

PSALM 121

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 121

A Song of degrees.

The inscription of the Syriac version is,

“one of the songs of ascent out of Babylon.”

Aben Ezra thinks it was composed on account of Israel, when in a siege and distress; or, adds he, on account of the children of our captivity; the present state of the Jews. Grotius is of opinion it was written by David, at the time of the battle with Absalom. Some take it to be a military psalm, proper for soldiers engaged with an enemy: others, that it is suitable for travellers when on a journey; and why not for persons also, when they commit themselves to God in the night watches, and about to take rest? And indeed it is suitable at all times; when the good man may, with the psalmist, expect divine help, and be secure of protection and preservation.

Ver. 1. *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills*, etc.] Not to the hills and mountains in Judea, looking about to see if the inhabitants of them, or any bodies of men, appeared upon them to his help in distress; rather to the hills of Moriah and Zion, where the ark of God, the symbol of his presence, was, and to whom he looked for assistance and deliverance: or to heaven, the holy hill of the Lord, and to him that dwelleth there; (see ^{<398D>}Psalm 3:2 123:1). The lifting up of the eyes is a prayer gesture, (^{<414B>}John 11:41 17:1); and is expressive of boldness and confidence in prayer, and of hope and expectation of help and salvation, (^{<4115>}Job 11:15 ^{<3886>}Ezekiel 18:6); when, on the contrary, persons abashed and ashamed, hopeless and helpless, cannot look up, or lift up their eyes or face to God, (^{<4506>}Ezra 9:6 ^{<3902>}Psalm 40:12 ^{<2183>}Luke 18:13). Some read the words, “I will lift up mine eyes upon the hills”^{f1730}; standing there and looking up to the heavens, and God in the heavens; who is the most High over all the earth, higher than the highest, and above all gods. Others render them interrogatively, “shall I lift up mine eyes to the hills?”^{f1731} to the idols worshipped on hills and mountains, and pray unto them, and expect help from them? No, I will not; salvation is not to be had from them, (^{<2403>}Jeremiah 3:23); or to the kings of the nations, as

R. Obadiah interprets it; and to powerful kingdoms and states he was in alliance with, comparable to mountains and hills, (^{394B}Psalm 46:2 ^{304D}Zechariah 4:7)? No, I will not; “it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes”, (^{498D}Psalm 118:9). And so the following clause may be read,

from whence shall my help come?^{f1732} not from hills and mountains; not from men, for vain is the help of man; not from kings and princes, the great men of the earth, nor from the most powerful nations; but from the Lord, as in (^{490B}Psalm 121:2), which may be an answer to this.

Ver. 2. *My help [cometh] from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.*] Who helps his people out of the hands of all their enemies, and out of all their troubles and afflictions; he helps them in the performance of duty, in the exercise of grace, in bearing the cross, in fighting the Lord’s battles, and on in their journey; he helps them to all blessings, temporal and spiritual; to all needful supplies of grace here, and glory hereafter; and this help he gives is quick and present, suitable and seasonable, is sufficient, and sometimes with, and sometimes without means; and they have great encouragement to expect it from him, since he is able to give it, being the Maker of heaven and earth; for what is it that he cannot do, who has made both them? And besides, he has promised to help them, and he is faithful that has promised; he has laid help on Christ for them, and set up a throne of grace, where they may hope to find grace and mercy, to help them in time of need; and they have had past experiences of his help and salvation. Arama connects this with the preceding psalm, and interprets this help of help from an evil tongue.

Ver. 3. *He wilt not suffer thy foot to be moved,* etc.] This is either an address of the psalmist to his own soul; or to any other good man, his friend and acquaintance, assuring of stability, and of final perseverance in grace to glory. The Lord keeps the feet of his saints from falling; he will not suffer them to be moved out of the spiritual estate in which they stand; nor off of the Foundation and Rock of ages, on which their feet are set, and their goings established; nor out of the house of God, where they are as pillars; nor out of his ways, where he upholds their goings; moved in some sense they may be, yet not “greatly moved”; their feet may be “almost” gone, and their steps “well nigh” slipped, and yet shall not fall finally and totally, or so as to perish; (see ^{491D}Psalm 62:2 73:2 37:24);

he that keepeth thee will not slumber; neither angels nor men are the keepers of the saints, but the Lord himself; he is the keeper of every individual saint, of every regenerate person, of everyone of his sheep, of every member of his church; he keeps them by his power, he preserves them by his grace, he holds them with his right hand; guides them by his counsel, keeps their feet from falling, and brings them safe to glory: and a watchful keeper he is, he does not so much as slumber; he keeps them night and day, lest any harm them, (^{<270B>}Isaiah 27:3). Gussetius reads the whole as a prayer, “let him not suffer [thy foot]”, etc. “let not thy keeper slumber”^{f1733}; to which the answer follows.

Ver. 4. *Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.*] He that kept Israel or Jacob, when asleep, and appeared to him in a dream, and promised to keep him in all places, and did; who found his posterity in the wilderness, and kept them as the apple of his eye: he keeps his spiritual Israel, whom he has chosen, redeemed, and calls; and he that is in general their keeper, is the keeper of every particular believer, who may promise themselves the utmost safety under his care; since, though he may sometimes seem to sleep, when he withdraws his gracious presence, defers help, and does not arise so soon to the assistance of his people as they wish for and expect; yet does not in reality sleep, nor is any ways negligent of them; no, not so much as slumber, nor is in the least indifferent about them, and careless of them; (see ^{<0285>}Genesis 28:15 ^{<6320>}Deuteronomy 32:10 ^{<0423>}Psalms 44:23). So Homer^{f1734} represents Jupiter as not held by sleep, while other gods and men slept all night; and hence Milton^{f1735} has the phrase of “the unsleeping eyes of God”: but the Phrygians had a notion that their god slept in winter, and was awake in summer^{f1736}.

Ver. 5. *The Lord [is] thy keeper*, etc.] This explains more fully who it is that keeps Israel and particular believers, and confirms the same; not a creature, but the Lord; the Word of the Lord, as the Targum, in (^{<3007>}Psalms 121:7): Christ, the Word and Wisdom of God; who is the keeper of his people by the designation of his Father, who has put them into his hands to be kept by him; and by their full will and consent, who commit the keeping of their souls to him; for which he is abundantly qualified, being able as the mighty God; faithful to him that has appointed him; tender and compassionate to those under his care, whom he keeps as the apple of his eye; and diligent and constant, for he keeps them night and day, lest any hurt them: he keeps them as they are his flock, made his care and charge; as they are the vineyard of the Lord of hosts; as they are a city, which,

unless the Lord keeps, the watchmen watch in vain; as they are his body and members of it, and as they are his jewels and peculiar treasure: these he keeps in the love of God; in his own hands; in the covenant of grace; in an estate of grace; and in his own ways, safe to his kingdom and glory;

the Lord [is] thy shade upon thy right hand; he is at the right hand of his people, to hold their right hand; to teach them to go, lead them into communion with himself, and hold them up safe; and to strengthen their right hand, assist them in working, without whom they can do nothing; and to counsel and direct them, and to protect and defend them against all their enemies. So a shadow signifies defence; (see ^{<0449>}Numbers 14:9) (^{<2072>}Ecclesiastes 7:12); and such great personages are to others; in which sense Virgil^{f1737} uses the word “shadow”; and much more true is this of God himself. And he is like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land; or of a spreading tree, which is a protection from heat, and very reviving and refreshing; (see ^{<2312>}Isaiah 32:2 ^{<2118>}Song of Solomon 2:3). The allusion may be to the pillar of cloud by day, which guided and guarded the Israelites in the wilderness, and was a shadow from the heat, (^{<2315>}Isaiah 4:5,6 25:4,5); as Christ is from the heat of a fiery law, the flaming sword of justice, the wrath of God, and the fiery darts of Satan.

Ver. 6. *The sun shall not smite thee by day*, etc.] With its rays, which it shoots forth like darts, and which fly swiftly, and pierce and hurt: hence Apollo, the same with the sun, is represented with a bow and arrows^{f1738}; so the rays of the sun seem to be called in (^{<3811>}Habakkuk 2:11);

nor the moon by night; this clause should be supplied, as a learned man^{f1739} observes, thus, “neither shall the moon cool thee by night”; for that has no warmth in it, and cannot smite with heat, as the sun does: for even, as he observes, its rays focused by a magnifying glass will not communicate the least degree of sensible heat to bodies objected thereunto; yet some say^{f1740} the moon is not only moist, but heats bodies as the sun. And Isaac Vossius^{f1741} observes, that there can be no light, which, separately considered, does not contain some heat at least: and Macrobius^{f1742} speaks of the lunar heat; and Plutarch^{f1743} ascribes heat and inflammation to it, and asserts it to be fire. It is said^{f1744} that some men of good credit, in a voyage to Guinea, strongly affirmed, that, in the night season, they felt a sensible heat to come from the beams of the moon. The Septuagint version is, “the sun shall not burn thee by day, nor the moon by night”. And burning may

be ascribed to the cold frosty air in a moonlight night, as to the north wind, as in the Apocrypha:

“20 When the cold north wind bloweth, and the water is congealed into ice, it abideth upon every gathering together of water, and clotheth the water as with a breastplate. 21 It devoureth the mountains, and burneth the wilderness, and consumeth the grass as fire.” (Sirach 43)

(see ^{<0340>}Genesis 31:40); and our English poet^{f1745} expresses a sentiment to this effect; yet not what affects the bodies of men, but plants, trees, etc. and this not owing to the moon, but to the air. However, these clauses are not to be understood literally; for good men may be smitten and hurt by the heat of the one and the cold of the other, as Jacob and Jonah, (^{<0340>}Genesis 31:40 Jon 4:8); but mystically, of persecuting antichristian tyrants, which are sometimes signified by the sun and moon, as both in Rome Pagan and Papal, (^{<0612>}Revelation 6:12 16:8); and of persecution and tribulation itself, (^{<0336>}Matthew 13:6,21 ^{<2706>}Song of Solomon 1:6); and is sometimes applied to the perfect state of the saints, either in the New Jerusalem, or ultimate glory, when there will be nothing more of this kind, (^{<0675>}Revelation 7:15,16). And there are some periods in the present state, when those entirely cease; nor are the saints ever really hurt by them, they being always for their good; or, however, not so as to affect their eternal happiness. The Targum is,

“in the day, when the sun rules, the morning spirits shall not smite thee; nor the nocturnal ones in the night, when the moon rules.”

Ver. 7. *Thee Lord shall preserve them from all evil*, etc.] The Word of the Lord, as the Targum. Not from the evil of affliction, though from that as a penal evil; or as a real one, it being made to work for good: but from the evil of sin; not from the being or commission of it; but from its dominion and damning power, or from a final and total falling away by it: and from the evil of the world; not from tribulation in it, nor from the reproach or persecution of it; but from the wickedness and lusts that are in it, and from the wicked men of it, their power, rage, and fury: and from the evil one, Satan; not from his temptations, but from sinking under them, and perishing by them; (see ^{<0372>}John 17:12,15);

he shall preserve thy soul: he preserves the bodies of his people, oftentimes from diseases and disasters, and from death, till the appointed

time comes; and then he preserves their dust in the grave, and raises it up at the last day; but more especially their souls, the redemption and salvation of which he undertook, and has effected; and which are preserved by him safe to his coming, kingdom, and glory.

Ver. 8. *The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in*, etc.] In transacting all the business of life, in going in and out about it; in all ways, works, and conversation; in journeying and travelling; in all affairs, civil and religious; and not only preserve, but prosper in all, (^{<B00B>}Psalm 1:3); the Lord blessing him, coming in and going out, (^{<B506>}Deuteronomy 28:6); and such, with the poet^{f1746}, are said to go with a good or prosperous foot. And such persons, in the Punic language, are called Namphanians, as Austin observes^{f1747}; who says the word signifies a man of a good foot: and the word seems to be the contraction of $\omega\mu[\rho\mu[\eta$, which signifies “his good” or “pleasant foot”^{f1748}; and so one that, wherever he comes and goes, things prosper with him, and with those that are in connection with him: such one was Jacob in the house of Laban, whom the Lord blessed, as he says, “since my coming”, or at “my foot”, (see Gill on “^{<B3B>}Genesis 30:30”); and such a foot Joseph had wherever he went, (^{<B3B>}Genesis 39:5,23). Arama interprets it of a man’s going out into the air of this world, and of his entrance into the world to come. The Targum is,

“the Lord will keep thy going out to business, and thy coming in to study in the law.”

from this time forth, and even for evermore; for the Lord not only preserves his people in life and at death, but in heaven, to all eternity; in the utmost safety and peace from all molestations by men or devils, and from their wrath and malice: not only his purpose and decree, but his power and providence, are the vast gulf between the one and the other; by means of which the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest, (^{<B6B>}Luke 16:26 ^{<B8B7>}Job 3:17).