



Reconstruction of a typical walled city from Iron Age IIa, copied from Gabriel Barkay, Alexander Fantalkin and Oren Tal. "A Late Iron Age Fortress North of Jerusalem." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. no 328 (Nov 2002), 49- 71

Psalm 118 and the King's Coming

Opening Worship

The Psalm begins and ends with the same line, a technique that is common in oral tradition, especially when the content is meant to be a sung by a group. This is one of the traditional praise songs (Heb. *hallel*) - songs that were sung in Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festivals (Heb. *shalosh regalim*). These three festivals were:

- Passover (*pasach*) - signaling the end of winter and the beginning of the year; this became "Easter" or, more appropriately "Resurrection"
- First Fruits (*shavuot*) - the first harvest of the barley and early grain; called Pentecost in the Christian tradition
- Tabernacles or Booths (*succoth*) - the autumn harvest festival, commemorating God's provision for the year

During these week long festivals, people would routinely and regularly sing Psalms 113–118 as a unit. Later traditions assign specific roles to them, but we do not know which fit into what part in Jesus's day. There is another psalm (136) that is called the Great *Hallel* which is sung on Sabbath days and other feasts.

v 1 Opening Bookend

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
For His steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.

The wording of the opening line is significant. It emphatically states one of the pillars of the worship of YHWH - the everlasting nature of his defining attribute, *hesed*. The psalm concerns itself with the manifestation of *hesed* in a situation when the psalmist was overwhelmed.

vv 2–4 Call to Worship

Let Israel say -
Let the House of Aaron say -
Let those who fear the LORD say -

His steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.

The call to worship is a triplet, inviting three groups of people to make the declaration of YHWH's HESED that the psalmist made in verse 1. The responsive singing shows that this was meant to be a processional.

Recounting the Break is a Siege

The middle section, verses 5–20, recount an incident of God's *hesed* sparing Jerusalem during a siege. Whether this is based on a historical siege or simply abstracted is not important. One of the reasons interpreters struggle with the form of this psalm is that they ignore this significant context.

vv 5–9 Preparatory Declarations

LEADER:
Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free.

ARMY:

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

LEADER:

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.

ARMY:

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.

Having made the important declaration of YHWH's steadfast love, the army begins to move to the walls and prepare to venture beyond against overwhelming odds.

There is a specific phrase doubled here: "YHWH is on my side [*lo-'aniy*]." Literally, this means "YHWH is with me" but the context of this is that YHWH is marching with the army of Israel. The psalmist, who is most likely meant to depict the king leading the battle, says that YHWH is the source of his freedom (v 5) and therefore the army replies that YHWH will then be with them and protect them in battle (vv 6–7).

vv 10–13 Surrounded in Battle

All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.

Venturing out of the walls of Jerusalem, the psalmist is quickly surrounded. The sortie to protect the city is against overwhelming odds. So, again there is a triplet used for emphasis: "In the name of YHWH, I cut them off [*'amil-ehem*]!" It is not without a sense of irony that the Hebrew verb here (*muwl*) is the same verb used for circumcision. The uncircumcised invaders have attacked the people of the covenant, so although they are overwhelmed and outnumbered, the Israelite army has no fear. YHWH helps (Heb. *'azr*).

vv 14–16 The Victory is YHWH's

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous:

The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,
The right hand of the LORD exalts,
The right hand of the LORD does valiantly!"

Another triplet is used to pair with YHWH's presence with the armies. The right hand (Heb. *yahmiyn*) is the hand of strength and war. It is the sword hand, and the hand of blessing. So, as the tide of the battle turns and Israel is able to see victory coming, the declaration is that YHWH's power alone is the reason they survive.

vv 17–19 Victory

I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death.

With the battle finally over, the psalmist's voice is calmed and reflective. He has survived the day. The enemy is defeated, and although he was willing to die to protect the city on this ridiculous sortie against overwhelming odds, YHWH has preserved him. He can turn and go back to the city.

vv 19–20 Return to the Gates

LEADER:

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

PEOPLE:

This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

So, he returns. The king and his army come to the gates of the city and call up to the gatekeepers to open the gates of righteousness. They have done well. They have defended the city of God. They are the righteous (*qodeshiym*) and so can pass through the YHWH's gates. The gates are opened, and the victorious king and his followers enter to make their way to the temple to thank YHWH.

Closing Worship

vv 21–24 The King Gives Thanks

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Once inside the city, is able to sing a declaration to YHWH in front of all the people. He sanctifies the day to YHWH, counting himself unworthy of the victory (v 22, "the stone that the builders rejected") and attributing all the glory to YHWH.

vv 25–27 The People's Responsive Thanks

Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!

And here is the "Hosanna" phrase that is repeated in the New Testament: '*ana' YHWH hoshiy'ah na'*'. It is really two Hebrew words meaning "save us" and derives from the same verb as the name *yeshua* or Jesus.

The declaration points to YHWH as the savior, but then also to the human savior - "he who comes in the name of YHWH" - which the faithful of Jerusalem would have called the son of David. This blessing would have been made by those already in the temple complex as the victorious king entered the gate and made his procession to the courtyard to be received.

v 28 Final Affirmation

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you.
You are my God; I will extol you.

The psalmist has arrived at the temple, and after all the events of the battle, he simply declares a doublet beginning with "You are my God." This is a response to the people's declaration "YHWH is God" (v 27), affirming their voice.

v 29 Closing Bookend

Just as the psalm began with this phrase, it ends with it. What was true at the beginning is true at the end. YHWH's steadfast love has carried the people through.