



The assurance that Yahweh can and will keep his own: An exegesis of Psalm 121:1–8



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Psalm 121 is one of the most popular and the most read psalm. That is the reason why the New Testament quotes and alludes to the book of the psalm more than any other book of the Bible. Christians all over the world see the book of psalm as the most prestigious book of the Old Testament. Luther sees the book as the 'little Bible' in the Bible. It is not only the most read it is the memorised book of the Bible. Psalm 121 represents the most trusted chapter of the psalm. The main purpose of this article is to do an exegesis of Psalm 121 with the hope that readers will find hope and trust in Yahweh. Psalm 121 has an emphasis on hope and protection by Yahweh. A look at the outline of the entire chapter shows that hope and security is the theme: Assistance from Yahweh is the theme of verses 1–2, the gazing into the mountain is where protection from Yahweh is vs 1, Yahweh's constant watchful Eyes (3–4), Yahweh as the protective shade (5–6) and Yahweh as the Protector for all Lives way (7–8). The exegesis of these various sections in Psalm 121 will be carried out with the hope that any reader who believes it or not will find hope, comfort and security.

Keywords: assurance; Yahweh; Psalm 121; hope; power of Yahweh.

Introduction

The majority of scholars accept Psalm 121 as one of 'unbridled assurance' and 'a perfect expression of trust in Yahweh' (Segal 2013:592), 'a calm' and 'comforting assurance of unshakable trust' in Yahweh (Weiser 1998:745). Instead of expressing 'the bold soaring of man's faith in the high places', the author expresses itself in a peaceful and straightforward language (Weiser 1998:745). That is probably why this psalm and Psalm 23 is one of the most popular, loved and the most read books of the psalm (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:525; Weiser 1998:45).

Despite the general popularity of the psalm in practice, scholars still have problems concerning the place of origin and the unity of the text. As the text does not mention a particular place of origin, there are some questions about the unity of the text and their literary-critical problems, especially in verses 4 and 7 (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:316). Hossfeld and Zenger summarise various scholars' opinions: the traveller's blessing when starting the pilgrimage, a dialogue on arrival in Jerusalem, dialogue from liturgical farewell from Jerusalem, internal dialogue of an individual, prayer monologue of the congregation, psalm for wisdom school and a form of the ancient apostrophe (vol. 3, 2011:317–320). The structure of the Psalm 121 is 1–2, 3–4, 5–6 and 7–8 (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:320). While all the superscriptions of all the psalm in the class of 'ascent' (Psalm 120–134) have שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, Psalm 121 has שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת.

This article aims to contribute to the existing knowledge about Psalm 121 by doing a critical exegesis and to make clearer the actual message of encouragement for comfort, security, peace, the message of unfailing hope and trust in Yahweh, which is the theme of this chapter. Perhaps, readers in Africa may learn to trust in Yahweh as the real and unfailing hope, especially in Nigeria where travellers are being kidnapped, killed and robbed every blessed day.

Help from Yahweh (1–2)

The opening question in Psalm 121, 'From where?', tries to drive home the assurance and the psalm implies a location whom, as if the one (speaker), faces danger and suddenly recalls that 'his true salvation is not to be seen' (Segal 2013:592). However, the following 'three factors indicate an undertone of doubt' (Segal 2013:592). Firstly, the opening question of concern and the slightly disconnected response hint that although there is immediate danger, the salvation is not very obvious, Secondly, the 'you' in verses 3–8 shows that there are difficulties. Verses 1 and 2 use first person and do not seem to relate to any audience and its focus is on the

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term עזר 'help'. The following six verses, שומר 'guard' (mentioned repeatedly six times) replaces 'help' and all are addressed to אתה 'you' (in singular). One could ask who is so addressed? Perhaps the original speaker is speaking to himself or is addressed by another. They both reflect a need for reassurance (Segal 2013:593). Thirdly, the speaker addresses somebody else:

There are linguists and psychologists who contend that a switch to the use of the second person often indicates an underlying lack of confidence on the part of a speaker. Reassuring an outside party is often a way for a speaker to reassure himself in light of doubt. (p. 593)

The promised blessings upon the traveller might seem simply optimistic; the kind of easy assurance one sometimes gives to anxious children. One should not, however, view the blessing as a guarantee that everything will go well on the journey. It is a blessing, that is, a wish uttered the following verses exposed the character of Yahweh, the creator God (vv. 3–8). In verses 3–4, Yahweh is referred to only by a pronoun. Yahweh is credited with three characteristics: (1) Yahweh protects the path of the pilgrims, (2) Yahweh is vigilant and does not sleep and (3) Yahweh is endlessly awake and attentive (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).

These three statements that are closely in parallel fill out the content of the term 'help'. God is our refuge and strength (Ps 46:1). Yahweh is the keeper, the one who guards, protects, preserves and keeps safe. Thus in verse 4, the question of verse 1 is fully answered (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526). It is conventional to take the affirmation of this psalmist at face value: God is endlessly vigilant. Such an affirmation is a source of great assurance. In lived reality, however, alongside these words might be set in Isaiah 51:9, 17, which summon Yahweh to vigilance and action; the reason for the summons may be argued that Yahweh is not endlessly awake and vigilant (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).

In the dramatic presentation of Israel's faith, Yahweh is a God who may indeed sleep and who requires attentiveness to be awakened. The statement of Isaiah 51 does not readily conform to conventional faith, but it is a candid recognition that Yahweh cannot always be credited with attentive care (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:527).

There have been different speculations by scholars about the mountain referred to in Psalm 121. We will discuss the various concepts of scholars on the mountain in Psalm 121.

Mountain in Psalm 121

Verse 1 can have different meanings. 'The hills' could refer to a mountain sanctuary, presumably Mount Zion, which would mean that the psalmist looks at the hills of Zion and

wonders aloud whether the God that is dwelling there will truly be a saving God. Verses 3–8 are a positive response. Another possibility, less likely, is that the mountains are a hideout for criminals who attack travellers (Clifford 2003:221–222). The thought raises fear in a traveller embarking on a journey. 'To lift up one's eyes' can mean seeing something at a great distance (Is 40:26; 49:18; Jr 13:20).

Looking at the mountainous land from afar, the psalmist is full of ardent longing yet fearful of the dangerous journey. An anxious question arises: From where will protection come? The psalmist hope, stated in verses 2 ('my help'), has the firmest of all bases – the Lord is the creator of the universe. No place in the world that does not belong to the Lord (Clifford 2003:222).

DeClaissé-Walford, explaining verses 1–2, said that in its canonical position in the Songs of Ascents, verse 1's *mountain* seems most likely to be Zion, the mountain of Jerusalem. Mountains and high places were commonly associated with deities. The OT text makes numerous references to high places. We may suggest that the Psalm singers in verses 1 and 2 ask a rhetorical question while surveying the landscape during the journey to Jerusalem: 'from which mountain does my help come?' The answer is obvious, 'the mountain of the Lord'. The singer identifies the Lord as my help (עזר) in verses 1 and 2.

In verses 1–2b, the overall understanding of the psalm is interpreted. Here scholars' positions are widely divergent. Quite often, the 'mountains' are interpreted as a reference to the difficulties and dangers accompanying a pilgrim to Jerusalem through the Palestinian hill country. Verse 1 would then be a very concrete expression of concern and anxiety, either before or at the beginning of the pilgrimage or during the journey itself; in that case, verse 1c is to be read as a genuine question. This is the sense in which the psalm is interpreted. For example, Weiser (1998:745) associates the psalm with the pilgrim's farewell to his home.

His face turned to the hills, on his lips the anxious question, 'Whence shall my help come?' The speaker of verse 1 stands ready to take his leave in the absence of any more exact designation. This can scarcely refer to the hill around Jerusalem. Perhaps, one would rather think of the mountains that the pilgrim would have to travel that are full of gorges, ravens, wild beasts and robbers. These characteristics of the mountain makes his departure difficult and fearful because of robbers (Hossfeld & Zeng 2011:321).

According to the answer given in Psalm 121 verse 2, it is seen as a confession of trust resting on the protection of Yahweh. Martin Rose correctly objects to this understanding of the mountains as places of particular danger that one should not

confuse the mountainous regions of Israel–Palestine with the Alps:

Certainly, at the time of the psalmist, any journey ran the risk of considerable danger, but I do not see any arguments that can explain why the psalmist has rightly chosen the mountains to represent them since they were not particularly dangerous. On the contrary, one of the main routes of communication in Israel/Judah followed more or less along the divide, the crest of the mountains of Ephraim and Judah. No one attempted to avoid the mountains altogether. (Batto 1987:155)

In our view, verse 1 is not referring to the ‘mountain world’ of Palestine–Israel as a place of real danger. Could not ‘the mountains’ have a metaphorical significance that evokes the helplessness and anxiety of human existence? Seybold (2003:215–216) suggested that the psalmist first expresses the fact that he turns his ‘eyes’ upward to the ‘mountains’ (v. 1). He comes up against the mountain wall, which limits his view. He feels small and in need of help ... that is the experience of alienation, of danger, of constriction that produces anxieties. Is there any help? This fearful person recalls his confession of faith (v. 2). It affirms that genuine help comes not from the world of experience but from beyond this world, from the creator of this world.

He lifts his gaze higher and transcends both the world-horizon and his feelings of fear and believes in his relationship to the master of the mountains, the cosmos, the earth and humanity. Whence? From there! The gaze that seeks in the heights and in the highest places for help and ricochets off the mountain wall now shoots into infinity, where it does not lose itself, but instead finds security and believes that something ‘comes from there [משם]’. This seeking gaze encounters something coming towards it from the same direction: the gaze of the eternal watcher (Morgenstern 1939:312).

One could thus in verses 1–2 see the individual, in fact, as the ‘point within the enclosed world’ who seeks the helping God. Although this is a possible perspective from which to interpret the psalm, the designation ‘the mountains’ seems to suggest that we ought to seek a more concrete point of reference there. In addition, it is by no means certain that the expression ‘lift up the eyes’ signals anxiety so much as longing and trust; moreover, the preposition *אל* means ‘to, towards’, and not ‘upwards’. A typographical meaning is present when ‘the mountains’ is taken as a designation for Israel and verse 1 is judged to be an expression of longing from a distance (more precisely: from exile) for ‘the homeland’. Franz Delitzsch understood the beginning of the psalm, which he explains as a prayer in or from exile: The mountains towards which the psalmist lifts his eyes are not just any mountains (cited in Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:322).

In Ezekiel ‘*הרי ישראל*’ Israel’s Mountain’ designate the homeland viewed from the flatlands of Mesopotamia. His longing gaze is directed towards the region of those mountains; they are his *kibla*, that is, the point towards which prayer is directed, as in Daniel 6:11). The (poet) looks up to the mountains (133:3; 87:1; 125:2) as he longingly asks:

whence will help come to me? He also gives the answers to this longing question that his help comes from Yahweh. Yahweh is enthroned behind and on these mountains, whose power, ready to help, extends to the utmost ends and corners of his creation and with (עם) whom there is help.

Yahweh has both the willingness and the power to help, so that help comes from nowhere other than from (מך) him alone. It has also been suggested that ‘the mountains’ should be understood as ‘mountains of God (Yahweh)’, that the confession in verse 2 should be read as a rejection of ‘other gods’ by the petitioner. But the ‘mountains’ can also designate ‘the mountains of Zion’, so that it should be interpreted as an emphatic confession of Yahweh as the God present on the ‘mountain of God’, Zion in Jerusalem.

The reading of verses 1–2 can be associated with a concrete topography, but it is also possible that it is a metaphorical statement (Allen 1983:151). Another direction of interpretation sees in ‘the mountains’ as a reference to Yahweh himself (cf. Dt 32:15; Ps 18:3, 32, 47, 92:16; 94:22; 95:1) and then understands verse 1 as an expression of trust, longing or joy. For some interpreters (Clifford 2003:221–222) ‘the mountains’ are then a real symbol of the power of Yahweh himself. Other interpreters regard the gaze upward to ‘the mountains’ as a turning to Yahweh as the powerful creator God dwelling ‘above the mountains’ in heaven.

Hossfeld and Zenger made some important observations for a correct understanding of the scene imagined in verses 1–2 as follows: as in most other Old Testament passages where it is attested, so also in Psalm 121 the expression *נשא עיניו* has the same meaning as the Akkadian *nascence*, ‘turn the eyes towards (with desire)’ (cf. Gn 39:7: Potiphar’s wife looks at Joseph; Ezk 18:6, 12; 23:27: Israel looks to idols; Jr 3:2: Israel looks to the sanctuaries on the heights).

Accordingly, lifting the eyes, in Psalm 121 as in Psalm 123, where the expression also begins with the psalm, means looking with longing towards the place where Yahweh is present as helping or gracious God. In the last psalm of the Pilgrim Psalter, Psalm 134, it is expressly said in verse 3 that the ‘creator of heaven and earth’ who is thus predicated in our psalm (v. 2) as a helper, exercises his beneficent power from Zion, ‘May Yahweh bless you from Zion, the creator of heaven and earth’ (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:322).

An alternative understanding of the mountains is that the reference is to the hilly location of Zion and the Temple. The remainder of the psalm is an answer to the question of verse 1 (vv. 2–8). The simple and direct answer in verse 2 is that Yahweh is the single and necessary source of help who will give protection. The primary qualifier for the name Yahweh is that this is the creator God, the one who has power and purpose enough to create all that is (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526). As the creator of ‘heaven and earth’, moreover, Yahweh is surely sovereign over ‘the hills’, even they seem to be full of threat. The threat is no match for the

creator, who is full of power and glory (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).

According to Allen, the exegetical value of הרים 'mountain' has been differently assessed according to the interpretation of the psalm as a whole. Those who relate the mountains to a journey implied in verses 3, 6, and 8, often interpreted negatively as a source of danger referring to the mountains around Jerusalem or mountains on the journey from Jerusalem to the pilgrim's home.

Hermann Gunkel understood the word (mountain) in a negative cultic sense: הרים refers to mountain sanctuaries dedicated to different gods, in contrast to the true God of verse 2 (cited in Allen 1983:151).

Others gave a positive value to the term and interpreted it as heavenly heights. Eissfeldt related it implicitly to heaven, where God is enthroned above the mountains. Dahood sees it as a divine title of Yahweh analogous to צור 'rock' (cited in Allen 1983:151). Briggs saw it as a positive cultic reference to the mountains of Jerusalem. Habel discovered contextual support for this interpretation in the cultic formulation closely associated with Jerusalem, which appears in verse 2b, so that verses 1–2 are consistent in their use of traditional Zion language. Then הרים refers to the cosmic mountain(s) on which Yahweh dwells and the reference to the sanctuary of Zion as the source of divine help (cited Allen 1983:151).

A key factor in determining the meaning of the relation of the two colas of the line. The erroneous interpretation of מני 'from where' as a relative, encouraged a positive cultic interpretation of הרים. When it is constructed as introducing a direct question, as a contrast, tends to be seen between the colas, which force a negative connotation upon the term. But there is a third possibility, that verse 1b represents an indirect question. Comparison with Genesis 8:8; 27:21; Joshua 2:4; Judges 13:6 demonstrate the feasibility of this suggestion.

In our opinion, the mountains are usually associated with where gods reside. Verse 1 could be interpreted as 'Will I lift up my eyes to the mountains' which prompts him or her to remember that his or her help does not come from this mountain where other gods/deities dwell and are worshipped by their adherents.

Among the indigenous churches in Nigeria, like Cherubim and Seraf, Celestial Church of Christ and the Aladura churches generally, mountains are still considered as the abode of God. Mountains are considered as a place close to God, a place where one's prayer can be answered fast; where one can receive fast healing and protection. That is why most of these churches go to nearby mountains to pray and fast. Many go there to sleep with the hope that they will be delivered from bondage.

Yahweh's constantly watchful care (3–4)

'God is our refuge and strength' (Ps 46:1). Yahweh is the keeper, the one who guards, protects, preserves and keeps safe (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).

The solemn rhythmic tone of verses 3–8 marks the word as different from verse 2. Different, too, is the controlling metaphor of protecting someone on a journey. The promised protection is practical and down-to-earth (Clifford 2003:222). The divine guardian will not let the traveller's foot slip (v. 3a, NSRV: 'be moved'); a tired traveller could easily sprain an ankle and not be able to walk farther, forcing a companion to stop and find makeshift lodging. A long journey would be made lengthier and stopping for the night might be perilous: uncertain lodging, no street lighting and danger of brigands (Clifford 2003:222). To have faith in a God who never slumbered (v. 3b) was a challenge.

Two pairs of step words occur in verses 3–4, 'keep' and 'slumber', linking them tightly together. Verse 4 memorable inculcates trust: literally, 'look, he does not slumber, he does not sleep – the guardian of Israel!' 'Guardian of Israel' is the centre of the poem. 'Shade' (from the blazing sun) is a metaphor for protection; the Lord himself is protection (Clifford 2003:222–3327). The word Marduk means the shadow, that is, the protector of Babylon (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:329). Perhaps, this motif is borrowed by Israel from other Ancient Near Eastern concepts. The word shade or shadow is a proclamation of the power of the war god, Ninurta (Hossfeld & Zenger 2011) in other places the Psalms call the Lord to awake (Ps 7:6; 35; 23; 44; 23; 59; 4–5). The sleeping god is a literary motif that can be found in many texts in the ancient Near East and that makes Psalm 121, with its portrayal of the Lord who neither slumbers nor sleeps, stand in sharp contrast to these texts, which accused gods of sleeping and not paying attention to the crying one (Batto 1987:153–177; Burnett 2005:215–35).

The practical tone continues as the speaker promises that the Lord will protect him or her against the burning rays of the sun and the light of the moon. The moonlight was regarded as harmful. Night and day is a merism, a poetic device that expresses the totality by naming the opposite. Thus, the phrase 'night and day' means 'at all times'.

Verse 4 presents the response to verse 3; it is a strong affirmation that the Lord is never inattentive. The wording in the text shows a clear contrast to verse 3. Beginning with the emphatic particle 'indeed' (הנה), the construction expresses the truth (now it is the other negative לא with the imperfect tense): 'Indeed, he will not slumber' (א ינום).

A second verb is added, parallel to the first, to strengthen the point: 'and neither will he sleep' (ולא ישן). And the subject of these two verbs is placed in the second half of the verse, 'the protector of Israel'. Here it is the participle again, but now with a clarifying object that broadens the application from

'your protector' to the 'protector of Israel'. God is not like the pagan gods. He does not need to rest, eat or sleep; he is always there and always protecting (Ross 2016:617). In verse 4, the keyword of assurance, 'guard' (שומר), occurs six times in the eight lines of the poem. In these verses, we find the first of six appearances of the word guard (שומר), always used in reference to the Lord. While the Psalm-singer refers to the Lord as *my help*, the second voice refers to the Lord as *the one who guards* (DeClaissie-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:896).

It was pointed out that the word *Samar* in verse 5a occurs in the middle of the Psalms – an equal number of syllables comes before and after the word – and therefore suggests that the Lord's 'guarding' of the Psalm-singer is the central message of the Psalm (De Claissie-Walford et al. 2014:896). The verb root שמר means to 'protect, guard, watch over and take care of'. It is attested, with the same meaning, in many ancient Semitic languages: Amorite, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Punic, Old South Arabic and Old Hebrew. The word is rendered in several English translations as 'keep' (RSV, NRSV, NASB), but the word conveys a more active concept. The Lord does not just 'keep' the psalmist in the sense of providing a space for the psalmist. But the Lord 'guards, protects, watches over' the psalmist, fending off those who seek out the psalmist or who would do the psalmist harm (DeClaissie-Walford 2012:896–897).

Such trust as voiced in this psalm is at the centre of the life of faith. Trust in Yahweh is not some great abstraction but in fact has to do with God's attentive care for the fullness of the pilgrim person and the pilgrim community. It should be observed, moreover, that Psalm 121, in its trust in Yahweh, has rhetorical parallels to the familiar benediction of Number 6:24–26. When the priest assures that the 'Lord will bless and keep you', the keeping is the vigilant protection of Yahweh that is reflected in Psalm 121 (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:527).

The respondent declares that the Lord will neither slumber nor sleep (vv. 3–4). In other places in the book of Psalms, the Psalm-singer calls on the Lord to awaken (Ps 7:6; 35:23; 44:23; 59:4–5). The idea of 'sleeping deity' is a motif present in numerous texts in the OT and the ancient Near East. The words of Psalm 121, which states that God will never slumber, stand in sharp contrast to the other texts accusing God of sleeping and refuse to pay attention to the cries of the Psalm-singer (Batto 1987:153–157; Burnett 2005:215–235).

Yahweh as protective shade (5–6)

Verses 5–6 elaborate on the consistency and the extent of the divine protection, which the faithful can expect. The content of these verses indicates the concerns of the pilgrims, but the attention is given fully to the assurances that will set them at ease. This section begins with the subject clearly stated, the LORD; the name is then repeated in the second part to emphasise it further. The LORD, that is, Yahweh has been now expressly identified as the protector of Israel: 'the Lord

is your protector'. After this short first exclamation, the verse develops the idea of protection (Ross 2016:618).

In verse 5, the assurance of the Psalm-singer that the Lord is a shade can be seen (צל). There is a reference to the word ten times in the Psalter, as part of the phrase 'the shadow (צל) of your wings' and it reflects the protection of a mother bird to her chicks. Firstly, the blessed states that 'the Lord is your shade over your right hand'. The figure 'shade' (a metaphor) compares divine protection with shade to signify constant and complete coverage. Shade for the pilgrim would be a real and delightful image. By stating that the shade is 'over your right hand', the speaker means that the protection would be on all that the pilgrim does, whatever he puts his hand to (a metonymy of cause). In verse 5, the Psalm-singer is given an assurance that the Lord is a shade (צל) (Ross 2016:618).

In verses 6–7, further assurance was given to the Psalm-singer that they will not be harmed by the sun in the day and by the moon in the night because the Lord will protect the inmost being (life) of the psalmist from malicious things (*ra*).

This constant coverage would ensure that nothing would harm the pilgrim (v. 6). Here the word 'sun' and 'moon'¹ form the expressed subjects of the verb. But they are to be explained as figurative (metonymies of the subject), intending to convey what goes on under the sun and the moon; they also complement the merism expressed in 'day' and 'night', meaning all the time. God will protect the faithful from any harm that strikes (נכה, a common word in the military context, meaning 'to strike, smite, attack') in the daytime or in the night time. This too would comfort the pilgrims because the journey to the holy city often meant travelling for a day or two (DeClaissie-Walford 2012:897).

Some commentators still suggest that the psalmist believed that God would protect the pilgrim from sunstroke or from becoming moonstruck. But it is more likely that the line is referring to anything that happens during the night or the day, for example, the prophets says that the 'day' of the Lord will burn with fire as an oven; meaning the judgement that will occur on that day (see Mt 4:1). The Targum has, 'when the sun has dominion by day, the morning demons shall not strike you; nor the night demons when the moon has dominion by night' (Ross 2016:618).

Thus, in verse 4, the question of verse 1 is fully answered (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).

Yahweh as protector for all Life's Ways (7–8)

In verses 5–8, more statements are made concerning Yahweh; only here. Yahweh is explicitly named four times. For this

1. In Isaiah 49:10 and Jonah 4:8, the heat of the sun is a common human experience, especially in Africa. However, scholars are not aware of the dangers of the moon as the sun in ancient times. What is clear is that medical texts from Mesopotamia diagnose some diseases in association with the moon god (Hilber 2009:110). Both the moon god (Sin) and the sun god (Shamash) are also associated with the same diseases (Hilber 2009:110). In both Mesopotamia and Ugarit (1300 BCE), evil omens are associated with the red or yellow colour of the sunrise (Hilber 2009:111). It is unlikely that the psalmist will recognise the potency of these gods.

rhetorical unit, verse 5 reiterates the primary claim of verses 3–4: Yahweh is the ‘keeper’. Yahweh is like a shade tree to protect travellers from the heat of the sun. The poetic parallel of the moon is added in context, for one does not need to be protected from the moon (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526). If this parallelism is rather a poetic device, then the sun and moon may be regarded, as often interpreted, as demonic forces that are subjected to the rule of Yahweh. In Brueggemann and Bellinger’s judgement, such an interpretation is not necessary; it is easy enough to stay with the concrete dangers that are all around the pilgrims (2014:526).

From the specificity of sun and moon, verses 7–8 make a more general claim. Now Yahweh protects the traveller ‘from all evil’, from every possible threat. It is Yahweh who keeps one’s life safe, even in dangerous circumstances. Verse 8 continues a rhetorical pattern that looks like a benediction for travel. The traveller is safe during departure and arrival, and all along the way. This psalm voices simple, direct confidence in Yahweh. The term שָׁמַר ‘keep’ (along with ‘help’) governs the poetry and gives content to the name of Yahweh. The reoccurrence of the term ‘keep’ attests to the abiding, complete trustworthiness of the presence of Yahweh in every season of risk (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526–527).

Verse 7 broadens the horizon – may God offer protection from all evil and guard ‘your life’ (חַיִּים). The latter word is concretely the throat area where the signs of life (breathing, moisture) are most vivid; by metonymy, it symbolises life itself. Wisdom literature speaks of the necessity of guarding one’s soul (נַפְשׁ) (Clifford 2003:222–223). Here God does the guarding. In the last verse, God guards one’s comings and goings (one’s every move) and does so forever. Thus, God’s protection is offered at all times, in every place and in every step, one can take (Clifford 2003:223).

The remainder of the psalm is an answer to the question of verse 1 (vv. 2–8). The simple and direct answer in verse 2 is that Yahweh is the single and necessary source of help who will give protection. The primary qualifier for the name Yahweh is that this is the creator God, the one who has power and purpose enough to create all that is (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526). As the creator of ‘heaven and earth’, moreover, Yahweh is surely sovereign over ‘the hills’, even if they seem full of threat. The threat is no match for the creator, who is full of power and glory (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:526).²

It is the habit of most Nigerian churches, especially the indigenous churches, to inscribe either a portion or the entire Psalm 121 in a cloth on their doorposts or motor vehicles for protection, because they believe that if Psalm 121 or other psalms are inscribed or chanted repeatedly, God’s protection from witches and wizards is guaranteed (Adamo 2017:45–46). It is often used as a talisman for protection, for

2. In verse 2a the suffix presents a difficulty. In the light of the confident verses 3–8, verse 2 could be regarded as answering the question of verse 1, giving by another voice. Scholars such as Gunkel, Budde and Schmidt emended צִוְרוּ ‘your help’, as part of a conjectural reconstruction of dialogue in which verses 1 and 3, where רַגְלִי ‘my foot’ and שִׁמְרִי ‘my guardian’ was read and spoken by one voice and verses 2, 4, 5–8 by another (Allen 1983:15).

healing and success (Adamo 2017:46, 2015:9–112; Olusegun 2021:150). It is firmly believed that the recitation of Psalm 121 is the affirmation of African Christian faith in God as ancient Israel did in the wilderness (Adamo 2017:45). It is believed that the recitation and inscribing a portion or the whole of Psalm 121 guarantee miracle and success as it happened among the ancient Israelites in the wilderness (Adamo 2017:45–46).

Conclusion

The theme of the psalm is brought to a conclusion in the last two verses – the verb ‘protect’ (יִשְׁמַר) is used twice in verse 7 and once in verse 8. The precise translation of the last two verses is not certain, although their meaning is clear. Most English versions translate it in all three places as the simple imperfect tense expressing the future. That is certainly a legitimate translation, and in a psalm filled with expressions of confidence, it is plausible. There is no indication in the form of the verb or the syntax to indicate it should not be the simple imperfect (and there is no indication that it must be the simple imperfect). But if it is simple future, the interpretation would be that God will protect them from all evil (Ross 2016:619).

Such a promise would need to be explained in light of the constant difficulties of life. The word ‘evil’ (רָעָה; s.v. Ps 10:15) can refer to any kind of calamity or misfortune in life, anything that brings pain and distress to a person, including sin, of course. For the psalm to assure the pilgrim that God will protect him from ‘all evil’ will have to be harmonised with other passages that focus on the ‘evil’ that the psalmist had to endure – hence we have the lament psalms. But the other way to interpret the verse is to translate the verbs in verse 7 as jussives, expressing the concern in prayer, and leave verse 8 as imperfects, responding. It is a translator’s choice because the verb form would be the same for an imperfect and jussive. This means that verse 7 is the prayer or wish, and verse 8 is the reply – which would follow the pattern of the verses with verses 2, 4, 6 and 8 as replies. In either case, whether two statements of confidence or prayer and confidence, the point is that the Lord protects his people (Ross 2016:619).

In both verses, the holy name has been placed first for prominence in thought. In verse 7 the prayer (or if preferred, the promise) is for protection from ‘all evil’, any harm – sin, disaster or trouble. The parallel expression in the verse assures that the Lord will protect the pilgrim’s very life (נַפְשִׁי; s.v. Ps 11:5), now and always. The two halves express the whole idea that life is protected from all harm (Ross 2016:619–20). Then in verse 8 the priest, perhaps, responds with the assurance of the Lord’s protection, he uses two merisms. The first is ‘your going out and your coming in’; the two together refer to all activities in the daily course, especially going out on the pilgrimage and returning home and indicating all movements in-between (see Dt 28:16; 31:2). The second merism is ‘from now and forever’

(literally 'from now and unto perpetuity'; for עולם, s.v. Ps 61:5), which means 'from now on' – always (Ross 2016:620).

The preceding concern is easy to understand given the treacherous walking in those hills and valleys even today. It is a prayer that any pilgrim will appreciate. Such protection from slipping would require attention to be given every step of the way and so if God is to prevent it then he must always be attentive. The parallel request, then, is that God does not slumber. The image may have suggested itself as the pilgrim made camp, knowing that God would not sleep. But the idea of slumbering is a figure (an implied comparison) for lack of attention or indifference and not merely a reference to being asleep (Ross 2016:616). The subject of the verb is 'your protector' or 'your keeper' as it is often rendered (שמרך; s.v. Ps 12:7), referring to the Lord. Here the participle as a substantive stresses the idea of 'protecting' and all that it involves. The prayer, then, is that the divine protector is vigilant in his care.

As this word 'protect/keep' (שמר) is used six times in these eight verses it is the focus of the passage. God's protection of his people at times came through direct, divine intervention. For example, God's protection of his people can come through angels who were given charge over people lest they dash their foot on the way (Ps 91:11), or through unexpected supernatural events (Jdg 5:4). It can also come through the circumstances of life in which the Lord was clearly at work but remained hidden (Gn 12:10–20). God's protection of his people can manifest through the agency of other believers (leaders such as kings and priests who were to shepherd the people) who were the Lord's instruments for guiding and protecting the people (Ross 2016:617).

This promise of divine protection was so basic to the well-being of Israel that it was part of the priestly blessing given in the sanctuary, 'The Lord bless you and keep you ...' (Nm 6:22–27). This psalm about protection for the pilgrimages to the sanctuary may have been a meditation on that oracle and if the psalm was also used at the dismissal for the journey home, the words of the blessing would be fresh in their minds (Ross 2016:617).

Without a doubt, the psalm is about absolute trust in the power of Yahweh to protect not only during the pilgrimage journey but throughout the entire duration of that pilgrim. It does not matter in what situation this psalm was composed, what matters is the resounding assurance of the protection and guidance of Yahweh. This exegesis of Psalm 121 is indeed a message to its readers, particularly Africa and Africans who learn to trust Yahweh. As mentioned before an actual message to Nigeria and those who live in that country for trust in Yahweh who is the real hope for the country.

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