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A Song of Ascents.

PSALM 120: 1 In my distress, I cried to the LORD. He answered me.

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The psalmist, in great distress, calls on the Lord for deliverance from calumny and defamation, Psa 120:1, Psa 120:2; shows the punishment that awaits his persecutor, Psa 120:3, Psa 120:4; deplores the necessity of his residence with the ungodly, Psa 120:5-7.

This Psalm, and all the rest that follow it, to the end of Psa 134:1-3, fifteen in number, are called Psalms of Degrees; for thus the Hebrew title המעלות hammaaloth is generally translated, as coming from the root עלה alah, to ascend or mount upwards. Hence מעלות maaloth, steps or stairs for ascending, 1Kgs 10:19, 1Kgs 10:20; 2Kgs 9:13. But as the word may be applied to elevation in general, hence some have thought that it may here signify the elevation of voice; "these Psalms being sung with the highest elevations of voice and music." Others have thought the word expresses rather the matter of these Psalms, as being of peculiar excellence: and hence Junius and Tremellius prefix to each Canticum excellentissimum, "A most excellent ode."

R. D. Kimchi says, "There were fifteen steps by which the priests ascended into the temple, on each of which they sang one of these fifteen Psalms." This opinion I find referred to in the Apocryphal Gospel of the birth of Mary: "Her parents brought her to the temple, and set her upon one of the steps. Now there are fifteen steps about the temple, by which they go up to it, according to the fifteen Psalms of Degrees." But the existence of such steps and practices cannot be proved.

Aben Ezra supposes that the word means some kind of tune sung to these Psalms. It is more likely, if the title be really ancient, that it was affixed to them on account of their being sung on the return from the Babylonish captivity, as the people were going up to Jerusalem; for though some of them are attributed to David, yet it is very probable that they were all made long after his time, and probably during the captivity, or about the end of it. The author of these fifteen Psalms is not known; and most probably they were not the work of one person. They have been attributed to David, to Solomon, to Ezra, to Haggai, to Zechariah, and to Malachi, without any positive evidence. They are, however, excellent in their kind, and written with much elegance; containing strong and nervous sentiments of the most exalted piety, expressed with great felicity of language in a few words.

Verse 1

In my distress - Through the causes afterwards mentioned.

I cried unto the Lord - Made strong supplication for help.

And he heard one - Answered my prayer by comforting my soul.

It appears to be a prayer of the captives in Babylon for complete liberty; or perhaps he recites the prayer the Israelites had made previously to their restoration.

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PSALM 120: 2 Deliver my soul, LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue.

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Verse 2

Lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue - From a people without faith, without truth, without religion; who sought by lies and calumnies to destroy them.

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PSALM 120: 3 What will be given to you, and what will be done more to you, you deceitful tongue?

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Verse 3

What shall be given unto thee? - Thou art worthy of the heaviest punishments.

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PSALM 120: 4 Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.

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Verse 4

Sharp arrows - The Chaldee has, "The strong, sharp arrows are like lightning from above, with coals of juniper kindled in hell beneath." On the juniper, see the note on Job 30:4, where this passage is explained. Fiery arrows, or arrows wrapped about with inflamed combustibles, were formerly used in sieges to set the places on fire. See my notes on Eph 6:16 (note).

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PSALM 120: 5 Woe is me, that I live in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

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Verse 5

That I sojourn in Mesech - The Chaldee has it, "Wo is me that I am a stranger with the Asiatics, (Ἰσκιαι useey), and that I dwell in the tents of the Arabs." Calmet, who understands the Psalm as speaking of the state of the captives in Babylon and its provinces, says, "Meshec was apparently the father of the Mosquians, who dwelt in the mountains that separate Iberia from Armenia, and both from Colchis. These provinces were subjugated by Nebuchadnezzar; and it is evident from 2Kgs 17:23, 2Kgs 17:24; 2Kgs 18:11; 2Kgs 19:12, 2Kgs 19:13, that many of the Jews were held in captivity in those countries. As to Kedar, it extended into Arabia Petraea, and towards the Euphrates; and is the country afterwards known as the country of the Saracens."

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PSALM 120: 6 My soul has had her dwelling too long with him who hates peace.

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Verse 6

My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace - A restless, barbarous, warlike, and marauding people.

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PSALM 120: 7 I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.

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Verse 7

I am for peace - We love to be quiet and peaceable; but they are continually engaged in excursions of rapine and plunder. It is evident that the psalmist refers to a people like the Scenitae or wandering Arabs, who live constantly in tents, and subsist by robbery; plundering and carrying away all that they can seize. The poor captives wished them to cultivate the arts of peace, and live quietly; but they would hear of nothing but their old manner of life.