozolimskiej*, Kraków 2004, p. 21–24.

18 Cf. D. Bahat, *Atlas biblijnej Jerozolimy*, oprac. wyd. polskiego W. Chrostowski, przekł. E. Czerwińska, Warszawa 1999 (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna, 11).

19 Cf. *Salmos*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 1482.

the same time, the place where all his compatriots can “praise God’s name.”<sup>20</sup> They have been summoned to this by God Himself (see: Exodus 23 : 14–17; Deuteronomy 12 : 5–6; 16 : 16–17).

The third trait of the city emphasized by the organs is its judicial and administrative function (verse 5). He expressed this graphically through the phrases: כְּסֵאוֹת לְמִשְׁפֵּט (literally: “the thrones of justice”) and כְּסֵאוֹת לְבַיִת דָּוִד ( “the thrones of the house of David”). The first of these thrones reflects concern for both social (see: 2 Samuel 15 : 1–6, 23 : 3–4; 1 Kings 7 : 7; Isaiah 1 : 21–26) and religious (see: Psalm 50; Isaiah 1 : 10–20; Jeremiah 7) justice.<sup>21</sup> The second one, meanwhile, emphasizes the role of David’s dynasty throughout the history of all of Israel. This dynasty is a guarantee of Divine and social order in Israel (see: 2 Samuel 8 : 15; Psalm 101; Jeremiah 21 : 12).

Both thrones also symbolized the city’s architecture: the royal palace (the symbol of David’s dynasty) was not far from the Jerusalem temple (a symbol of rectitude). The theology of Zion encountered the theology of the kingdom in Jerusalem (see: Psalm 2 : 6; 122; 132).<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.3. Wishes for Jerusalem and Its Inhabitants (Verses 6–9)

The idea of peace (שְׁלוֹם) dominates the last part of the Psalm. In its semantic field, this lexeme also contains the terms: “prosperity” and “inviolability.”<sup>23</sup> Arriving in Jerusalem, the Psalmist makes use not only of the traditional forms of greeting (see, for example, 1 Samuel 25 : 6; Matthew 10 : 12–13), but he also internalizes his attachment and positive disposition towards Jerusalem as well as its inhabitants. He wishes it peace, which is turned into prosperity and full sovereignty. Jerusalem’s success and safety were blessings and peace for the entire society of Israel.<sup>24</sup>

20 Cf. A. Klawek, *Modlitwa za Święte Miasto*, „Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny” 2 (1949) No. 4, p. 228, <https://doi.org/10.21906/rbl.2374>.

21 “In all likelihood, the introduction of David’s monarchy did not completely remove the juridical authority of the chiefs of generations or the guardians of local shrines, but royal courts appellate courts” – *Księga Psalmów. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz, ekskursy*, oprac. S. Łach, przygotował do druku J. Łach, Poznań 1990, p. 520 (Pismo Święte Starego Testamentu, 7.2).

22 Cf. L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150, revised*, Dallas 2002, p. 214 (Word Biblical Commentary, 21).

23 Cf. שְׁלוֹם, [in:] L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J. J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu*, red. nauk. wyd. polskiego P. Dec, Warszawa 2008, vol. 2, p. 490–493 (Prymasowska Seria Biblijna, 30).

24 L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, op. cit., p. 214.

In these verses, the relationship between the Psalmist and Jerusalem appears to be the bond between a bride and bridegroom, which is expressed, among others, in the singular feminine second person possessive pronouns: אִהְבְּכִי – “who love you” (verse 6); בְּרַחֲבֵיךְ – “within your ramparts” (verse 7); בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיךָ – “within your towers” (verse 7); שְׁלוֹם בְּךָ – literally “peace be with you” (verse 8); טוֹב לְךָ – “for your good” (verse 9).<sup>25</sup> The inspired bard created a rhyme out of them at the end of the lines four times, and once at the end of a hemistich (verse 7), which is not a common phenomenon in Hebrew poetry, as if he tried to transparently and deeply express his love for Jerusalem.

The orans becomes the voice of Israel. In the expression לְמַעַן אֶחָי וְרֵעִי – “For the sake of my brothers and friends” (verse 8), he speaks in the name of all of Israel’s generations (see: Malachi 2 : 10) or in the name of his brothers who could not have gone on a pilgrimage with him to the holy city.<sup>26</sup> He asks that Jerusalem be a city of peace (שְׁלוֹם, verse 8) and good (טוֹב, verse 9), so that its name would correspond to what happens in its interior.<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Concluding Reflection

The Psalmist, who, inspired by God, wrote the one hundred twenty-second song of the Psalter, was a deeply committed worshiper of Yahweh. His bond with God was expressed in, among other things, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the city that God chose to be a special place where man could praise His name (see: verse 4).

Traveling to Jerusalem, the orans did not only follow a religious commandment (see: Exodus 23 : 14–17; Deuteronomy 12 : 5–6; 16 : 16–17). He was a man for whom the mere fact of planning a pilgrimage brought joy (see: verse 1),

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *I Salmi*, nuova versione, introduzione e commento di T. Lorenzin, Milano 2008, p. 481 (I Libri Biblici. Primo Testamento, 20).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. G. Ravasi, *Psalmi*, cz. 4: *Psalmi 104–123 (wybór)*, przeł. K. Stopa, Kraków 2009, p. 348–349 (Zgłębiać Biblię).

<sup>27</sup> The name “Jerusalem” is of Semitic origin. However, its etymology is unclear. The following meanings can be found among the explanation of this term: “founded by Shalem;” “Shalem’s estate” (the legendary founder of this city or a description of the city in which the god Shalem was worshiped) as well as “the city of peace” – cf. P. C. Bosak, *Leksykon wszystkich miejsc biblijnych*, Kraków 2016, p. 460; cf. Benedict XVI’s reflections on this topic – idem, *Psalm 122 – święte miasto Jerozalem*, „L’Osservatore Romano” wydanie polskie 2006 nr 2, p. 53–54. It is worth familiarizing oneself with a comprehensive history of Jerusalem: S. Sebag-Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, New York 2012.



which attests to his close relationship with Yahweh. The external form of the pilgrimage expressed his internal state, which reflected his spiritual richness.

However, Psalm 122 is not the Psalmist's direct prayer to God, but rather a pronouncement directed to His beloved city. This love results not from the orans' aesthetic sensitivity, but from his love for Yahweh, who was the host of this city.

While on pilgrimage to Zion, the hagiographer listened to God, trying to "understand" His designs concerning Jerusalem, which was a fusion of theocracy and monarchy. The Psalmist had close ties to the "house of the Lord" (verse 1, 9) and similarly respected "the house of David" (verse 5). These two houses were keystones for all of Israel and all pilgrims, both those who literally journeyed there and those who for various reasons could not set out. The hagiographer felt community with both (see: verse 8). In the name of all of them, he prayed that the symbolic name "Jerusalem" ("the city of peace") would be a reflection of its actual state (verses 8–9). The fate of the entire nation was strictly tied to that of Jerusalem. Peace and prosperity in this city meant peace and prosperity among the entire Chosen People and vice versa. However, the orans prayed for peace for Jerusalem not in the context of dependency, but of love.

In Christ's time, the psalm was probably also recited (sung) by pilgrims heading towards Jerusalem. It is highly probable that Jesus Himself prayed it. Together with the message of this song, we can image how much internal pain Christ's words prophesying the downfall of the city must have contained (see: Luke 19 : 41–44). Jesus' weeping is the best expression of this (see: Luke 19 : 41). However, God did not leave Jerusalem without hope (see: Luke 21 : 24).

Increasingly, this psalm is recited by contemporary pilgrims traveling from all the corners of the world to Jerusalem. For many, the possibility of going on a pilgrimage to this city (and to all of Israel) is a source of true joy (see: verse 1). Although there no longer is a "House of the Lord" (verses 1, 9) or a "house of David" (verse 5) in Jerusalem, there still is a Holy Land upon which God, who became a man in Jesus Christ, walked. Each pilgrimage to this city experienced with faith was and is a time of grace for the pilgrim as well as for those who accompany him or her spiritually (see: verse 8). Prayers for peace (see: verse 8) and good (see: verse 9) for Jerusalem are still necessary and relevant. Ultimately, it is still a place chosen by God.

## Abstract

### The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Psalm's Depiction 122 (121)

The article takes up the analysis of Psalm 122 from the perspective of the pilgrimage phenomenon in old Israel. Probably it was created by the influx of pilgrimage which the psalmist made to Jerusalem together with his relatives. After the return, fixing his thoughts in his mind, he wrote for himself as well as for the future generations a text, which at the end was formed as a Psalm 122. It is by some part an explanation of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Universality and timelessness of the words given allows to distinguish in it three aspects of the pilgrimage road: (1) Organising and coming to Jerusalem (v. 1bc–2), (2) Praise of Jerusalem (v. 3–5), (3) Wishes for Jerusalem and its citizens (v. 6–9) that became the subject of the present analysis.

**Keywords:** Psalm 122; Jerusalem; pilgrimage; joy; house; peace

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