

PRAYERS FOR NATIONAL PEACE: A READING OF PSALM 122:6-9

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the Poet's prayer for National peace in Psalm 122:6-9. The poet gives an imperative command to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and goes on to offer a prayer that includes the invocation of blessings on people who promote peace and a prayer for peace. The passage also includes a statement of the poet's personal interest in the peace of Jerusalem. Here, he states the reasons why he prays for peace in Jerusalem: for the sake of his brothers and companions and for the sake of the temple. From the structural reading of the passage, the point of emphasis is seen to be a desire for the peace of Jerusalem. From these points of emphases, lessons on nation Building are drawn for Ghanaians. Ghanaians should pray for the peace of the nation and seek peace because of families and friends as well as prominent national and religious heritages.*

Key Words: Psalm, Blessing, National peace, Ghana

Introduction

The issue of nation building is of prime importance to every country and since peace is a very important ingredient for nation building everyone desires peace in their nation and in neighbouring nations. Hence the poet in Psalm 122 makes peace his main point of prayer in verses 6-9. Thus, the passage seems to be a command to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and a personal prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. While, the Psalm has received many interpretations, it is hardly likely to find scholars drawing links between this Psalm and nation building. Also, most scholars have always dealt with the Psalm as a whole.¹

¹ In their various introductions, Leopold S. J. Sabourin, *The Psalms* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1974), Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III 101-150*, AB (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988); Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) and A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwcll (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) have only generally looked at the Psalm as a whole and without specifically relating it with contemporary issues such as nation building or national peace.

This paper, however, deals with verses 6-9 and explores the Poet's prayer for national peace by an analysis of the structure and style of the poem. This is followed by relating the poem to the issues of nation building in Ghana and Africa in general.

Psalm 122

Psalm 122 is considered among the so called Canticles of Zion¹. These Canticles of Zion are poems that extol Zion as “God’s Holy Mountain” (48:2), “Salem, chosen for his abode” (76:3), “city of God” (46:5; 48:2), “the holy dwelling of the Most High” (46:5)². Zion is considered a very important place in the Psalter. According to Sabourin, “the central role played by Zion in the political, cultural and religious life of Israel results from her choice as the seat of the Eternal King and the capital of the temporal monarchy.”³

Psalm 122 is situated among Psalms which are a self-contained book of Psalms “which was later added to the collection framed by Pss. 1 and 119.”⁴ These psalms are referred to as Pilgrim Songs.⁵ They are Psalms. 120- 134 and they reveal a certain material unity. They are described by Westermann as Psalms of the Community, the worshipping Community.⁶ Sabourin distinguishes these, which he calls Pilgrim Songs, from the Canticles of Zion. According to him, the Pilgrim songs (120-134) do not constitute a distant category.⁷ Despite the fact that they are

¹ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 206.

² Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 205; Dahood, *Psalms III*, 203, considers Psalm 122 a song of Zion that was probably composed by a pilgrim who was reflecting upon the memories of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem while on his way home; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary on the whole Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 377, on the other hand believe that the Psalm was sung in sight of Jerusalem's distant hills. Thus, it was a psalm for pilgrims when they halted at the gates for the procession into the sanctuary.

³ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 205; William A. VanGemeren, *Psalms. The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5: 774 lists the “Songs of Zion” as 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 132 and adds that they “have much in common with the royal psalms as they celebrate the glories associated with Jerusalem: temple and kingship.” He, however, includes the fact that the songs of Zion proclaim the glories of Zion in universal and eschatological terms, unlike the royal psalms.

⁴ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 255.

⁵ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 206.

⁶ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 255.

⁷ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 206. Sabourin explains that the Pilgrim Psalms “do not constitute a literary type, and Ps 122 excepted, are not among the Canticles of Zion, although in them also would naturally feature themes connected with the Holy City (p. 9).” He adds that they were meant to provide devotional inspiration to those in pilgrimage.

different, they also have some themes in common: the love of Zion and faith in the presence of God in the midst of his people.⁸

Though Sabourin argues that Psalms 120-134 are “Pilgrim Songs,” Westerman also argues that the only real pilgrimage song in the collection is Psalm 122. He adds that it is the only one in the Psalter and that “Songs of Zion” (Psalms 125, 126, 132) are similar to it.⁹ Sabourin, on the other hand, lists Canticles of Zion as Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122.¹⁰

Whether Psalm 122 belongs to the Pilgrim Songs or Songs of Zion, it is clear that in each case, its significance “extends from the focus of Zion as the goal of the pilgrimage (vv 1-2) to the eschatological vision of Zion as the center of God’s judgment and peace (vv. 5-9).”¹¹ It is realized that Psalm 122 is both a Pilgrim Psalm and a Zion Psalm since both motifs are embedded in it.

Structural Analysis

Structurally, it can be realized that the Psalm has been given almost the same structure by different scholars. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown mention that the psalm is composed of:

- An introduction (vv 1-2)
- Excellency of Jerusalem, the civil and religious capital of all Israel (vv. 3-5)
- Prayers for its peace, as involving the whole national brotherhood, and the house of God (vv. 6-9).¹²

With similar elements, Dahood proposes a structure that is quite different from the ones considered. He talks of three stanzas but describes the first stanza to include vv. 1-4a. Here, he sees the poet describing his joy

⁸ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 206.

⁹ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 255.

¹⁰ Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 206.

¹¹ VanGaemeren, *Psalms*, 774.

¹² Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary on the whole Bible*, 377. Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 213, states that it “expresses in three stanzas what were the dominant feelings of the pilgrims about to leave Jerusalem: recollections of the joyful event, motives of the pilgrimage, prayer for the holy city.” The same structure is proposed by VanGaemeren when he suggests an expository structure to include the Pilgrim’s joy (vv. 1-2); the Pilgrim’s praise (vv. 3-5); and the Pilgrim’s prayer (vv. 6-9).

when arriving at the Holy City. The second stanza includes vv 4b-5, where the poet pronounces a brief homily on why one should visit Jerusalem on a Pilgrimage. The final stanza, vv. 6-9, which is the same as the other scholars' ideas, is made up of an invocation of blessings on the Holy City.¹³

Dahood's structure suggests that the joy of the poet extends to v. 4a. However, the designation that he gives to the second stanza, homily on why Jerusalem is preferred, begins from verse three where the poet described Jerusalem in detail. This is followed by the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem in the third stanza (vv. 6-9).

The structure of the entire Psalm will therefore stand as follows;

vv. 1-2 The poet's expression of Joy over Jerusalem

vv. 3-5 A detailed description of Jerusalem and why it should be preferred

vv. 6-9 A prayer for the peace and wellbeing of Jerusalem

From the foregoing, it is clear that Psalm 122 is a very special psalm with special characteristics and treatment. This paper seeks to look at the last part of the Psalm (vv. 6-9), where the poet offers a prayer for national peace (the Peace of Jerusalem). The issues emanating from this analysis will be discussed in relation to nation building in Ghana.

The Text

The passage under discussion appears in the MT as follows:

שְׂאֵלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם יְשֻׁלְיוֹ אֱהַבְיָדָ:
 יְהִי־שְׁלוֹם בְּחִילָדָ שְׁלוֹהָ בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיָדָ:
 לְמַעַן אֲחִי וְרַעֲי אֲדַבְרָה־נָּא שְׁלוֹם בְּדָ:
 לְמַעַן בֵּית־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲבַקֶּשָׁה טוֹב לָדָ:

¹³ Dahood, *Psalms*, 203. 204.

This is translated as follows:¹⁴

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls, Prosperity within your palaces."
For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, "Peace be
within you."
Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek your good.

Like the entire Psalm, this third stanza, which is the focus of this paper, is made up of a dual parallelism which places emphasis on certain key words. These shall be the focus of the discussion. The parallelism observed here is both thematic and consonance. Thus, the stanza is structured in two parts, each containing dual parallelism. The first part in vv. 6 and 7, and the second part in vv. 8 and 9.

Verses 6, 7

The first two lines (vv. 6, 7) stand as follows:

שְׁאַלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם יְשֻׁלוּ אֶהְבִּיד׃
יְהִי־שְׁלוֹם בְּחֵילְךָ שְׁלוֹה בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיךָ׃

Pray for the **peace** of Jerusalem: "May they **prosper** who love you.
Peace be within your walls, **Prosperity** within your palaces."

In the first two lines (vv. 6-7), peace and prosperity are used in a thematic and rhyming parallelism. The two lines both have a "Peace ... Prosperity" thematic scheme. It is also note-worthy that the two words also have similar consonants, נ and ל, making them sound the same. This consonance suggests emphasis.

Though they each perform a different function, their placement makes the reader see clearly that the poet desires the peace and prosperity of the nation (Jerusalem). The first part of line one is an imperative, a command to pray for peace. This is immediately followed by a pronouncement of prosperity on all Zion-lovers. In the second line, the poet

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from the New King James Version.

offers the prayer by way of a pronouncement of peace and prosperity on Jerusalem.

Apart from the parallel uses of peace and prosperity within the first two lines, the lines also have a rhyme at the end and within them. Within the lines there is a repetitive use of *שלם* which draws the reader's attention.¹⁵ These consonants are found in word such as pray, peace, Jerusalem, prosperity. This indicates a point of emphasis on the fact that the poet is offering a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem (a city of Peace).¹⁶

A look at the end of each line also reveals an end rhyme. Both line one (v. 6) and line two (v. 7) end with *ayik*. This ending is the second person feminine suffix which specifically refers to Jerusalem in each case. The focus of such rhyme is on Jerusalem. The first one referring to those who love you and the second one referring to your citadels/palaces. Thus, the alliteration and assonance in the two lines specifically point to one major theme: prayer for the peace of Jerusalem.

It is seen from the parallelism and consonance that the major emphasis of the poet in this first part of the third section is the peace of Jerusalem. Thus, he advocates for a prayer for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem.

Verses 8, 9

The last two lines (vv. 8, 9) stand as follows:

לְמַעַן אַחֵי וְרַעֵי אֲדַבְּרָה־נָא שְׁלוֹם בְּדָד:
לְמַעַן בֵּית־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲבַקֶּשׂה טוֹב לָדָד:

For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, "Peace *be* within you."

Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek your good.

¹⁵ Dahood, *Psalms*, 206 observes that the poet "creates effective assonance and alliteration with four of the line's five words containing the *sh* sound".

¹⁶ Dahood, *Psalms*, 206 mentions that the word-play on "Jerusalem" and "Shalom", peace has often been noted. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Commentary on the whole Bible*, 377 explains that Jerusalem means a peaceful possession and so the frequent alliteration of the similar-sounding words (peace, prosper, prosperity) with one another, and with Jerusalem, is designed to endear the mother city to the nation.

These two lines both begin with the same word: לְמַעַן “for the sake of” and end with the same consonant, ך. This is the second person feminine suffix attached to the prepositions that refer to Jerusalem, which has already been emphasized in the preceding lines. The ending of each line shows that the poet wishes to speak peace in Jerusalem and to seek the good of Jerusalem. Here, he is pronouncing a blessing (peace and goodwill) on the city. It is noted that, in this part of the pronouncement, peace is repeated, but prosperity is replaced with good, adding another word to the dual parallelism. It however indicates the primacy of peace in the wish of the poet. It is very important to him that he mentions it three times without replacing it with any synonym. Thus, the main desire of the poet in these lines is Peace.

The use of לְמַעַן at the beginning of each line points the reader to an issue of reason or motivation. The poet is pointing out the reason why he will pray for the peace of Jerusalem and seek her good. The two lines therefore present the two reasons why the poet desires peace. The parallels that are presented here indicate two major reasons why the poet desires to pray for peace:

- For the sake of my brothers and my friends
- For the sake of the house of the Lord our God

To the poet, it is to the advantage of all Israel that there should be peace in Jerusalem. He sees peace as a commodity that will be beneficial to other people. According to the poet, the welfare of these people is wrapped in the peace of Jerusalem.¹⁷ Spurgeon explains that the poet has this sentiment either because the brothers and companions dwell there or because they go up there to worship.¹⁸ He also sees the people as brothers and friends. This explains the close bonding that existed among the pilgrims. They were so closely connected that, for the sake of each other, the poet desires the peace of Jerusalem.

The second reason that the poet gives for desiring peace in Jerusalem is “the house of the Lord our God”. It is observed that he ends the psalm

¹⁷ Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Commentary on the whole Bible*, 378.

¹⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasure of David* (London: R. Culley, 1870), 36.

with the theme he began with:¹⁹ *Bêt-yhwh*, “The house of the Lord”. At the beginning of the psalm, the poet says he was glad when they called him to go into the house of the Lord. The poem also ends with the emphatic declaration that he will desire the peace of Jerusalem for the sake of the house of the Lord. By this, the poet referred to the temple in Jerusalem which was a national artifact. Its beauty and splendor as well as its national importance were enough to motivate a desire for peace.

By certain elements in Jerusalem, the poet was pointing to the civil, political, and religious significance of Jerusalem.²⁰ The poet has every reason to desire and pray for the peace of Jerusalem. With such good reasons, he commands prayers for the peace of Jerusalem and also offers a prayer for national peace. From this, the modern-day Ghanaian can learn important lessons of desiring peace which will help in nation building.

Lessons for Modern-day Ghana

From the poem, the modern-day Ghanaian can learn lessons which will help in nation building. These lessons will help us to desire peace and pray for national peace. First of all, the fact that the poet uses an imperative form of the verb implies that the readers should do it as a command. Whereas all the other verbs are cohortative and jussive, the injunction to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is an imperative. Today’s Ghanaian also needs to see the prayer for the peace of Ghana as an imperative. It should not just be a wish but a mandatory task. If this is impressed upon the minds of all citizens, peace will most likely prevail. A person who sees it as his duty to pray for the peace of the nation will most likely promote the peace that he is praying for.

Finally, the poet states his own personal reasons why he desires the peace of Jerusalem. The modern-day Ghanaian may have personal reasons for desiring national peace. Having very good reasons why one desires national peace will motivate the Ghanaian to strongly promote peace. If a Ghanaian has good reasons why he/she desires peace in the nation, he will not be influenced by politicians or any other war-mongers. If one does not have any personal reasons for promoting national

¹⁹ Dahood, *Psalms*, 207; see also Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Commentary on the whole Bible*, 378.

²⁰ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 776.

peace, the poet states his own reasons which can be the motivation for modern-day Ghanaians.

The first motivation of the poet is “for the sake of my brothers and my friends”. This implies that he had in mind other people who were related to him in one way or another. The modern-day Ghanaian can have as a motivation for promoting national peace, the people close to him/her. Others may be made up of our family members and friends. Praying for national peace in Ghana may be motivated by our love for our spouses, children, parents, and other nuclear and extended family members. We may also have in mind associates and colleagues. The individual should think of the effects of national uproar and chaos on others who are associated with him/her.

The second reason that the poet had for desiring the peace of Jerusalem is “for the sake of the house of the Lord our God.” Within this reason one sees the temple in Jerusalem which has very important national and spiritual significance for the poet. In the first stanza of the psalm, the poet describes the euphoria that he has when he goes to the house of the Lord. The temple, however, does not only mean a lot to the poet, but to the entire nation. The poet, here, makes an issue of national interest his personal interest. The temple was a national artifact, yet the poet sees his own interest in the national artifact. Modern-day Ghanaians should have interest in national issues. They should have national artifacts such as the stadia, theatres, parks, tourist attractions, etc. in mind and be motivated to desire peace for the nation. Such a motivation will help the individual desire peace, pray for it and promote peace. This will go a long way to help in nation building.

Conclusion

The promotion of nation building depends so much on national peace. The poet in the third stanza has national peace as his main focus. He uses devices such as parallelism, alliteration, and consonance to state that he desires a prayer for national peace. Thus structurally, verses 6 and 7 give an imperative command to pray for national peace and a prayer for national peace that includes an invocation of prosperity on those who love the nation. The last two verses (vv. 8, 9) present the poet’s motivation for praying for national peace. He indicates that he will desire the good of the nation because of his family and friends as well as an artifact of national interest. The modern-day Ghanaian can

learn lessons from the passage that will help promote peace as well as nation building. The Ghanaian should see the prayer for national peace as an imperative, expect personal peace and prosperity when there is national peace, and have personal motivations for desiring and promoting national peace.

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