

Alexander Massey

Esa Einai /  
I lift my eyes  
to the mountains

Psalm 121

(solo voice – Hebrew or English)

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# Esa Einai / I lift my eyes to the mountains

## Psalm 121

Oxford Unitarians service at Harris Manchester College, Yom Hashoah 5774/2014

Many commentators have seen this psalm as expressing total confidence in God. The King James Bible translates the opening line as “I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help,” as though help is expected, and understood to be available in the hills. In fact, the second half is actually a question, so it should read: “I lift my eyes up to the hills. Where will my help come from?” In other words, the poet is not confident there is any help coming at all. Moreover, the question is ‘from where’, not ‘from whom’ – so in the opening moment there is no helper figure in sight, or perhaps even in mind. In my English lyric, I have aimed to clarify this reading with my addition of “Help! Help!”. In the second verse, the speaker then names God as the source of help.

The subsequent verses then switch to the second person singular – ‘you’. This could well be a second speaker responding to reassure the first. Verse 4 begins ‘Hineh!’, meaning ‘stop, and really pay attention!’; the speaker seems to be trying to convince someone of his claim that God really is present (hence my taking a little licence to translate this as ‘surely’). There is another interesting turn in the language. The opening verse is asking for help (*ezer*). But the second speaker does not pick up on this word. Rather, he substitutes the word *shomer*, meaning ‘guard’ or ‘watch’, which is ambiguous – while God is described as being fully present, and never sleeping, He is not actually described as necessarily stepping in to help. Nevertheless, the word *shomer* is used in various forms six times in the psalm, reflected in the English as either ‘Guardian’, or the verb ‘guard’. Given that seven is the traditional Jewish number symbolizing perfection, I wonder whether the use of *shomer* only six times is an intentional clue about *imperfection* and lack of resolution in this psalm.

The verbs beginning with the letter *yud* could be translated as the future tense - ‘God will ...’. But they could be translated as expressing a wish – ‘May God ...’. In my English version of the psalm, I have explored this possibility by having the last two verses begin with ‘may’, which turns them into blessings. In this wording, they also convey some ambiguity, with both the hope that they will come true, and therefore the subtle implication that they might not. The wording avoids expressing any certainty that all will be well. In his commentary, Rabbi Benjamin Segal writes: “This may indeed be one of the clearest indications of the nature of biblical faith. Trust does not erase doubt. The glass is first and foremost half full, but there is no attempt



to hide the fact that partially, it is empty.”<sup>1</sup>

## The music

The ambiguity that I see in the words of Psalm 121 is echoed in the tonal ambiguity of the piece. Using the Jewish *Yishtabach* mode throughout made it possible to alternate between a brooding atmosphere (B minor / E minor), and more optimistic mood (G major).

The frequent use of the interval of the minor second points to the uneasiness lurking under the surface of the whole psalm ('eyes', 'earth', 'slip', 'slumber', 'surely', 'strike you', 'night', 'guard you', 'evil'); but there are two important moments (bb20 and 32) where this minor second takes on a positive character when the music resolves into the major (more on this in a moment). There are further subtleties in the use of the minor second. The lowest occurrence is C-B. This is reserved for the lowest, 'earthy' moments of: the 'eyes' (b1, NB before they are 'lifted'), 'earth' (b11), 'slip' (b13, of the foot on the earth), 'strike you' (b25, ie being struck down). The next lowest, G-F#, is used for the ambiguity between 'help' or its potential absence: helping coming (or not) in b6, God's 'slumber' (b14), the questioning tone of 'surely' (b15), the danger of 'night' (b26). The highest minor second, C-B, retains some of this ambiguity, but ultimately resolves to a more comfortable place: 'slumber' (b16) and 'sleep' (b17) resolve to the major with 'God' (b20); 'evil' (b28) resolves with 'may' (b29) and 'guard' (b32). There is also a more hidden sub-narrative with these 'minor second' cross-references via the following:

b14 'slumber' → b16 'slumber' (exact echo a 4<sup>th</sup> higher) → 'sleep' (b17) → 'God' (b20) → 'night' (b26) → 'evil' (b28) → 'may' (b29) → 'guard' (b32)

I read the psalm as having a three-part structure. The first section is bb1-11. The Hebrew text of this is a *chiasmus*, which is a mirror structure (sometimes of exact words, and sometimes of meanings). In this case, it is an abcd-dcba pattern:

- (a) *Esa einai* (b) *el heharim*. (c) *Meiayin yavo* (d) *ezri*?  
(a) I lift my eyes (b) to the mountains. (c) From where will come (d) my help?  
(d) *Ezri* (c) *mei'im YHVH oseh* (b) *shamayim* (a) *va-eretz*.  
(d) My help (c) from God the Creator (b) of heaven (a) and earth.

The mirrored concepts are:

- a) lift eyes [implied: from earth] / earth  
b) mountains / heaven  
c) from where / from God  
d) my help / my help

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<sup>1</sup> <http://psalms.schechter.edu/2012/06/psalm-121-context-of-trust-text-hebrew.html>



The music of section one has been composed to copy this same chiasmic structure. The beginning of the mirrored tune in b6 brings a more positive mood as the speaker affirms that there is help from God; but this mood diminishes by b10, and the return to earth.

Sections two and three (bb12-22, 23-35) have been treated strophically, as I see similarities in their literary structure. Each section begins with fears, and hopes of what will not happen - hence the minor keys -, and ends with affirmation of what God will do - hence the major key which is confidently stated by reaching the dominant note (D) in the penultimate bar and resolving to the tonic (G).

### **Performance notes**

1. Although this is a solo, given that there could be one speaker in the first section, with a response from someone else from section two onwards, two singers could perform this piece, or even a third person could sing the third section.



# Esa Einai

Music: Alexander Massey

Yom HaShoah 5774 / 2014

Text: Ps 121

Oxford Unitarians service at Harris Manchester College

Freely ♩ = 63



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# I lift my eyes to the mountains

Music: Alexander Massey

Lyrics: Alexander, adapted from Ps 121

Yom HaShoah 5774 / 2014

Oxford Unitarians service at Harris Manchester College

Freely ♩ = 63

1. I lift my eyes to the mountains Help! Help! From

where will my help come? 2. My help is from God,

Ma - ker of hea - ven and earth. 3. He will not let your foot

slip; your Guar - dian will not slum - ber. 4. Surely He will not slum - ber nor

sleep, the Guar - dian of Is - ra - el. 5. God is your Guar - dian;

God is your shade at your right hand. 6. By day the sun will not

strike you nei - ther the moon by night 7. May God guard you from all

e - vil; may He guard your soul.

8. May God guard you in your go - ing and com - ing now and for - e - ver - more.



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