

PSALM 121 AS A WISDOM POEM

by

JOHN T. WILLIS

Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX 79699

Each of the psalms with the superscription *šîr hamma'ălôt* (or *lamma'ălôt*), 'Song of Ascents' (?), may be studied profitably at any one of three stages: (a) its original *Sitz im Leben*; (b) its position and function in the collection of Psalms 120–134; and (c) its place and purpose in the present, completed Psalter. Some scholars argue that Psalms 120–134 were composed originally as a group of poems for a particular occasion, in which case none of the psalms in this collection is to be studied alone.¹ However, the diversity of genre,² style, structure, and subject matter in these fifteen poems, as well as the presence of Psalm 132, argue against such a view. Psalm 132 is considerably longer than most poems in this group, and is a Royal Zion Psalm which clearly originated as a separate psalm.³

The message of Psalm 121 is clear and compelling. The psalmist assures his audience that Yahweh "guards" (vss. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8) Israel (vs. 4) and each individual Israelite (vss. 1–3, 5–8) constantly (vss. 3, 4) and

1. So largely L. J. Liebreich (1955, pp. 33–36) and R. Press (1958, pp. 401–415). Liebreich contends that twelve of these psalms (excepting 124, 126, 131) were originally elaborations of the four key words of the Priestly Blessing in Num 6:24–26: "bless," "keep," "be gracious," and "peace." Since this Blessing contains fifteen words, three psalms were added. Tosefta Sotah, 7:7 states that the priests pronounced the Priestly Blessing on the steps of the hall which led to the interior of the temple. Thus *šîr hamma'ălôt* means "a song rendered in conjunction with the Priestly Blessing which was pronounced on the steps of the hall." Press argues that all of these psalms were written about the same time in the late exilic period by Jews anticipating the return from exile to Jerusalem (for further details, see below).

2. É. Lipiński (1979, cols. 110–111) combines Psalms 73, 91, and 121 as Psalms or Oracles of Divine Protection (Psalm 121, a "Priestly" Oracle). É. Beaucamp (1979, cols. 147–148) strongly emphasizes the variety of genres contained in Psalm 120–134.

3. J. R. Porter (1954, pp. 167–159), O. Eissfeldt (1959b, p. 485), D. Hillers (1968, p. 51, n. 12), and most scholars date Psalm 132 in the preexilic period, because it assumes the Davidic monarchy is reigning in Jerusalem. However, H. Kruse (1983, pp. 284–296) contends that it was written at the end of the sixth century B.C.E., because it contains postexilic words and ideas. The evidence favors the majority opinion.

in all circumstances (vs. 8). One can depend totally on Yahweh's help, because he is maker of heaven and earth (vss. 1-2).

The primary intention of the present study is to determine the *Sitz im Leben* which produced this psalm *originally*. This will necessitate a discussion of its genre, the function of "Israel" (vs. 4), and the identity of the speaker or speakers. Accordingly, one must decide whether this psalm is a genuine dialogue or a monologue. Now, instead of discussing each of these matters systematically in separate sections, the present approach describes and evaluates major interpretations of the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 121, and then proposes a view which the present writer considers most likely in light of the evidence. This approach demonstrates that Psalm 121 can be understood as a song of pilgrims going to worship, and also as either a dialogue or a monologue. It brings out that the presence or absence of "Israel" in an otherwise "individual" psalm may be interpreted as compatible or incompatible with the poem as a whole. Finally, it shows that an analysis of the structure of this psalm (vss. 1-2, 3-8; or vss. 1, 2-8; or vss. 1-4, 5-8; or vss. 1-2, 3-5, 6-8; etc.) has no direct connection to an understanding of its original genre or *Sitz im Leben*.

1. *An Exhortation to Israel*

W. E. Barnes (1931, pp. 594-595) suggests that the psalmist is a Pastor who had experienced Yahweh's providence, and assures the people of Jerusalem that this providence is constantly available to them.

R. Press (1958, pp. 401-415) argues that Psalms 120-134 were written about the same time in the late exilic period by authors anticipating the imminent return of Jews from Babylonian exile. In *Ezra 7:9*, *hamma'ālāh* refers to the return home from Babylonian exile. So the superscriptions over Psalms 120-134, *šīr hamma'ālōt*, literally, 'song of processions', suggest the march of various groups of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.⁴

E. Kissane (1964, p. 568) suggests that Psalm 121 is an exhortation to "Israel" (vs. 4) to have the same confidence in God which the psalmist has. This view fails to pay attention sufficiently to the strong individual emphasis in this psalm.

2. *Israel Waiting for Good Tidings*

In Psalm 121, T. K. Cheyne (1904, pp. 183-184) pictures Israel amid the mountains of Judah (or possibly, Jerahmeel), waiting for messengers

4. Press (1958, p. 414) writes: "Mit einiger Wahrscheinlichkeit wird man als den zeitgeschichtlichen Hintergrund dieser genannten Psalmen (i.e., Ps 120-134) die letzte Zeit des babylonischen Exils vermuten dürfen."

of good tidings (cf. Nah 1:15; Isa 52:7). He emends the text of verse 1b to ^ʿa^ʾāmīn kī, “I am sure that my help is coming,” because if the mountains around Jerusalem symbolize Yahweh’s dwelling place, the psalmist would be certain of the source of his help. Cheyne emends verse 6 to *kūšam* and *yērahmēʿēl*:

Cusham shall not smite thee by day
nor Jerahmeel by night.

Thus the enemy includes the Jerahmeelites, a favorite view of Cheyne’s. This interpretation is based on several questionable (and unnecessary) textual emendations.

3. *A Psalm of Confession*

O. Eissfeldt (1959a, pp. 494–500) calls attention to several similarities between Psalm 121 and Psalm 91. The latter is a “Psalm of Confession” (*Bekehrungspsalme*), in which a former worshiper of Elyon (= Shadday) now confesses Yahweh (91:1–2). Similarly, the author of Psalm 121 is a new convert to Yahweh. Verse 1 refers to his previous faith, when he looked to the gods on the high places for help. A priest responds in verse 2, encouraging him to hold fast to his recent “confession” that Yahweh alone is God. The connection of the “hills” or “mountains” with the high places on which foreign gods were worshiped is possible, but not explicitly stated in the text, which can be interpreted in other ways very naturally.

4. *An Encouragement not to Fear the Vengeance of Ejected Gods*

D. A. Walker (1898, pp. 205–206) asserts that both lines in verse 1 are questions, and reads verses 1–2:

Shall I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains
(high places, the seats of idolatrous worship)?
Nay verily, from whom cometh my help?
My help cometh from Yahweh
which made heaven and earth.

The mountains are those round about Jerusalem (cf. Ps 125:2). Psalm 121 was written shortly after the beginning of Josiah’s reform in 621 B.C.E., in which worship on the high places was forbidden (2 Kgs 23:5). Many Judeans feared that the gods they had worshiped on these high places would bring vengeance on them for this ejection. Possibly Psalm 121 was written to reassure these fearful individuals. They need not fear Shamash, the deposed “sun” god, when they “go out” of the city, nor Yareah, the deposed “moon” god, when they “come in” after a day’s work (cf. vss. 6 and 8). Yahweh is their “keeper,” and he is more

powerful than the gods of the high places. This interpretation assumes unnecessarily that the "mountains" refers to the high places, makes the sun and moon of verse 6 foreign deities, restricts the meaning of "going out and coming in" in verse 8 to leaving and returning to the city for daily work, and binds Psalm 121 to a specific historical situation without convincing evidence.

5. *A Spiritual Song*

M. H. E. Weippert (1983, pp. 279–289) proposes that Psalm 121 is a "spiritual song" performed before a congregation. Its apparent dialogue nature is only literary. While this view has some merit, Weippert's main concern is the polemic against sleeping deities in verses 3–4 rather than the psalm as a whole.

6. *A Dialogue between Departing Worshipers and Those Staying Behind*

Several Scholars understand Psalm 121 as a dialogue between worshipers just leaving their dwelling places for the sanctuary and their relatives or friends who stay behind. F. Bovet (1889, pp. 43, 44) argues that Psalms 120–121 at the beginning of the Pilgrimage Psalms correspond to Psalms 133–134 at the end. So, like Psalm 134 contains blessings for pilgrims as they leave Jerusalem by those abiding in the house of Yahweh, Psalm 121 contains blessings for pilgrims leaving for Jerusalem to worship by those remaining at home. The alteration between the first and second person indicates a dialogue. Its author is an Israelite in a foreign land.

P. Volz (1925, pp. 580–585) insists that Psalm 121 is a genuine "*Wechselgespräch*" in the sense that two persons are involved: a father and his son. The son is departing on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual Autumn Festival in the September heat. The father, concerned for his son's safety, commits his son to Yahweh's care.

J. Calès (1936, pp. 450–452) thinks Psalm 121 is a dialogue between those leaving home on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and those staying behind. The travelers, concerned with their safety, are encouraged to believe in Yahweh.

M. Mannati (1979, pp. 87, 90, 99) thinks Psalms 120–134 as a collection of psalms are arranged artificially for Jews returning from the diaspora on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Thus, "I" is Israel. These psalms span the whole spectrum of the pilgrimage *in order from beginning to end*: Psalm 120 contains the announcement of departure; and Psalm 134, the farewell to the Levites. Accordingly, Psalm 121 comes at the moment of departure. It is a genuine dialogue. The departing pilgrim(s)

utters verses 1–2; and the community, verses 3–8, divides into two choirs: the first, speaking in verses, 3, 5, and 7; and the second, in verses 4, 6, and 8.

K. Seybold (1978, pp. 55–72; 1979, pp. 247–268) concludes that the redactor of Psalms 120–134 transformed the personal God of the individual into the “keeper of Israel” (v. 4), made Psalm 121 a dialogical liturgy (p. 63), and (with Psalms 128, 133, and 134) connected this psalm with the giving of the blessing at Zion (p. 64). This collection is connected with the Priestly Blessing in Num 6:24–26 (pp. 64–66; following Liebreich). These psalms are arranged to accompany the pilgrim journey from the departure from home to the departure from Zion. Psalms 120–122 extend from the departure from home to the arrival at Jerusalem. The original pilgrimage in which this collection was used was the return from captivity; all subsequent pilgrimages using these psalms were a re-living of that event (pp. 69–72).

This interpretation has much to commend it, especially Volz’s view that Psalm 121 contains a father’s admonitions to his son. However, two advocates of this position (Mannati and Seybold) are dealing with the second stage of the use of Psalms 120–134 rather than with the original *Sitz im Leben*, which is the primary concern of the present paper. Further, a more careful examination of the content and terminology of Psalm 121 indicates that originally a different type of setting than that suggested here is more likely (see below).

7. *A Dialogue between a Group of Pilgrims and their Leader*

W. R. Taylor (1955, p. 644) thinks Psalm 121 contains a genuine dialogue between a group of pilgrims and their spiritual leader during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The pilgrims are encamped in desert regions at night, with sentries positioned on the tops of nearby hills to watch for dangers. One pilgrim, before entering his tent for the night, looks toward the hilltops and sees one of the sentries. Then he realizes that the real guardian of Israel is Yahweh.

W. O. E. Oesterley (1955, pp. 502–503) takes a similar view. He believes the “hills” of verse 1 are those around Jerusalem. In verse 1, the leader speaks triumphantly to his band of pilgrims, “From whence cometh my help?” The band replies in verse 2, “Thy help comes from Yahweh.” The leader responds with a wish in verse 3:

May he (Yahweh) not suffer my foot to slip,
may my guardian not slumber!

The band replies with reassurance in verse 4–8.

A major problem with this view is that it requires several emendations of the text. Furthermore, Oesterley apparently is thinking of the later setting of this psalm.

8. *A Dialogue between Two Pilgrims*

H. Herkenne (1936, p. 401) believes Psalm 121 is a dialogue between two pilgrims who have just caught sight of Jerusalem. Pilgrim A asks two questions: in verse 1 and in verse 3, which should be read:

Cannot perhaps your foot be allowed to totter,
(and) cannot perhaps your protector slumber?

These questions do not express genuine doubt, but are rhetorical. Pilgrim B replies with assurances in verses 2 and 4, which he expands in verses 5–8.

9. *A Song of Pilgrims Traveling to Jerusalem to Worship*

Many scholars suppose that Psalm 121 was written by (or for) pilgrims on their way from their homes to Jerusalem to attend one of the great festivals.⁵ F. Baethgen (1897, p. 372) thinks the speaker throughout is the home community, but that this psalm is suitable for pilgrims going to Jerusalem. F. Delitzsch (1883, p. 265) and G. Hylmö (1925, pp. 24–30) suppose that Psalm 121 was originally written by an individual in Babylonian exile just before he set out to return to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. J. A. Alexander (1864, p. 509), A. F. Kirkpatrick (1902, p. 736), J. P. Peters (1922, pp. 443–445, 447), and N. Peters (1930, pp. 316–317) suggest that it was to be sung (antiphonally?) when pilgrims first caught sight of Jerusalem.

C. C. Keet (1969, pp. 27, 28, 30) and W. S. Prinsloo (1980, pp. 162–168) contend that this psalm was a monologue composed by a traveler in the group. The psalmist declares that Yahweh alone is dependable because he is creator of heaven and earth (v. 2), keeper of Israel (v. 4), and guardian of the individual (vss. 5–8). Verse 1 is a polemic against other gods, who dwell on the mountains; and verse 6 is a polemic against the worship of the sun (god) and moon (god).

5. In addition to the scholars mentioned below, B. Duhm (1922, p. 430), E. H. Blakeney (1948, p. 111), A. Cohen (1950, pp. 420, 421), A. Weiser (1962, p. 745), R. Tournay (1964, pp. 476–477), and B. Gemser (1968, pp. 170–175). Gemser suggests that originally Psalm 121 referred to a farmer going to and returning from his work; but in the collection, to pilgrims going to and returning from a festival. Although this collection is intended as pilgrimage songs, “. . . moet men de meeste dezer psalmen niet als oorspronkelijk en opzettelijk voor de pelgrimsreizen gedicht beschouwen” (p. 171).

10. *A Liturgy of Blessing*

A widely held view of Psalm 121 is that it is a liturgy of blessing, that it contains a dialogue between a worshiper (or worshipers) and a priest (or priests), in which the priest utters a divine blessing on the worshiper. The worshiper speaks in verse 1, and the priest in verses 2–8;⁶ or the worshiper speaks in verse 1, the priest responds in the second person in verse 2, the worshiper replies in the first person in verse 3, and the priest speaks in verses 4–8;⁷ or the worshiper (a representative of Israel: either the king or some other leader) speaks in verses 1–2, and the priest pronounces the blessing in verses 3–8;⁸ or the worshiper (a representative of Israel) speaks in verses 1–4, and the priest utters the blessing in verses 5–8;⁹ or the priest or Levite speaks throughout.¹⁰

11. *A Dismissal Ceremony*

Several scholars believe Psalm 121 contains a dialogue between a pilgrim departing from the sanctuary and a fellow-pilgrim staying behind,¹¹ or a priest (or priests).¹² The pilgrim expresses his concern over possible perils of the journey (vs. 1, or vss. 1–2), and his friend or the priest assures him that Yahweh will guard him from all dangers (vss. 2–8, or vss. 3–8). The “going out and coming in” (vs. 8) is the departure

6. So H. Schmidt (1934, p. 222), G. W. Anderson (1962, p. 440), J. I. Durham (1971, p. 421), A. A. Anderson (1972, p. 851), and L. Sabourin (1974, p. 276).

7. So H. Gunkel (1929, pp. 539–540) and E. A. Leslie (1949, p. 215). Gunkel (p. 541) contends that there is no indication that someone is about to depart on a journey, whether a pilgrimage or otherwise.

8. So basically L. Delekat (1967, pp. 76–77, 81), J. H. Eaton (1967, p. 280), R. E. Murphy, O. Carm. (1968, p. 598), and M. Dahood (1970, p. 199). Delekat thinks the author of Psalm 121 was given verses 3–8 in writing by a priest after offering a sacrifice of homage. The original author of verses 3–8 was a worshiper of the deities of the high places, but became convinced they could not help, for Yahweh is superior to the deities of the high places. This reconstruction is very subjective, and hardly likely.

9. So S. Mowinckel (1921–1924, V, pp. 47–50; in contrast to II, p. 170–171; see V, p. 49, n. 1). Mowinckel argues that this psalm was part of the ark procession at the Enthronement (or New Year, or Autumn) Festival (= Feast of Tabernacles) (see also 1921–1924, II:326–328; III:111, 113; 1962, II:50, 76, 82–83, 129–130).

10. So J. M. P. van der Ploeg (1971, pp. 351–354). He reasons that the author’s purpose is to encourage pilgrims at the Jerusalem temple.

11. Apparently A. Weiser (1962, pp. 745–747) believes the one who stays behind is a fellow pilgrim, although he may have a priest in mind.

12. So J. Gilet (1957, pp. 596–598), A. J. Rasker (1961, p. 78), H.–J. Kraus (1966, pp. 833–837), A. Deissler (1968, pp. 231–232), A. A. Anderson (1972, pp. 851–854), L. E. Toombs (1972, pp. 295–296), and L. C. Allen (1983, pp. 152–154).

from the temple and the arrival at home, or the next trip to the temple (so H.-J. Kraus, 1966, p. 837).

The idea that a priest or Levite is one of the speakers is attractive, because there are striking similarities between this psalm and the Priestly Blessing in Num 6:24-26, and it was common for priests or Levites to pronounce divine blessings at the sanctuary (see. J. T. Willis, 1974, pp. 147-169). However, the evidence given below points in a somewhat different direction.

12. *Self-Assurances of a Mountain-Climber*

P. H. Pollock (1940, pp. 411-412) suggests that the author of Psalm 121 was a compulsive mountain-climber. As he looks to the mountains he is preparing to scale, the thoughts of this psalm come to him. He recognizes the dangers of the climb, and seeks Yahweh's help (vss. 1-2). He is confident that Yahweh will keep his foot from slipping (vs. 3), and will protect him from the sun and the moon (vss. 5-6).

13. *Self-Encouragement of a Businessman*

J. Morgenstern (1939, pp. 316-323) envisions the writer of Psalm 121 as a businessman contemplating a business trip. He will travel a familiar road. As he lifts his eyes to the mountains ahead, he fears marauding bands who might sweep down upon him (vs. 1). Then his thoughts turn to Yahweh who, as "maker of heaven and earth," is able to protect him from all dangers.

14. *A Monologue between a Worshiper and His Own Soul*

Some scholars affirm that the "dialogue" in Psalm 121 is only apparent. The poet is far from the temple. So, Psalm 121 cannot contain a real dialogue between a priest and a worshiper. The liturgical aspect of this psalm is literary. In reality, it contains a monologue between a worshiper and his own soul; he becomes his own priest. His faith provides the answer to his fears. The question in verse 1 is rhetorical, and the psalmist answers his own question. He composed this psalm as one means of discharging his pastoral responsibilities.¹³

15. *A Wisdom or Didactic Poem*

All the views suggested above are based on some aspect (aspects) of Psalm 121 as it has (they have) triggered the imagination of the investi-

13. So H. Kessler (1899, pp. 263-264), R. Kittel (1914, pp. 438-439), D. G. Castellino (1955, pp. 838-839), F. Nötscher (1962, pp. 272-273), and H. M. W. van Grol (1983, pp. 358-359, 363).

gator as to the kind of setting which produced it. The decision as to whether this reflects a genuine dialogue or a monologue plays a major role in one's assessment of the genre of this psalm. Certain views are not necessarily diametrically opposed to other positions, or with the view proposed below. At the same time, some views bring into focus weaknesses in other views. An attempt to take into consideration all the phenomena in this psalm has led the present writer to conclude that it can best be explained as a Wisdom or Didactic Poem. As far as I know, no one has examined this possibility to determine its merits and weaknesses, although H. J. Kraus's question (1966, p. 835) as to whether one is to assume a simple dialogue between a father and son at the time of the son's departure¹⁴ may point in this direction. The following arguments favor this hypothesis.

First, the question-answer technique in verses 1-2 is typical of the wisdom teachers.¹⁵ They arouse the curiosity of their pupils by asking a rhetorical question, then provide the appropriate answer. A. Jolles (1956, p. 106) and J. L. Crenshaw (1974, pp. 240, 241, 243) define a riddle as "a question that conceals an answer." However, this question-answer form is typical of other wisdom forms as well. Prov 23:29-30 offers one example:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
 Who has strife: Who has complaining?
 Who has wounds without cause?
 Who has redness of eyes?
 Those who tarry long over wine,
 those who go to try mixed wine.

(Additional examples occur in Prov 5:15-23; 15:7c-10; 22:29; 26:12; Job 11:7-12; 15:14-16; 28:20-23; Eccl 1:10).

Ps 121:1-2 is similar to these texts in structure, approach, and intention. A worshiper of Yahweh could hardly respond to the question, "From whence does my help come?", other than the way recorded here. Yahweh alone is the source of help. C. C. Keet (1969, p. 27) says: "Perhaps the most satisfactory explanation is to suppose that the psalmist himself declares his trust in Yahweh by using the form of question and answer."

14. A. Weiser (1962, p. 746) and A. A. Anderson (1972, p. 851) also suggest that Psalm 121 may contain a dialogue between a father and his son.

15. J. K. Kuntz (1974, pp. 197-198) argues that one criterion for determining a Wisdom Psalm is the use of rhetorical questions. W. O. E. Oesterley (1955, p. 503) refers to the "didactic tone" of Psalm 121.

Second, Ps 121:3–8 apply the principle of verses 1–2 to an individual (the pronominal suffix in vss 3–8 is masculine singular throughout). This is typical of Wisdom Teachers. For example, in Prov 3:19–20, the sage states the general principle that Yahweh founded the earth and established the heavens by “wisdom.” Then in verses 21–26, he urges his “son” to keep wisdom in all facets of life (using the second person masculine singular pronominal suffix and the second person singular verb throughout). The speaker in Proverbs 4–7 addresses several pupils, for he uses *bānîm*, “sons,” several times (cf. e.g., 4:1; 5:7; 7:24), and yet each time he returns to the singular, as if he were addressing one student (see also Prov 23:1–8, 22–28; Eccl 4:17–5:5; 7:9–14; 9:7–10).

Third, the author of Psalm 121 applies a general maxim concerning the people of Israel (vs. 4) to the individual (vss. 3, 5–8). In keeping with this, certain passages in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes apply to the individual teachings that texts outside Wisdom Literature apply to Israel. For example, Joel 4:16 states:

The Lord is a refuge to his people,
a stronghold (*mā'ôz*) to the people of Israel.

(See similarly Nah 1:7; Neh 8:10). But Prov 10:29 affirms virtually the same thing of the individual:

The Lord is a stronghold (*mā'ôz*) to him whose way is upright,
but destruction to evildoers.

(Also, compare Jer 4:14 with Prov 15:26; see also Jer 6:19; 18:12; Isa 65:2.)

Fourth, the reference to Yahweh as the one “who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121:2) reflects the theme of creation, which is a major theme in the Wisdom Literature (see e.g., Job 28:38–41; Prov 3:19–20; 8:22–26; Eccl 1:3–11; 3:11; O. S. Rankin, 1936, pp. 9–15; G. von Rad, 1972, pp. 144–185, 298–303). Of course, Yahweh is called “Maker of heaven and earth” outside the Wisdom Literature (as e.g., in Gen 14:19, 22; see N. C. Habel, 1972, pp. 321–337), but a word, expression, or concept does not have to be *unique* to a book or body of literature to be *characteristic* of that material. For example, Yahweh is called “the Holy One of Israel” twenty-five times in the book of Isaiah, and consequently it is clearly *characteristic* of this book. But this divine title is not *unique* to the book of Isaiah, as it occurs also in 2 Kgs 19:22; Ps 71:22; 78:41; 89:19 (Eng. 18); Jer 50:29; 51:5; Ezek 39:7. The same point applies also to some of the arguments to follow.

Fifth, the concept of Yahweh as “helper” (^{c-z-r}) of the individual (Ps 121:3, 5–8) appears in the Wisdom Ps 37:40:

The Lord helps them (*ya^czērēm*) (the righteous) and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

(See Job 6:13.)

Sixth, the designation of Yahweh as “keeper” (*š-m-r*) of Israel (vs. 4) and of individuals (vss. 3, 5, 7, [twice], 8) occurs several times in the Wisdom Literature. The following examples are significant. (a) The psalmist states in verse 3:

He (Yahweh) will not let your foot be moved (*lammôṭ raglekā*),
he who keeps you (*šōmērekā*) will not slumber.

Similarly, the Wisdom Teacher says in Prov 3:26:

For the Lord will be your confidence
and will keep your foot (*wešāmar raglākā*) from being caught.
(See also Ps 91:12).

(b) In 121:7a, the psalmist says:

The Lord will keep you from all evil (*yišmorkā mikkol rā^c*).

This thought is similar to that of Ps 91:9–11:

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your habitation,
no evil (*rā^cāh*) shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent,
for he will give his angels charge of you
to keep you (*lišmorkā*) in all your ways.

(c) Yahweh is designated as “your keeper” (*šōmērekā*) in verse 5a. In the Wisdom Literature, Yahweh is called keeper of the individual in Ps 37:28;¹⁶ 91:11;¹⁷ Job 29:2 (see Prov 4:6; 7:5, referring to Wisdom).

Seventh, the figure of Yahweh as the “shade” (*šēl*) over the psalmist (vs. 5b) appears in the Wisdom Ps 91:1, and in two psalms influenced by Wisdom (17:8; 36:8 [Eng. 7]).¹⁸ Further, the idea of Yahweh being at the psalmist’s “right hand” (*yēmînekā*, vs. 5b) reflects Wisdom language (cf. Ps 17:7; 73:23;¹⁹ 91:7; Job 40:14; Prov 3:16; Eccl 10:2).

16. For Psalm 37 as a Wisdom Psalm, see H. L. Jansen (1973, pp. 51, 137, 139), A. Descamps (1958, pp. 195), and L. Sabourin, S. J. (1964, pp. 51–53).

17. For Psalm 91 as a Wisdom Psalm, see H. L. Jansen (1937, pp. 137–138), O. Eissfeldt (1965, pp. 86, 125–126), G. Fohrer (1968, p. 290), and P. Rowntree (1969, pp. 25, 38–40).

18. For the influence of Wisdom on Psalms 17 and 36, see P. Rowntree (1969, pp. 25, 42–43, 53–54).

19. On Psalm 73 as a Wisdom Psalm, see A. Descamps (1958, p. 195), L. Sabourin, S. J. (1964, pp. 51–53), O. Eissfeldt (1965, pp. 125, 127), and G. Fohrer (1968, p. 289).

Eighth, the assurance that Yahweh will protect the psalmist from the sun and moon (vs. 6) may reflect an ancient belief that the sun, moon, and stars were deities (cf. Deut 17:3; 2 Kgs 23:5; Ezek 8:16). But the Israelites affirmed that Yahweh is greater than the heavenly beings, for he created them. Therefore, they are subject to him, and even praise him (cf. Josh 10:12–13; Ps 19:5 [Eng. 4]; 74:16; 136:8; 148:3; Amos 8:9; Isa 49:10; Jer 31:35; Hab 3:11). Such thoughts occur in Job 9:7–9; 25:5; and 31:26, passages which reflect longstanding beliefs in the wisdom schools. These beliefs form a part of the thought world in which the author of Psalm 121 lived. The thought of Ps 121:6 also occurs in Ps. 91:5–6, a Wisdom Psalm.

Ninth, the expression “going out and coming in” (*yāṣāʾ* and *bôʾ*, vs. 8) may refer to the psalmist’s daily activities, or to his journey as a pilgrim.²⁰ This expression is not *unique* to the Wisdom Literature (it occurs in Josh 2:2, 5; 1 Sam 18:16; 2 Sam 5:2; 1 Chr 27:1; 2 Chr 15:5). At the same time, it is found frequently enough in Wisdom texts (cf. Job 1:6–7, 12: 2:1–2, 7; Eccl 1:4; using *šûb* instead of *bôʾ* in Prov 2:19; Eccl 5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]; using *hālak* instead of *yāṣāʾ* in Prov 7:19–20; Eccl 8:10) to be regarded as *characteristic* of Wisdom language.

Tenth, arguments six (a, b, c), seven, and eight (above) show that there are several striking similarities between Psalms 121 and 91 (cf. 121:3 with 91:12; 121:7 with 91:9–11; 121:5a with 91:11; 121:5b with 91:1, 7; 121:6 with 91:5–6), as O. Eissfeldt (1965, pp. 111, 120, 126; 1966a, pp. 498–500), L. C. Allen (1983, pp. 152, 154), and others have emphasized. Now since Psalm 91 is a Wisdom Psalm (see note 19), it is reasonable to believe the same is true of Psalm 121.

Eleventh (and finally), it is generally acknowledged that three of the Songs of Ascents are Wisdom Psalms, viz., 127, 128, and 133.²¹ Thus it would not be surprising to find another Wisdom Psalm in this collection. In fact, there are connections between Psalm 121 and these three psalms in spite of their divergent themes. Yahweh is depicted as man’s helper (121:1–2 and 127:1–3; 128:1–4). Zion is the place of his blessings (121:1–2 and 128:5; 133:3). He blesses both the individual and Israel (121:4 and 128:6). Yahweh does not sleep (121:3–4), so his beloved may

20. Several scholars (including F. Baethgen, 1897, p. 373; A. F. Kirkpatrick, 1902, p. 738; A. Cohen, 1950, p. 421; B. Gemser, 1968, p. 175; C. C. Keet, 1969, p. 30; A. A. Anderson, 1972, p. 854; and L. C. Allen, 1983, p. 152) admit that either view is possible in this psalm.

21. So A. Descamps (1958, p. 195), L. Sabourin, S. J. (1964, p. 52), O. Eissfeldt (1965, pp. 86, 125, 126 on Psalms 128 and 133), G. Fohrer (1968, p. 292), P. Rowntree (1969, pp. 25, 40–42), and J. K. Kuntz (1974, p. 190).

sleep securely (127:2). Yahweh is described as “keeper” (121:3–5, 7–8 and 127:1). Going out and coming in (121:8) is similar in thought to rising up early and going late to rest (127:2). And there is concern for Yahweh’s continued protection and blessing in the future (121:8 and 128:5–6; 133:3). The evidence set forth in the ten arguments above and these connections between Psalm 121 and Psalms 127, 128, and 133 seem to favor the possibility, if not the probability, that Psalm 121 is a Wisdom Psalm. In this case, an interesting structure for the order of the Songs of Ascents would emerge. A Wisdom Psalm (121) would stand next to the initial psalm in the collection, another (133) next to the last psalm, and two Wisdom Psalms (127, 128) in the center.

Now if the line of reasoning in this paper points in the right direction, two additional thoughts seem appropriate. First, Wisdom Psalms are not necessarily anti- or extra-cultic in form or content. They may have arisen in a non-cultic setting, but they were suitable for various cultic uses. Second, the Wise Men who produced the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible should be viewed as members of, participants in, and contributors to the Israelite community (cf. Jer 8:8–10; 18:18, where they appear alongside the priests and the prophets), not as separate from, rival to, and exclusive of that community. Psalm 121 perhaps represents a significant contribution of the Wise Men to that community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, J. A. 1964. *The Psalms Translated and Explained*. Grand Rapids.
- Allen, L. C. 1983. *Psalms 101–150. Word Biblical Commentary 21*. Waco.
- Anderson, A. A. 1972. *The Book of Psalms 2. New Century Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids.
- Anderson, G. W. 1962. “The Psalms.” *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, pp. 409–443. Ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley. London.
- Baethgen, F. 1897. *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*. 2. Auflage. *Handkommentar zum Alten Testament II/2*. Göttingen.
- Barnes, W. E. 1931. *The Psalms with Introduction and Notes. Westminster Commentaries 16/1*. London.
- Beaucamp, É., O. F. M. 1976. *Le Psautier. Ps 73–150. Sources Bibliques*. Paris.

- . 1979. "Psaumes: II. Le Psautier." *Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément* 9: cols. 125–206. Paris.
- Blakeney, E. H. 1948. "Psalm cxxi. 1–2." *The Expository Time* 59:111.
- Bovet, F. 1889. *Les Psaumes des Maaloth: Essai d'Explication*. Paris.
- Briggs, C. A., and E. G. Briggs. 1906. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms II. The International Critical Commentary*. New York.
- Butenwieser, M. 1938. *The Psalms Chronologically Treated with a New Translation*. Chicago.
- Calès, J. 1936. *Le Livre des Psaumes, II. Psaumes: LXXIII–CL*. 6th ed. Paris.
- Castellino, D. G. 1955. *Libro dei Salmi. La Sacra Bibbia*. Rome.
- Cheyne, T. K. 1904. *The Book of Psalms II*. London.
- Cohen, A. 1950. *The Psalms. Soncino Books of the Bible*. London.
- Crenshaw, J. L. 1974. "Wisdom." *Old Testament Form Criticism*. Ed. J. H. Hayes. *Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion* 2:225–264. San Antonio.
- Dahood, M. 1970. *Psalms III. The Anchor Bible* 17A. Garden City.
- Davies, T. W. 1904. *The Psalms (LXXIII–CL) II. The New Century Bible*. New York.
- Deissler, A. 1968. *Le Livre des Psaumes. Verbum Salutis. Ancient Testament* 2. Paris.
- Delekat, L. 1967. *Asylie und Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum. Eine Untersuchung zu den Privaten Feindpsalmen*. Leiden.
- Delitzsch, F. 1883. *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*. Trans. D. Eaton. New York.
- Descamps, A. 1958. "Pour un Classement Littéraire des Psaumes." *Mélanges Bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert. Travaux de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 4:187–196. Paris.
- Duhm, B. 1922. *Die Psalmen erklärt. Kurzer Hand-kommentar zum Alten Testament XIV*. 2. Auflage. Tübingen.
- Durham, J. I. 1971. "Psalms." *The Broadman Bible Commentary* 4:153–464. Ed. C. J. Allen. Nashville.
- Eaton, J. H. 1967. *Psalms. Torch Bible Commentaries*. London.
- Eissfeldt, O. 1959a. "Psalms 121." *Stat crux dum volviture orbis. Eine Festschrift für Landesbischof D. Hanns Lilje, Abt zu Loccu, zum sechzigsten Geburtstag am 20. August 1959*, pp. 9–14, Berlin. = 1966a. *Kleine Schriften* III:494–500. Tübingen.
- . 1959b. "Psalm 132." *Die Welt des Orients* II: 480–483. = 1966b. *Kleine Schriften* III: 481–485. Tübingen.
- . 1965. *The Old Testament: An Introduction*. Trans. P. R. Ackroyd. New York.

- Fohrer, G. 1968. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Trans. D. E. Green. Nashville.
- Gemser, B. 1968. *De Psalmen. Tekst en Uitleg II*. Nijkerk.
- Giblet, J. 1957. "Brevis elucidation Psalmi CXXI (Vulg. CXX)." *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 42:596–598.
- Grey, H. G. 1916. "Psalm cxxi. 1." *The Expository Times* 27: 185–86.
- van Grol, H. W. M. 1983. "De Exegeet als Restaurateur en Interpret: Een Verhandeling over de Bijbelse Poetica met Ps. 121 als Exempel." *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 44:234–261, 350–365.
- Gunkel, H. 1929. *Die Psalmen*. 4. Auflage. Göttingen.
- Habel, N. C. 1972. "'Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth': A Study in Tradition Criticism." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:321–337.
- Herkenne, H. 1936. *Das Buch der Psalmen. Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testamentes V/2*. Bonn.
- Hillers, D. R. 1968. "Ritual Procession of the Ark and Ps 132." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30:48–55.
- Hylmö, G. 1925. *De s. k. Valfartssångerna i Psaltaren (Psalmi CXX–CXXIV)*. *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift* NF 21/2. Lund.
- Jansen, H. L. 1937. *Die spätjüdische Psalmendichtung: Ihr Entstehungskreis und ihr "Sitz im Leben."* Eine Literaturgeschichtlich-Soziologische Untersuchung. Oslo.
- Jolles, A. 1956. *Einfache Formen*. 2. Auflage. Halle.
- Keet, C. C. 1969. *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary upon Psalms CXX to CXXXIV*. Greenwood.
- Kennedy, J. 1916. "Psalm cxxi. 1." *The Expository Times* 27: 138–139.
- Kessler, H. 1899. *Die Psalmen. Kurzgefasster Kommentar Alten und Neuen Testaments. A. Altes Testament VI/1*. 2. Auflage. München.
- Kidner, D. 1975. *Psalms 73–150. A Commentary of Books III–V of the Psalms*. London.
- Kirkpatrick, A. F. 1902. *The Book of Psalms. The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. Cambridge.
- Kissane, E. J. 1964. *The Book of Psalms*. Dublin.
- Kittel, R. 1914. *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt. Kommentar zum Alten Testament XIII*. Leipzig.
- Kruse, H. 1983. "Psalm CXXXII and the Royal Zion Festival." *Vetus Testamentum* 33:279–297.
- Kraus, H.–J. 1966. *Psalmen. Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament XV/2 3*. Auflage. Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Kuntz, J. K. 1974. "The Canonical Wisdom Psalms of Ancient Israel—Their Rhetorical, Thematic, and Formal Dimensions." *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in honor of James Muilenburg*. Ed. J. J. Jackson

- and M. Kessler. *Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series* 1: 186–222. Pittsburgh.
- Leslie, E. A. 1949. *The Psalms*. Nashville.
- Liebreich, L. J. 1955. "The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74:33–36.
- Lipiński, É. 1979. "Psaumes: I. Formes et Genres Littéraires." *Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément* 9:cols. 1–125. Paris.
- Mannati, M. 1979. "Les Psaumes Graduels Constituent-ils Un Genre Littéraire Distinct à l'Interieur du Psautier Biblique?" *Semitica* 29:85–100.
- Marrs, R. 1982. *The Šyry-Hm^clwt (Psalms 120–134): A Philological and Stylistic Analysis*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.
- Morgenstern, J. 1939. "Psalm 121." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58:311–323.
- Mowinckel, S. 1921–1924. *Psalmenstudien* I–VI. Oslo.
- _____. 1967. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* 1–2. Trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas. Nashville.
- Murphy, R. E., O. Carm. 1968. "Psalms." *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* I, pp. 569–602. Englewood Cliffs.
- Nötscher, F. 1962. *Die Psalmen. Echter-Bibel*. Würzburg.
- Oesterley, W. O. E. 1955. *The Psalms*. London.
- Peters, J. P. 1922. *The Psalms as Liturgies*. New York.
- Peters, N. 1930. *Das Buch der Psalmen übersetzt und kurz erklärt*. Paderborn.
- van der Ploeg, J. P. M. 1971. *Psalmen uit de grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd. De Boeken van het Oude Testament*. Eds. W. Grossouw and J. P. M. van der Ploeg. Roermond.
- Pollock, P. H. 1940. "Psalm 121." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59:411–412.
- Porter, J. R. 1954. "The Interpretation of 2 Samuel VI and Psalm CXXXII." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 5:161–173.
- Praetorius, F. 1917. "Bemerkungen zu den Šīr hamma^cālōt." *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 71:389–400.
- Press, R. 1958. "Der zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund der Wallfahrtspsalmen." *Theologische Zeitschrift* 14:401–415.
- Prinsloo, W. S. 1980. "Psalm 121: 'n Triomfied van vertroue." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 21:162–168.
- von Rad, G. 1972. *Wisdom in Israel*. Trans. J. D. Martin. Nashville.
- Rankin, O. S. 1936. *Israel's Wisdom Literature*. New York.

- Rasker, A. J. 1961. "Psalm 121." *Herr, tue meine Lippen auf. Eine Predigthilfe*. 2. Auflage. Ed. G. Eichholz. V, pp. 76–84. Wuppertal-Barmen.
- Rowntree, P. 1969. *Wisdom in the Psalms*. Cardiff.
- Sabourin, L. 1964. "Un classement littéraire des Psaumes." *Sciences Ecclésiastiques* 16:23–58.
- . 1974. *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*. New Ed. New York.
- Schmidt, H. 1934. *Die Psalmen. Handbuch zum Alten Testament*. Erste Reihe 15. Ed. O. Eissfeldt. Tübingen.
- Seybold, K. 1978. *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen. Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Psalm 120–134. Biblische Theologische Studien* 3. Eds. F. Hahn, H.–J. Kraus, W. H. Schmidt, and W. Schrage. Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- . 1979. "Die Redaktion der Wallfahrtspsalmen." *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91:247–268.
- Taylor, W. R. (Exegesis) and F. H. Ballard (Exposition). 1955. "The Book of Psalms." *The Interpreter's Bible* IV, pp. 638–712. Ed. G. A. Buttrick. Nashville.
- Terrien, S. 1952. *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*. New York.
- Toombs, L. E. 1972. "The Psalms." *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, pp. 253–303. Ed. C. M. Laymon. London.
- Tournay, R. and R. Schwab. 1964. *Les Psaumes. La Sainte Bible* 15. 3d ed. Paris.
- Volz, P. 1925. "Zur Auslegung von Psalm 23 und 121." *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 36:576–585.
- Walker, D. A. 1898. "Note on Psalm CXXI.1." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 17:205–06.
- Weippert, M. H. E. 1983. "Slapende en ontwakende of stervende en herrijzende goden?" *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 37:279–289.
- Weir, T. H. 1915–1916. "Psalm cxxi.1." *The Expository Times* 27:90–91.
- Weiser, A. 1962. *The Psalms. A Commentary*. Trans. H. Hartwell. *The Old Testament Library*. Philadelphia.
- Whitley, W. T. 1915–1916. "Psalm cxxi.1." *The Expository Times* 27:186.
- Willis, J. T. 1974. "Ethics in a Cultic Setting." *Essays in Old Testament Ethics (J. P. Hyatt, In Memorium)*, pp. 147–169. New York.