

Exegesis of Palms 121 – Rev. Nishantha Fernando

Literary form and features

Psalm 121 can be identified as a testimony to a persons' faith when he was faced with a problem and, secondarily, as a liturgical blessing¹. It is often associated with the blessing of pilgrims in the home before they journey to Jerusalem². This priestly blessing is connected to the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:22-27)³. Psalm 121 is "used as a liturgy for travellers, with those going on journey reciting vv 1-2 and those remaining at home speaking the words of encouragement and blessing in vv 3-8"⁴. The word Yahweh is mentioned five times in the psalm (vv.2,5 [twice], 7, 8) and a key verbal idea, repeated six times, is "keeping" (vv.3,4,5,7[twice],8)⁵. The Psalm can be divided into four sections: verses 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 and 7-8. The first section is a mainly a pilgrim Psalm, in verse 3 "You" is a personal address in the second person singular. The "you" is always the object of YHWH'S action; only in v. 6 are the subjects that act on the "you" the sun and moon. All action is ultimately controlled by YHWH, and the acting subject is YHWH⁶. That shows YHWH has the ultimate authority over nature and there is nothing beyond his power. The Psalm shows YHWH as a guardian, protector of Israel. "Psalm 121 is about individual human life, always threatened, and the promise of YHWH'S all-encompassing protection"⁷. Verses 3-8 are three structured verse pairs: the initial pair (vs. 1, 2) is a testimony to Yahweh as 'my help', the next pair is a promise to the pilgrims, with the special nature of the 'help' as 'watching'⁸. "The second of each verse pair spells out actions that Yahweh will or will not undertake (vv.4, 6, 8)"⁹. According to Claus Westermann the first two verses of Psalms 121 are in the first person and rest of the other section is addressing a second person. The first section is about trust in God and the second about the promise of God for protection and guidance, therefore it is an individual blessing of Israel's worship as well as blessing of the pre journey¹⁰. The significant feature of the going out and coming

¹Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger. "Psalms 3" Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on The Bible' (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011),p.316.

²Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger. "Psalms 3" Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible' (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011),p.317.

³Craig C. Broyles. "New International Bible Commentary" Psalms' (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1999),p.449.

⁴Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (eds.). "Psalms for Preaching and Worship" A Lectionary Commentary ' (Michigan/Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009),p.312.

⁵Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (eds.). "Psalms for Preaching and Worship" A Lectionary Commentary ' (Michigan/Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009),p.313.

⁶Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger "Psalms 3" Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible' (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011),p.319.

⁷Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger "Psalms 3" Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible' (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011),p.320.

⁸Craig C. Broyles. "New International Bible Commentary" Psalms' (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1999),p.449.

⁹Craig C. Broyles. "New International Bible Commentary" Psalms' (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1999),p.449.

¹⁰Claus Westermann, The Living Psalms (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1989),p.290.

in under the protection of Yahweh is that every footstep of the devotee was watched by him (v.3)¹¹. It can also be identified as a simple dialogue between a father and a departing son¹². Another suggestion about this Psalms is that it is a promise to a King when he goes to battle and an assurance that he will return safely. When in connection to pilgrimage it could also be an address to a people who are going home¹³. Therefore, according to scholarly opinion this Psalm can be understood in different ways.

When compared to other Psalms, Psalm 91 has a close relationship to 121 particularly the subject of Yahweh's protection¹⁴. Verse 3 of the 121 and verse 3 of 91 are similar and speak of protection. Also the content of the message of the psalm is close to a priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26¹⁵. In a comparison between the NIV, the JPS, and the NRSV Bibles it can be seen that there are differences in the poetic features of the psalm¹⁶. There are also word differences and literary style differences. Psalm 122 is the only completed pilgrim song in the book of Psalms and Psalm 84 is closely related to those songs found in Isaiah 2:3 (=Micah 4:2); Jeremiah 31:6¹⁷. The pilgrimage songs always express the feelings of the individual and include a blessing.¹⁸

Historical and social context

Psalm 121 belongs to the smaller collections of Psalms 120-134 called 'songs for the processions'. As is stated in the headings most of these psalms were composed for the festivals of harvest and tabernacles¹⁹. Psalms 120 to 134 bear the unique title of 'A song of ascents, or degrees; these psalms could be connected to offering of the-first fruits at the temple at Pentecost²⁰. Psalms 121 belongs to book 5 of the Psalms and book 4 and 5 were identified as compositions of the 'second temple'²¹. Book five is the last book of psalms (Psalms 107-149) and it contains thanksgiving and communal hymns²². According to Jewish custom every male had to go three times a year to worship the God Yahweh in Jerusalem but it was not possible to do it alone because of the distance

¹¹Hans Joachim Kraus. "Psalms 60-150" A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).p.430.

¹² Hans Joachim Kraus. "Psalms 60-150" A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).p.428.

¹³ John Goldingay. Psalms Volume 3 (Michigan, Baker Academic, 2008).p.455.

¹⁴John Goldingay. Psalms Volume 3 (Michigan, Baker Academic, 2008).p.455.

¹⁵Leslie C. Allen. "Word Biblical Commentary Volume 21" Psalms 101-150' (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002).p.207.

¹⁶ Alastair G. Hunter. An Introduction to Psalms (T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies), (London, T&T Clark, 2008).p.64.

¹⁷Hermann Gunkel. An Introduction To The Psalms (Gorgia, Mercer University Press, 1998).p.236.

¹⁸ Hermann Gunkel. An Introduction To The Psalms (Gorgia, Mercer University Press, 1998).p.237.

¹⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel. The Psalms in Israel's Worship vol.2 (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962).p.195.

²⁰ Alastair G. Hunter. An Introduction to Psalms (T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies), (London, T&T Clark, 2008).p.19.

²¹Alastair G. Hunter. An Introduction to Psalms (T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies), (London, T&T Clark, 2008).p.36.

²²Erhard S. Gerstenberger. Psalms: Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry (The form of the Old Testament Literature,v.14, (Grand rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988).p.38.

and danger; therefore pilgrims went as groups to prevent risk of danger²³. Mountains were considered a danger and difficulties were faced by pilgrims when they went to Jerusalem through the hill country of Palestine²⁴. This is because of the way they had to go was not easy; but those who had faith in YHWH the God almighty of Israel depended on him for protection. Because they believed YHWH was God of mountains therefore there was no fear when walking through mountain regions. That mountains stand as a dwelling place of God (Ps.48:2-3, 87:1-2)²⁵. Also mountains stands as symbols of God's protection of Zion (psalm 125:2), as other gods shrines and as the route of the festal advent (Psalms 68:7; 76:4; Isaiah 52:7; Nahum 1:15)²⁶. The God of Israel's watchful eye was always upon people. He did not sleep but the other gods, of Israel's neighbours had a rest time. That is a mark of the uniqueness of the God of Israel in comparison to the other ancient Near Eastern gods. The other gods were sleeping when their people called them (1Kings 18:27), but the God of Israel did not so. Cain asked about his brother (Genesis 4:9) and showed himself lacking integrity and love, but Yahweh did not fail to keep and protect Israel²⁷. While the rest of the gods were identified in human form the God of Israel was the creator of humanity and not human; He was the guardian of Israel²⁸. Yahweh as keeper of Israel is always alive and awake (Ps.18:46.) In contrast to him the other vegetation gods of cultivated land were sleeping during changes of season (I Kings 18:27)²⁹. Therefore the significant priority for those who had faith in the God of Israel was that their life was protected and they did not need to worry about their lives; the main thing was they had to keep faith in him. As in verse 6 the moon shall not strike you it was a special insurance from Yahweh because in the Babylonian context disastrous effects are ascribed to the moon god; he is the cause of fever and leprosy³⁰. Verse 1 of the psalm was a naturally tempted to asked as question by a Jew in half pagan social context, because many sanctuaries 'on the hills' were represent ancient tradition of gods, the dough of the person was that if Yahweh was powerless or wouldn't help him. But the person who asked the question has an experienced of the

²³ Hermann Gunkel. *An Introduction To The Psalms* (Gorgia, Mercer University Press, 1998).p.235.

²⁴ Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger "Psalms 3" *Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011).p.321.

²⁵ Raymond E. Broun, S.S. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. Roland, E. Murphy, O. Carm (eds.). *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London, Geoferey Chapman, 1989).p.547.

²⁶ John H. Eaton. *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New translation* (London, T&T Clark International, 2003).425.

²⁷ Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (eds.). "Psalms for Preaching and Worship" *A Lectionary Commentary* (Michigan/Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).p.314.

²⁸ Frank Lothar Hossferld and Eric Zenger "Psalms 3" *Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011).p.324.

²⁹ Hans Joachim Kraus. "Psalms 60-150" *A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).p.429.

³⁰ Hans Joachim Kraus. "Psalms 60-150" *A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).p.430.

past of his for fathers who had faith in Yahweh; therefore the answer is verse 2. Then the worshiper gets proper answer of proclaimed in the very words of blessing of cultic liturgy which is in: 121:4, 7-8³¹.

Theological perspectives

In Psalm 121 the theology of creation is highly emphasised because the Psalmist is seeing God's creation and His/her power; he was trying to find refuge in God's protection through seeing God's own creation. The psalmist's faith was based on God the creator; therefore to him Yahweh is the source for everything and has all authority over nature as well as over all other sources of powers. Yahweh is the creator of heaven and earth. Yahweh is protector and creator, One who sustains the world and One who secures His faithful; every person was protected among the pilgrims³². Therefore one of the main theological emphases of this Psalms is the theology of protection because Yahweh is creator God of the universe; He/she has the power and authority to provide this protection. As the psalmist reflected upon that protection it was affirmed in later verses of the Psalms as an assurance of the security of God's people who were keen to worship Him/her in Jerusalem, where Yahweh's temple was situated. The significant feature of that protection was it could only be given by Yahweh; other gods could not give such protection because they were not in that powerful position. Therefore monotheism was the only option open to faithful Israel; only one God, no other gods; it was the God's commandment (Exodus 20:3-4) - which God had given to the people of Israel; the chosen people of Yahweh. The chosen people had therefore, a special duty to worship Yahweh truly. Yahweh was the source of the life, there were no fears of death nor fear of evil because for the faithful believer who worshipped Him/her would be looked after by him. Therefore the worshipper of Yahweh did not bother about life threatening circumstances because his life was in the hand of Yahweh. Therefore hope in Yahweh meant an experience of human security.

The significant feature on the receivers' side was that s/he should be a faithful to Yahweh, and then only would s/he find assurance, received from God. Therefore if someone wanted protection s/he should be on the side of Yahweh then only s/he received the blessing. When missionaries evangelised Asia and Africa those who were baptised got benefits. They said that the baptized were in the light where as others were in the darkness; therefore in the context of

³¹Sigmund Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* vol.2 (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962),p.129.

³²Cyril S. Rodd. "Psalms 73-150" *Epworth Preacher's Commentaries*' (London, Epworth Press, 1964),p.92.

conversion in to Christianity most people became Christian for reasons of practical survival, not as a real commitment to God; for instance in Sri Lanka in 1962 when Christian schools were taken over by the government a majority of teachers gave up Christianity and return to Buddhism. The theology of prosperity which most Christians groups are trying to implement at present teach that if you believe in Jesus/God or become Christian you will be blessed in everything. This is a challenge to the teaching of Christ in the context of the chosen people or baptized people.

For the Israelites worship in the sanctuary was a special event; the festivals were the high point of their spiritual life, roots of life and activity³³. It was the part of the covenant life between Yahweh and people of Israel as chosen people. Therefore participated to festivals was a sign of the fulfilling covenant life and it was a part of their spiritual life style.

³³Hans Joachim Kraus. "Theology of the Psalms" A Continental Commentary' (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992),p.101.