

Protection in Psalm 121: 3-8 in African Yoruba Context

Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi^{1*}, Nathaniel TeminiJesu Okunade² and Emmanuel Olumuyiwa Malomo³

¹Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi, Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria.

²Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.

³Department of Religions, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Protection of lives and property is a global concern especially in this era of insecurity in all the continents of the world. This study is an attempt to read Psalm 121: 3-8 in relation to Protection in African Yoruba Context. African biblical hermeneutics which provides a lens to reread biblical text in African Context was used for the study. It was discovered that the book of Psalm is one of the most popular books of the Bible. The Psalms are very rich in human experiences over the centuries and as such they are very popular in ancient Israel and the early Church. Portions of the Psalms are memorised and read by the Jews and Christians in worship services and at some special occasions. One of the Psalms that has gained recognition, quoted and alluded to in the time of danger or insecurity is Psalm 121. In Psalm 121: 3-8, the psalmist described Yahweh as a God that is committed to the protection of those who put their confidence in his ability to protect. Yahweh's eyes are always watching and keeping his people from evil. Ancient Israel believed in the capacity of Yahweh to protect as evident in this Psalm and as such they read, memorise and inscribe portions of it on their documents and personal effects. The African Yoruba people read, memorise, inscribe portion of this Psalm on clothes, door posts and vehicles for protection purposes. The study concluded that Psalm 121: 3-8 is divine word and can be used to invoke protection in the events of danger, like the Yoruba use incantations (ogede). It is hoped that readers of the Psalm and the entire Bible in Africa will find hope, comfort and protection as they contextualised its contents.

Keywords: Protection, Psalm 121, Yahweh, Ancient Israel, African Yoruba

1. Introduction

Protection is a process of making sure that something or somebody is not harmed, injured, or damaged [1]. People all over the world are constantly seeking for protection of their lives and property. Protection of humans is seriously sought for in this age because of the high level of insecurity across the globe. There are wars, diseases, sicknesses, hunger, and all sorts of evils that threatens the existence of human. The nature and process of protection by African indigenous people is remarkably different from that of the Western world [2]. This is because, an average African believe that the world is full of evil spirits, witches, sorcerers and a host of enemies that are responsible for misfortunes and all the evils that have bedevilled the world.

The book of Psalms is considered by Christians across the globe as the most prestigious book of the Old Testament [3]. It is held that Psalms are performative when used orally, chanted and recited as divine prayers by the Christian church as early as the third-century Christian Era (CE) not only for guidance but also to drive away demons [4]. One of the things that make the Psalms unique is that it has the capacity to situate those who used it in a relationship with God because worshippers feel as if they are the first recipient

of the message. Some biblical scholars opine that Psalm 121 is a hymn of confidence and trust in Yahweh alone for help and protection. This Psalm to a large extent is an indication of some common cultural and religious practices on the issue of security and help as provided by Yahweh [5]. This Psalm is an expression of absolute trust in the capacity of Yahweh to protect [6]. The author did not mix words in presenting Yahweh as the sure place of protection. Structurally, Psalm 121 could be arranged thus: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8 [7]. However, our concern in this study is Psalm 121: 3-8. This study, therefore examines the Psalmist concept of protection in Psalm 121: 3-8 in African Yoruba Context. African Biblical Hermeneutics which provides a lens to reread biblical text in African Context was adopted for the study.

1.1. Literary Analysis of Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is a psalm of hope and confidence in Yahweh who has the capacity to protect at all times. It is also a Psalm for protection, and help from the God of creation. Archaeological discoveries from the first millennium revealed that ancient Israel inscribed verbs like רמש (guard) and רצן (protect) on their documents [5,8]. In the same fashion, some scholars have submitted that the verbs רמש (guard) and רצן (protect) were found in the excavations at Carthage as part of the

protective formula use in ancient time [5,9,10]. This is an indication that the ancient world was used to inscribing portions of Scriptures on their documents for protective purposes.

Gleaning from the opening verse of this Psalm, it appears the author is faced with danger and was in need of prompt or urgent intervention but discovered that his salvation is in Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth [6]. The psalmist confidence in the ability of Yahweh to protect is clearly seen in the expression: "he will not suffer your feet to be moved" It appears the speaker is a ruler or a leader in Israel [11]. This also suggests that the speaker's desire is to see the Israel putting their trust and hope in Yahweh who is their sure and reliable protector. The Psalmist described Yahweh as a person who never sleeps nor slumbers. In other words, Yahweh protects the path of the pilgrims, he is vigilant, endlessly awake and attentive [12]. Yahweh keeps, guards, protects, safes and preserves [3]. Yahweh's protection is therefore guaranteed day and night. This is the reason why this Psalm is called a Psalm of Confidence or Trust (Brueggemann). It is a Psalm of life of trustful receptivity of God's gifts. This Psalm is a testament that the presence of God transforms every situation. In the same way, Kraus (1988:305) submitted that, this forms part of prayer songs, which Gunkel considers as songs of trust [13].

1.2. Protection in Psalm 121: 3-8.

Attempt is made in this section of the study to interpret the Psalm 121: 3-8 in relation to protection for travellers and those who desires it. In the text, protection is promised and sure [13]. The psalmist informed his audience in verse 3 that Yahweh 'will not let your foot slip'. In other words, divine guardian will not allow pilgrims to fall. This is because, the topography of the land of Israel can make pilgrims who are not use to it fall and sustain injury that will not allow them to make progress in their journey. This situation will force pilgrims to stop and lodge in a place that may be dangerous for them. This experience can make the journey to be longer than expected [13]. This reminds me of my experience as a pilgrim in Israel in 2014. One of the pilgrims in my team fell as we were walking in the street of Jerusalem. That delayed our journey that day, as the medical team had to attend to her. We were unable to visit all the historical sites scheduled for the day because of this incidence.

We shall underscore the word 'keep' and 'slumber' in verses 3-4. Yahweh is presented as a being that neither sleeps nor slumbers. He is always on duty 24/7 daily. The psalmist uses the metaphor 'shade' for Yahweh in an attempt to describe how protective he is [13]. Among the Babylonians the word Marduk 'shadow' is used for God because of his protective ability. Some scholars argued that Israel may have borrowed this idea from their neighbours [7] Also, in some texts in ancient Near east some gods were believed to be sleeping, hence the need to wake them up. It is held that whenever the gods are asleep, they will not pay attention to the cry of those who called them [14,15]. This appears to be the motif of Psalm 121, that present Yahweh as a being that neither sleeps nor slumbers.

The word 'indeed' or truly in v.4 is an affirmation that Yahweh is ever active. Unlike the gods of their neighbours, Yahweh does not eat, sleeps, or rest. He is always available at anytime to protect his people [16]. Yahweh does not sleep like humans or other gods as claimed by Elijah (1 Kgs. 18: 27). However, when Yahweh appears to be far off in time of need, he may be described as sleeping (Ps 44: 23-24; cf. 132: 4) and as waking when he renews his attention to the problem (78:65).

Furthermore, the word "shade" צֶלַח suggests protection from all forms of adverse climatic situations [17]. A shade is a place a person under the heat of the sun can take cover. The Hebrew word צֶלַח shadow conveys the ideas of shade, protection, and defence. Shade, even that of a boulder, gives some relief from the heat of the day, especially for the slave (cf. Job 7:2). The metaphor, 'shade' compares divine protection with literal shade to signify constant and complete coverage for the pilgrims throughout the journey. This assurance is necessary so that the pilgrims can put their minds at rest as they proceed in their journey [16]. Yahweh is believed to be concern with the security of his people. Here, the Psalmist see God as a "shade" or shadow. Yahweh is like a shade tree to protect the pilgrims from the heat of the sun Therefore, the Psalmist prays that God may hide him under "the shadow of his wings" (Psa 17:8; cf. Psa 36:7, 8; Psa 91:1).

In verse 6, the psalmist assures the pilgrims that they will not suffer harm from the sun in the day and from the moon in the night. The Hebrew word שֶׁשׁ sun appears 131 times in the Old Testament. The sun is used to designate time and direction; its rising equals the east and it's setting the west (Zech 8:7). Sunset marks the end of the day and the beginning of a new calendar day. The sun is believed to have power. It could strike a man and cause him to faint (Jon 4:8). The Shunammite's son probably died of sunstroke (2Kings 4:19-20). But the Lord protected the pilgrims from the sun's striking (Psa 121:5, 6). This statement suggests that Yahweh will protect and keep his own people all the time. This is another assurance for the pilgrims that Yahweh has determined to protect them as they embark on their journey in the holy land [18].

Besides, verse 7-8 describes Yahweh as protector 'from all harm' or evil. The Hebrew word for evil is רָעָה. This word also means bad, misery, distress, injury, wickedness. The feminine noun רָעָה functions much like the masculine adjective, though somewhat more frequently. Often רָעָה is an adjective too, and qualifies its nouns in terms of the negative function, or condition, and the injurious activity of the noun [17]. Yahweh is also a watchman and preserver of life. It is Yahweh who does the guarding and the preserving of the pilgrims at all times, in every place in the journey [13]. The Psalmist declared that הָיָה לְךָ יְהוָה הָיָה לְךָ יְהוָה "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore". The Hebrew word כָּלֹעַ forever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual, always, eternity and so on is used more than three hundred times to indicate indefinite continuance into the very distant future. This is an indication that the protection of the pilgrims is continually guaranteed [17].

1.3. African Yoruba Interpretation of Psalm 121: 3-8

Our task in this part of the study is to discuss the African Yoruba interpretation of Psalm 121: 3-8. To start with, it is crucial to know who the Yoruba are and where they are found in Africa. In Nigeria, The Yoruba people are found mainly in the southwestern Nigeria, and in States like Kwara and Kogi. They also live in Republic of Benin and Sierra Leone. The Yoruba formed the largest ethnic group in sub-Saharan Africa [19]. Like most African, the Yoruba people are very religious. In fact, they had their own religion before the advent of Christianity. Most Indigenous Yoruba Christians prefer the African biblical hermeneutics when it comes to the interpretation of the text. Because, this type of interpretation makes the Bible relevant in any Culture and generation. The most preferred book of the Bible by Yoruba Indigenous Christians is the Psalms. They memorise portions of the Psalms, read them constantly into water for healing of all sorts. They inscribe portions of some Psalms on their door post, on vehicles and on cloths for protection. Examples of these preferred Psalms are: 2, 23, 24, 35, 91 and 121.

Now, it is expedient to consider Psalm 121: 3-8 in relation to protection among the Africa Yoruba people of Nigeria. Protection of lives and property is a global phenomenon. Nations and people from all walks of lives spend huge amount of money to achieve protection. However, protection is still a challenge to humanity. A careful study of the biblical literature reveals that protection is one of the attributes of Yahweh. We shall now consider Psalm 121: 3-8 in relation to Protection in African Yoruba Context.

In verse 3, the phrase “He will not let your foot to be moved” (On ki yo jeki ese re ki o ye) is very fundament to protection. The Yoruba word for foot is *ese*. Every human has two legs with which the use to move around to do their daily assignments. Without foot (*ese*), there may be no movement. It may be difficult to achieve goals once a person is cripple. Falling is a very serious matter, because when a person falls, he may not rise again. It is with the foot (*ese*) we stand. Foot is a vehicle through a person rises and falls. It is with the foot that a person runs away from the place of danger. In the event of protection, the foot is very fundament. The assurance that God will prevent the foot of the one who trust in him from falling is a great thing. It is an indication that the foot will always be well positioned for escape in the time of danger. In this verse 3, the Psalmist recognizes the protection of God on his people as sacrosanct. The Psalmist’s confidence is based on the belief that Yahweh is their guardian and that of all believers. Yahweh protects, guides and blesses his own [20]. That is why he said to his audience: ‘he will not allow your foot to be moved’. He is very sure that God will protect his own people. This good news to the Yoruba because of the dangerous terrain where they live. Some of the Yoruba live on mountains, in the valley and sometimes theses areas are very slippery during the raining season. The Yoruba people have also fought wars and saw people’s foot slipping and falling and perished. To the Yoruba people, there is hope for someone who is standing of his feet than the one that has falling. When טוֹם is used with לֶגֶר “foot,” it speaks of the foot slipping or sliding in a time of calamity (Deut 32:35; Ps

38:16, 17; Ps 94:18). The phrase ‘on ki yo jeki ese re ki o ye’ brings relief and confidence to a Yoruba person that God’s protection is sure. This shows that God is always there to help and to protect his people [21].

Also, the phrase “he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (... eniti npa Israeli mo, ki itogbe, beni ki isun) in verse 4, is very crucial. To show the intensity of Yahweh’s care, the psalmist declared that God never sleeps nor slumbers. In other words, God’s commitment to protection of his people. This is an indication that the God of Israel does not rest, eat or sleep, he is always in the business of protecting [16]. This is in contrast to human who may be hungry, tired, need rest and then sleep. The idea of ‘sleeping deity’ is a motif found in some texts in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. The words ‘does not sleep nor slumber’ in Psalm 121 are in contrast to the texts accusing deities of sleeping and refusing to attend to the cries of their worshippers [14,15]. To ‘keep’ also means to protect, guard, watch over and take care of. God will not allow his people to suffer harm in the hands of the evil people [18]. Keeping connotes preservation, for Yahweh is the vigilant protection of his people as reflected in Psalm 121 [12]. To the Yoruba, humans will always need protection from a higher being because every day has its own evil. Since humans cannot stay wake all day and night, there is the need for protection from the Supreme Being. Knowing that God does not sleep (*kii sun*) and slumber (*kii togbe*) is a delight to the Yoruba especially in this age of insecurity life and property. In the event of danger some Africans call on their dead parents or ancestors for intervention. This is because the African belief that their ancestors can still fight their course and protect them if they call on them. When people are going through tough time and they need help, they sometime say: *Iya mi ma sun lorun o* (my mother, do not sleep in heaven), *Baba mi lorun mase sun* (my father in heaven do not sleep), *abiyamo orun, gba mi* (mother in heaven, deliver me). This is because they believe that the dead parents still see what is happening on earth and can render help. It is good news for an African Christian to hear that the one who keeps him does not sleep nor slumber [17]. Security situation in Africa is worrisome. It appears that security agents are doing their best but the level of insecurity is still very high. This situation calls for a superior protector and a higher power. There are terrorists and banditry activities in the land and as such some African cannot sleep with their two eyes closed. Some security guards employed to guard people and organisations have compromise security ethics. Humans employed as guards sometimes sleep on duty and this has put the lives and property of the people or organisations in danger [17]. This is the reason why the phrase ‘does not sleep nor slumber’ (*kii sun beni kii togbe*), make sense to a Yoruba person. God is now perceiving as a sure and reliable protector of lives and property.

In addition, in verse 5, the psalmist declares: ‘The LORD watches over you’ (*Oluwa li olupamo re*). This presents God as a person protector. It suggests that God can and will protect an individual (*olupamo re*). God has the capacity to protect individuals, corporate bodies or groups. In other

words, God is always the sure protector of Israel and those who put their trust in him [16]. The psalmist added that the 'Lord is a shade'. A shade is a place where people go for shelter or cover in a time of danger. The name of Yahweh is described as a place of refuge where people can take cover in times of danger (Prov. 18: 10). Yahweh is also presented as a sure place of refuge and strength a present help for those in trouble (Psa. 46: 1).

The word ṣ̣ṣ̣ "shadow" (ojiji) conveys the ideas of shade, protection, and defence. The words 'the Lord is your shadow' (Oluwa ni ojiji re) is very important to a Yoruba person who believes in the supernatural powers using shadow to bring misfortune to humans. In this context, God is presented as a shade over his people and this inspired confidence and hope. Comparing protection with shade in this context connotes constant and complete coverage like the mother bird to her chicks. This suggests perpetual protection of the one that put his trust in God [16]. Yahweh is the shade or the source of protection for his people (Psa 121:5ff; Isa 25:4). God promises to hide the suffering servant in the shadow of his hand in order that he can proclaim his penetrating message for a period of time (Isa 49:2).

The psalmist gave words of assurance when he said: "The sun shall not smite you by day" (Orun ki yio pa o nigba osan, tabi osupa nigba oru). It is the responsibility of the sun to provide light for humans in the day time. The Africans experience great heat from the sun (Orun) in the afternoon almost on a daily basis. In African context a person without house or roof on his head will suffer from the scourges of the sun in the day. This phrase suggests that God has now become a roof on the head his people and as such they cannot be smitten by the sun. Since God is now a roof, there is no course for alarm. It also means that God will protect his people from any all harms in the day and night. Africans are excited to hear that sun will not smite them in the day and it brings relief and solace to them. As far as an average Africans are concerned, protection from the heat of the sun a great thing because of the location of Africa. Africans understand what it means to be smitten by the sun better than the western world. It is good news for the Africans that God shall deliver them from being smitten by the sun [17].

Furthermore, the phrase "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life" (Oluwa yio pa o mo kuro ninu ibi gbogbo: yio pa okan re mo) is an important one to the Africans who believe that they are constantly surrounded by evil men and women. This assurance from the text is fundamental to an average African who is confronted with evils on a daily basis. The fear of evil by Africans has made them to device different strategies to deal with it. One of those strategies is the use of potent word, incantations (ogede). They use ogede to defend themselves, Children, friends, family members and their property. It should be noted that some eminent biblical scholars concord with African biblical scholars and ancient Israel that spoken words were never empty sound but an operative reality that will surely be fulfilled [21-24]. This is the reason why some Jews in ancient Israel wrote the words of the scripture especially Psalms on their bodies, singing

and chanting these words in their daily meditations and prayers to Yahweh.

Africans also use animate and inanimate things like stones, sand, trees, leaves human parts, animals, water, urine and so on for protection [2]. Evil means any form of misfortune and calamity that happen to humans. It is anything that brings pain, discomfort, distress, and suffering to humans. This is why the psalmist declared that "the Lord will keep you from all evil". In other words, God has the capacity to keep from all evil and he will do it. God's protection of his people at time can come through direct divine intervention. Protection can also come through angels (Psa. 91: 11), or through supernatural events (Jdg. 5: 4). God's protection can manifest through other believers or leaders [16].

In African context, no body dies naturally. Deaths and any form of misfortunes are works of evil people. To many African, death, poverty, sicknesses, diseases, bad luck, hunger and the likes are evil. This is why those thousands of Africans that have died are believed to have been killed by evil people (ota) around them. Thousands have died through bad roads, terrorise groups and lack of good hospitals and wrong medications. It is clear from this phrase 'he will keep your life' (yio pa okan re mo), that it is only Yahweh who will and can keep a person safe from all evils and in dangerous situations. In other words, God will always offer protection from all form of evil. The Yoruba word for evil is ibi. Ibi connotes anything that is not pleasant, calamity, bad, or disastrous. The Yoruba belief that ire ati ibi lafi da le aiye (the world was created with evil and good). In other words, evil and good are to co-habit in the world. The Yoruba often prayer: oluwa, maje ki oju mi ki o ri ibi (God do not allow me to see evil). As far as the Yoruba people are concerned evil (ibi) is the handiwork of the enemy (ota). For instance, the Yoruba believe that every person has at least an enemy (ota). The enemy does not wish anybody well. The two types of enemies (ota) recognised by the Yoruba are humans (eniyan) and the world (aiye). Human enemies (eniyan) can be identified in the time of quarrels, disputes, rivalry in polygamous homes and the likes while the world (aiye) are sorcerers, witches, wizards and all those that have intention to harm another person (Adamo, 2005: 70). They employed all forms of incantations (ofò), charms (epe) and cast spells on people [25]. The activities of these enemies may result in death, loss of jobs, sickness and disease, and any form of misfortune on their victims.

It should be noted that the cultural methods of protection were abandon by the Africans who accepted Christianity. It was in their search for alternative means for protection in the Bible that they discovered the Psalter and thus it became a substitute. Some of the indigenous African Christians use the Psalm as talisman or amulets, and medicine for protection, healing, provision and success in all life endeavours. The inscribed portions of Psalm on parchments, bodies, vehicles, doorposts and recited, chanted and sung with unwavering faith or trust in God [2].

In verse 8, the psalmist declares that: "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in" (Oluwa yio pa alo ati abo re mo). This is an assurance of continuous protection of Yahweh. This promise of divine protection was so basic to the well-being of Israel that it was part of the priestly blessing given in the sanctuary, 'the Lord bless you and keep you' (Num. 6: 22-27). This is an assurance of protection by Yahweh. The phrase 'going out and your coming in', may be referring to daily activities of humans on earth [20]. Humans generally are engaged in different activities that requires going out and coming in. Africans travel a lot. Travelling in Africa can be very challenging in the light of the condition of the roads. Most roads in African are dead traps. The rate of accidents on African roads are very high. Many people have lost their husbands, wives, children, parents, friends and love ones to road accidents. Those who can afford traveling by Air will use this service not because it is very fast but for safety purposes. Also, the activities of terrorists, kidnappers, bandits, and rapist are very common on African roads. The kidnappers request a huge amount of money as ransomed from relations or friends of their victims before they are released. Those who have no money to pay are killed or sometimes people who paid are molested and killed. In the northern part of Nigeria, the activities of bandits are very prominent (Awojobi). The assurance that God will watch or keep the going out and coming in of those who trust in God become a relief for African travellers. African Indigenous Christians read, sang, chanted and inscribed this Psalm on their door post or vehicles with a view to be protected on a dangerous journey on the road or on a flight or in the sea. In this manner, the Psalms are like the trends in modern speech act theory, which maintains that words are potent and effective. Therefore, the Psalms, becomes the talisman or amulets, medicine, potent words for protection when inscribed on parchments, bodies, vehicles, doorposts and recited, chanted and sung with faith in God [26].

2. Conclusion

The study revealed that Psalm 121: 3-8 is about the capacity of Yahweh to Protect his people in the events of danger or evil. The psalmist claimed that God is fully committed to the protection of those who put their trust in him. African Yoruba people in Nigeria in their search for biblical text on protection see this Psalm as God's assurance of protection. Most African Indigenous Yoruba Christians apply this Psalm for protection of their lives and property. They read, memorise, recite and read portions of it into bathing water for healing and protection. They write portions of this Psalm on parchments, clothes, door post and vehicles for protection purposes. In this way they reaffirm their faith in God's power to save [28-31].

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