

*Genre*

A prayer so small and simple as Psalm 123, talking calmly about believers and God and making trust the main theme, may be legitimately called a PSALM OF CONFIDENCE (cf. Psalms 16; 23; Westermann, *Praise*, 55, 80; listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry"). On the other hand, petition and complaint elements are characteristic for INDIVIDUAL and COMMUNAL COMPLAINT, a genre classification preferred by quite a few exegetes (cf. Allen, 160; Gunkel, 544-45; Mowinckel, *WI*, 216; Anderson, 856-57; et al.).

*Setting*

Because of the strong emphasis on "we" discourse (Scharbert, "Das 'Wir'"; listing at "Introduction to Psalms"), we have to visualize our psalm as having been used in congregational worship. Perhaps it was once part of complaint services in public calamities, together with a more extensive description of the emergency (cf. Psalm 44; Isa 63:7-64:11; Jeremiah 14; see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section B; P. A. Hanson, *ABD* I, 1099-1103), destined to voice the element of confidence. Complaint psalms and liturgies, as a rule, include expressions of confidence in juxtaposition with plaintive elements (cf. Pss 22:5-6, 10 [RSV 4-5, 9]; 31:4-7 [RSV 3-6]). Why not imagine a complementary liturgical use of small texts like Psalms 23; 62; 123 to highlight the basic trust of the suppliants? Seen in the context of pilgrimages to Jerusalem ("Psalms of Ascents," → Psalm 120), the song expresses the desires of the wandering group. Mays (pp. 394-95) imagines a definite moment when it came to be intoned: "Pilgrims stand within the gates (122:2) and their first word to the LORD is a prayer for grace." The taunting by the haughty ones (v. 4), then, perhaps would be directed against those who ventured on a peregrination of obedience and hope.

*Intention*

By itself the psalm expresses the confidence of the congregation in God, taking in the experiences and hopes of all its members, the "haughty" ones posing a painful problem. By doing so, the text also induces new hopes among those who suffer irritations from people outside the core community of faithful, be it from hostile foreigners or dissident parishioners.

*Bibliography*

C. Curti, "Due frammenti esegetici sul salm 123," in *Paideia Cristiana (Fest. M. Naldini; ed. G. Privitera; Rome: Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale, 1994)* 131-40; H. Goeke, "Gott, Mensch und Gemeinde in Ps 123," *BibLeb* 13 (1972) 124-28; F. M. Th. de Liagre Böhl, "Hymnisches und Rhythmisches in den Amarnabriefen aus Kanaan," in idem, *Opera Minora* (Groningen: Wolters, 1953) 375-79.

**Psalm 124:**  
**Thanksgiving of Community**

*Structure*

	MT	NRSV
I. Superscription	1a	-
II. Affirmation of confidence	1b-5	1-5
A. Irreal conditions	1b-2	1-2
B. Summons to recite (interspersed)	1c	1b
C. Irreal consequences	3-5	3-5
III. Hymn	6-7	6-7
IV. Well-wish	8	8

The SUPERSCRPTION is within the pattern of the Psalms of Ascent (→ Psalms 120; 122). "If Yahweh had not been with us" — the first two lines open with this conditional phrase (vv. 1b, 2a), which discusses the irreal case of God acting in a way he really did not do. This kind of retrospective reflection on "What would be our situation, if something had happened differently in the past?" (always in the sense: if something had gone wrong) was apparently quite popular. We find similar phraseology (with *lûlē*, "if not"; the formulation *im lō*, "if not," is mostly reserved for oath formulations; cf. Ezek 17:16, 19; → Ps 127:1), e.g., in Gen 31:42; 43:10; Deut 32:26-27; Judg 14:18; 1 Sam 25:34; 2 Sam 2:27; 2 Kgs 3:14; Isa 1:9; Pss 106:23; 119:92, but only the two Psalm passages, Gen 31:42, and Isa 1:9 deal with the same subject matter: God's forbearance over against a querulous people or person. The interspersed SUMMONS TO RECITE is a special formulaic expression of call to worship (→ Ps 118:1-4). In this case, as in 118:1-4; 129:1, the hymnic line to be sung by the congregation is intoned in the first place by the liturgist. Then he or she calls upon all people present to join in ("let Israel say") and the thematic first line is repeated, a ritual procedure described also in Exod 15:20-21; 1 Sam 18:6-7. *nh* in the first passage means "to intone a song" (as a cantor). Since the hymnic SUMMONS TO PRAISE seems usually to have been expressed by the imperatives of *šir*; "sing," *ydh*, Hiphil, "give thanks," *hll*, "praise," *rnn*, "extol" (cf. 33:1-3; 81:2; 98:1; 105:1-2; 106:1; 113:1; 117:1; 148:1-4; etc.; Gunkel-Begriff, *Einleitung*, 33; listing at "Introduction to Psalms") the formulas construed with a verbal form of *mr*; "speak" (either jussive or imperative), may well be a subordinate type to the aforementioned more musical and theological phrases.

Granted, then, that Yahweh did stay at the side of his elected ones (in spite of their obstinacy), they now gratefully meditate on the dreadful consequences of a potentially unfavorable attitude of God in the past. Three almost uniformly structured lines answer the question posed (vv. 3-5): the main clauses are all introduced by *ʾāzay*, "in that case, then." This conjunctive particle is normally spelled a little shorter, namely *ʾāz*; the unique forms of vv. 3-5 seem more emphatic. Interestingly, v. 3 stays with the historical situation hinted at in v. 2b: "They, i.e., the enemies, would have devoured us." The other two

lines (vv. 4-5) take up mythological language speaking about "waters" that flood and swallow people (cf. similar metaphors in Isa 8:7-8). Although connections with Exodus 14-15, the drowning of the Egyptians, are feasible, the main signification points to primeval floods. Enemies are equated with dreadful chaos waters, as extant in complaint psalms (cf. Psalm 69; Jonah 2). Such paralleling is done in some prophetic texts, too (cf. Isa 17:12-14), not to speak of the Psalms themselves alluding to those powers (cf. Pss 93:3-4; 96:3; 98:7-8; Kaiser, *Bedeutung*; listing at Additional Bibliography, section B; Stolz, *Figuren*; listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry").

In conjunction the two elements together of naming the irreal case of abandonment and its horrible consequences form an AFFIRMATION OF CONFIDENCE to Yahweh, with grateful or even hymnic undertones. We see a liturgical movement going on in this block of verses: the "Israelites" in their totality (represented in the congregation) are summoned to articulate their agenda (v. 1c). In accordance with other texts that single out special groups to speak up in liturgy (cf. 115:9-11; 118:2-4), v. 1c here may include all the groupings of the Judahite community. V. 2b, for its part, visualizes the uprising of an unidentified "man," "people," against the congregation — which seems fairly strange. Only in the following line are they described as those who want to devour the faithful (v. 3). But the situation remains obscure; we do not know whether inner or outward enemies are pictured as the evil attackers. Antagonistic powers, human or mythical, are mentioned in abstract terms, summarizing experiences of generations. Liturgically, the stereotyped, uniform structure of vv. 3-5 insinuates repetitious chanting.

The historical or social background does not become more lucid in vv. 6-7, a HYMN introduced by *bārūk yhw̄h*, "blessed be Yahweh" (v. 6a). This BLESSING FORMULA is frequent in the Psalms (15 times; cf. 18:47 [RSV 46]; 28:6; 72:18-19; 119:12) and in some other parts of Hebrew Scripture (cf. Gen 9:26; 24:27; 1 Kgs 1:48; 8:15, 56; Ruth 4:14; Ezra 7:27; 2 Chr 2:11; 6:4; 9:8, often in greeting situations; → Psalm 72). Again, the "negative" action of Yahweh is praised: he did not abandon his congregation ("us"! ) or deliver them to the bestial opponents (v. 6). On the contrary, his faithful escaped their enemies' fury. The metaphor employed is not exactly congruent with the enemy vocabulary in vv. 2-4, but it is poetically suggestive: the hunter's net was torn, the birds gained their freedom (v. 7; cf. *pah*, "bird trap," 69:23 [RSV 22]; 91:3; 119:110; 141:9; metaphor of bird, i.e., believer: 11:1; 102:8). Constant use of the first person plural makes all this allusive discourse a firm part of communal experience. Indeed, Psalm 124 is one of the strongest and most homogeneous "we" psalms in the Psalter (cf. Scharbert, "Das 'Wir'"; listing at "Introduction to Psalms"). This fact alone indicates congregational origin and use. The last line is at the same time a kind of blessing on the community, as well as a WELL-WISH on all participants, and a communal affirmation of confidence. Evoking the name of Yahweh and his solemn attributes as a creator ("of heaven and earth": sacred formula, extant, e.g., in 102:26 [RSV 25]; 115:15; 121:2; 134:3; 136:5-6; Exod 20:11; 31:17; cf. R. Bartelmus, *TWAT X*, 204-39) the congregational part comes to a close, not in an official word but with the people's own formula (note the difference from Num 6:22-27; Ps 121:3-8). The concise

phrase in v. 8 has been adopted into Christian worship, particularly by John Calvin (Mays, 397), being part, as it were, of service liturgies, e.g., as an introit or a word of assurance from the pulpit.

### Genre

What could be the genre classification of a psalm so extravagant in its formal appearance? The initial summons to the congregation (v. 1c) suggests a hymnic situation; reference to near catastrophes and God's gracious forbearance point to thanksgiving motives. *bārūk* formulas are testimonies to an atmosphere of gratitude and praise as well. Taken together with the overall emphasis on having escaped grave dangers and being safe now, the evidence favors COMMUNAL THANKSGIVING. The alleged nonexistence of collective thanks is unconvincing (against Allen, 163: "individual language in plural dress"; Westermann, *Praise*, 102-11; Crüsemann; et al.). But we should remind ourselves: typical introductions of giving thanks, descriptions of distress now overcome, expressions of vows to be consummated, affirmations of loyalty and support, are lacking in this psalm (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4C). There is no liturgist expressly mentioned acting in front of a group. But the congregation as a whole responds to a summons by singing a meditative/hymnic litany of having escaped deadly snares in its history.

### Setting

Therefore the setting is supposedly the worship service of the Jewish community, and the agents are all the members united in prayer. History, at this point, has been condensed into the vexing experiences of having escaped; the formulations of our little hymn do not suggest mighty interventions of Yahweh. Perhaps we are dealing with an early type of congregational hymn or response meant to be intoned as part of a more extensive liturgy. Inclusion of the psalm in the collection of pilgrimage songs may be due to the communality of the text, the retrospect on a difficult past and the exhilarating longing for relief and betterment through the walk to the Holy City.

### Intention

Like other expressions of gratitude toward Yahweh, the guardian of his community, our psalm is to extol God's patience with his faithful, thus reassuring them in the perils of a hostile world (*'ādām*, "human being," v. 2b, in this case meaning "everyman," "anybody," who became Israel's enemy).

## Bibliography

- J. Chopineau, "Pourquoi le Christ est-il venu?" *ETR* 60 (1985) 165-77; J. Magonet, "Convention" (see listing at Psalm 121); J. Schreiner, "'Wenn nicht der Herr für uns wäre!' Auslegung von Psalm 124," *BibLeb* 10 (1969) 16-25; I. W. Slotki, "The Text and the Ancient Form of Recital of Psalm 24 and Psalm 124," *JBL* 51 (1932) 214-26.

Psalm 125:  
Song of Confidence

## Structure

	MT	NRSV
I. Superscription	1a	-
II. Felicitation	1bc	1
III. Assurance to community	2	2
IV. Threat to evildoers	3	3
V. Petition	4	4
VI. Imprecation	5ab	5ab
VII. Well-wish	5c	5c

The SUPERSCRPTION is the standard one of the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134; → Psalm 120; 122). The song begins with something like a FELICITATION: a participial expression defines the faithful ones, who "trust in Yahweh" (v. 1b). In fact, a plurality of believers is called upon, while more frequently the word *bōjēah*, "trustful one," occurs in the singular (13 plural over against 23 singular forms in Hebrew Scripture). Sometimes the plural term is found in prophetic denunciations (cf. Isa 32:9-11; 42:17; Jer 7:8, 14; Am 6:1) or other expressions aiming at unfounded trust (cf. Isa 36:6; Ps 49:7 [RSV 6]). Nowhere but in Psalm 125 is the plural form connected with really good trust in Yahweh. Still, the designation, prefixed by the definite article, seems to be of a common type in early Jewish communities; cf. *hahōlēkīm bētōrat yhwē*, "the ones who live by Yahweh's torah" (119:1); *yir'ē yhwē*, "the ones who fear Yahweh" (22:24 [RSV 23]; 115:11; 118:4). Identification of the community happened through Yahweh and his manifest will.

The trustful ones in MT are compared with steadfast Zion, the mountain of God's choice and habitation (v. 1c; cf. Psalm 48; Isa 4:1-5). The invincibility of his abode was part of the Jerusalemite traditions even before the Israelites took over the city (cf. B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* [SBT 2/3; London: SCM, 1967]; Stolz, *Strukturen*; listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry"). "To be unshakable" (*mūt*, Niphal, "tumble," with negation) is also affirmed in regard to the earth itself (cf. Pss 93:1; 96:10; 104:5), and it is a hoped-for estate in spiritual and material life (cf. 15:5; 16:8; 21:8 [RSV 7]; 62:3, 7 [RSV 2, 6]; 112:6; Prov 10:30; 12:3). The parts compared — believers and Mount Zion — in our present estimation are in a certain tension, grammatically

and semantically. Not so, apparently, for the Yahweh faithful of old. The plurality of members is conceptualized in one community and enclosed in the singularity of the mountain, and the vividness of the believers has its equal in personified Zion. We may surmise that the subject "those who trust in Yahweh" is close to a beatitude in form and meaning (→ Ps 1:1). Our initial line v. 1bc in any case is conveying FELICITATIONS to those who belong to the blessed group of believers.

If the line under debate is the opening of our psalm, the following line merely elaborates on the first one, repeating words of assurance to the troubled community ("his people," v. 2b). The point of comparison is now the enclosure of Jerusalem. The mountains around are like guardians for the city; in the same way Yahweh is believed to shelter his congregation. Note the key word *sābīb*, "all around" (twice in v. 2; cf. Ps 34:8 [RSV 7]; Josh 21:44), not frequently used in connection with Yahweh's protective activity.

Two lines of comforting and promising speech or song prepare, by juxtaposition, two more of denigrations. There seems to be no need to introduce specifically any opponents to the state of bliss imagined in vv. 1-2. The "rod of wickedness" shows up abruptly (v. 3a), and we have to speculate as to its historical, social, or religious identity. The expression as such is unique; similar wordings are used in Ezek 7:11; Sir 32:23. The thrust of v. 3 is to ward off evildoers, more precisely, to cut short their influence, in order not to lead into temptation the *šaddiqim*, the "just ones" (v. 3c; cf. v. 3b). This juxtaposition is clear enough! The outlines of the "wicked," however, are not clarified at all. They hold sway over the "heritage of the just ones" (v. 3b). They obviously perform iniquities attractive to the *šaddiqim* (v. 3cd). Looking toward v. 5 we may add two more, but equally vague, characteristics: They "turn aside to their crooked paths" (v. 5a; the only other occurrence of "crooked paths," Judg 5:6, is more than obscure), and they are condemned together with the "evilmongers" (v. 5b: *pō'ālē hā'āwen*; cf. S. Mowinckel, *PsSt* I). What is certain is the function of v. 3: *kī lō* in this context is a negative wish formula "May it not be that" (cf. the apotropaic formula of not wanting to get involved: *hālilāh lī*, "be it far away from me," Gen 44:17; 1 Sam 24:7; 2 Sam 23:17; Job 27:5). The two lines in question, then, constitute a precative THREAT TO EVILDOERS. Significantly, they do not carry any reference to Yahweh, in contrast to vv. 1-2, 4-5, where every single line (alternatingly in the a and b cola) is equipped with the holy name. This makes me believe in the original autonomy of the middle segment of Psalm 125 (cf. Beyerlin, 35-43).

Next come two lines of PETITION and its defensive counterpart, IMPRECATION (vv. 4-5ab). "Do the best, Yahweh, for the good ones" (v. 4a) is a classic expression of asking favors from a deity. The verb *yīb*, Hiphil, is occasionally used in such imperative petitions (cf. 51:20 [RSV 18]), and Yahweh himself is called the "doer of good" (119:68). Now, petition for one's own sake is objectified by choosing honorific names: "the good ones," "those honest in their hearts" (v. 4), corresponding, of course, to the "trustful ones" of v. 1b. Dignity and merit are thus introduced into the song. Formal petition is not so frequent in psalms of confidence (see below, Genre), but it is certainly not alien to that class of songs (cf. "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B). If this is true, imprecation, too,