



Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners

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There are no references or allusions to Psalm 121 in the New Testament. Nevertheless, it remains one of the more popular psalms in Christian liturgy, hymnody, and piety. In the Lutheran tradition, for example, this psalm has found a place in services at both the beginning and the end of life. In the baptismal service of the old Evangelical Lutheran Church, as the child or adult was brought to the font, the pastor said, “The Lord preserve thy coming in and thy going out from this time forth and forevermore,” a paraphrase of Psalm 121:8.¹ Contemporary services for comforting the bereaved and for the burial of the dead make use of Psalm 121.² The Psalm is suggested for use in ministering to those who are addicted³ and the last verse is part of an order for the blessing of a dwelling.⁴ In the course of the church year, Psalm 121 is assigned as one of the readings for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost. Hymn paraphrases include John Campbell’s, “Unto the Hills,”⁵ Ernst W. Olson’s, “Mine eyes unto the mountains I lift,”⁶ and John Ylvisaker’s setting of this psalm to the traditional American folk tune, “Wayfaring stranger.”⁷ Among memorable musical settings we may mention Mendelssohn’s, “Lift thine eyes to the mountains” and the chorus, “He, watching over Israel,” both from the *Elijah*, as well as Leonard Bernstein’s use of the Psalm in “A Simple Song” in his *Mass*. Finally, this psalm has always had a place in the everyday piety of the people of God; we shall comment on that in Part III below.

Psalm 121 belongs to a group of psalms from 120-134 which bear the title, “A Song of Ascents.” We begin with some observations about that group as a

¹See the *Altar Book* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.). Use of this rubric in the baptismal liturgy may be found as early as 1688, in the *Danmark og Norges Kirke Ritual*, 66; I owe this reference to my colleague Herman A. Preus.

²*Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 108, 117; *Lutheran Book of Worship: Minister’s Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 190.

³*Occasional Services*, 56.

⁴*Ibid.*, 187.

⁵*Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) 488; *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 445.

⁶*Service Book and Hymnal*, 398.

⁷*Songs for a New Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 141.

whole, continue with some comments toward understanding the Psalm, and conclude with some reflections on its use in our own worship and piety.

I. SONGS OF ASCENTS

The location of the “Songs of Ascents” within the Psalter suggests that these psalms once existed as a separate collection. They are preceded by the lengthy 119th Psalm in praise of Torah, which Westermann has convincingly argued once concluded an early form of the Psalter.⁸ Following Psalms 120-134 are the liturgical Psalms 135 and 136, which have no connection with the psalms which precede them. Thus at some stage in the formation of the Psalter, it appears that this collection of “Songs of Ascents” was added to a collection which consisted of Psalms 1-119.

1. The meaning of the title, “A Song of Ascents” has been long debated and often reviewed.⁹ That explanation which seems best to fit the evidence and which is the opinion of the majority of recent scholars understands “ascents” as a reference to the “going up” to Jerusalem for the annual festivals held there (see Deut 16:16). A “going up” to Jerusalem is mentioned in Psalm 122:4 of this group, as well as in texts like I Kings 12:28, Isaiah 2:3, Matthew 20:17 and Luke 2:42; Psalm 24:3 refers to ascending the “hill of the Lord.” Thus these psalms may be designated “pilgrimage psalms.” This position has been refined in a number of ways: Kraus suggests that the “going up” may also refer to the last stage of the pilgrimage, the procession (II Sam 6:12, 15; I Kings 12:33; II Kings 23:2).¹⁰ Seybold believes that the sequence of the psalms may reflect the stages of the journey: Psalms 120-122 are concerned with setting out, 123-132 fit the situation “again on Mt. Zion,” and 133 and 134 are suited for the time of farewell.¹¹ Hans Seidel finds a tripartite structure in each of these psalms, consisting of the statement of a theme, a meditation on that theme, and a concluding blessing. He classifies these psalms as “Short Meditations” (*Kurzandachten*), connecting them with the preaching of the Levites to the pilgrims.¹² In sum, we cite Seybold’s conclusion that this collection is “a handbook for pilgrims, a kind of vade mecum with prayers and songs, perhaps a breviary, also containing texts for meditation...”¹³

⁸Claus Westermann, “The Formation of the Psalter,” in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 252-253.

⁹For a convenient summary, see Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 101-150* (Waco: Word Books, 1983) 219-221. A more extended treatment is given in Cuthbert C. Keet, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents* (London: Mitre Press, 1969) 1-17. See also Klaus Seybold, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 13-16 and Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), xx-xxii. All of these conclude that the most reasonable explanation of the title is “A Song for Pilgrimages.”

¹⁰Kraus, *Psalmen*, xxi.

¹¹Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 71-72.

¹²Hans Seidel, *Auf den Spuren der Beter* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1980) 41-42. See also his essay, “Wallfahrtslieder,” in *Das Lebendige Wort, Festschrift* for Gottfried Voigt, ed. Hans Seidel and Karl-Heinrich Bieritz (Berlin, 1982).

¹³Seybold, *Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 73, my translation.

2. In his insightful study of these psalms, Seybold points out that they have a number of things in common in addition to their titles.¹⁴ Most obviously, with the exception of Psalm 132, the psalms in this collection are short. The average length of a psalm in the Psalter is 17 verses; the average of those in this collection is under 7 verses (Psalm 132 has 18). Many of these psalms have a formal conclusion, consisting of a blessing, a confession, or a hymnic sentence (121, 124, 125, 128, 129, 130, 131, 133 [Seybold translates, “Live well forevermore.”]). Thirdly, there are a good number of phrases which are repeated in these psalms: “let Israel now say” (124:1; 129:1),

“O Israel, hope in the Lord” (130:7; 131:3), “who made heaven and earth” (121:2; 124:8; 134:3), “Peace in Israel” (125:5; 128:6, identical in Hebrew), “May the Lord bless you from Zion” (128:5; 134:3 identical in Hebrew). Fourth, there are frequent references in these psalms to Zion (125, 126, 128, 129, 132, 133, 134) and to Israel (121, 122, 124, 125, 128, 129, 130, 131). We might add that these psalms are permeated with addresses to Yahweh, the Lord. The name occurs in each of the fifteen psalms, most often in the cry from the depths in 130 with six occurrences, then in 121 with five. Finally, Seybold points to linguistic similarities among these psalms, including use of the deictic particles *ken* and *hinnē*, the enclitic relative *še*, and Aramaicisms. Considered together, all of these features point to a homogeneous collection which is well suited to the situation of the people of Israel making their way to Zion.

Where might these psalms have originated? Seybold calls attention to clues in the texts which suggest locations far from Jerusalem: in Psalm 120, the psalmist is in Kedar in the wilderness of Arabia; 133 refers to Hermon in the north, 126 to the Negeb in the south. The linguistic evidence, including dialectical elements and a colloquial Hebrew, points to an origin “in border areas and in the Diaspora, sociologically in the lower strata.”¹⁵ The imagery in these psalms is taken from life in rural areas and the small villages: from the work of farming (126:5-6; 129:3, 6-7), building (127:1-2), and gate keeping (130:6), as well as the activities of hunting and warfare (120:4ff; 124), festival and celebration (122; 133), and especially from the sphere of family and home (123:2; 127:3ff.; 128:3-4; 131:2). Seybold concludes that the world of these psalms

is the world of the simple person and the little people, of the farmer, the handworker, the mother with small children, the father of the family, who works from early until late, who experiences both tears and jubilation, who rejoices at the festivals and thinks about religious matters. These psalms are witnesses from everyday life, witnesses of folk poetry and folk piety. All of this makes them especially precious.¹⁶

3. What are the features of this “folk piety” to which these psalms give expression? The God whom these psalms address and about whom they speak is the mighty Creator of the heavens and the earth (121:2; 124:8; 134:3). That God is also the powerful Deliverer who has rescued Israel from their enemies in warfare (124; 126:1-3) and to whom the people pray to deliver them again (125:4-5;

¹⁴Ibid., Chapter 2.

¹⁵Ibid., 41, my translation

¹⁶Ibid., 42, my translation.

126:4-6; 129:5-8). But the primary impression one gets in listening to these psalms is that this mighty Creator and Deliverer is also a God who is close at hand, who cares about the everyday concerns of his people, who blesses them with those things needed for a happy and successful life. The Lord prospers them in their work (127:1; 128:2) and watches over them in their sleep (121:6; 127:2). He provides them with food (128:2) and protects them on their travels (121). God gives his people the happiness of family life (127:3-5) and the joy of watching their young ones

“shoot up” around their table (128:3-4). The people of these psalms know the laughter of celebration (126:1-3, 6) and the gladness of gathering for worship (122:1; 133). They also know the depths of despair, but even in these depths, they still hope in the Lord (130). They put their trust in the Lord, mighty as the mountains around Jerusalem (125), caring as a good master or mistress (123). They know that their lives can be lived out in calm and peace, like the life of a child resting quietly in its mother’s arms (131).

In a long series of lectures on these psalms given in 1532 and 1533, Luther summarized by saying that they “deal with important teaching and almost all of the articles of our Christian faith, of preaching, forgiveness of sins, the cross, love, marriage, authorities, so that they set forth as it were a summary of all essential teachings.”¹⁷ Such are these psalms of the people, these songs for pilgrimage.

II. ANALYSIS OF PSALM 121

In its earliest setting, Psalm 121 seems to have functioned as a farewell liturgy:¹⁸

The one about to set out says:

1. I lift up my eyes to the mountains.
From whence does my help come?
2. My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

The one staying behind addresses the traveller:

3. He will not let your foot stumble,
he who watches over you will not doze off.
4. Indeed, the One who watches over Israel
will not doze off, nor will he sleep.
5. The Lord is your Protector;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
6. By day the sun will not harm you,
nor the moon by night.
7. The Lord will protect you from all evil;
he will watch over your life.
8. The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in
from now to eternity.

¹⁷Erwin Mülhaupt, ed., *D. Martin Luthers Psalmen Auslegung*, 3. Band, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965) 599, my translation.

¹⁸Westermann points to similarities in both structure and content with Psalm 91, which also has the speaker’s words in the 1st person (v. 2) followed by address to the speaker in the second person (vv. 3-13), *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984) 202.

1-2. The Psalm begins with the anxious question of one about to set out on a journey. Even today we know that moment of anxiety at the outset of a long trip: the car has been packed, the family is settled in, the seatbelts are fastened. But before turning the ignition key, those

questions cross our minds: Will we get there without an accident? Will we all arrive safely? In the case of this psalm, the question is asked by one setting out for Jerusalem. Who knew what dangers might lie ahead, along those roads which twist and turn their way through the mountains? (cf. Luke 10:30).

The expression “my help” occurs twice in this first part of the Psalm and catches its central focus. The question is an expression of the traveller’s anxiety: “from whence does my help come?” The answer expresses that same person’s trust: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

Informing the piety which finds expression in vv.1 and 2 are the same fundamental theological convictions which we have noticed running through these pilgrimage psalms. (1) *The Lord is mighty*, here expressed in the clause about God’s creating activity. (2) *The Lord is caring and close at hand*, expressed in the repeated, “my help.” In other words: the Lord is Creator, but he is also *my Helper*. The same confession of faith in the Helper and Creator is made by the community at the conclusion of Psalm 124.

3-6. In the second part of this farewell liturgy, another person addresses the one about to set out. This could have been a priest or, more likely, a relative or friend.

The traveller’s own confession (v. 2) had recalled the Lord’s might but also his nearness and care. The remainder of the Psalm is now a development of that second theme, expressed with a sixfold repetition of the Hebrew, root, *šāmar*. The root has two distinct senses as it is used in this psalm. The first is “attentive care” or “watching over,” as it is translated in vv. 3,4, 7b and 8. In another of the pilgrimage psalms, the participial form of *šāmar* is used to denote the watchman whose job it is to guard the city and warn the inhabitants of any danger; this becomes a picture of the Lord’s own “watching” activity (Psalm 127:1-2). That which is essential in the work of a watchman is that he stay awake (127:1; contrast the watchman in Isa 56:10!). The Lord, says Psalm 121, is the Good Watchman who remains alert, neither dozing off nor sleeping. Verse 4 comes close to expressing the theme of the entire Psalm. Mendelssohn recognized its significance when he made it the thematic statement for his chorus in the *Elijah*, “He, watching over Israel, slumbers not nor sleeps.” Luther called this a “psalm of comfort” (*Trostpsalm*), summarizing its message by saying that it teaches “that we should remain steadfast in faith and await God’s help and protection. Because even though it appears that God is sleeping or snoring...this is certainly not so, despite the way we feel and think. He is surely awake and watching over us....Eventually we’ll learn that, if we can only hold fast.”¹⁹

In one instance, the Psalm asserts that the object of the Lord’s watching is the people Israel (v. 4). But in the other five occurrences of *šāmar*, the object of the activity is the second person singular, “you” (3, 5, 7a) or “your life” (7b) or “your going out and your coming in” (8). Thus while Psalm 127 pictures the Lord as Watchman over the whole people, that which makes Psalm 121 unique

¹⁹Ibid., 456, my translation.

is its declaration that the Lord watches over not only Israel, but also over *you*, the individual about to set out on a journey. In the first six verses of this psalm we have a series of ever narrowing spheres of the Lord’s activity: he is Creator of the entire universe, he watches over Israel, and he watches over the individual.

With vv. 5 and 6 the second sense of *šāmar* comes to expression. Now the image is of the Lord providing a barrier between some danger and the individual, thus the translation “*Protector*.” The first of these dangers to be mentioned is the sun. Sunstroke was a serious problem for those in biblical lands. Elisha the prophet once treated a young man who had been struck down by the sun (II Kings 4:18-37). Judith’s husband died of sunstroke (Judith 8:2-3; cf. also Jonah 4:8 and Isa 49:2, 10). Belief in the harmful effects of the moon’s rays persists into New Testament times as is indicated by the word *selēniasomai*, “moonstruck,” in Matthew 4:24, translated by the *New American Bible* as “lunatics,” from the Latin for moon, “luna.” The sense of these two verses is to assure the traveller of the Lord’s protection in the daytime as well as through the night.

7-8. The thematic word *šāmar* occurs three times in this final segment of the Psalm, but now the sphere of the Lord’s protecting and watching activity is extended in an astonishing way. Vv. 3-6 had promised the Lord’s protection from the dangers of the day and the night; now the Psalm asserts that “the Lord will protect you from *all* evil.” Vv. 3-6 had been concerned with the Lord’s watching over for a specific journey; now the Psalm asserts that the Lord will watch over “your *life*.” The biblical expression, “going out and coming in” refers to all of one’s activities, the “comings and goings” which make up our daily lives (cf. Deut 28:6; 31:2; Josh 14:11). Thus the Psalm concludes by declaring that the Lord will watch over everything the individual does, not only for the duration of a journey, but “from now to eternity.”

To summarize the movement of this psalm:

- 1-2 A traveller about to set out asks an anxious question and answers it with a confession of faith in God the Creator and Helper.
- 3-6 Another person declares to the traveller that the Lord who watches over Israel will watch over and protect him on his journey.
- 7-8 That same person declares that the Lord’s protecting and watching will continue for a lifetime and beyond.

We could represent the contrasting and expanding concerns of this psalm with the images of an hourglass. The first series of narrowing concerns has to do with space: the Lord is Creator of *heaven and earth*, Watcher over *Israel* and Watcher over the *individual* (1-6). Then the expansions have to do with time: the Lord who watches over the individual *for one journey* will keep on watching *for a lifetime and to eternity* (7-8).

III. A PSALM FOR SOJOURNERS

How might this psalm be appropriated for use in our own piety and worship? On my shelf is an old *King James Version* of the Bible, used as a text in college days. In the margin, alongside this psalm, is written, “the traveller’s psalm,” a notation from a beginning Bible course. We have seen that these

pilgrimage psalms bear the marks of their origins in the everyday lives of the people of God.. Psalm 121 has continued to be used by such ordinary people as a psalm for travellers, well suited for reading or reciting at the beginning of a journey. Who knows the number of Jews and

Christians who have been comforted and encouraged by this psalm in such a situation? The reader can supply examples. This is still a psalm for travellers, whether they are about to set out on the highway in a Chevrolet, or on a runway in a 747.

But we have seen that the movement of the Psalm itself suggests a wider application. Its use in services for both baptism and burial indicates that this wider application has been recognized by the church. In the last two verses, the Psalm expands the notion of the Lord's watching and protecting to include an entire lifetime. Thus the "traveller's psalm" is applied to the whole of life, the image being of life itself as a journey, a sojourn.

This is a typical image in the Bible. When the aged Jacob finally got down to Egypt and met the Pharaoh, he said with a sigh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are a hundred and thirty years...." (Gen 47:9). Another psalmist prays, "Hear my prayer, O Lord...for I am thy passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers" (Ps 39:12). The New Testament remembers Abraham and Sarah as sojourners, ever on the way: "By faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob...." (Heb 11:9). The etymology of "sojourner" catches the sense of the biblical concept well: from the Latin, *sub diurnus*, "for a day," meaning one who lives in a place "temporarily, as on a visit."²⁰

A homiletical comment: We may not be so fond of this image of life as a journey, ourselves as ever on the way. We may prefer the picture of a circle with ourselves in the center, family and friends gathered around. But this circular imagery is precisely the way in which the rich but foolish farmer understood life, himself in the middle, successfully settled down, ever working to widen the expanse of his possessions and property, but never suspecting that his earthly sojourn was about to end (Luke 12:13-21). Our own view of life may tend toward the sentiments expressed in that comfortable old song which pictures a cottage small and a cozy room, populated by "just Molly and me, and baby makes three." But the melody running through the biblical stories of God's people and the one to which this psalm is suited is a newer, more bracing one, "On the road again...."

Jesus called his followers to this sort of "on the road again" life. On occasion he did sit with his disciples gathered around him, on a hillside or at a table. Those must have been good times! It was Peter who wanted to hold onto one of them and who suggested, "Let's build some shelters here and stay a while" (Mark 9:1-8). However, the call of Jesus was never "gather around me" or even "listen to me," but rather, "follow me." It is a call to take up the life of the sojourner, the one living here "temporarily, as on a visit." The New Testament calls that discipleship.

Thus the words of this psalm go beyond the promise of God's protection for the trip from Kedar to Jerusalem, or from Anchorage to St. Paul. To a people

²⁰Cf. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Cleveland: World, 1956) 1386.

of God today this psalm declares: the Lord will protect you from all danger and will watch over your life, your going and your coming, from now to eternity.

It may be that the unrelieved optimism of Psalm 121 needs to be complemented by the more realistic tone of the most well-known of the psalms. That one, too, pictures life as a journey, but in this case, instead of looking up toward the sunlight mountains, the psalmist is standing at the edge of a dark valley. He begins by speaking *about* the Lord, the Shepherd, but

then continues by speaking *to* the Lord: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me...” (Ps 23:4). Any journey through mountains, such as that which Psalm 121 anticipates, includes descending into the depths as well as traveling along the heights. The “Good Shepherd” psalm asserts that the Lord is there in the valleys, too. The apostle Paul, who himself lived a sojourner’s life, residing in tents and even making them, added that no perils along the way, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

A final scene, which illustrates yet another way in which this psalm has functioned in the lives of God’s people: This time I was not present, but a woman and her son told me. Her father, his grandfather, lay dying, full of years, after months of illness. They all knew that the end was near. There was some anxiety as this aged traveller was about to set out on the final phase of his sojourn. In that moment of anxiety, like an Israelite anticipating the journey to Jerusalem, like countless brothers and sisters in the faith about to set out for somewhere, his daughter and grandson heard him repeat this sojourner’s psalm, in the *King James Version* he knew by heart: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help....”

The varied settings of this psalm in the lives of the ordinary people of God witness to its astonishingly wide focus. It has long been a psalm suited for travellers about to set out on a journey, whether they bend down to tighten a sandal strap or reach over to fasten a seatbelt. But it is also a psalm for sojourners, with a scope wide enough to embrace the whole of life’s way, from baptism until burial and beyond.