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PILGRIM IN PSALM 121

GOD-TALK FOR A DISILLUSIONED PILGRIM IN PSALM 121

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In the post-exilic period, a collection of psalms generally known as the Psalms of Ascent was composed.¹ One of the psalms within this group—Psalm 121—contains a set of metaphors that try to describe the Divine.² In this psalm an interplay between “voices” can be heard that presents themes such as divine inscrutability, dissolving metaphors, and the threats of real life.

PSALM 121

Before entering into exegetical considerations, a translation is in order.

1. I lift my eyes to the mountains:
 From where will my help come?
2. My help comes from YHWH
 who created heaven and earth.
3. He will not allow your foot to totter,
 your guardian will not slumber.
4. Behold, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers
 nor sleeps.

¹ Psalms 120–134; they are dated to the post-exilic period due to themes and language; see e.g. L.D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents: (Psalms 120–134), their Place in Israelite History and Religion* (SBLDS, 148; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996). I see no reason to deviate from this position.

² There exists an abundance of literature on this topic; see e.g. M.C.A. Korpel, *A Rîft in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (UBL, 8; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1990), 58–87; M. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO, 169; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 9–37; W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); F.E. Deist, *The Material Culture of the Bible: An Introduction* (The Biblical Seminar, 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); D. H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities. Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); W.P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), esp. p. 4.

5. YHWH is your guardian,
YHWH is your shadow at your right side.
6. The sun will not strike you by day,
or the moon by night.
7. YHWH will guard you from all evil,
He will guard your soul.
8. YHWH will guard your going out and your coming in
from now until eternity.

Orientation and Problems

Psalm 121 belongs to the collection of the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134). The Hebrew phrase **שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת** is difficult to translate exactly. Sometimes it is rendered as “hymns of the stairs,” based on an interpretation that the various hymns in this collection were sung while ascending and descending the stairs of the Temple in Jerusalem.³ In view of the content of these hymns, a classification of “pilgrim songs” may be more suitable.⁴ These psalms can easily be understood as songs that reflect events on the journey to Jerusalem, and metaphorically of events in the journey through human life. As mentioned above, these psalms are dated to the post-exilic period, when the Temple in Jerusalem was the center out of which the new identity of an emergent Judaism was being constructed. In the Songs of Ascent, and therefore in Psalm 121, the voice of a pilgrim is heard. This ancient pilgrim is the “I”-character in the psalm; one who is on his way to Jerusalem, and one who throughout his life has experienced the perennial problems of humankind,⁵ especially the problem of YHWH’s inscrutability.⁶

In a preliminary reading, the psalm seems to have only one theme: the assurance of divine assistance. A closer look, however, reveals a problem. It seems that with v. 2, the psalm has reached its end, because the “I” provides an answer to the question raised in v. 1.⁷ If v. 2 is construed as an expression of faith by which the “I”

³ Already in the m. Mid. 2:5; Sukkah 5:4.

⁴ See J. Limburg, “Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners,” *Word & World* 5 (1985), 180–187.

⁵ See J.W. Bowker, *The Sense of God: Sociological, Anthropological and Psychological Approaches to the Origin of the Sense of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).

⁶ See, e.g., B. Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer: Zur Exegese und zum theologischen Verständnis von Psalm 121* (Biblich-Theologische Studien 35; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998); C.J.A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (Pretoria: Protea Bookhouse, 2005), 259–61.

⁷ Some scholars change עזרי in v. 2 into עזרך, “your help,” suggesting that it is already “the other voice” that gives an answer to the existential question from v. 1; most recently O. Loretz, *Die Psalmen*. Teil II (AOAT, 207/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 242; in the versiones antiquae no evidence for this change can be found. C. Westermann, *Ausgewählte Psalmen: Übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen:

identifies him/herself, then vv. 3–8 seem superfluous. In addition, starting in v. 3 there is a transition from “I” to “you.”⁸ These observations might lead some to the conclusion that two originally separate hymns were woven together, but this is not necessarily so. The reading of Psalm 121 that I advance in this article focuses on the transition from “I” to “you” in v. 3, on how the two parts of the psalm can be connected conceptually and pays particular attention to the composition of the hymn and to the nature of the imaginary language in it.

Style and Composition

Psalm 121 is a sonorous, rich, and artful composition.⁹ An ongoing repetition of words and sounds can be detected. Verse 1b, for instance, shows alliterations with א and ע (עֵינַי, “my eyes,” “rhymes” with עֵזְרִי, “my help”; see אָשָׂא, “I lift,” and אֶל־הַרְרִים, “to the mountains”). Within vv. 3–8, the root שמר appears six times.

The composition of Psalm 121 can be approached from different perspectives. Some scholars argue for a *form-critical* division, which leads to a composition of two uneven parts¹⁰:

- vv. 1b–2 → dialogue with the self in need
- vv. 3–8 → wishes of blessing

A more poetic approach, however, construes Psalm 121 as a hymn regularly composed of two stanzas further divided into two strophes each:

Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1984), 202, and K.A. Plank, “Ascent to Darker Hills: Psalm 121 and its Poetic Revision,” *Literature & Theology* 11 (1997), 152–67 (153–54), argue—without emendation—that the answer in v. 2 is given by “the other voice.”

⁸ See e.g. H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen* 2. Teilband Psalmen 64-150 (BKAT, XV/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 41972), 835; Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 152; Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer*, 11, 16–17; H.-F. Richter, “Von den Bergen kommt meine Hilfe: Zu Psalm 121,” *ZAW* 116 (2004), 406–08. Willis, “Attempt to Decipher,” does not accept a dialogue here, but construes a contrast—opposite to the threat of the “other” deities, stands the help from YHWH; see also J.T. Willis, “Psalm 121 as a Wisdom Psalm,” *HAR* 11 (1987), 435–51.

⁹ See for details: P. van der Lugt, *Strofische structuren in de bijbels-hebreeuwse poëzie* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 401–02; H.W.M. van Grol, “De exegeet als restaurateur en interpreter. Een verhandeling over de Bijbelse poëzie met Ps. 121 als exempel,” *Bijdragen* 44 (1983), 234–61; A.R. Ceresko, “Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?” *Biblica* 70 (1989), 496–500; P. Auffret, *Merveilles à nos yeux: études structurelle de vingt psaumes dont celui de 1Ch 16,8-36* (BZAW 235, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 182–90; Vos, *Theopoetry*, 253–55.

¹⁰ M.J. Dahood, *Psalms III 101-150* (AB, New York: Doubleday, 1970), 199–202; K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 478; Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 40–41; J.M. Brinkman, *Psalmen IV* (Tekst & Toelichting; Kampen: Kok, 2001), 86–88.

- Stanza I: vv. 1b–4 → vv. 1b–2 and vv. 3–4
- Stanza II: vv. 5–8 → vv. 5–6 and vv. 7–8

This second division is to be preferred over the more interpretative form-critical division, because the poetic approach is based on the attributes of the text. This approach to the text construes vv. 1b–4 as one coherent unit. This position concerning vv. 1b–4 requires, however, an explanation, since it implies a paradox. It is clear that the “wishes of blessing” in vv. 3–4 are not of the same kind as the “wishes of blessing” in vv. 5–8, 11. The verbal forms in the former express negated acts: “He will not allow your foot to totter”; “God neither slumbers *nor* sleeps.” The verbal forms in vv. 5–6, however, describe an enduring situation: “YHWH is your guardian.” Verses 7–8 once again contain verbal forms that express actions: “YHWH will keep you from all evil.” Moreover, as noted above, the “I” from vv. 1b–2 changes from v. 3 onward into a “you.” Apparently, the “I” is addressed by another person. This transition between “I” and “you” bears on the issue of whether the “I” receives an answer to the question “From whence will my help come?”

Thus the poetic approach to Psalm 121 mentioned above leads to the following delineation of this text:¹²

Stanza I	strophe A	1b–2	Question:	“From where will my help come?”
	strophe B	3–4	Answer:	What God does not do
Stanza II	strophe C	5–6	Wish of blessing:	Who God is in general
	strophe D	7–8	Wish of blessing:	Who God is for the “I”

“From where will my help come?”

The character of the pilgrim’s need is unknown. This absence of clarity is at the same time the power of this psalm—every time this hymn is repeated, the person praying may identify him/herself with the agony expressed in the opening question. “The mountains” may be interpreted in, at least, two different ways.¹³ As per the worldview of the ancient Near East, mountains in the Hebrew Bible are often seen as the dwelling place of the Divine. The expression “lift the eyes” can be seen as referring to a praying gesture (see Ps. 123:1: “I lift my eyes up to You, the one who dwells in heaven”).¹⁴ In this interpretation, the mountains in Ps.

¹¹ See also Vos, *Theopoetry*, 256.

¹² See also Van der Lugt, *Strofische Structuren*, 401–02; Van Grol, “Exegeet als restaurateur en interpreter”; Ceresko, “Psalm 121,” 496–500; Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer*.

¹³ See also Vos, *Theopoetry*, 255–56.

¹⁴ See, e.g., O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte*

121:1 do not symbolize a threat, rather, they are the locus from which the pilgrim expects help. This view assumes a close parallel between verse 1a and 1b: the lifting of the eyes to the divine abode is a gesture accompanying a prayer that deals with the question “From whence will my help come?” This approach fits with the more general idea in the Hebrew Bible that mountains are protecting pillars of creation.

There exists, however, yet another interpretation. The mountainous areas in ancient Israel were scarcely populated. In combination with the absence of roads or clear passage ways, these areas were seen as forlorn and desolate regions. They are a haven for birds of prey and other wild animals, but a dangerous place for humans.¹⁵ This implies that “the mountains” could symbolize the threats that a pilgrim had to endure during his journey. Against these threats humans are powerless.¹⁶ Following this view, the mountains are symbols of doom. Although this interpretation distorts the assumption mentioned above of the parallelism between verse 1a and 1b, it opens the possibility of another parallel with the language in the second stanza where it says that YHWH guards against all sorts of evil. This connection would underscore mention of the mountains in v. 1 as a symbol of threat, as will be made clear in the following sections.

The noun עֲזָרָה, “help,” occurs some 80 times in the HB. In most cases it refers to a variety of forms of military aid. The significance “personal help”—that is, of a non-military character—occurs in texts conveying divine assurance in the HB. In these cases, God is seen as helper of the *personae miserae* such as the poor (Ps. 72:12) or the fatherless (Ps. 10:14). God’s help is expected also in times of personal despair and anxiety (Ps. 86:17). The character of divine help differs among situations.¹⁷

It seems, as noted above, that with v. 2, the psalm has reached its end. The “T” gives an answer to the question raised. When v. 2 is construed as an expression of faith with which the “T” identifies,

Testament (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 31984), 297; M.D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150): Studies in the Psalter, IV* (JSOTSup, 258; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 1998, 41.

¹⁵ This image is reflected in texts like Isa. 18:7, Jer. 50:6, and Ezek. 7:16.

¹⁶ Thus: Seybold, *Psalmen*, 478; K.A. Plank, “Ascent to Darker Hills,” 152–67; L.P. Marlé, “Psalm 121: Yahweh’s Protection against Mythological Powers?” *OTE* 19 (2006), 712–22. Ceresko, “Psalm 121,” 501–03, construes “the mountains” in a similar way, but assumes them to be a threat for warriors. J.T. Willis, “An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b,” *CBQ* 52 (1990), 241–51; Crow, *Songs of Ascents*, 40; H.-F. Richter, “Von den Bergen kommt keine Hilfe: zu Psalm 121,” *ZAW* 116 (2004), 406–08, go one step further by seeing them as references to the cultic sanctuaries on mountain tops of deities other than YHWH.

¹⁷ See Korpel, *Rift in the Clouds*, 311–13.

then vv. 3–8 seem superfluous. Yet the transition from “I” to “you” in v. 3 makes a different reading of v. 2 possible. In my view, v. 2 should be construed as an expression of despair and disillusion.

The “I” knows—either from tradition or from personal experience—that YHWH can be worshipped as the creator of heaven and earth. It can be assumed that prior to the situation expressed in this hymn, the speaker was able to connect the story of his life with the traditional story of God.¹⁸ In Israel’s theological reflection on creation, the latter is closely associated with governance (e.g., Deutero-Isaiah). In other words, “creation” does not exclusively refer to a divine action at the beginning of time, but mostly to God’s creative acts in history.¹⁹ The main line of thought in creation theology is not a belief in creation *ex nihilo*, but in a creation *contra nihilum*. When God acts against the powers of threat and darkness, Israel recognizes her creating liberator.²⁰

Therefore, Psalm 121 could be read in the following way: as a result of threat and despair, the traditional faith has faded away behind the horizon. The traditional expression of faith, and trust in God’s creative power has become a fossilized mantra. The liminal experience in the mountainous area has challenged the speaker’s traditional belief.²¹ The vivid image of God as acting creator turned into a solid unchangeable image that tried to contain the uncontainable. The “I” is now turned into a disillusioned pilgrim. The story of his life is diametrically opposed to the traditional belief system of a sustaining Creator.²² The “I” is in need of an “other” to help him or her cope with reality and disillusion. What then is the image of God that the other voice offers? This question will be discussed in the next three sections.

What God does not do

The second strophe contains some utterances concerning YHWH. The section can be construed as a general God-talk. In that case, these expressions convey generally accepted ideas about God, i.e. this is how YHWH always acts. They can, however, also be seen as the “other’s” address to the “I” using events from the life story of the “I.” If so, the language in this part of the psalm does not refer

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, would call this “core testimony.”

¹⁹ Thus: Kraus, *Psalmen 2.*, 836; Wilmes, *Jahwe—ein schlummernder Beschützer*, 14–15.

²⁰ See also Ps. 124:8.

²¹ See the essays in M. Junker-Kenny, P. Kenny (eds), *Memory, Narrativity, Self and the Challenge to Think God: The Reception within Theology of the Recent Work of Paul Ricœur* (Religion, Geschichte, Gesellschaft 17; Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2004).

²² Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 478, labels the “I” as a “Verunglückter”; see also Brinkman, *Psalmen IV*, 87; Richter, “Von den Bergen kommt keine Hilfe”.

to eternal divine attributes, but should be seen as a personalized and contextual testimony.

The expression “He will not allow your foot to totter” has a parallel in Ps. 66:9. This expression provides assurance that God sustains certain people by not letting them totter. The collocation of the words translated as “slumber” and “sleep” refers to the ancient Near Eastern concept of divine sleep. It was generally supposed that the gods rested on occasion. Elijah mocks this concept in his competition with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:27). Some scholars have read Ps 121:4 against the background of the mythical idea of dying and rising gods, gods as powers that die and rise with the agricultural seasons. This is a thought provoking idea, but the language used in Ps. 121:4 excludes such an interpretation.²³ The “other” says to the “I” that YHWH can be approached at all times.

Verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 121 have a parallel structure to one another. Verse 3 ends with “your guardian” while v. 4 has the phrase “the guardian of Israel” at the end. This parallelism indicates that the phrases refer to each other and are similar in meaning. There is a connection between the individual and the community; God is of relevance for the individual “I,” and also for the people in its entirety. The divine care for the people as a whole, does not exclude attention to the individual.

God is characterized as the guardian of Israel, both of the entire people and of the individual. The Hebrew root שמר appears six times in Psalm 121. It occurs over 400 times in the HB with a basic meaning “to exercise great care.”²⁴ In the HB, both YHWH and humans are the subject of this care. Humans have to care for the Torah. The Sabbath also has to be kept by them. The verb can also be used to denote the keeping of cattle (Gen. 30:31) or the careful tilling of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). The HB gives testimony of divine care for land, peoples, and individuals.

Who God is in general

The theme of divine care determines the contents of the third strophe too, albeit in two different ways. “YHWH is your shadow at your right-hand.” The term צל, “shadow” is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, it communicates care and protection; a shadow protects against the heat of the day (e.g. Job 7:2). The expression “to live under the shadow of one’s roof” connotes that guests are protected (e.g. Gen. 19:8). In all these cases צל, “shadow,” actually

²³ As has been demonstrated by Kraus, *Psalmen 2.*, 836; M. Weippert, *Jahwe und die anderen Götter: Studien zur Religionsgeschichte des antiken Israels in ihrem syrisch-palästinensischen Kontext* (FAT, 18; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 99–107; Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer*, 61–62; T.N.D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East* (ConBOT, 50; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001).

²⁴ Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer*, 15.

means “shelter.” On the other hand, shadow carry negative metaphoric connotations; for example, human life passes by “like a shadow.”²⁵ In Psalm 121, לַיִל has a positive significance.²⁶

In v. 5 the reference to sun and moon is a merism.²⁷ By referring to these two extremes, the whole circle of day and night is indicated. This merism parallels the expression of faith that YHWH neither slumbers nor sleeps. The image that God protects against the torrid and scorching heat of the sun is immediately clear. The implied “striking” of the moon most likely refers to the idea present in many cultures that exposure to the light of the full moon could lead to all sorts of illnesses.²⁸

God in Relation to the Individual ‘I’

The final strophe appropriates all these ideas to the life of the individual. The blessing for the “I” can be summarized in the words “YHWH will keep you from all evil.” The final clause of the psalm contains an interesting verb order when it says “YHWH will guard your *going out* and your *coming in*.” The Old Greek translation already inverted the order of the verbs.²⁹ The collocation of the two verbs for “going out” and “coming in” in this order in the HB has more than one possible meaning. For instance, in 1 Sam. 29:6, it has military undertones³⁰; the soldier goes out to battle and later returns home. In other texts, however, the sequence refers to the daily routine of Israelite farmers going out to the field and coming into their homes for the evening.³¹ A third possibility, given the

²⁵ See the complaints on the transitory character of human life in the HB, e.g. Job 8:9; 14:2.

²⁶ See also Kraus, *Psalmen* 2., 836; Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, 477, renders לַיִל in parallelism with Acc. *šillu* as “Schutz.”

²⁷ On this figure of speech, see: A. M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 71 (1952), 11–18; H. A. Brongers, “Merismus, Synekdoche und Hendiadys in der Bibel-Hebraischen Sprache,” *כה* 1940–1965 (OtSt, 14; Leiden: Brill, 1965), 100–114; J. Krašovec, *Der Merismus im Biblisch-Hebräischen und Nordwestsemitischen* (BibOr, 33; Roma: Biblical Institute Press 1977; L.L. Besserman, “Some Modern English Merisms,” *American Speech* 49 (1974), 302–03.

²⁸ See, e.g., B. Berman, “Fooled by the Full Moon,” *Discover* 24 (2003), 130.

²⁹ LXX: κύριος φυλάξει τὴν εἴσοδόν σου καὶ τὴν ἔξοδόν σου; Vulg.: *Dominus custodiat introitum tuum et exitum tuum*. This order is also attested in a variety of modern translations and hymnic presentations of Psalm 121.

³⁰ See Ceresko, “Psalm 121,” 503; A. van der Lingen, “*BW*–*YS*” (“To Go Out and To Come in”) as a Military Term,” *VT* 42 (1992), 59–66.

³¹ Thus: W. Schottroff, *Der altisraelitische Fluchspruch* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 30; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1969), 60–61; Crow, *Songs of Ascent*, 39. R. Frankena, “Some Remarks on a New Approach to Hebrew,” in M.S.H.G. Heerma van Voss e.a. (eds), *Travels in the World of the Old Testament: Studies Presented to Prof. M.A. Beek on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 16; Assen: Van Gorcum 1974), 47, referred to a parallel with

context here, is that it refers to the pilgrim's leaving and returning.³² In my view, Ps. 121:8 primarily refers to the daily routine of the farmer. But in a more metaphorical reading, however, the line may be interpreted as a reference to pilgrimage, or even to human life in its entirety.³³

SUMMING UP

The interpretation of the mountains as images of threat in v. 1, together with the construction of the creed in v. 2 as a metaphor turned obsolete and the presence of a variety of voices in the hymn, yield a reading of Psalm 121 that clarifies the transition from "I" to "you" in v. 3. Even, when people are disillusioned by the threats of life, imaginary language remains a feature to communicate on what they thought to be the ultimate ground of being. The disillusioned pilgrim of Psalm 121, for whom the traditional saying "My help comes from YHWH who created heaven and earth" apparently had become an empty phrase, is helped when addressed with other images. The pilgrim's story becomes thus a lesson for readers of the Psalms.

Akkadian: *ina erēbiki u waški*, "at your going in and going out," *ARM X* 141, 22–23.

³² Thus Kraus, *Psalmen* 2., 839.

³³ Limburg, "Psalm 121"; Wilmes, *Jahwe – ein schlummernder Beschützer*, 68–69.

