

Psalm 121

The LORD is Your Keeper

1. Introduction

The second line of the Aaronic Blessing ("the LORD keep you") is prominent in this psalm. Three times the LORD is called "the One who Keeps", and three times he is the subject of the verb "he will keep". In Hebrew the central words of the psalm are "the One who keeps Israel; the LORD is the One who Keeps you".

This is appropriate for a "pilgrim song". Risks attend any journey nowadays – how much more before tarmac. Keeping/guarding was a burning issue for wayfarers in the ancient world.

"Step structures" are prominent in the psalm, e.g. "he shall not slumber...he shall not slumber or sleep"; "the One who keeps you... the One who keeps Israel... the LORD is the One who keeps you." Franz Delitzsch observes that the psalms "is formed [as its title suggests] after the manner of steps."

2. Structure

The psalm is usually divided into four stanzas of 2 verses each. It has been observed that this structure means that each stanza opens with a part of the body: "my eyes", "your foot", "your right hand", "your soul, i.e. your whole self". This is an attractive idea.

However, a minority view sees in the psalm three stanzas as outlined below. Each of these stanzas opens and closes with matching ideas, i.e. "mountains" are matched with "heaven and earth"; the LORD's protection of "your foot" is matched with his protection "at your right hand"; "day and night" are matched with "time and eternity".

A¹ (vv. 1-2) *All Power – the Help of the Creator*

B¹ (vv. 3-5) *Ever Watchful – the Vigilance of the Keeper*

C¹ (vv. 6-8) *In Every Circumstance – the Care of the Present One*

3. Notes

(a) All Power – the Help of the Creator (vv. 1-2)

Often those who relate the psalm to a journey think that the psalmist looks at the mountains as a source of danger. However, the mountains were a major feature of the Promised Land, its climate and its flora and fauna (Deut. 11:10-12) – this had theological significance for Israel, teaching the people to live by faith. Moreover, in the Psalms the mountains are occasionally seen as the place of God's dwelling, a token of God's protection, and a symbol of God's ancientness.

"The poet looks up to the mountains, the mountains of his native land, the holy mountains..., when he longingly asks: whence will my help come? and to this question his longing desire itself returns the answer, that his help comes from no other quarter than from Jahve, the Maker of heaven and earth, from Him who sits

enthroned behind and upon these mountains, whose helpful power reaches to the remotest ends and corners of His creation, and with...whom is help, i.e. both the willingness and the power to help, so that therefore help comes from nowhere but from...Him alone" (Franz Delitzsch).

"Yet suppose someone asked, 'But how do you know?' In the parallelism, the first colon implicitly raises a question that the second answers... The LORD's particular acts of deliverance are made possible by the fact that [he] is the maker of the heavens and the earth" (John Goldingay).

(b) Ever Watchful – the Vigilance of the Keeper (vv. 3-5)

Notice the change from first person "I" in vv. 1-2 to the second person singular "you" in vv. 3-8. The pronouns "you" and "your" now come thick and fast, emphasising the fact that we are in God's hands.

In verse 3 the word for "not" is more normally used for requests or commands. So should this verse be taken not as a statement but as a wish or prayer? Commentators are divided, but context suggests that vv. 3-5 do "not simply express powerful wishes evoking divine blessing but carries the stronger tones of certain promise of such blessing" (Leslie Allen).

There is an allusion to the wilderness experience of Israel in this stanza – the LORD kept the Israel "in all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed" (Josh. 24:17).

Israel's experience is individualised: "the One who keeps *Israel*... The LORD is the One who keeps *you*."

"Your right hand" – the Hebrew people oriented themselves by looking east; so their right hand was to the south – only shade on the south is any use in the northern hemisphere.

(c) In Every Circumstance – the Care of the Present One (vv. 6-8)

"The blazing sun and the sinister moon feature as polar examples of the many vicissitudes that bring fears both rational and irrational and block the fulfilment of life's positive potential." Alternatively, "the verse rather refers to the freezing cold of night in the mountains." In any case, "the moon may be present simply as makeweight, to make the parallelism work and to complete a merism affirming how the LORD's protection covers any danger at any time, day or night" (Allen).

"Your soul" – this is not the immaterial aspect of human nature. Rather, it is the Hebrew way of referring to the whole person, cf. Genesis 2:7, "...and the man became a living soul."

The promise of v. 7 must be understood in the light of Scripture, e.g. God's promise and purpose expressed in Romans 8:28-29. Thus the promise of v. 7 is bigger than "journeying mercies" – "From the hurtful influences of nature that are round about him the promise extends in vers. 7, 8 in every direction...: everywhere and at all times; and that from this time forth even for ever" (Delitzsch).