

The Pilgrimage of Life

In the classic film *The Sound of Music*, the high point comes when the von Trapp family flees their native Austria. With German soldiers in pursuit, the family hides in the convent where Maria once resided when she was a nun. The troops enter the convent, forcing the von Trapps to escape through a rear exit. As they hurry out the back, they come quickly to what appears to be a dead end. Seemingly in a hopeless situation, Maria exclaims (in King James English), “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help!” (Ps. 121:1). Inspired by this confident affirmation, the von Trapps slip away and cross the border into the Swiss Alps—evidently the “hills” that Maria had in mind.

It is not surprising that, in her distress, Maria appealed to the first verse of Psalm 121. This verse is one of the best known in the Psalter, and when a verse is known by heart, it can easily be called

“This psalm is an unqualified song of trust in the LORD’s help.” —James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation, 390.

upon in a moment of need. Surprisingly, though, knowing a Bible verse well can sometimes be a liability. When a verse is familiar, the meaning seems too obvious, and this familiarity tempts us to avoid the hard work of good interpretation. The measure of a good biblical understanding is fidelity to the text. Even though a psalm can have numerous legitimate applications because the language is poetic and flexible, not every interpretation is equally faithful to the central intent of the text. Some limits should be applied.

So, recognizing that good interpretation has limits, how should Psalm 121 be interpreted? Was Maria’s understanding of this psalm, as she escaped “to the hills,” a good one? In order to know, we must

ask two basic questions: (1) What was the original setting for this psalm? and (2) What picture of God underlies this psalm?

The Setting

Psalm 121 is unusual because it gives a clue to the original setting in its title, “A Song of Ascents.” In both English and Hebrew, the meaning of the word “ascents” is somewhat ambiguous, but a variation of the same term is found in the very next psalm, Psalm 122:4, in a reference to a ritual journey to Jerusalem (see also Ezra 7:9 and Ps. 24:3). This strongly suggests that Psalm 121 was used by pilgrims as a “traveling song,” as they made their way up to Jerusalem, ascending to the holy city. Indeed, Psalm 121 is placed with similar psalms, grouped for that very purpose (Psalms 120–134, which, as a group, are called “songs of ascent”). In its original setting, then,

Psalm 121 was probably chanted by pilgrims moving along the road ascending to Jerusalem and was not used as a cry of distress like Maria’s. (She might have quoted more appropriately from Psalms 3, 7, or 142, which are indeed “psalms of trouble,” works set during the time of Saul’s pursuit of David.)



The road to Jerusalem

The pilgrims in ancient Israel who uttered Psalm 121 would have been on their way

up to Jerusalem for one of the holy feasts, most of which lasted for several days. In fact, when the celebration of a feast was combined with travel time to and from Jerusalem, the total festivities could last several weeks. Therefore, the Old Testament speaks of festival “seasons” (NRSV: “appointed feasts”). Today, in a symbolic way, the church preserves Psalm 121 as a song for pilgrims journeying to a feast by placing it in the lectionary in late October, in the time before Advent and Christmas. Positioned this way, Psalm 121 is a pilgrim song of the church, preparing Christians each year for the

weeks of “pilgrimage,” mentally and spiritually, to the celebration of Christ’s coming.

Beyond the reference to “ascents” in the title, the body of Psalm 121 also offers clues about the psalm’s original setting. One telltale sign is the way the pronouns shift from first person in verses 1–2 (“I” and “my”) to second person in verses 3, 5–8 (“you” and “your”). This shift is a clue that Psalm 121 was used as a worshipful responsive chant, probably uttered either as the pilgrims started their journey to Jerusalem or at the close of the festival as the pilgrims left the Temple and made their way home. The first part of the chant (verses 1–2, and possibly verse 4) seems to be voiced by one of the pilgrims, who represents the whole company of travelers. The second part of the psalm would have been spoken in response by another voice. If the original setting of the psalm was the initial departure for Jerusalem, this second part could have been voiced by a travel leader, or perhaps one who is remaining at home. If the setting was the departure from the Temple, the latter part of the psalm was probably uttered by a priest at the Temple.

Understanding the original setting and use of this psalm in the pilgrim festivals can remind us today that God’s people are still a band of pilgrims and that the journey of faith is a community affair. Moreover, knowing that the psalm was used in the holy seasons of Israel’s worship can also be a valuable insight for the church. Faith is nurtured in the rhythms and festivals of the Christian year. The observance of seasons like Advent and Lent and of holy days like Christmas and Easter corresponds to the ancient festivals of Israel. The cycles of the church’s calendar celebrate the fact that faith is strengthened by moments of keen awareness of the visitation of God. Traveling the pilgrim road of such seasons as Advent and Lent each year helps give pace and direction to the life of faith. It reminds us in the “ordinary days” that the God “who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4).

Portrait of God

What picture of God do we see in Psalm 121? In order to discern the understanding of God that permeates this psalm, we need to correct a common misunderstanding of the first verse. In *The Sound of Music*, Maria uttered that verse as a statement of confidence: “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help!”

However, the Hebrew of the psalm treats that verse as a question: “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?” This rhetorical question sets up the affirmation of faith in verse 2: “My help comes from the LORD.”



A traveler might have seen shrines like these to other gods.

In other words, the way Maria utters Psalm 121:1 seems to imply that her help is going to come “from the hills.” Is this what the psalm means to say? Some believe so, but others suggest that “hills” (Ps. 121:1a) probably had a negative meaning. “Hills” refers either to dangerous territory filled with bandits (see Luke 10:30) or to the hilltops around

Jerusalem where shrines of other gods were located. (In the ancient mind, gods were thought to be tied to specific geographical locations. A god of a mountain would have absolute power on that mountain, or a god of a valley would have unrestricted power in that valley.) In either case, the answer to the question, “From where will my help come?” is a resounding, “Not from the hills!” Despite the fact that in 1 Kings 20:23 Yahweh is described as a “god of the hills” (a designation that is refuted within the same story in 1 Kings 20; see also Jer. 3:23), that does not seem to be the intention here.

Indeed, as the pilgrim casts a wary eye toward the treacherous hills and wonders “from where will my help come?” the psalm provides the reassurance that “help comes

from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:2). Though appearing only once in this psalm, this reference to God as creator of heaven and earth is very important. The same description occurs in two of the other psalms grouped in the songs of ascent (Pss. 124:8; 134:3), with the last occurrence

possibly acting as a conclusion to the whole collection (Psalms 120–134). The phrase “maker of heaven and earth” is, therefore, a central tenet of faith in the songs of ascent.

So, as the pilgrims traveled on their way to Jerusalem, even if

Many translations of Psalm 121:1 rely heavily on that of Martin Luther, who translated the phrase “from where my help comes” as a relative clause, instead of as a question, “From where will my help come?” which is a more accurate translation.

their journey was only from another region of Israel, they surely observed worship sites (in “the hills”) devoted to other deities—gods perhaps believed by their adherents to have ordered the cosmos. Thus, to confess that their God, Yahweh, was “maker of heaven and earth” was a declaration that these other deities were inferior to the Lord. The phrase “maker of heaven and earth” is one of the primary confessions of the church, found in the Apostles’ Creed. Here, too, it stands not only as an affirmation of the true God but also as a renunciation of the false gods who dwell “in the hills” of our own culture. For example, the secularization of society leads to the popular falsehood that human technology and progress prove God nonexistent, or at least make God irrelevant. Today, in the presence of these secular “deities,” the faithful are challenged to affirm that God is still sovereign, still “the maker of heaven and earth,” just as ancient Israelites professed Yahweh to be the only power ultimately in control of the universe.

This comparison of Yahweh to other deities continues in verses 3–4, where it is declared that Israel’s God “does not sleep or slumber.” Here Yahweh is called, “keeper,” the most prevalent description for God in the psalm (appearing six times). Israel’s neighbors commonly believed that their gods “slept” (or died) during winter months and were revived in seasons of growth and harvest. Israel emphatically rejected this; Yahweh never slumbers, never stops keeping watch over Israel.

The idea that God keeps constant watch over Israel and its pilgrims is intensified by the alternation of speakers in these two verses. One possible way to reconstruct the dialogue is that the first speaker, one of the pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, says “My help comes from the LORD” (v. 2). Then a second voice, perhaps a worship leader, replies, in effect, “May he not let your foot slip; may your keeper not sleep” (v. 3). Then the pilgrim responds, “Indeed! He neither sleeps nor slumbers. (He is) the keeper of Israel” (v. 4). In essence, then, the psalm renders its claims about God by playing them off against two false ideas: Does Israel’s help come from the “gods of the hills”? No, help comes only from Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth! Does Yahweh ever fall asleep like those other gods? No, the God who keeps Israel never slumbers!

So the “big picture” of God in this psalm is of one who created

Can gods fall asleep?

After their sacrifice remained untouched, Elijah taunted the worshipers of Baal at Mount Carmel and accused their god of sleeping (1 Kings 18:27).

the cosmos, who helps Israel, and who, unlike the gods of other peoples, never fails to keep watch. But people of faith need to know that the “big picture” of God speaks to the small places of our everyday lives. By using the common poetic device of parallelism, Psalm 121 allows these large beliefs about God to become smaller, more personal comforts as well. The vast claim that God is “maker of heaven and earth” (121:2b) is set parallel to the conviction that God is “my help” (121:1b). The large-scale proclamation that God is concerned about the whole people, that God is the “keeper of Israel” (121:4b), is placed alongside the more personal truth that God is “your keeper” (121:3b). Thus, the pilgrim confesses the faith that the one who ordered the universe and who keeps Israel from harm is also a personal God who guides the steps of each person on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In the final four verses of the psalm, we are introduced to a new image of God: God as “shade.” These verses are spoken again by a “worship leader,” and they not only confess the faith of the speaker, but are said as a blessing on behalf of the pilgrims for their safe-keeping as they travel. Verse 5 describes God as “your shade.” This is, of course, a soothing figure of speech. Imagine how comforting it would be to a traveler in the heat of the Palestinian countryside to think of God as “shade.” However, the picture of God as “shade” is more than just a consoling image; it is also a majestic one. In Psalm 36:7, Yahweh’s “shade” or “shadow” is equated with the shelter or safety of the Temple, the seat of God’s reign over the whole cosmos. So to describe God as “shade” is part of a larger portrayal of Yahweh as king, as one who has the power to rule, to shelter, and to protect (see Judg. 9:7–15).

In verse 6, we see hints of some of the difficult traveling conditions the pilgrim might face, and from which Yahweh protects: the sun by day, the moon by night. With the proximity of the mention of shade in the previous verse, the reference to the sun seems obvious. However, the mention of the moon may seem odd. The modern reader should remember that ancient people believed the moon could affect

people adversely; they could become literally “moonstruck.” However, more is involved than natural perils. Some ancient peoples con-

Ever been moonstruck?

Though the word often describes a dreamy or sentimental state, “moonstruck” also can describe someone who is mentally unbalanced. In fact, the English word “lunatic” comes from the Latin word for “moon.”

sidered the sun and the moon deities: for example, the Egyptian Ra (the sun god) and the Mesopotamian Nanna (the moon god). So here, once again, as was the case in verses 1–4, the psalm probably reveals and highlights the pilgrims’ struggle with other gods.

On the hilltops and in the sky, both day and night, Yahweh’s followers are challenged by the power of rival deities. The psalm writer, however, makes plain that travelers are safe because of the watchful care of Yahweh. Verse 7 offers a final summary of protection “from all evil” with a line that is either a wish (“may he keep you”) or a description of what will be (“he will keep you”). Verse 8 ends the psalm with a final reference to Yahweh’s “keeping” vigil over future pilgrimages to the holy city (“coming in” and “going out”).



“The Jew even today fixes a *mezuzah* on the portal of his house door, which he touches each time he goes in or comes out of his home. This is a small metal cylinder containing a piece of parchment on which are written the words of Deut. 6:4–9 and 11:13–21. As he touches it, he repeats the words of verse 8 of this Psalm.” —George A. F. Knight, *Psalms*, vol. 2, Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 266.

Traveling Mercies

Today we see Psalm 121 as intended to aid all pilgrims, not only those ancient travelers to Jerusalem but also contemporary people of faith who journey toward Christ in the church. Such a journey is made with full recognition of false gods all around who compete for devotion. Psalm 121 assures those travelers that the keeper of Israel is indeed the “maker of heaven and earth” and not a pretender. The recognition of God’s power as creator also colors the celebration of the advent of “Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord.”

With these points in mind, consider again Maria of *The Sound of Music* and the question posed at the beginning of this unit about how to interpret this psalm. Was Maria’s interpretation true to the text of Psalm 121:1? Was it historically accurate? In some ways, we must answer no, even though the words of Psalm 121:1 gave her

dramatic and needed support in a time of crisis. Even so, we should add that Psalm 121, like most works in the Psalter, can take on a life



Want to Know More?

About feasts? See Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 103; Barbara Smith, *The Westminster Concise Bible Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 60–61; Werner H. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 117–27.

About idols and worship? See McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 137; Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 280–81.

About pilgrimages? See McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 210; J. G. Davies, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 433–37.

all its own in the liturgy of the church and in the devotion of the faithful. For example, Psalm 121:1 is understood by many in light of 2 Kings 6:17, which tells of Elisha and his company, surrounded by the king of Aram and his army, having eyes opened to the vision of horses and fiery chariots on the mountain, that is, to divine help “in the hills.” This connection, like Maria’s, may be inaccurate historically, but what are we to say when a passage of scripture, like Psalm 121:1, though misapplied,

still offers words of comfort to those who are distressed? Who can say how often believers have grappled for a word from God, and misinterpreted or misapplied what they found?

The writer Frederick Buechner tells of a low time in his life when despair had nearly overtaken him. In the midst of depression, he saw a car speed past with a customized license plate that read “TRUST.” Buechner took this as a sign from God that he should place his life totally in God’s hands. He did: his depression left him, and he went on with his life. Some time later, however, he discovered the car that delivered the profound message of “trust” actually belonged to one of his neighbors, an investment banker. The license plate message had no religious context. Yet who can say definitely that this license plate wasn’t God’s word for Buechner that day? (Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991], 49–50.)

It is ironic that both that five-letter word “trust” and Maria’s cry, “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help!” were words taken *out* of context, but still were so powerful. Scripture

is best interpreted *in* context. However, some verses seem to have power independent of their context, or of our ability to discern the context. By the grace of God, some texts provide strength for the living of these days even when applied imperfectly. For Maria, the majesty of the Alps probably reminded her of God's majesty. And maybe, in the final analysis, she was not too far from the original meaning of Psalm 121. In her mind, surely the God who created heaven and earth, who created those magnificent peaks, could deliver her family in their time of trouble. As with the pilgrims of old, she believed that the one who ordered the universe could keep her from harm, could provide "shade" in the heat of her distress. She was convinced that God was more powerful than the threat facing her, and for travelers ancient and modern, Psalm 121 affirms that the God who made heaven and earth is indeed stronger than any earthly peril.



Questions for Reflection

1. This psalmist is aware that human beings are prone to place trust in false gods, and the psalm challenges us to trust in the Lord in the face of many other competing interests. What are those things in which contemporary people are tempted to trust?
2. The last two verses of Psalm 121 offer a promise of protection from evil. How realistic is this promise of God's protection in life's "going out and coming in"?
3. In this unit, mention is made of times when calling to mind scripture has been an encouragement to people of faith. What are some other scriptures that give encouragement?
4. This psalm probably was used as part of a pilgrim festival, a regular yearly trip to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. What are some of the regular things done in worship throughout the year? Why are these things observed or practiced?