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BOB BECKING, GOD-TALK FOR A DISILLUSIONED 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. One of the psalms within this group—Psalm 121—contains a set of metaphors that try to describe the Divine. 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.

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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.

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 שיר למטה 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. In view of the content of these hymns, a classification of “pilgrim songs” may be more suitable. 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, especially the problem of YHWH’s inscrutability.

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. If v. 2 is construed as an expression of faith by which the “I”

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3 Already in the m. Mid. 2:5; Sukkah 5:4.
7 Some scholars change יִזְכֶּר in v. 2 into יִדְעָת, “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 antique 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.” 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. An ongoing repetition of words and sounds can be detected. Verse 1b, for instance, shows alliterations with נ and רו, “my eyes,” “rhymes” with יי, “my help”; see נ, “I lift,” and מ, “to the mountains”). Within vv. 3–8, the root פפ 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 parts:

- 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:

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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.


- Stanza I: vv. 1b–4 \(\rightarrow\) vv. 1b–2 and vv. 3–4
- Stanza II: vv. 5–8 \(\rightarrow\) 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. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza I</th>
<th>Strophe A</th>
<th>1b–2</th>
<th>Question:</th>
<th>“From where will my help come?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strophe B</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>Answer:</td>
<td>What God does not do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanza II</td>
<td>Strophe C</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>Wish of blessing:</td>
<td>Who God is in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strophe D</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>Wish of blessing:</td>
<td>Who God is for the “I”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“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.

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11 See also Vos, *Theopoetry*, 256.
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. This implies that “the mountains” could symbolize the threats that a pilgrim had to endure during his journey. Against these threats humans are powerless. Following this view, the mountains are symbols of doom. Although this interpretation distorts the assumption mentioned above of the parallelism between 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 רַע, “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 persona 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.

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

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

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\(^{18}\) Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, would call this “core testimony.”


\(^{20}\) 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 Ricoeur* (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. 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 שֵׁם appears six times in Psalm 121. It occurs over 400 times in the HB with a basic meaning “to exercise great care.” 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 הנע, “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 הנע, “shadow,” actually

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

In v. 5 the reference to sun and moon is a merism. By referring to these two extremes, the whole circle of day and night is indicated. This merism parallels the expression of faith that יְהֹוָּה 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.

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 “יְהֹוָּה will keep you from all evil.” The final clause of the psalm contains an interesting verb order when it says “יְהֹוָּה will guard your going out and your coming in.” The Old Greek translation already inverted the order of the verbs. 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 undertones; 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. 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 יְהֹוָּה in parallelism with Acc. סילה as “Schutz.”
29 LXX: κύριος φυλάξει τήν εὐπορίαν σου καὶ τήν ἕξοδον σου; Vulg.: Dominus custodiat intrinsum tuum et exitum tuum. This order is also attested in a variety of modern translations and hymnic presentations of Psalm 121.
context here, is that it refers do the pilgrim’s leaving and returning.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{32} Thus Kraus, \textit{Psalmen 2.}, 839.
