

McAFEE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

BEHOLD, HOW GOOD AND HOW PLEASANT: AN EXEGESIS OF PSALM 133

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## INTRODUCTION

"Behold how good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity."<sup>1</sup> Thus begins Psalm 133, one of the Psalter's Songs of Ascents.<sup>2</sup> Many passages in the Hebrew Bible address the goodness of humankind dwelling together. In Gen 2:18, God creates the first human, אָדָם, and God says, "It is not good for the human to be alone; I will create for the human a strong helper as a partner." And so God painstakingly fashions woman from the rib of the human. The human greets the woman with the words, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23).<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 12, God calls Abram with the words, "Go forth from your country and your kindred and your father's house" (v. 1). And so, Abram goes as God commands, and we read that "Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot . . . and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran" (Gen 12:5). Abram left community and traveled to a new land in community. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, we note that the ancient Israelites viewed themselves more often as members of communities than as individual human beings. During the time of the wilderness wanderings, Israel is consistently referred to as "the people of Israel"<sup>4</sup> and the "congregation of Israel."<sup>5</sup> We know the names of only a few individual Israelites from the wilderness narratives: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; Jethro; Caleb and Joshua. The book of Leviticus addresses issues that have to do with maintaining balance and harmony within the community of faith. In the aptly-named "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 19-26, we read:

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Pss 120-134, located in Book Five of the Psalter.

<sup>3</sup> NRSV translation.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Exod 17:2; Lev 1:2; 11:1; 25:1; and Num 15:2.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Exod 16:9; Lev 8:5; and Num 1:2; 14:5.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor; I am the LORD your God. (19:15-16)<sup>6</sup>

A number of sayings in the book of Proverbs address the issue of dwelling together in unity: "Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife" (17:1). "It is honorable to refrain from strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel" (20:3).<sup>7</sup> Community is an all-important concept in the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 133 celebrates the goodness of kindred living together in unity.<sup>8</sup> The psalm most likely was shaped originally as simple words of wisdom within family life in ancient Israel and, at some in its transmission history, had other elements added to it in order to render part of the larger story of ancient Israel. In this paper, I will show that the simple wisdom words at the heart of Psalm 133 were adopted and placed within the Songs of Ascents of the Psalter (Pss 120-134). I will first examine the placement of Psalm 133 within the larger context of the book of Psalms. I will then examine the "proverbial shape" of the psalm. Finally, I will study the final shape of the psalm and reflect on its function in the life of postexilic Israel.

#### PLACEMENT

Psalm 133 is located in a group of psalms in Book Five of the Hebrew Psalter that are designated in their superscriptions as "Songs of Ascents (Pss 120-134)." Scholars do not agree on the origin of this group of psalms, but the psalms seem to have a strong connection with temple worship in Jerusalem. The Rabbinic writing known as the Mishnah, a collection of oral

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<sup>6</sup> NRSV translation.

<sup>7</sup> NRSV Translation.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent brief treatment, see James Luther Mays, "There the Blessing: An Exposition of Psalm 133," in *God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 79-90.

rabbinic teachings that date from the first through the third centuries CE, states that the fifteen Songs of Ascents correspond to the fifteen steps of the postexilic temple.<sup>9</sup> In this understanding, the ascent referred to would be the ascent of priests or worshipers as they made their way up the steps and into the temple in Jerusalem. Additionally, the Songs of Ascents are the psalms traditionally read at the Autumn Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths, or *Sukkoth*), one of the festivals of the Jewish faith, including Passover, which ideally is celebrated in Jerusalem. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorates God's care for the Israelites during the time of the Wilderness Wanderings (Exod 16-Deut 32), reinforcing the "pilgrimage" theme of the Songs of Ascents.

Whatever its origin, the collection known as the "Songs of Ascents" was incorporated into Book Five of the Psalter at some point in the Psalter's shaping process. How did the process of shaping take place? During the past twenty-five years, a number of biblical scholars who study the book of Psalms have posited radically different ideas about its shape and function than their predecessors in the discipline. They maintain that the Psalter was most likely shaped into its final form late in the postexilic period (perhaps as late as the first century CE<sup>10</sup>). In addition, while none would contest that the Psalter is a collection of the hymns of ancient Israel and that its designation as "the hymnbook of the second temple" is appropriate, scholars now maintain that the Psalter is also a narrative within a poetic text.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Simon Cohen, "Liturgical Psalms," in *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isaac Landman, vol. 9 (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia Co., 1943), 18-19. See also Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. 1, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> See Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: the Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 105-18.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBL Dissertations Series, ed. J.J. M. Roberts, no. 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); J. Clinton

Careful study of the Psalter's five-book structure suggests that it tells a story, that the Psalter is a connected narrative rather than a miscellaneous collection of songs from ancient Israel. The story line is as follows. Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the major themes of the Psalter. In Psalm 1, the psalmist outlines two paths in life--the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous. Its opening words are "אַשְׁרֵי" (usually translated "happy" or "blessed," but better rendered "content") is the person who does not follow the advice of the wicked." The wicked person is like chaff that the wind blows away, but the righteous person, through diligent meditation on the תּוֹרָה—the instruction of God, is like a tree firmly planted by a stream. Psalm 2 introduces the theme of royalty, which for ancient Israel meant a king from the line of David.<sup>12</sup> But in Psalm 2 the royal idea has an interesting twist: According to verses 10-11. God, not humanity, is the ultimate ruler of the earth. Psalm 2 ends with the same word that begins Psalm 1: "אַשְׁרֵי—content are the ones who take refuge in God" (2:11). Psalms 1 and 2 may be read as the introduction to the Psalter—the two lenses through which the reader is to view the Psalter.<sup>13</sup> Psalm 1 urges the reader to meditate upon the Torah as the path to right living, and Psalm 2 states that, regardless of the useless plotting of earthly rulers, God who sits in the heavens is sovereign over the created order.

The remainder of Book 1 (Pss 3-41) and all of Book 2 (Pss 42-72) recount the history of ancient Israel during the time of the kingship of David, son of Jesse; Book 3 (Pss 73-89) reflects the times of Solomon, the divided kingdoms, the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the

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McCann, Jr., ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, JSOT Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, no. 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); and McCann, "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," In *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> See 2 Sam 7.

<sup>13</sup> deClaisse-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 4.

Assyrians, and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians; Book 4 (Pss 90-106) addresses the Israelites in Exile in Babylon; and Book 5 (Pss 107-150) recounts the return from Exile, the rebuilding of the temple and life in postexilic Jerusalem--a life that must have been radically different from what it was before the Babylonian conquest.<sup>14</sup>

Psalm 133 is one of the fifteen "Songs of Ascents" that were incorporated into Book Five of the Psalter at some point in its shaping process. According to its placement within the story of the Psalter, the "Songs of Ascents" reflects some aspect of the reestablishment of temple worship. The Songs of Ascents is an interesting and varied collection. It includes Individual Laments (Pss 120 and 130), Community Laments (Pss 123 and 126), Individual Hymns of Thanksgiving (Pss 121, 122, and 131), Community Hymns (Pss 124, 125, 129, and 134), Wisdom Psalms (Pss 127, 128, and 133), and a Royal Psalm (Ps 132).<sup>15</sup> The variety of *Gattungen* represented in the Songs of Ascents troubles many scholars. They question whether such an eclectic mix could ever have been a collection actually used in the worship life of ancient Israel. Michael Goulder reminds us, however:

Why should we think that a collection of psalms is not a unity because it contains pieces from different *Gattungen*? Have such critics never attended a church service that began with a confession, included lessons of instruction, hymns of praise and prayers, and ended perhaps with the General Thanksgiving?<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if we are permitted to read the Songs of Ascents as the songs of the Israelites during their period of "Boothing," that is, the time of Wilderness Wandering, then perhaps we should view the varied psalmic types of the Songs of Ascents as a reflection of the many emotions that characterized the Israelites during their time in the wilderness.

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account, see *Ibid.*, 31-44.

<sup>15</sup> For a full discussion of psalm types, see *Ibid.*, 19-29.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return: Book V, Psalms 107-150*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, no. 258 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 24.

## THE PROVERBIAL SHAPE OF THE TEXT

133:1      שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד  
הִנֵּה מֵה־טוֹב וּמֵה־נְעִים שָׁבַת אֶחָיו גַּם־יַחַד:

"The song of the Ascents, for David.

Behold how good and how pleasant it is, when kindred dwell together in unity."

The terms "good" (טוֹב) and "pleasant" (נְעִים) are used in a number of contexts in the Hebrew scriptures (although they are not usually found together). "Good" occurs many times in the beginning chapters of the book of Genesis. The priestly account of creation records that God "saw that it was good" (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). At the end of all of the creative acts of Genesis 1, the priestly writers conclude, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). The Hebrew word טוֹב is used no less than 550 times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>17</sup> Its basic meaning is found in its use as a descriptive adjective of "the practical utility of an object, an action, or a situation, with reference to its being 'useful' or 'advantageous.'"<sup>18</sup> H.J. Kraus maintains, based on the apocryphal Wisdom of Ben Sirach and ancient texts from Egypt, that מֵה־טוֹב is "a characteristic wisdom form."<sup>19</sup> Erhard Gerstenberger adds that the interrogative מֵה "with a following adjective or verb of evaluation may be found in proverbial sayings and popular songs."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard Lisowsky, *Kondordanz zum hebraischen alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 545-49.

<sup>18</sup> I. Hover-Johag, "טוֹב, *tōb*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. V, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 299.

<sup>19</sup> H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 485.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Prov 15:23; Cant 4:10; Ps 8:1, 9; 36:8. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, ed. Rolf P. Knierim, et al., vol. XV (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 371.

The word translated "pleasant"—נְעִים—is from the Hebrew root נעם.<sup>21</sup> It is used many times in the context of love language in the Hebrew Bible, with a range of meanings that include "beauty, attractiveness, and loveliness."<sup>22</sup> In Cant 1:16, the maiden sings to her beloved, "Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely (נְעִים). In David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:23, David cries, "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely (נְעִים)!"

"Kindred" is a translation of אֶחָיוֹ (brothers), which best renders the contextual meaning of the term—the ancient Israelite "extended family where "brothers (kindred) reside together" (Deut 25:5) and care for one another. The word יְחָד, translated as "unity," derives from the Hebrew word for "one," אֶחָד. The unity expressed and hoped for is an oneness, a singleness among kindred. Robert Davidson, in *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, states, "The whole psalm may, therefore, be interpreted in terms of family life and seen as an extended comment on traditional wisdom sayings commending family harmony."<sup>23</sup>

2 כַּשֶּׁמֶן הַטּוֹב | עַל-הָרֹאשׁ יֵרֵד עַל-הַזָּקָן  
זָקֵן-אֶהְרֵן שִׁירָד עַל-פִּי מִדֹּתָיו:

"Like the good oil on the head, flowing down upon the beard,  
the beard of Aaron. which is flowing down upon the edge of his garments."

<sup>21</sup> It is, interestingly, the root of the name Naomi.

<sup>22</sup> T. Kronholm, "נְעִים nā'ām" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. IX, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 469-70.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 432.

Kindred dwelling together in unity is like the good (טוֹב) oil. Oil from the olive is and was an important commodity in the dry environment of the Near East. Olive oil is mixed with sweet-smelling spices and is used for hair and skin care.<sup>24</sup> A basic act of hospitality when visitors entered another's home was to wash their feet and to pour soothing and refreshing oil upon their heads, which ran down into the beards of men.<sup>25</sup>

In the second line of verse 2, the oil flows down upon Aaron's beard and upon the edge of his garments. Aaron was anointed high priest of the ancient Israelites in Leviticus 8: "Then Moses took the anointing oil and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it . . . He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him, to consecrate him" (Lev 8:10, 12). The good oil of hospitality takes on a sacred character when it is used to consecrate the high priest of ancient Israel.

3 כֶּטֶל־חֶרְמוֹן שִׁירַדְּ עַל־הַרְרֵי צִיּוֹן

"Like the dew of Hermon, which is flowing down upon the mountains of Zion."

Mt. Hermon, located some 125 miles north of Jerusalem, is known for its abundant dew. In Palestine, which sees little rainfall between the months of April and October, dew is the only source of moisture for plants. Robert Davidson suggests that "dew" became "proverbial as a symbol of the life-giving moisture needed in an often arid landscape."<sup>26</sup> The words dew (טֹל) and rain (מְטָר) are used in synonymous parallelism in a number of places in the Hebrew scriptures (Deut 32:2; 2 Sam 1:21; and Job 38:28). Without the nightly

<sup>24</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 486.

<sup>25</sup> See Amos 6:6; Mic 6:15; and Ps 23:5; 92:10; 141:5.

<sup>26</sup> Davidson, *Vitality*, 432.

accumulation of dew, the land would be parched and dry for many months of the year.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, like the olive oil poured as refreshment upon the visitors' heads, the nightly dew soothes and refreshes the land.

In addition to concepts of soothing and refreshment, dew is linked with the order of creation, with fertility, and with God's blessings. In Gen 27:38, Isaac says to Jacob when he gives him the blessing rather than his brother Esau, "May God give you the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine." To Esau, Isaac says, "Away from the fatness of the earth shall you home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high" (Gen 27:39).

As with verse 2 of Psalm 133, in which the oil of hospitality flows down over the beard and garments of Israel's high priest, so in verse 3 Mt. Hermon's abundant dew flows down on the mountains of Zion, the center of worship for ancient Israel, and it is soothed and refreshed.

Richard J. Clifford, in the Abingdon Commentary on the book of Psalms, points out that many of the terms used in Psalm 133 are also used in the Song of Songs—הִנֵּה (behold), הַמָּה (how), טוֹב (good), נְעִים (pleasant), הַשֶּׁמֶן הַטוֹב (good oil), טֵל (dew), and הָהָר (mountain), suggesting that the psalmist "borrowed from traditional lyric poetry" to compose the words of Psalm 133.<sup>28</sup>

The language and metaphors used in Psalm 133 connect its images into a semantic whole. The word טוֹב (good) links verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 133. In verses 2 and 3, the oil and

<sup>27</sup> Benedikt Otzen, "טֵל ṭāl" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. V, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 323.

<sup>28</sup> Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 260.

the dew יָרַד (flow down) upon the beard, the edge of Aaron's garment, and upon the mountains of Zion. The repetition of the words טוֹב (two times) and יָרַד (three times) within the verses, and the conjunction of "good" and "flowing down" in verse 2 ("it is like the good oil . . . flowing down upon the beard") indicate the psalm singer's purposeful juxtaposition of the terms. Does the psalm singer wish the hearer to reflect upon and celebrate the good abundance that flows down from God to those who dwell together in unity?<sup>29</sup>

כִּי שָׁם | צִוְּהָ יְהוָה אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה חַיִּים עַד־הָעוֹלָם:

"Because there the LORD commanded the blessing, life for all time,"

כִּי, in its syntactical use in Psalm 133, is a causal particle. It follows the principal clause of the statement and presents the interpretation or reason for the statement given in the principal clause. Thus, in verse 1, we read, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for kindred to dwell together in unity." Why? Because, according to verse 3b, "there (in Zion—the center of worship in ancient Israel) the LORD has commanded the blessing, life for all time."

"Blessing" is a common and pervasive term in the Hebrew Bible. In Gen 2:3, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." God told Abram in Gen 12:2, "I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing." Jacob wrestled at the Jabbok and refused to let go of his challenger until he had received a blessing (Gen 32:26). The verb בָּרַךְ occurs some four hundred thirty times in the Hebrew scriptures. Its basic meaning is "to kneel down" and has strong connections with the ancient Semitic root word for "knee." It indicates a posture of gratitude and awesomeness.

<sup>29</sup> See McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1214.

When we read, though, that God blesses, how do we appropriate the concepts of "kneeling down" or "gratitude"? Kraus suggests that God's blessing on humanity is an act of giving the power to live life or an enhancement of life.<sup>30</sup> We might say that God condescends—bends the knee—to humanity and gives to humanity a God-given power to live life to its fullest. And in the context of this psalm, life lived to its fullest includes gathering together with others as God's holy people in the city of Jerusalem.

The outcome of God's blessing is life "for all times." The phrase עַד־הָעוֹלָם, pervasive in the Hebrew scriptures, is often misunderstood as an indication of the idea of a life beyond this life. In Psalm 133, as in most instances in the Hebrew Bible, the phrase has to do with life in this world, rather than life in a world beyond. A good translation of it might be "for a long time" or "as long as the farthest or remotest time."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the blessing bestowed by God upon the singer of Psalm 133 can be characterized as a blessing that lasts "as long as one lives."<sup>32</sup>

#### SHAPE AND FUNCTION OF PSALM 133 IN THE LIFE OF POSTEXILIC ISRAEL

According to a number of scholars, Psalm 133 began as a proverbial saying in the life of ancient Israel and most likely consisted of verses 1, 2a, and 3a.<sup>33</sup>

Behold how good and how pleasant it is,  
when kindred dwell together in unity.

Like the good oil on the head,

<sup>30</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 486.

<sup>31</sup> H.D. Preuss, "עוֹלָם 'olām," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, et al., Vol. X, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 531.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 535.

<sup>33</sup> See McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1214; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 485; and deClaisse-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms*, 120-22.

flowing down upon the beard,

like the dew of Hermon.

In this form, the reader notes that all cultic references are gone. It is just a simple blessing with two visual, concrete images of that blessing—the oil and the dew. But with that simple saying, the visitor infuses an ordinary event of life--entering someone else's home—with a sacred aspect. By speaking the wisdom words "how good"—מִזֶּה טוֹב—upon entering another's household, the visitor bids God to bless the household.

At some point, now lost in the recesses of history, a psalm singer augmented the simple wisdom words with cultic references. That song, along with others, was shaped into a fifteen-psalm collection called the Songs of Ascents. The collection deals much with matters of daily life (see Pss 120, 122, 127, 128, and 131), and it deals much with matters of national life (see Pss 123-126; 130-132; and 134). Clint McCann states, "The juxtaposition of psalms reflecting daily concerns with those reflecting national concerns makes sense in the context of festal celebrations, where individual and families from all over would have been brought together by loyalties that transcended the personal and familial."<sup>34</sup> The good oil of hospitality is poured upon Aaron's head; the abundant dew of Mt. Hermon refreshes Zion. Scholars note the same development in others of the Songs of Ascents, including Psalms 122, 128, and 131.<sup>35</sup>

The ancient Israelite hearer of The Song of Ascents we call Psalm 133 would most likely have remembered the proverbial saying on which the psalm is based. But that saying, that blessing, was given special meaning by its cultic additions. The oil poured upon the head in

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<sup>34</sup> McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1176.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1214.

verse 2 is poured upon Aaron's head, and the oil runs down into his beard and onto the collar of his garments.

Mt. Hermon's abundant dew in verse 3 comes down upon Mt. Zion, and Jerusalem, the center of worship for ancient Israel, is soothed and refreshed. As the pilgrims approach the temple in Jerusalem together as kindred, the unity—the oil and the dew—flows down and is good and pleasant.

By singing Psalm 133 as one of the Psalms of Ascents, the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem celebrated the joy and goodness of dwelling together as kindred—they remember the proverbial saying that is the foundation of Psalm 133. But the words of the whole psalm remind the people that their family relationship was established not by blood, but by their mutual share in the covenant community of God. The Songs of Ascents prepared the pilgrims to celebrate together, as a family, as kindred living in oneness, the festivals of the Lord their God. The good oil, the dew, coming down upon Zion.

#### CONCLUSION

If the scholars who suggest that the Songs of Ascents were sung by ancient Israelite pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem for festal celebration are correct, then we are able to picture their *Sitz im Leben*. Family groups set out from their village homes and, as they traveled along, joined with other family groups who were also headed for Jerusalem. These groups met others and soon large numbers of people walked and rode together. And they sang the psalms as they traveled along.

In its position in the Book of Psalms, then, Psalm 133 is a proclamation of delight, sung by pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem. We have here picture of the sincere and simple pleasure of people who are bound together by their covenant with their God and who, having

come from a great distance, anticipate with joy standing together in the courts of the temple and in sitting down together at the feast table. The celebrations of festivals at the Temple in Jerusalem transformed pilgrims coming from different places into a family that for a holy time ate and dwelt together. Psalm 133 was a song of greeting, of anticipation, and of celebration of that holy time.

St. Augustine boldly claimed that Psalm 133 inspired the foundation of monasteries, since its words paint a picture of the ideal of brothers, of fellow pilgrims in the faith, dwelling together in unity.<sup>36</sup> In the Christian tradition, Psalm 133 is often used as a text for the observance of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper calls the whole people of God to a family table where all are welcome. And so The Lord's Supper is a fitting liturgical appropriation of the Psalm. McCann's words concerning Psalm 133 are appropriate for those ancient Israelite pilgrims and they are appropriate for worshipers today.

The ultimate goodness that God intends is the gathering of God's larger family, the whole people of God. When God's people gather in Jerusalem, in God's place, they experience their true family and home, for they are in touch with the true source of their life--God's presence.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 414.

<sup>37</sup> McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1214.

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