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An Interpretive Analysis of Psalm 121

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Often referred to as the “warriors prayer,” Psalm 121 has been universally applied to anyone facing a perilous journey or great hardship. Yet, because of the psalm’s apparently simplistic verses, many fail to evaluate the psalm for its deeper spiritual meaning. Though often applied to the soldier’s mission, Psalm 121 originally referred to pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem. An analysis of the context and symbols of Psalm 121 reveals that this psalm did not originally discuss hardship, but rather it expressed enthusiasm for the journey undergone by pilgrims and established God as the supreme deity. However, the psalm’s core theme of the universality of God has enabled the message of this psalm to be applied to struggles beyond the pilgrimage.

In order to examine the themes in Psalm 121, it is first necessary to examine the context in which the psalm was authored. Psalm 121 is included among psalms 120 through 134, which are collectively referred to as the “Psalms of the Ascents.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Biblical scholars believe that Psalm 121, along with the additional Psalms of the Ascents were sang or recited during rites performed at religious celebrations.[[2]](#footnote-1) Further, the participants in these festivals were pilgrims who were on their way to Jerusalem in order to make an “ascents of praise to Zion.”[[3]](#footnote-2) Despite the devotion to Yahweh that is expressed in the mission of the pilgrims, the period in which Psalm 121 was written in also features sources of religious insecurity. Scholars assert that Psalm 121 was written under the rule of Josiah where the burning of incense to appease the sun and moon gods of other religions was decisively banned.[[4]](#footnote-3) Due to the inability to participate in appeasement rituals, many feared retribution from the gods from other religions.[[5]](#footnote-4) Thus, doubt over the absoluteness of Yahweh also informs the worldview of the authors of Psalm 121.

In addition to considering the context of Psalm 121, it is also necessary to analyze the textual elements of the psalm in order to interpret its meaning. Verses 1-4 are most crucial to uncovering the key themes that repeat throughout the psalm. The psalm opens with the following verses:

I raise my eyes toward the mountains

From where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord

the maker of heaven and earth.[[6]](#footnote-5)

An initial review of this psalm conveys the message that the author looks to God to help him successfully cross the mountains. However, this misinterpretation can cause the reader of the psalm to overlook the themes that are present within these opening verses. Reviewing the open verses in context of the psalm’s title reveals the psalm’s reference to the journey of pilgrims to Jerusalem.

The title of Psalm 121, “A Song of Ascents,” provides an overview of the meaning that is conveyed the opening verses of the psalm. As scholar Jerome Creach notes, the translation of the term “ascent” from Hebrew provides an unclear meaning for the modern reader.[[7]](#footnote-6) However, the meaning of this title can be obtained from Psalm 122.4 where the term is used to refer to a ritual journey to Jerusalem.[[8]](#footnote-7) Elaborating upon the social setting in which Psalm 121 would have been invoked, Creach establishes that Psalm 121 was likely recited during the preparation time preceding the pilgrimage.[[9]](#footnote-8) Further, the observation that the psalm shifts in pronouns between verses 1 and 2 suggest that the psalm was used as a liturgy in public worship.[[10]](#footnote-9) Following the first verse, the author appears to redirect a question toward other pilgrims.[[11]](#footnote-10) Thus, it is likely that this psalm was repeated in a celebratory rather than solemn manner. Through this context, the mood that is conveyed by the psalmist can be further analyzed.

While the title of Psalm 121 reveals the joyous occasion in which the psalm was incited, an analysis of the first verse also alters the connotations of the psalm. However, traditional misinterpretations and disputes over the meaning of the first four verses of the psalm have impeded upon the accurate understanding of these verses. First, there were conflicting views on what the act of lifting one’s eyes towards the mountains conveys in the first verse that altered the interpretation. In combination with the question asking where the pilgrim will find help, the opening verse has often been interpreted to express the spiritual struggle of the author, who is asking for assistance facing the dangers of ascending the mountains.[[12]](#footnote-11) Yet, the settled interpretation reveals the attitude that the psalmist held towards the journey that pilgrims embarked upon. As Biblical scholar John Willis contends, many scholars believe that this passage does not refer to the physical act of looking towards a mountain, but rather “a spiritual yearning or anticipation.”[[13]](#footnote-12) Further, the mountain referred to in the first verse can be understood as the hills upon which Jerusalem, the destination of the pilgrims, rested.[[14]](#footnote-13) Thus, Willis concludes that to raise one’s eyes towards the mountains was to optimistically look towards the destination.[[15]](#footnote-14) Through this context, the psalmist expresses anticipation of the journey rather than angst over the perils that will be faced during the pilgrimage.

In addition to expressing the joy of the pilgrimage, Psalm 121 asserts the supremacy of God as its second main theme. As the contextual review of the Psalms of the Ascents highlighted, the pilgrims of Psalm 121 were making their pilgrimage during a period where the performance of rituals to appease other gods was banned. Thus, while the psalm also serves the purpose of assuring the pilgrims that Yahweh is the only God who is needed to protect them from the perils they might face on their journey. As Creach notes, verse 3 is significant in achieving this goal because it established God as the “maker of heaven and earth.”[[16]](#footnote-15) This distinction is important because it is repeated in Psalms 124:8 and 134:3, which underscores the phrase’s centrality as a tenet of faith.[[17]](#footnote-16) Also, the title “maker of heaven and earth” appears in the Apostle’s Creed, demonstrating its significance to the Church as a descriptor of Yahweh.[[18]](#footnote-17) However, most significantly, in providing God with this designation, the psalmist signifies that God is superior to the other gods in the ancient world.[[19]](#footnote-18) This theme is central to the psalm and is expanded upon in additional verses.

An analysis of the setting of Psalm 121 further reveals the theme of God’s supremacy over pagan Gods. As the historical background of the psalm establishes, pilgrims before their departure primarily invoked the psalm. Yet, as Creach notes, the environment of the pilgrims is also reflected in the verses of the psalms.[[20]](#footnote-19) The mountains referenced in verse 1 serves as the first textual clue that reveals the psalmist’s core message. Though the mountains in verse 1 is traditionally thought to serve as a symbol for God, the psalm already distinguished God as being separate from the mountain by establishing God as the maker of heaven and earth.[[21]](#footnote-20) Thus, it can be inferred that the mountain represents a symbol that is distinct from Yahweh. While the pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem, they would also pass hilltops surrounding Jerusalem where the shrines of other gods could be found.[[22]](#footnote-21) By contrasting the supreme standing of God with the gods that are set along the hills, which the mountain refers to, the psalmist presents the message that Yahweh has standing over other gods.

Further symbols are presented in Psalm 121 to expand upon the theme of God’s superiority to the pagan Gods. In verses 3 and 6, the psalm states:

God will not allow your foot to slip;

your guardian does not sleep.

Truly, the guardian of Israel

Never slumbers nor sleeps.[[23]](#footnote-22)

These verses contrast the efficacy of God with the efficacy of the pagan Gods. During the season when the pilgrims were made, pagan Gods were often deemed to be asleep until the season of the harvest emerged.[[24]](#footnote-23) Again, the psalmist distinguishes Yahweh by establishing that their God is present throughout the year while the other Gods hibernate or die.

Additionally, the protection that the psalmist invokes can be viewed as an additional statement of the superiority of Yahweh. In verses 5 and 6, the psalmist asserts that God will provide shade to protect the pilgrim from the sun and the moon. However, these protections serves as symbolic rather than literal requests. Though the hills of Jerusalem were often open hills where pilgrims faced the intensity of the sun’s rays, the inclusion of the moon in the verse conveys the spiritual message that the author presents.[[25]](#footnote-24) During the period, the moon was thought to bring about lunacy, and thus was feared by pilgrims.[[26]](#footnote-25) Further, the sun invokes the symbol of the Egyptian sun god Ra, and the moon invokes the symbol of the Mesopotamian moon god Nanna.[[27]](#footnote-26) Taken into context, the psalmist is not requesting protection from physical dangers during the journey, but for protection from spiritual dangers presented by other deities. Thus, the psalm asserts God’s authority by conveying God’s ability to reign over the influence of other gods during the journey.

Upon initial interpretation, Psalm 121 appears to convey the fear that a traveler holds toward their journey. Thus, it has traditionally been invoked by soldiers and pilgrims alike to express the struggles of any individual facing a difficult journey. However, a contextual and textual analysis of the psalm reveals that it contains multifaceted meanings that are often overlooked by the modern worshiper. Originally written as liturgy for pilgrims to recite prior to their journey, the psalm was not intended for solemn interpretation, but to mark an occasion of joy. Further, the psalm attempts to remove doubt of the supremacy of Yahweh by establishing his superiority over other competing gods in the ancient world. Through this interpretive lens, it can be established that the symbols and themes contained in Psalm 121 assert the universality of God by demonstrating his ability to protect the pilgrim in all stages of his journey.

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4. Dean A. Walker, “Note on Psalm cxxxi. I.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 17, no. 2 (1898): 206, accessed October 15, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3268794. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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