

## **"THE LORD WATCHES OVER YOU": A PILGRIMAGE READING OF PSALM 121**

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From ancient times to the modern era, life with God has been viewed as a pilgrimage. Songs, stories, and poems regularly speak about the trust, courage, and vigilance needed in that pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most exquisite of such songs is Psalm 121. As a psalm of trust, it counsels God's people to trust quietly in Him in all the vicissitudes of life. Through its careful artistry of antiphonal voices, and its movement through question, affirmation, and blessing, this psalm speaks of God who is both transcendent Creator and Keeper of the nation as well as imminent Watcher of each of His people. The result is that pilgrims of faith can receive strength and courage in the journey through an alien and hostile world to their destination in Zion.<sup>2</sup>

### A TRANSLATION

1 A Song of Ascents

I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

From where does my help come?

2 My help comes from Yahweh,  
Maker of heaven and earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course the classic in Christian literature is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hebrews 12:22-24.

- 3 He will not allow your foot to slip,  
Your Keeper will not slumber.
- 4 Indeed, He will never slumber,  
He will never sleep, the Keeper of Israel.
- 5 Yahweh is your Keeper,  
Yahweh is your shade on your right hand.
- 6 By day the sun will not harm you,  
Or the moon by night.
- 7 Yahweh will keep you from all harm,  
He will keep your life.
- 8 Yahweh will keep your going and your coming,  
From now until forever.

### BACKGROUND AND SETTING

#### SONGS OF PILGRIMAGE

The title of Psalm 121 reads **שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת**--"a song of ascents" (NIV). The psalm is the second in a collection of 15 psalms with essentially the same title.<sup>3</sup> Historically, this title has created a plethora of interpretations and approaches to this collection of psalms,<sup>4</sup> but recent scholarship has come to a general consensus that the title points to songs of pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup> According to this interpretation, these psalms, among others, were sung in the context of the great pilgrimage feasts in which the nation was called to Jerusalem three times a year.<sup>6</sup> The term **עֲלָה** is apparently related to the pilgrim's ascent of Mount Zion to Jerusalem for worship. However, it may also reflect the processional ascents to the temple by the pilgrims themselves in the final stage of their pilgrimage, or by the processional choirs who led the gathered pilgrims in worship and celebration (cf. 2 Sam. 6:12; 1 Kings 13:33; 2 Kings 23:2; Neh. 12:37; Ps. 42:4; Isa. 26:2; 30:29; Jer. 31:6; Mic. 4:2).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The title of Psalm 121 differs slightly from the other 14 in that it has the preposition **לְ** before **הַמַּעֲלוֹת**. This seems to be more stylistic than anything, since **לְ** can be used as a circumlocution for the expression of the genitive (E. Kautsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1910], 419-20, par. 129a-h). Leslie C. Allen suggests that this was the original title for the entire collection (*Psalms* 101-150, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1983], 219).

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of such interpretations, see the presentation in C. C. Keet, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents* (London: Mitre, 1969), 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 745.

<sup>6</sup> These feasts were the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring, the Feast of Weeks in the early summer, and the Feast of Ingathering (or Tabernacles) in the fall (Exod. 23:14-17; Isa. 30:29).

<sup>7</sup> Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 219-20.

Also these songs are likely to have been among those sung by the returning exiles from Babylon as they ascended the mountains to Jerusalem and home (Ezra 2:1; 7:7).<sup>8</sup>

Most of the songs have Jerusalem as a central focus of celebration,<sup>9</sup> and the themes of unity, brotherly love, family, and prosperity of life were natural expressions of a worshiping pilgrimage community.

#### FROM COMPOSITION TO COLLECTION

The final form of this collection of pilgrimage psalms is evidently postexilic, since it includes a postexilic psalm (126, perhaps also 125). Undoubtedly each song had a different context and purpose in its initial composition. Genres include a song of Zion (Ps. 122), wisdom psalms (127, 128, 133), a royal psalm (132), thanksgiving psalms (124, 126), songs of trust (Ps. 121, 125, 131), a praise liturgy (Ps. 134), and lament psalms (Ps. 120, 123, 129, 130).<sup>10</sup> However, as the psalms were collected and sung by the community in the context of pilgrimage, they took on new functions in the liturgy and eventually were stabilized as an identifiable collection celebrating pilgrimage.

Liebreich argues convincingly that the 15 psalms in this sub-collection were chosen to accord with the 15 words of the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26. Further, he observes that the four key words used in the blessing (יְבִרְכֶךָ, וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ, וְיַחְנֶךָ, and שְׁלוֹם) occur throughout these psalms, which in fact were commentaries on these words.<sup>11</sup>

Several interpreters have linked these psalms with King Hezekiah and the 10 "degrees" the shadow receded in the courtyard (2 Kings 20:10).<sup>12</sup> The central psalm (Ps. 127) is attributed to

<sup>8</sup> To define the songs as referring only to this event (i.e., "Songs of the Repatriated") is too limiting. Further, some of the titles (e.g., 122:1; 124:1; 127:1; 131:1; 133:1) contradict this notion.

<sup>9</sup> Only Psalms 120, 127, and 130 do not have some kind of reference to Zion.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 242.

<sup>11</sup> Leon J. Liebreich, "The Songs of Ascents and Priestly Blessing," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955): 33-36. Such intrabiblical development is becoming increasingly recognized as a significant factor in the composition of the Scriptures. Three of the psalms-124, 126, and 131--do not contain one of the key words. Liebreich suggests that the original collection had only 12 psalms and that these three were added to bring the number to 15 to accord with the number of words in the blessing. Cf. Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., *Reading between the Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); and Udo J. Hebel, *Intertextuality, Allusion, and Quotation: An International Bibliography of Critical Studies* (New York: Greenwood, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> The term מַעְלוֹת occurs in 2 Kings 20:8-11 (cf. Isa. 38:8), which may connect these psalms to this text and event.

Solomon, and on both sides of it the flanking seven psalms contain two by David and five anonymous ones, which would have been reappropriated or composed by Hezekiah (Isa. 38:20).<sup>13</sup> This, in turn, may be related to the 15 steps to the temple and the Jewish tradition of the levitical practice of singing each song as they ascended the steps.<sup>14</sup>

The collection evidently has been carefully structured so as to create a progression. These psalms begin with a prayer of distress from one who is far from home (Ps. 120) and concludes with a call to praise in the sanctuary of Zion (Ps. 134).<sup>15</sup>

#### PSALM 121 AS A PILGRIM PSALM

Psalm 121 speaks specifically of pilgrimage.<sup>16</sup> It celebrates Yahweh as the One who is the "help" (עֲזָרָה) of the pilgrim on the journey to home and Yahweh. Yahweh does not sleep. He protects and guards along the way and watches over the pilgrim's life. Further, with the prominence of the Exodus motif in the theology of Israel, this psalm may well reflect the care and protection of Yahweh in the wilderness journey to the Promised Land.<sup>17</sup>

Since the psalm can readily be seen as addressing the pilgrimage of Israelites from their homes in the hills to Jerusalem, it was included in the collection of pilgrim psalms. Further, the pilgrims would readily identify with their forefathers in the journey to the Promised Land, the place of the Lord's dwelling.

### LITERARY OBSERVATIONS

#### STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM

The most significant and readily apparent observation regarding the structure of the psalm is the change of speaker between verses 1-2 and verses 3-8.<sup>18</sup> Whether the psalm is a

<sup>13</sup> See Keet's discussion of this view (*A Study of the Psalms of Ascents*, 10).

<sup>14</sup> *Middot* 2:5; *Sukka* 5:4.

<sup>15</sup> Other suggestions have been posited over the years. For surveys of these suggestions see Keet, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents*, 1-17, and Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 219-21.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony R. Ceresko makes an interesting suggestion that the psalm was originally a prayer of a warrior (probably the king) who looked to God for help in his battles in the hills ("Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" *Biblica* 70 [1989]: 501-10).

<sup>17</sup> The Exodus and the Conquest are prominent themes in the Old Testament, including the hymnic material. Cf. Eugene H. Merrill, "Pilgrimage and Procession: Motifs of Israel's Return," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 261-72; and Erik Haglund, *Historical Motifs in the Psalms* (Lund: Gleerup, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Most commentators observe this feature, including A. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-

"dialogue" within the pilgrim's inner self, or an antiphonal song between pilgrims, or between a pilgrim and someone giving blessing,<sup>19</sup> there is clearly a shift from the first person to the third person at verse 3. In various analyses, this observation is a constant. Some differences of opinion, however, occur concerning further structural refinements in verses 3-8.

Allen observes a three-stanza structure: an introductory strophe of two lines (vv. 1-2) followed by two strophes of three lines each (vv. 3-5 and 6-8). His observations revolve around (a) the threefold occurrence of the participle of **שָׁמַר** (vv. 3, 5) balanced by the threefold occurrence of the imperfect of **שָׁמַר** (vv. 7-8), (b) the occurrence of the divine name at or near the end of each strophe, (c) the fivefold occurrence of the second masculine singular suffix (**ךָ**, **הָךָ**) in both of the three-line strophes, and (d) the relationship of positive and negative lines.<sup>20</sup> Some have suggested a two-stanza structure based on a cultic liturgy in which verses 1-4 present the question and supplication of the congregation and verses 5-8 record the response of the priestly choir.<sup>21</sup>

VanGemeren observes a four-stanza structure moving in a "stairlike" parallelism in the following fashion:

- A. Yahweh is the Creator (vv. 1-2)
- B. Yahweh is the Guardian of Israel (vv. 3-4)
- C. Yahweh is "Your" Guardian (vv. 5-6)
- D. Blessing (vv. 7-8).<sup>22</sup>

However, a two-stanza structure with identifiable subunits seems to capture the literary structure of the psalm best. Coupled with the change in speaker between verses 2 and 3 is the prominence of second masculine pronominal suffixes in verses 3-8 (10 occurrences) compared with their complete absence in verses 1-2.

sity Press, 1906), 736; and Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 290. Weiser suggests that in verse 2 the **עֲזָרָךְ** is due to the "carelessness" of the copyist in repeating the word from the end of the first line. Therefore the change in speakers takes place at verse 2, "Help comes from Yahweh ..." (*The Psalms*, 744, 747). There is no textual support for this emendation, and it makes good sense to retain this confident affirmation in verse 2 as that of the pilgrim.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion below, on pages 169-70.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Weiser correctly observes that this interpretation fails because of the personal character of the psalm, "which does not admit of a collective, cultic interpretation" (*The Psalms*, 746).

<sup>22</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:772.

Both these observations point to a definitive rhetorical shift between verses 2 and 3, which shift serves as the primary organizing factor in the psalm, yielding a basic two-stanza structure.

In further defining the structure of the second stanza, the six occurrences of related terms built on the root **שמר** are significant. As already noted, the first three are participles and the last three are imperfects. However, the three imperfects are grouped in the last two verses. This points to verses 7-8 as a final blessing for the pilgrim in the future ("he will keep you/your life/your goings and comings").

Positive and negative statements have also been carefully used in crafting the second stanza. Verses 3-4 include two negative statements, verses 5-6 have one positive and one negative statement, and verses 7-8 (the blessing) contain two positive statements. The psalmist apparently moved progressively from a negative statement through a transitional stanza to a final climactic and positive blessing.

While the psalm falls into a two-stanza structure, each of the four two-line pairings have been tightly woven together through anadiplosis, or staircase parallelism.<sup>23</sup> In each case the last word or phrase of one line is repeated or echoed at the beginning of the next line: **עֹזֶרִי/עֹזֶרִי** (vv. 1-2), **לֹא-יָנוּם/אֵל-יָנוּם** (vv. 3-4), **יָמִינֶךָ/יָמִינֶךָ** (vv. 5-6), **יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֵנִי-יִצְאֶתְךָ וּבֹאֶתְךָ/יִשְׁמְרֵנִי** (vv. 7-8).<sup>24</sup> Thus the entire song is carefully bound together internally.<sup>25</sup>

Superimposed over the entire psalm is an encompassing A-B-A pattern. An inclusio is formed between verses 1-2 and verses 7-8 with the use of related forms of **בָּא** and **מָן**. This inclusio focuses on a centerpoint for the entire psalm in verse 5a: **יְהוָה שְׁמֹרְךָ** ("Yahweh is your Keeper").<sup>26</sup> Ceresko observes that 58 syllables precede this phrase and 58 follow it.<sup>27</sup> These two words in fact convey the dominant theme of the psalm as evidenced by the five-

<sup>23</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 251.

<sup>24</sup> W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 208-13. Also Ceresko ("Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" 497) and VanGemeren ("Psalms," 772) make this helpful observation.

<sup>25</sup> Allen observes this feature but uses it to support a three-stanza structure in that each stanza includes such parallelism (*Psalms* 101-150, 153).

<sup>26</sup> A similar superimposing structure is in Psalm 113. The word "hallelujah" brackets the psalm as an inclusio and verse 5 is the centerpoint of the psalm. But the psalm follows the typical hymnic pattern of a call to praise (vv. 1-4), reasons for praise (vv. 5-9a), and conclusion to praise (v. 9b).

<sup>27</sup> Ceresko, "Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" 499. A similar device is found in Ruth 1:1-5 and 4:13-17, in which units of 71 words bracket the book.

fold repetition of יהוה (vv. 2, 5 [twice], 7, 8), the sixfold repetition of forms of שָׁמַר (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7 [twice], 8), and the tenfold repetition of כָּהֵן (vv. 3 [twice], 5 [thrice], 6, 7 [twice], 8 [twice]).

Thus the psalm seems to be built on a basic two-stanza structure, with the second stanza crafted into two significant movements. The first of these movements revolves around the participial form of שָׁמַר and speaks of assurance, and the second revolves around the imperfect form of שָׁמַר and speaks of blessing. The superimposed inclusio and centerpoint structure helps set the theme of the psalm.

#### THE SPEAKERS IN THE PSALM

The rhetorical break between verses 2 and 3 has given rise to several understandings of who is speaking in the psalm. Morgenstern<sup>28</sup> and others suggest that the dialogue is within the pilgrim himself, and a single voice is being heard.<sup>29</sup> Appeal is often made to Psalms 42 and 43 for such a self-address. However, since "my soul" (נַפְשִׁי) does not occur in Psalm 121, it is difficult to establish the parallel.

More commonly the psalm is interpreted as having two speakers, that of the pilgrim in verses 1-2, and a second voice in verses 3-8. This second voice is usually viewed as being that of a priest or elder confirming or assuring the pilgrim in his opening affirmation of faith.<sup>30</sup> Understanding verses 7-8 as a concluding blessing to the psalm, it seems that the psalm was a farewell benediction either as the pilgrim left his village to make his journey to Jerusalem, or perhaps as he left the temple to return to his home and his daily routines.<sup>31</sup> A variant of the two-speaker understanding is to view the psalm as an antiphonal expression of pilgrims traveling together in their caravans calling to one

<sup>28</sup> Julian Morgenstern, "Psalm 121," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 323-71.

<sup>29</sup> Ceresko, "Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" 498.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1972), 851; A. Cohen, *The Psalms*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1945), 420; Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 431; Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (Staten Island, NY: Alba, 1969), 108; and Weiser, *The Psalms*, 746.

<sup>31</sup> Kraus argues that the psalm is a farewell cultic liturgy by a priest giving a benediction to the departing pilgrims (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theologie des Psalmen*, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1979], 1012). Others suggest that it may be an entrance liturgy between priest and pilgrim (e.g., J. W. Rogerson and J. W. MacKay, *Psalms 101-150*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 115).

another with opening affirmations of faith and responses of confirmation and assurance.<sup>32</sup>

Whatever the original structure of speakers, apparently the psalm came to be used in various settings and ways in the life and faith of the worshiping Israelites. Certainly it could well have been sung as a dialogue with oneself. Or it is not difficult to imagine an elder in the village or a priest at the temple pronouncing a benediction on the pilgrim as he was about to depart. And one can readily see how the song could have been sung antiphonally by pilgrims traveling to and from Jerusalem, including pilgrims on their return from exile in Babylon.

## EXPOSITION

### MESSAGE

The message of Psalm 121 may be summarized in this way: The pilgrim on his journey to the dwelling place of God can have great confidence that Yahweh, the Keeper of Israel, will be his help and will keep him safe and secure because he trusts in Him.

### EXPOSITORY OUTLINE

Title (v. 1a): A Psalm of Ascents (v. 1a).

- I. The pilgrim speaks: By question and answer he identified Yahweh as the source of his help (w. 1b-2).
  - A. As he anticipated his journey through the mountains to Jerusalem, he asked who would be his help (v. 1b).
  - B. He affirmed his faith in Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth, as his help (v. 2).
- II. The priest<sup>33</sup> speaks: By describing Yahweh's watchfulness over the pilgrim, he affirmed the pilgrim's faith (vv. 3-8).
  - A. Assurance: He affirmed that Yahweh is unfailing in His watchfulness over His pilgrim (vv. 3-6).
    1. He pointed to Yahweh as an unsleeping Shepherd, who will not allow the pilgrim to slip on the rocky paths (vv. 3-4).

<sup>32</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 736.

<sup>33</sup> This term is used for lack of a better generic one. The speaker is one who gives a blessing to the departing pilgrim. There is a range of options for the identity of this second voice.

2. He pointed to Yahweh as an unfailing Protector, who will stand in strength beside the pilgrim day and night (vv. 5-6).

B. Blessing: He announced that Yahweh will continue to keep the pilgrim's life from all harm both now and in the future (vv. 7-8).<sup>34</sup>

#### EXPOSITION OF THE PSALM

I. The pilgrim speaks: By question and answer he identified Yahweh as the source of his help (vv. 1b-2).

A. *As he anticipated his journey through the mountains to Jerusalem, he asked who would be his help* (v. 1b). As the pilgrim contemplated his journey, he looked toward the route and final destination with both trepidation and anticipation. He "lifts up his eyes" (עָלָה עֵינָיו אֶל הַרְרֵי), a phrase, which, when used with the preposition אֶל, frequently indicates a looking and seeing with some kind of anticipation of or disposition toward the object (cf. Gen. 39:7; Ps. 123:1; Ezek. 18:6, 12, 15; 33:25).<sup>35</sup> In this case it is the "hills" or "mountains" (הַרְרֵי).

In the Old Testament, mountains were often considered places of provision and protection (Gen. 19:17; Deut. 33:15) and of renewal and hope (Isa. 55:12; Ezek. 34:13-14; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13). However, they were also often viewed as places of loneliness and abandonment (Judg. 11:37-38; 1 Kings 22:17; Lam. 4:19), the haunts of wild animals and birds (1 Sam. 26:20; 1 Chron. 12:8; Ezek. 39:4; Ps. 50:11; 76:4; 104:18; Song of Songs 4:8), the abode of false gods (Deut. 12:2; Hos. 4:13) and enemies (Num. 23:7; Judg. 6:2), and a place where one could slip and fall (Jer. 13:16). Metaphorically the term is used to speak of political powers, both Israelite and Gentile (Ps. 68:16; Isa. 2:2, 14; Amos 6:1; Mic. 4:1). Frequently the mention of mountains brought to mind God's power in His ability to control and tame these symbols of strength, majesty, and danger (Deut. 32:22; Job 28:9; Isa. 41:15; 42:15; 64:3).<sup>36</sup>

In this psalm are two broad categories of understanding, one positive, the other negative.<sup>37</sup> From a positive point of view the

<sup>34</sup> The separation of verses 7-8 from verses 3-6 reflects the attempt to take seriously the movement from the participle to the imperfect of עָלָה .

<sup>35</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 670.

<sup>36</sup> S. Talmon, "הַרְרֵי," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 3:327-47.

<sup>37</sup> For a summary of options see Allen, *Psalms* 100--150, 151.

hills or mountains have been interpreted as a reference to heavenly heights,<sup>38</sup> a divine title for Yahweh similar to Yahweh's title as "Rock" (צֶרֶף),<sup>39</sup> and most commonly a reference to the mountains of Jerusalem and the temple as a place of anticipation and hope (cf. Ps. 87:1; 125:1-2; 133:3).<sup>40</sup> From a negative perspective, the hills have been interpreted as the source of danger and hardship for the pilgrim in his journey,<sup>41</sup> and/or a reference to the sanctuaries of false gods found in the mountains.<sup>42</sup>

Ceresko has correctly noted images of Yahweh's care during the pilgrimage: God does not let the pilgrim's foot slip (v. 3), and He is there to guide and protect (v. 5), even from the harmful rays of the sun and sinister light of the moon (v. 6). These indicate that the psalmist intended the hills to be viewed as actual hills encountered in the journey and that the resting place of the final journey was Jerusalem. Significantly the key term **בְּמַרְפֵּי**, used six times in the psalm, was used by Joshua in recounting the Exodus/wilderness journey (Josh. 24:17), a journey through hills to the ultimate destiny of Canaan (cf. Num. 33:47-48). Ceresko writes, "In singing this psalm, the pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem and the 'house,' of Yahweh would have had little difficulty in imagining themselves as reliving the Exodus experience of their ancestors who also journeyed to God's 'house,' i.e., the Promised Land."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> P. Voltz, "Zur Auslegung von Ps. 23 and 121," *Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift* 36 (1925): 584; Otto Eissfeldt, "Psalm 121," in *Stat crux, dum uoluitur orbis: H. Lilje Festschrift*, ed. G. Hoffmann and K. H. Rengstorf (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1959), 13.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 200.

<sup>40</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 121; and C. A. and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1907), 2:446. Related to this notion is the view that **בְּמַרְפֵּי** is a plural of majesty referring to the mountain, namely, Jerusalem (G. Ravasi, *Il libro dei salmi: Commento e attualizzazione I* [1-50], Lettura pastorale della Bibbia 12 [Bologna: 1981], 528, cited in Ceresko, "Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" 501).

<sup>41</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 746; Kraus, *Theologie des Psalmen*, 1013; and Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 852.

<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 129; cf. Weiser, *The Psalms*, 746; J. H. Eaton, *Psalms*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1967), 280; and E. A. Leslie, *The Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1949), 215.

<sup>43</sup> Ceresko, "Psalm 121: Prayer of a Warrior?" 508. He notes that **בַּיְתוֹ**, "house," is a cipher for the Promised Land. He sees a transformation of the psalm from an early usage rooted in the prayer of a warrior who knew well that Yahweh's protection was closely associated with the hills and cliffs of the hill country. Hence the hills, seen as a positive source of strength, influence its reading as a pilgrim psalm in a positive way.

There is good reason to read the psalm as including both positive and negative aspects. As the pilgrim looked to the mountains, he saw them as a place of both fear and hope. They contain danger and yet salvation. They were the residence of bandits, animals, and even pagan shrines, but they were also the residence of the temple and Yahweh.<sup>44</sup>

As he contemplated his journey, he asked, "From where does my help come [יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל]?" Some have tried to interpret יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי as a relative particle introducing the statement "from where my help comes"<sup>45</sup> (as in the KJV), thus affirming that the mountains are a source of help. However, this is not an exegetical possibility. The term is a compound of יָיָ, "where?"<sup>46</sup> which clearly carries an interrogative idea. The viewing of the hills with their potential for danger (and hope) has raised the question as to the pilgrim's source of help.

However, even when viewed as a question, this clause may be taken as an indirect question, "I lift my eyes to the mountains, to see from where my help comes."<sup>47</sup> As Allen notes, "This exegesis moves back to a point close to an earlier one which was grammatically unfounded [relative particle] but perhaps instinctively not distant from the truth."<sup>48</sup> This supports the rather ambivalent interpretation of יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי, and allows the singer to understand that looking to the hills brought both hope and fear.

B. *He affirmed his faith in Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth, as his help* (v. 2). The answer to the pilgrim's question in verse 1b comes in a bold affirmation of faith. Repeating יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי,<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> VanGemeren writes, "Both thoughts may well have occupied the ancient traveller: anxiety and anticipation" ("Psalms," 772).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 151.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 327. Morgenstern writes, "As is recognized by all scholars, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי can under no condition whatever be regarded as a relative pronoun or a relative particle" ("Psalm 121," 312).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. T. H. Weir, "Psalm 121:1," *Expository Times* 27 (1915/16): 90-91, Waltke and O'Connor write that terms such as these are "locative in reference and strictly interrogative in use, although they occur in both direct and indirect questions" (*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 327).

<sup>48</sup> Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 150.

<sup>49</sup> The repetition of יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי should not be viewed as dittography since the two words begin and end separate poetic lines, and to remove either would make the line unintelligible. Some have suggested that, the first-person singular pronoun suffix should be changed to a second masculine singular pronoun suffix, initiating the voice of the second speaker in verse 2 rather than in 3. Others opt for dropping the suffix altogether and make this statement a simple affirmation of a general truth (see discussion in Allen, *Psalms* 101-150, 151). However, as Allen notes, since the structural break occurs at the end of verse 2, the first-person singular suffix should be retained and exegetically related to verse 1.

the response comes in a nominal clause in which the pilgrim expressed his understanding that his help is from Yahweh. The term עֲזָרָה often refers to military assistance and is frequently used of God's help in battle (1 Chron. 12:18; 2 Chron. 14:10; Isa. 50:7, 9; 63:5). However, in the Psalter the term is used of Yahweh's personal assistance for the underprivileged (Ps. 10:14; 72:12) and for the psalmist when in sickness or distress (28:7; 86:17).<sup>50</sup> This latter usage is in view here.

The term מַעֲשֵׂה, which expresses "*origination or authorship*,"<sup>51</sup> repeats the Hebrew מַעַן (מֵן) from מַעַן יְיָ in verse 1b, thus providing a rhetorical as well as a semantic connection to the question just asked. The emphasis here is an affirmation that the covenant God, the One who redeemed Israel from Egypt and established His covenant with her, is the God from whom help comes.

To complete his celebration the psalmist stated that this Yahweh is "the Maker of heaven and earth" (עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ). Such a description of Israel's God was a regular expression in her confessions of faith (cf. Ps. 115:15; 134:3; 146:6) and spoke of Yahweh's power to help.

Because all things are God's handiwork, he has the power to help whatever might happen; for even now all things are still in his hand. The distinctive character of the Old Testament concept of creation comes out clearly here. It ministers not to a theoretical explanation of the universe but the mastering of a concrete situation in life in a practical way. It represents not a piece of knowledge but a decision to submit oneself to God's creative will and power.<sup>52</sup>

This statement forms the foundation for the statements of confidence found in the rest of the psalm.

And so the pilgrim has spoken. He has asked and answered the question of hope and fear with a conclusion of faith and a referral of life back to his covenant God and Creator. In his pilgrimage of faith, autonomy and misguided dependence have been ruled out, and full trust is placed in God.

II. The priest speaks: By describing Yahweh's watchfulness over the pilgrim, he affirmed the pilgrim's faith (vv. 3-8).

A new voice chimes in, and the rest of the song may be cast as the expression of a priest or elder who speaks to the departing pil-

<sup>50</sup> Carl Schultz, "עֲזָרָה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:660-61.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 769 (italics theirs).

<sup>52</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 747. Cf. Norman C. Habel, "Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study in Tradition Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 328-29.

grim with confidence and assurance.<sup>53</sup> The theme of these verses is readily observed by noting the tenfold occurrence of the second masculine singular (קָהָךְ, vv. 3, 5, 6, 7, 8), the sixfold occurrence of forms of the root שָׁמַר (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8), and the fourfold repetition of הָיָה (vv. 5, 7, 8), building off the pilgrim's affirmation in verse 2. By means of repetition the psalmist carefully crafted the priest's speech around the dominant theme of the psalm, "Yahweh watches over you."

A. *Assurance: He affirmed that Yahweh is unfailing in His watchfulness over His pilgrim* (vv. 3-6).<sup>54</sup> The psalmist used two closely related metaphors to describe Yahweh's watchfulness. The first, that of a shepherd, stresses God's persistent watchfulness and care (vv. 3-4), and the second, that of a defender or champion, speaks of His invincible protection (vv. 5-6).

The participles of שָׁמַר in verses 3-5 are substantial and emphasize Yahweh's condition as Keeper.<sup>55</sup> As Keeper, He protects from falls over cliffs (v. 3), remains awake and alert (vv. 3-4), and protects from danger (vv. 5-6).

1. *He pointed to Yahweh as an unsleeping Shepherd who will not allow the pilgrim to slip on the rocky paths* (vv. 3-4). Yahweh, the Maker of heaven and earth, is viewed in the intimate and pastoral imagery of a shepherd who leads his sheep along dangerous paths without allowing them to slip and who never sleeps.

The poet used a steplike parallelism that increases in intensity from verses 3 to 4 by the use of several rhetorical devices. First, by using intensifying negatives, he moves from a twofold usage of negative לֹא in verse 3 to a twofold usage of the stronger negative אַל in verse 4.<sup>56</sup> This steplike intensification is

<sup>53</sup> The question of the identity of the speaker has been discussed previously.

<sup>54</sup> The identity of verses 3-6 as a literary unit separate from verses 7-8 based on participial and imperfect forms of שָׁמַר has already been noted.

<sup>55</sup> See Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 614-15.

<sup>56</sup> The particle אַל usually introduces a negative wish (Kautsch and Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 321-22, par. 109c; and Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 567). Kirkpatrick (*The Psalms*, 737) and Weiser (*The Psalms*, 744), retain this idea and render the line as a prayer, "May he not allow your foot to slip, may your Keeper not slumber," with verse 4 being the answer to that prayer. Kirkpatrick even suggests that another voice speaks in verse 4 and corrects the "wish" of verse 3 with a definitive אַל: "Nay, there is no need for such a prayer, for Israel's keeper never sleeps." Such an interpretation is unnecessary when it is understood that אַל may be used as a straightforward negative expression and expresses an intensification to verse 4 with the usage of אַל (Cohen, *The Psalms*, 420; cf. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 317, par. 107o-p, 322, par. 109d; P. Jouon, *Grammaire de l'hebreu biblique*, 2d ed. [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1923], 310, par. 114i, k; and Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 567 n6).

furthered by the repetition of נָנוּם ("slumber") in both lines, first with אֶל and then with לֵא. Second, he intensified the names of God. In verse 3b he referred to God simply as "your Watcher" (שֹׁמֵרְךָ), but then in verse 4b as "the Watcher of Israel" (שֹׁמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל). Third, by the interjection "Behold/Indeed"<sup>57</sup> at the beginning of verse 4, he called attention to the unceasing vigil of the Keeper of Israel. These verses could be rendered,

He will not allow your foot to slip,  
Your Keeper will not slumber.  
Indeed, He will never slumber,  
He will never sleep, the Keeper of Israel.<sup>58</sup>

Three times in these verses the pilgrim is assured of Yahweh's sleepless vigil. The words נָנוּם (used twice) and יָשָׁן, speak of sleeping, and with the negative they may be used metaphorically of watchfulness (cf. Isa. 5:27). Both are also used of the sleep of death (for נָנוּם see Ps. 76:5; Nah. 3:18; for יָשָׁן, see Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2).<sup>59</sup> Not only is the pilgrim's God awake and watchful; He is also alive and well in contrast to Baal, who was taunted by Elijah as being asleep (1 Kings 18:27).

The final phrase "the Keeper of Israel" (שֹׁמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל) is significant. The priest mentioned the figure of a caring, careful shepherd; he also called on history ("the Keeper of Israel") to reinforce the pilgrim's confidence. The pilgrim understood that God's care for His people extends into the present, and "the national tradition of *Heilsgeschichte* becomes a paradigm of the pilgrim's personal experience and trust."<sup>60</sup> The Shepherd of the covenant people is the Shepherd of the covenant person.

2. *He pointed to Yahweh as an unfailing Protector who will stand in strength beside the pilgrim day and night* (vv. 5-6). The second metaphor points to Yahweh as protector or guardian. He is described as the pilgrim's "shade" (צֶל) on his right hand. The term צֶל can be used both positively as "protection," "shade," or "defense" (cf. Gen. 19:8; Num. 14:9; Job 7:2; Isa. 30:2-3) or negatively to speak of what is ephemeral or passing (e.g., man's life, 1

<sup>57</sup> See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 168-71, for a discussion of the syntactical usage of הִנֵּה.

<sup>58</sup> Morgenstern sees verse 4 as an intrusive marginal comment that makes a nationalistic comment on the suffix of שֹׁמֵרְךָ ("Psalm 121," 319). This suggested emendation has no textual support.

<sup>59</sup> R. Laird Harris, "נָנוּם" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:563; John E. Hartley, "יָשָׁן" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:414; and J. Schupphaus, "יָשָׁן" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:438-41.

<sup>60</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 748; also see Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, 108.

Chron. 29:15, or a sick or sorrowing person, Job. 17:7).<sup>61</sup> In this case the psalmist described Yahweh in the positive sense as a source of protection and care (cf. Ps. 91:1; Jer. 48:45; Lam. 4:20).

Such protection is said to be on the pilgrim's "right hand" (יְמִינֶךָ) (עַל-יְדֶיךָ). This is a common biblical metaphor that speaks of both favor and strength (cf. Gen. 48:13-14). Often Scripture speaks of the "right hand of Yahweh" to describe the power of Yahweh in delivering His people (e.g., Ps. 18:35; 98:1; Isa. 41:13) as well as His favor and blessing (Ps. 16:11; Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:33-35). In this case, however, Yahweh is said to be the shade or protection on the pilgrim's right hand (cf. Ps. 16:8). This was the place of one's champion or savior. The psalmist declared, "For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save him" (Ps. 109:31; cf. 108:6). The pilgrim was fully assured that Yahweh, as protector and shade (a figure chosen in view of the dangers of pilgrimage in the blazing sun), would stand by him as a champion or hero in his pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The specifics are elaborated on in verse 6, which has been chiasmatically crafted to focus on the promise of protection:

By day,  
the sun  
will not harm you,  
or the moon,  
by night.

The pilgrim is promised protection. from the effects of the blazing heat of the sun (cf. 2 Kings 4:19)<sup>62</sup> by day,<sup>63</sup> and the sinister fears of the moon by night. From ancient times the moon has been viewed as dangerous and ominous, the source of disease and "lunacy" (cf. σεληνιαζομαι, "moonstruck," Matt. 4:24; 17:15).<sup>64</sup> While the Hebrew pilgrim may well have known from his understanding of God and the world that such a danger does not actually exist, it is easy to understand how popular lore and superstition would invade and dominate in spite of theological under-

<sup>61</sup> John E. Hartley, "עַל-יְדֶיךָ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:767.

<sup>62</sup> Commentators regularly refer to the danger of sunstroke in the Mediterranean climate (e.g., Cohen, *The Psalms*, 421; Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 738; and Weiser, *The Psalms*, 749).

<sup>63</sup> See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English. Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 401, for this translation of יְמִינֶךָ.

<sup>64</sup> Dahood writes, "The notion that the moon beamed harmful influences was widespread in the ancient Near East" (*Psalms III*, 202; cf. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 853; and R. Clements, "יְמִינֶךָ," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:357). On the use of the New Testament term see J. M. Ross, "Epileptic or Moonstruck," *Biblical Theology* 29 (1978): 126-28.

standings to the contrary. The psalm realistically addresses the mind-set of the pilgrim in his perceptions of dangers and fears.<sup>65</sup>

The pilgrim was told that the sun or moon "will not harm" (לֹא יִנְכָּהּ) him. The term נִכָּה, meaning "smite, strike, hit, beat, slay, kill,"<sup>66</sup> carries the metaphor of shade and defense (v. 5) to its ultimate statement. The pilgrim could rest assured of Yahweh's unfailing protection from the oppression and sinister elements that would confront him along the way.

The use of the merism<sup>67</sup> "sun by day" and "moon by night" assures the pilgrim that Yahweh will protect at all times, day or night. Further, it encourages the pilgrim in the knowledge that Yahweh wants him to entrust all to His loving care day or night.

B. *Blessing: Yahweh will continue to watch over the pilgrim's life now and in the future* (vv. 7-8). These two final verses, while part of the speech of the priest, stand apart from verses 3-6 as marked by a change from a substantival participial form of the key thematic term שָׁמַר to an imperfect form.<sup>68</sup> The description of Yahweh as "Watcher/Keeper" now moves to an emphasis on the action of "watching" or "keeping."<sup>69</sup> This serves to identify a change in the compositional structure of the psalm, which moves from affirmation (vv. 3-6) to benediction (vv. 7-8).

The emphasis of these last two lines is that Yahweh will actively keep or watch over His pilgrim in all circumstances, both now and in the future. Emphasis is created by the active verbal use of יִשְׁמַר, as well as by the occurrence of the name of Yahweh (יְהוָה) at the beginning of each line.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> VanGemeren sees only a general reference to the dangers of day and night as represented by the sun and moon ("Psalms," 773). However, there seems to be more here in reference to the superstitions and popular fears of the people of the day. One wonders how many of God's people today still pause to pick up a four-leaf clover or feel a twinge of anxiety when a black cat crosses the road ahead of them.

<sup>66</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, נִכָּה in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:577.

<sup>67</sup> Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 435. The observation that a merism is used here does not preclude the more sinister interpretation of the role or effect of the moon.

<sup>68</sup> See discussion on page 175.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 496-518, 613-15.

<sup>70</sup> In normal Hebrew prose, the subject follows the verb. Displacement occurs because of emphasis and/or poetic artistry (C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1987], 94-95; and Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2d ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976], 96-99). It is evident that in this case the psalmist sought to emphasize Yahweh's activity of keeping and watching. The Qumran scroll omits the second יְהוָה (J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967], 38-39).

The pilgrim was assured that Yahweh would keep him from all evil or harm (עָרָב). The term עָרָב conveys both moral (cf. Ps. 41:5; 73:8; 109:20; Mic. 2:1; 7:3; Mal. 1:8) and amoral notions (Isa. 45:7; Jer. 39:12; Amos 6:3).<sup>71</sup> In light of the context of pilgrimage and concern for well-being on the journey, the amoral rendering "calamity," "disaster," or "harm" is the better way to interpret the term here.<sup>72</sup> The pilgrim was confident that no harm or disaster is outside the control and care of God. Cohen observes that the "all" (כָּל) points to the totality and comprehensiveness of God's protection. "Life exposes man to a great variety of mishaps, but none are beyond God's sheltering care."<sup>73</sup>

Further, the psalmist announced that Yahweh will keep the pilgrim's "life" (נַפְשׁוֹ) from all harm. The word נַפְשׁוֹ is widely recognized as referring to much more than "soul."<sup>74</sup> Rooted in the notions of "breathing," "appetite," or "craving" (Exod. 15:9; Deut. 23:24; Isa. 56:11),<sup>75</sup> the term carries the primary meaning of "life." But as Waltke observes, it denotes "the living self with all its drives, not the abstract notion 'life' which is conveyed by *hayyim*, nor the other meaning of *hayyim* which refers to a quality of existence as well as the temporal notion of being."<sup>76</sup> Waltke develops Westermann's observation that when נַפְשׁוֹ occurs as the subject of a verb it is usually rendered "soul" (i.e., desires, inclinations), but when it is the object of a verb it is usually rendered "life," that is, "the state of personal existence over against death."<sup>77</sup> The occurrence here is as the direct object of יִשְׁמְרֵנִי and the psalmist is expressing confidence that the pilgrim's "personal existence" will be kept by Yahweh.

<sup>71</sup> G. Herbert Livingston, "רָעָב," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:854-56; cf. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 853.

<sup>72</sup> See NIV; Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 151; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-151: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 426; and H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 869. The KJV, NEB, NKJV, and RSV retain the moral option by translating "evil."

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *The Psalms*, 421.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. C. A. Briggs, "The Use of *npsh* in the Old Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 16 (1897): 17-30; E. Jacob, ψυχή, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 9:617-37; and Bruce K. Waltke, "נַפְשׁוֹ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:587-91.

<sup>75</sup> D. Winton Thomas, "A Study in Hebrew Synonyms: Verbs Signifying 'To Breathe,'" *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und Verwandte Gebiete* 10 (1935): 311-14; cf. Waltke, "נַפְשׁוֹ," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:587-91.

<sup>76</sup> Waltke, "נַפְשׁוֹ," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:589-99.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid; cf. Claus Westermann, "נַפְשׁוֹ," in *Theologisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, 1:71-95.

Such care is circumscribed in the final line of the psalm. The pilgrim's "going out and coming in" (יָצֵאתָ וּבֹאָה) are under the watchful eye of Yahweh. This phrase is used elsewhere of going and coming from town to field for work (Deut. 28:6; 31:2), of carrying out duties as a military leader (Josh. 14:11) and as a king (1 Kings 3:7), and the comings and goings of life in general (2 Kings 19:27; cf. Isa. 37:28). So while the pilgrim was assured by another merism of God's watchfulness over his pilgrimage from beginning to end, there is an overtone to this phrase that includes all of life and its affairs and undertakings.<sup>78</sup> God's watchfulness extends to the daily routines of work and worship in the life of the pilgrim of faith.

Lastly, the pilgrim heard the assuring words that God's care extends not just to all places and settings of life, but also to all time, "from now until forever" (עַד-עוֹלָם).<sup>79</sup> Pious Jews today, as they leave or enter their house or a room in the house, touch the mezuzah, a small metal cylinder that is placed on the right hand door post and that contains a piece of parchment inscribed with Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, and they recite Psalm 121:8.<sup>80</sup> God is Keeper, everywhere, now and forever. Such is the widest possible vista for God's constant help for the pilgrim of faith.

## CONCLUSION

In this beautiful psalm of trust the people of God are encouraged to trust Him in the pilgrimages of life. The problem arises when reality confronts poetic call. Does this psalm guarantee unconditional protection from all harm and danger to the pilgrim? Did believers never suffer from sunstroke or fall into the hands of bandits? It is apparent that while the psalm speaks of such blanket protection, the pilgrim must understand that everything that invades his or her life is under God's watchful care and providence. The spirit of the psalm is to evoke trust in Yahweh, the Keeper of the pilgrim, and the Keeper of Israel, the Maker of heaven and earth. Often things that happen in the life of the pilgrim would not be his or her choice. But the psalm is not pointing

<sup>78</sup> Cohen, *The Psalms*, 121.

<sup>79</sup> On עוֹלָם as "long duration, antiquity, futurity," see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 761. Cf. Allan A. McCrae, "עוֹלָם," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:672-73.

<sup>80</sup> Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Mezuzah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11:1474-75; Nathan Ausubel, "Mezuzah," in *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*, 290-91; and Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 738.

in this direction.<sup>81</sup> The direction is upward, toward God. The believer must recognize that life is a gift from God, the Giver of life. The pilgrim can rest confidently, knowing that God's glory will prevail, and that justice (מִשְׁפָּט) and righteousness (צְדָקָה) will ultimately rule.<sup>82</sup>

The confidence expressed in Psalm 121 is rooted in the grandeur of the psalmist's vision of God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth; He is the Keeper of Israel. In spite of the perils of one's pilgrimage, the believer can exercise trust in the Lord. God is neither too great to care, nor are God's people too insignificant to be noticed. This quiet psalm reflects on God who quells the anxiety of the pilgrim's heart, who watches over him or her with a shepherd's gentleness and a guardian's vigilance, and who gives thoughtful benediction to one's daily routines.

<sup>81</sup> Psalms of trust must be held in tension with psalms of lament-psalms that speak of the pain, grief, and suffering found in the pilgrimage. However, even lament psalms include an expression of praise and trust as the concluding note. Anderson (*Out of the Depths*, 76) and Roland E. Murphy (*The Psalms, Job, Proclamation Commentaries* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], 16-17) make the important distinction between "lamentation," which is an expression of grief over the irreversible, and "lament," which is an appeal for intervention by a compassionate God.

<sup>82</sup> This is a crucial point in the exposition of the psalm. Otherwise it becomes nothing more than pious sentiment. The psalm must remain essentially theocentric and doxological, and one must resist the tendency to move it into anthropocentric domains. Some helpful treatments of the subject of theodicy include D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); Alister E. McGrath, *Suffering and God: Why Me? Why Doesn't God Do Something? Does God Care?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. (New York: Macmillan, 1962); and idem, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1961). The terms "justice" and "righteousness" used here are rooted in the prophetic utterances of the moral and ethical nature of the messianic kingdom (cf. Isa. 11:4; 28:17; 42:1-9).

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