

THE JPS BIBLE COMMENTARY

PSALMS תהילים



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Benjamin Sommer, Jewish Theological Seminary

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Volume 1: Psalms 1-30 (forthcoming)

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Volume 2: Psalms 31-60 (forthcoming)

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Volume 3: Psalms 61-90 (forthcoming)

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Sidebars on the Ritual and Liturgical Uses of Psalms

AJ Berkovitz, Hebrew Union College

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Benjamin Sommer, Jewish Theological Seminary

Overview

Perhaps no part of Jewish literature is more familiar or more beloved to Jews than the Book of Psalms. These poems are an important part of the Bible. They occupy a prominent place in Jewish prayer and are widely quoted across midrash, poetry, philosophy, and mysticism. Their recitation has often been thought to possess healing properties, and communities throughout history have turned to these poems during times of joy and distress, both personal and collective.

Nevertheless, as Professor Benjamin Sommer of the Jewish Theological Seminary notes, “perhaps no part of the Jewish heritage is more user-friendly, but less familiar to contemporary Jews, than the Book of Psalms.” These texts are rarely studied outside the academy, and no comprehensive scholarly Jewish commentary exists in English.

The JPS Bible Commentary: Psalms will fill this void for scholars, clergy, educators, and the broader public. This new, five-volume series in the celebrated JPS Bible Commentary collection makes the Psalms’ complexity, meanings, historical settings, poetic power, and communal and theological importance accessible to all readers. As the first comprehensive Jewish commentary on the Psalms in English to incorporate the insights of academic Bible scholarship, the series will shape the study of this book for generations to come. At the same time, these volumes’ clear language, elegant format, and deep immersion in classical Jewish exegesis—the hallmarks of JPS commentaries—will attract a wide range of readers.

Like previous JPS commentaries, this series includes the Bible’s Hebrew text, the iconic JPS English translation, a line-by-line commentary, and detailed discussions of topics ranging from the Bible’s ancient context to the Jewish interpretative tradition. For the first time, this series also includes sidebars on the Psalms’ ritual and liturgical uses, recovering and highlighting diverse uses of each psalm from the ancient world through modernity in communities across North Africa, Yemen, Europe, North America, the state of Israel, and beyond.

Part of the Psalms’ greatness is that they can be read as poetry, literature, prayer, and theology. The international team of scholars involved in this series brings diverse approaches to this rich material, employing their methodologies to illuminate the Psalms—and enabling readers to explore how these texts can be encountered from multiple perspectives.

Professor Sommer relates a story about a synagogue lecture by the great twentieth-century Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel. “After the lecture,” Professor Sommer recounts, “an audience member came over to Heschel and said, ‘last week I went to my neighbor’s church, and I thought their psalms were so beautiful. Why doesn’t Judaism have a book like that?’” *The JPS Bible Commentary: Psalms* will recover and illuminate the Psalms for Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike, empowering individuals and communities across the globe to study and reflect on these timeless poems. This series is sure to take its place as a classic work on this beloved biblical book.

God’s constant guardianship is the main theme—the root שמר, “to guard, watch,” occurs six times. Scholars who think the Songs of Ascents are pilgrimage songs identify the speaker as a pilgrim making his way to Jerusalem. Though the way may be difficult and fraught with danger, the speaker encourages himself and others that God will protect them. But the psalm speaks in very general language, lacking any specific mention of the Temple or other location. If, indeed, a difficult journey is implied, the psalm may be expressing hope or gratitude for the long journey from Babylonia to Judah, that is, for the return from exile. Others read the psalm more generally as referring to God’s protection throughout the vicissitudes of life. Less accepted nowadays is the idea that this is a preexilic psalm, originally relating to the king’s role as leader in battle, that was later associated with pilgrimage.¹

121 A song for ascents.

I turn my eyes to the mountains;
from where will my help come?

קבא שיר למעלות

אשא עיני אלהים
מאין יבא עזרי:

1. A song for ascents See “Excursus: Songs of Ascents” (pp. 183–188). The superscription here, שיר למעלות, diverges slightly from the other Songs of Ascents, although no difference in meaning is discernible. The large Psalms scroll from Qumran, 11QPs^a, reads למעלות here and למעלות at 123:1.

I turn my eyes to the mountains Literally “I lift my eyes to the mountains.” Compare Ps. 123:1, in which the speaker raises his eyes to the heavens, where God is enthroned. If this is a pilgrim’s song, recited while the pilgrim ascends to Jerusalem or perhaps while he is in Jerusalem preparing to return home, the mountains are those surrounding Jerusalem. “Mountains” have been interpreted both positively—high places are traditionally associated with the deity—and negatively, as dangerous and threatening places, or even the abode of other gods or mythological forces of evil. If this is a song about the return from exile, the mountains presented obstacles along the difficult road to return (cf. Isa. 40:4, where valleys are raised and mountains lowered to level the mountainous terrain from Babylonia to Jerusalem for a smooth passage). S.D. Goitein suggests that the speaker is looking up toward the horizon, seeking human help or seeking a herald announcing the coming deliverance (cf. Isa. 52:7), but, seeing none, realizes that his help comes from God.²

from where will my help come? This may be a question or a statement. The word מאין may function as an interrogative particle, “from where, whence,” or as the beginning of a relative clause (as in Josh. 2:4, “I didn’t know where they were from”). If a question—“Where does my help come from?”—the answer is provided immediately following in verse 2: “From the LORD.” If it is a statement—“from where my help comes”—as construed in KJV, then verse 2 is a further elaboration of who the helper is.

²My help comes from the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.
³He will not let your foot give way;
your guardian will not slumber.

עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה ²
עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:
אֲלֵי־יָתֵן לְמוֹט רַגְלִי ³
אֲלֵי־נֹם שֹׁמְרִי:

2. God is here called “maker of heaven and earth” rather than the God of Israel or its ancestors. In that context, not only are “the mountains” actual topographical features, that is, the mountains surrounding Jerusalem or on the road to return, but they also become the symbol of the creation of the cosmos, the land mass that rose up from the waters (Ps. 104:6–8) and that rose out of the water as the Flood receded and the world was created anew (Gen. 8:4–5). Indeed, it is the vigilance and protection of God as creator that the speaker wants to evoke. “Maker of heaven and earth” is a liturgical phrase found three times in the Songs of Ascents (here, 124:8, 134:3) and twice outside them (115:15, 146:6). It is likely that this divine epithet became popular in postexilic times (see 2 Chron. 2:11).

3. God will prevent the traveler from stumbling on the mountain ascent, reinforcing the scenario of a long, rugged journey by foot. This rugged journey may be a pilgrimage from elsewhere in the Land of Israel or the difficult passage from Babylonia to Jerusalem, the return from exile. God, who is labeled here as “your guardian,” becomes “Israel’s guardian” in verse 4, and is called by His proper name in verse 5.

He will not let your foot give way Compare Ps. 66:9, where the idiom is parallel to “grant life.” The expression may be used in a general sense of keeping one secure, but here, in the context of a journey, it is even more concrete.

The psalm opens with a first-person speaker, “I turn my eyes,” and here another persona is introduced, addressed in the second-person masculine singular, “you,” who remains present through the rest of the psalm. Some scholars see a dialogue between the speaker (“I” in v. 1) and someone else, variously identified as a pilgrim and his son or companion, or a priest and a pilgrim. Some suggest that the “I” responding in verse 2, saying, “My help comes from the LORD,” is a second persona addressing the first, providing the answer to his question, “From where will come my help?” I prefer to see the same speaker throughout the psalm, in dialogue with a “you,” the addressee who never speaks but who represents the community. The presence of this “you,” felt more strongly here than in other psalms with first-person speakers, permits an escalation of the speaker’s points about God as a guardian.

The negative particle אֵל preceding the verbs indicates that they should be understood as if they were jussive, to express volition: “may he not,” or with strong conviction, “he will not.” On the other hand, the verbs are in the indicative form. Translations vary; some opt for the jussive and others for the indicative.³ NJPS “will not” is ambiguous, since NJPS uses “will” for both jussive and indicative (see vv. 6–7). I understand it as a jussive, a wish for the “you” persona that God will protect him.

- ⁴See, the guardian of Israel
neither slumbers nor sleeps!
⁵The LORD is your guardian,
the LORD is your protection
at your right hand.
⁶By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.

4 הַגִּבּוֹר לֹא יִנּוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן
שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:
5 יְהוָה שְׂמֹרְךָ
יְהוָה צִלְּךָ
עַל-יַד יְמִינֶךָ:
6 יוֹזֵם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא יִכְפֹּה
וְיָרַח בַּלַּיְלָה:

4. See Rendering הַגִּבּוֹר, an emphatic or intensifying particle, which here strongly affirms the idea in the preceding verse that God never sleeps.⁴ The intensification of this verse continues in that the verbs are clearly indicative, not jussive—the particle לֹא is used here instead of the particle אַל in verse 3. And “not slumber” becomes “neither slumbers nor sleeps,” while “your guardian” becomes “the guardian of Israel.” This is a strong absolute statement: Israel’s guardian certainly does not ever slumber or sleep.

neither slumbers nor sleeps The idea that non-Israelite gods do sleep occurs in Mesopotamian texts and, mockingly, in 1 Kings 18:27. Psalm 44:24 asks why God is asleep when He should be taking action to save Israel (35:23 also asks God to rouse Himself). Psalm 78:65 compares God’s springing into action to waking from sleep. The image of God sleeping is used as a metaphor for standing by, doing nothing. The call to rouse God is a plea for God to take action. Our psalm insists that God never sleeps (cf. Isa. 40:28, where God never gets weary); that is, God is ever vigilant, always on guard to protect Israel.

5. your protection The noun צֶלַל, literally “shade, shadow,” is a common metaphor in the ancient Near East for the protection provided by gods and kings (e.g., Ps. 91:1).⁵ It takes on a more literal sense in verse 6, where it blocks the sun (and moon).

at your right hand God is close by, at your side, to fight off danger or malevolent forces (Ps. 16:8, 110:5).

The combination of “shade” and “right hand” is unique, combining two different metaphors for protection: God is your shade (and God is) at your right hand. Generally, the entire person is in God’s shade, or protection (17:8, 63:8, 91:1), so to say that God is the shade over (or: upon, on) your right hand is strange (KJV, RSV, Hossfeld and Zenger). NJPS fudges the problem nicely by arranging the phrases in this verse into three lines (all the other verses have two lines), hinting at the possibility that there are three separate statements here.⁶ The gist of verses 5–6 is “God is your guardian. He stands at your side like a shadow, protecting you day and night.”

6. Because God is the maker of heaven and earth (v. 2), no object in heaven or earth, like the sun or the moon, can do harm of its own volition. The sun’s rays are dangerous, especially to the traveler (if this is a pilgrim song); God will provide shade (v. 5). In what sense does the moon strike? Many commentators refer to an ancient belief that the light of the full moon could cause illness (cf. “moon-struck”), but this is a postbiblical idea. The destructive nature of the moon, or moon-god, depicted as a knife, is mentioned

- ⁷The LORD will guard you from all harm;
He will guard your life.
⁸The LORD will guard your going and coming
now and forever.

7 יהוה ישמרך מכל־רע
ישמר את־נפשך:
8 יהוה ישמר־צאתך ובואך
מעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:

in a few Egyptian texts.⁷ However, it seems unlikely that this idea lies behind our verse. In the absence of supporting biblical evidence that the moon was considered dangerous, many scholars have reasoned that the parallelistic structure generated the mention of the moon in order to parallel the sun, without reference to the moon's harmful influence. In any case, the parallelism of sun (day) and moon (night) forms a merismus that includes all times of day and all natural elements. God protects the person at all times from the forces of nature. Interpreted in the context of the Babylonian exile, the sun and moon may represent major Babylonian deities, who may have been perceived as wishing harm to Israel, but who are rendered harmless by God.

8. going and coming Everything you do, daily work (Deut. 31:2; 2 Kings 11:8). Those who read the psalm as being about life in general see here the daily agricultural activities of going out to the fields and coming back home (although Ps. 126:6, which clearly depicts such actions, uses הלך rather than יצא). In a military context, the phrase means going out to and returning from battle. If this is a pilgrimage song, it refers to starting out and returning home from the journey to the Temple.

now and forever A liturgical phrase (Ps. 113:2, 115:18, 125:2, 131:3; Isa. 9:6, 59:21; Mic. 4:7) that projects the thought into the continuous future so that it becomes permanent.⁸

Ritual and Liturgical Uses

This psalm is the second of the fifteen Songs of Ascents (שירי המעלות, Psalms 120–134). On the uses of these psalms as a group, see the discussion on Psalm 120 above.

Psalm 121 is one of the most famous and frequently used psalms in all rites, probably due to its simple language, its encouraging theme, and its wide applicability. Its reference to the moon and nighttime (v. 6) explains its appearance in the Blessing of the Moon ceremony (ברכת הלבנה) in all five rites and as a part of the conclusion of the Evening Service in the Eidot Hamizrah, Yemenite, and Sefard-Hasidic rites. In those three rites, this psalm, together with Psalms

122–124, is recited on Sabbath mornings before Pesukei deZimra. In the Eidot Hamizrah rite, one also recites this psalm on Purim after reading the Scroll of Esther. This use acknowledges God's help to the people of Israel in all times, especially at night (Esther 6:1; see our psalm, vv. 4, 6b, 8). The recitation of this psalm when embarking on a journey and, in the Italian rite, after the reading of the Shema before retiring for the night attests to its popularity and use in times of worry, uncertainty, and liminality.

It is frequently recited today in synagogues during times of crisis, often at the end of the formal services; usually the prayer leader recites a verse, and the

congregation repeats the verse, and this responsive reading continues through all eight verses. Similarly, this is one of four psalms recommend for reading “in times of tragedy” in the Conservative *Siddur Lev Shalem* (along with Psalms 120, 130, and 140); so also in *Va’Ani Tefillati*, an Israeli Conservative siddur (along with 120). Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbinic manuals recommend it for recitation during an illness, at a funeral, when accompanying a coffin to burial in a cemetery, or at the unveiling of a tombstone. It is recommended for use in a house of mourning in the Reform *Gates of the House* and is included in the Yizkor (memorial) service in *Mishkan T’filah*, an American Reform siddur. A Modern Orthodox rabbinic manual recommends reading Psalms 121, 130, and 91 in the presence of a dying person, followed by the Yigdal and Adon Olam hymns.

The Italian rite designates this psalm for recitation on the Shabbat of Parashat Tazria’. The reason for the connection is not clear. The parashah begins with a reference to childbirth, a dangerous event for the mother, and the psalm describes God’s protection to those in danger; admittedly, however, this is a very broad connection. The Italian rite also designates this psalm for recitation when taking the Torah from the ark at the Morning Service on Mondays and Thursdays. Perhaps the reference to God’s help coming toward the speaker from a hilltop in the first verse connects to the Torah coming out of the ark on the *bimah* into the congregation; the reference to going out and coming back in the last verse may also recall the exit of the ark at this point in the service and its return only shortly thereafter.

This psalm constituted the fourth blessing added

to the Amidah on days when a court instituted a public fast because of a drought (M. Ta’an. 2:3). That blessing concluded with the phrasing “May the One who answered Elijah at Mount Carmel answer you and hear the sound of your weeping today. Blessed are You, O LORD, who hears prayer” (M. Ta’an. 2:4, referring to 1 Kings 18:36). Rashi, in his commentary to the Mishnah, points out the connection between the opening verse of our psalm, which mentions mountains, and Elijah’s prayer on Mount Carmel.

A book of prayers for a married woman from eighteenth-century Italy directs a woman to recite this psalm when she walks to a *mikveh* shortly after nightfall. The choice of this psalm may relate to the danger of walking at night, especially in a world without streetlamps. It may also relate to the hope that the woman will become pregnant later that same night (when she and her husband will resume sexual relations after her immersion in the *mikveh*), since pregnancy and childbirth are not only hoped for and joyous but also filled with peril, especially in the pre-modern world. The woman recites this psalm again when dressing after immersing herself in the *mikveh*, immediately before she returns home.

A Modern Orthodox rabbinic manual suggests reading Psalms 121, 122, and 126 at a bat mitzvah ceremony.

Shimmush Tehillim suggests saying this psalm seven times when leaving home alone at night, since the psalm affirms that God never sleeps and always guards His people (vv. 3–4); therefore no one will be struck by the moon (v. 6), since “God shall guard your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forever” (v. 8).

THE JPS BIBLE COMMENTARY

PSALMS 120–150 תהלים קנ-קנ

The Traditional Hebrew Text with the JPS Translation

Commentary by ADELE BERLIN

Sidebars on Ritual and Liturgical Uses of Psalms

by AVIGDOR SHINAN

and BENJAMIN D. SOMMER



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