

Bill Nicholas
 SS-343: Psalms -- M.A. Seminar
 Kevin Schindler-McGraw, OFM Conv.
 11-13-97

Psalm 91: “Security Under God’s Protection”

The subject of this paper and seminar is Psalm 91 found in the fourth section of the Book of Psalms. In this paper I will present a general thematic analysis of Psalm 91 based on an overview of the verses of the psalm. This will include an overview of its possible composers, speakers and usages. I will present a general exegesis of the psalm discussing word usage, key verses as well as conflicting translations that I found in the scholars I studied. I will present views and interpretations on this psalm within the Jewish and Christian faiths. I will make note of its use in our modern liturgy, both the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours. Finally, I will offer some final reflections on the psalm in light of the principle content of the paper in addition to personal reflections and conclusions offered throughout the paper.

The date of the psalm is difficult to set. Equally difficult is answering key questions regarding the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalm as to who the speaker is and to whom the psalm is spoken. Various settings are proposed by scholars, some rather definitively. However, there is enough of a difference between them as to be uncertain as to the true life of the psalm and its use in the life of Israel. As a result, the interpretations of the psalm are also varying depending on the conclusions of each scholar regarding the *Sitz im Leben*.

Psalm 91 is the song of someone who has taken refuge under God’s protection. The specific location of that protection ranges from the general state of being cared for by God to the Temple as the shelter of God in which the psalmist takes refuge. It is classified as a psalm of trust. Among scholars there are differences of opinion as to its specific use in the liturgical life of ancient Israel. There are, therefore, different settings for the use of the psalm among scholars. Some see it as a Royal Psalm. In the psalm the king is addressed as one who dwells under the shelter of God’s protection in virtue of his office. He is instructed to put his trust in God who promises protection in return.¹

Another sub-classification of Psalm 91 is an instructional psalm given by one who has experienced the protection of God. This individual now instructs another on the trust he or she has experienced.² There is no specific individual in mind other than the one who is instructed on trust in God by the one who has experienced God’s saving protection. The consensus, however, appears to be that Psalm 91 is a psalm -- *possibly* royal -- of profound trust in God, and the the blessings and graces that flow from it. It is followed by an oracle in which God himself affirms the words of the psalmist in the first part of the psalm.

Psalm 91 is portrayed within the scope of individual circumstances. Faith is expressed by the forcefulness of the psalm’s language, its strong and gentle illustrations and striking contrasts. Psalm 91 speaks of God protecting the individual who trusts from dangers and threats. The psalm, however, does not promise immunization from trouble. Rather, protection is such that

¹Mitchell Dahood, S.J., Psalms II, Vol. XVII of The Anchor Bible, (Garden City,: Doubleday, 1968) 239.

²Bernhard W. Anderson, Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 203.

each trial strengthens and purifies God's servant.³ In this light, the psalm teaches a certainty of salvation that overcomes all dangers. The victorious power to overcome the world is granted to the individual.

In a liturgical setting, Psalm 91 is seen as instruction given to those admitted into the Temple.⁴ The pilgrim, upon entry into the Temple area, was advised to trust in God. The imagery of the psalm that deals with God's protective care can have direct reference to the structure of the Temple itself as the abode of God's protection. This will be discussed later in the paper.

The speaker who recites the psalm also varies between scholars. For example, in the first verse of the psalm, "You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High," the poet seems to be addressing the king or perhaps a cultic official. If it served as a royal psalm some scholars consider it to have been composed and recited by a court poet to the king.⁵ If it was a liturgical or instructional psalm, some believe it might have been recited by a priest to another newly commissioned priest, to a pilgrim as he entered the Temple precincts, or, to the king as he worshipped in the Temple.⁶ Finally it could have been sung by someone who had experienced the protective love of God and was instructing another based on his or her experience.

Another interpretation combines the classifications of royal and instructional psalm as a means of explaining who the speakers of the psalm are. It also places the psalm in the context of a battle led by the king. In this interpretation the king arrives at the temple and states his intention to worship. The priests welcome him and instruct him on how to put faith in God's divine protection. Finally God speaks the divine oracle assuring the victory of the king, who then returns to the battlefield.⁷

II

The divisions of Psalm 91 vary between scholars. The most common division is two parts: v. 1-13 and 14-16. This is the division found in the Book of Psalms. Part one is a promise of divine protection and assurance of human steadfastness. The second part is a confirmation of the first by divine assurance.

Some scholars divide the first part of the psalm into two parts: Verses 1-2, 3-13, and 14-16. Verses 1-2 are a call to the believer to declare their complete trust in God and is addressed to a person who has already found residence in the shelter of God's protection. Verses 3-13 is instruction given by the psalmist to the trusting individual concerning the depth that the expression of trust involves. Finally verses 14-16 are a divine oracle. Divine approval is given to one who "knows" God by name.⁸

There is also a third division presented by Bruggemann. The psalm is divided into three parts, but the verse groupings are different. Verses 1-8 are considered a rhetorical unit combining the intimacy of personal faith with a metaphor of God's majestic transcendence. God is referred to as "refuge" two times. In this grouping, verses 3-6 depict a journey on a dangerous

³Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. *Psalms II* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983) 714.

⁴A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, Vol II, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 655.

⁵Dahood, 329.

⁶A.A. Anderson, 655.

⁷Noël Quesson, *The Spirit of the Psalms* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 148.

⁸Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary* (Mineapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 222-224.

road in which God makes a safe passage possible. Verses 9-13 reiterate the first eight verses but in a more affirmative tone. God is called “refuge for the third time. Verses 11-13 return to the setting of a journey in which God’s angels provide protection. In verses 14-16 a royal decree of assurance is given from YHWH in response to the first thirteen verses.⁹

III

The over-all flow of the psalm is a song of trust in God the Almighty. Staying overnight in the shadow of YHWH is meant to express a feeling of being safe from danger. The darkness of the shadow of the Almighty may refer to the inner chamber of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. So there is a particular feeling of security and closeness with God. This sense of security comes from the knowledge that someone keeps guard over the individual and is strengthened by the individual’s trust. Anxiety grows uneasy through a lack of confidence in God (v. 3). Although man made weapons may break, God’s fidelity will never fail (v. 4). This faith of the one who trusts in God is sustained by God’s unchanging character rather than on the psalmist’s courage or strength.

God can set one free from all superstitions or realities that threaten or terrify. All epidemics, pestilence and demonic powers against which the psalmist is helpless are warded off by God whose protective presence shields the individual from these threats. Hence fear, superstition and the sense of helplessness are overcome (vv. 5-6). In the climax of the psalm, the psalmist’s faith reaches its height, leaving behind all doubt in the fidelity of God. As people fall to the right and left, the psalmist sees with his own eyes the disasters from which he is spared, experiencing first hand the protective power of God (vv. 7-8).

This culminates in verses 9 and 10 which are a repetition of the first verse, but in a more affirmative sense. Here the psalmist assures the listener that all of the wonders he has just described will happen if he or she puts their trust in God. This is followed up by a cheerful picture of God sending angels as guardians, carrying and protecting the psalmist (vv. 11-12). Thus the believer knows himself to be cared for and safe in God’s keeping and is unconcerned with dangers and threats (v.13).

Finally, the words of the psalmist are affirmed by God. God gives the assurance of deliverance to those who are intimately connected and devoted to him in a communion of prayer sustained by faith. God builds upon the protection promised in the previous verses and offers a long life in addition to divine protection to those whose trust is unwavering. This promise embraces all reality, spiritual, material, earthly and heavenly.

In the first two verses of Psalm 91 the psalmist uses four designations for God. The psalmist speaks of God as “the Most High,” “The Almighty,” and refers to God as “my refuge,” and “my rock” or “fortress.” The psalmist also makes use of three names for God making what appears to be a progression to the Divine Name used for the God of Israel. In **verse 1**, the psalmist speaks of dwelling in the shelter of *‘Elyon*, “Most High,” then of abiding in the shadow of *Shaddai*, a poetic rendition of the Divine Name. This becomes even more specific to the God

⁹Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 156-157.

of Israel in the **verse 2** when the Divine Name YHWH specifically identifies the God of Psalm 91 as the God of Israel.¹⁰

In **verse 1** of the psalm the idea of “shelter” may allude to a sanctuary or to the general state of divine protection.¹¹ “Shelter” may also allude the sanctuary of the Temple. The “shadow of the Almighty” may refer to the shadow of the wings of the Almighty. This could allude to the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies which held up the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple’s inner sanctuary.¹² This interpretation of verse 1 denotes a closeness to God within a religious context. The pilgrim, king, or priest takes refuge under that presence of God; literally, under the wings of the cherubim. Therefore, they are sheltered under the power of God. The idea of the *wings* of the Almighty may also liken the one “who dwells” to an eaglet safeguarded by a Great Eagle.¹³ This second interpretation of verse 1 is a much more paternal one. Both interpretations view the protection of God in a very intimate way. One who is knowledgeable of the cult practices of the Hebrew people, however, can appreciate the intense intimacy implied in taking shelter in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest was permitted once a year.

Verse 2 is translated in different ways. One is in the manner of a command in which the psalmist tells the one who dwells in God’s shelter to “say to the Lord, my refuge.”¹⁴ The other is in the manner of the personal testimony of the individual: “I will say.”¹⁵ The latter case would indicate a change in person from “*You* who dwell” in the first verse to “*I* will say” in the second. The translation provided in the *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* provides the latter as the appropriate translation.¹⁶ The manner in which God is addressed also varies in different translations of the second verse. In one translation the second verse reads: “Let him say *to* YHWH.”¹⁷ Another reads: “Say: ‘O YHWH...’”¹⁸ The *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* translates “I will say *of* YHWH...” or “of the Lord.”¹⁹

In **verses 3-6** the psalmist speaks of God protecting the one who trusts from threats to physical life. In verses 3-4 the imagery alludes to human threats while verses 5-6 seem to refer to demonic or natural pestilential threats against which the psalmist has no defense. The “snare of the fowler” that seeks to destroy refers to a human threat or evil. There is, however, a conflict in translation with regard to “the destroying plague” in the second half of verse 3. Here two different interpretations are presented. One sees these as natural dangers; specific forces distinct from those that are human.²⁰ The other, however, follows the LXX which interprets that the “deadly pestilence” or “destroying plague” refers to a destructive word.²¹ This involves an alteration of the word *middeber* (‘from the *pestilence* of’) to *midbar* (‘from the *word* of’) which suggests malicious plots or slander.²² The *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* translates the

¹⁰Dahood, 330.

¹¹A.A. Anderson, 656.

¹²Kraus, 222.

¹³Dahood, 330.

¹⁴Dahood, 328.

¹⁵A.A. Anderson, 656.

¹⁶John R. Kohlenberger, III, *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) 450.

¹⁷Kraus, 219.

¹⁸Dahood, 328.

¹⁹Kohlenberger, 450.

²⁰Dahood, 331.

²¹Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, Trans. Hervert Hartwell (London: SCM Press, 1959) 607.

²²A.A. Anderson, 656.

phrase to read: “from pestilence of deadly ones.”²³ In light of the reference to plague (*deber*) in verse 6, which describes the threats of natural or demonic forces,²⁴ some scholars tend to agree that the latter interpretation of “slandering tongue” is the proper one.

Verse 4 returns to a metaphorical comparison of God’s protection. The statement that God “will shelter you with pinions, spread wings that you may take refuge,” likens God again to an eagle. God’s “arm” or “faithfulness” is likened to a *soh^erah* (protective shield) or *sâhartâ* (walled enclosure). This would indicate an image of war in which the strength of faith defies the danger of enemies. What exactly it is that is buckler and shield is disputed among scholars because of another variance in translation found in verse 4. Some scholars interpret “*mittô*” to refer to “faithfulness.” This faithfulness is in reference to God’s fidelity to the covenant.²⁵ Others read it to be *’ammâtô* referring to God’s “arm.”²⁶ Some scholars consider the latter to be a better parallel to the theme of God spreading his wings to provide protective care. The translation from the Hebrew text, however, states that it is the “faithfulness” of God that is shield and rampart.²⁷ This interpretation may make a more personal reference to God’s covenant relationship with Israel. This also may serve to further contrast God’s faithfulness which never fails with man made weapons that do.

In most scholars agree that **verses 5-6** describe threats and dangers that are not human; dangers against which humans cannot protect themselves. In **Verse 5** the “terror of the night,” while still possibly referring to a hunter’s trap, more likely refers to demonic or other superhuman power that strikes fear and terror at night. The “arrow that flies by day” refers to sinister forces that cause illnesses such as sunstroke.²⁸ Another interpretation sees the “terror” of the night as referring to a *pahad*, a pack of wild dogs which roam, hunt and maraud at night. If *pahad* in the first part of the verse does refer to a pack of hunting dogs, the reference to “arrow” may denote a hunter’s arrow, a human threat. This would agree with the symbolism of verses 1-3 that compares the object of the psalm to a young eagle. However, the use of the word in Psalm 91 may represent the “missile” of demonic power, identifying with the pestilence of verse 6 to indicate sunstroke as a scourge of the daytime.

In **verse 6** the psalmist returns to the use of the word “pestilence” or “plague.” Here, however, the psalmist is most likely referring to a literal plague or scourge rather than to a slanderous tongue as in verse 3. This continues the psalmist’s reference to natural disasters, sometimes seen as demonic or magical forces believed to cause epidemics and threaten the one who trusts in God.²⁹

In **verses 7-8** it is unlikely that the psalmist uses a metaphor for battle. It may refer to those struck down by the plagues or strokes referred to in the previous verses. With verse 8 it may also refer to the disasters of day and night as punishment of the wicked; disaster or sickness from which the psalmist is spared.³⁰

In **verse 8** the psalmist experiences God’s saving action first hand. The phrase “You will look” or “you need only to look” carries in it a degree of certainty that the psalmist will behold

²³Kohlenberger, 450.

²⁴Dahood, 332.

²⁵A.A. Anderson, 657.

²⁶Dahood, 331.

²⁷Kohlenberger, 450.

²⁸Weiser, 608.

²⁹Weiser, 608.

³⁰J.W. Rogerson and J.W. McKay, *Psalms*, Vol II., (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 205.

what will surely happen. It also implies that God's justice will be so obviously manifested that the individual need only to open his or her eyes and look to see God's presence and saving action. God will exercise justice against the wicked. The one who trusts in God will be protected even though he or she is in the midst of that disaster and walking among those who are punished.

Verse 9 has two conflicts in translation among scholars. The first is another change in person in the psalm, from the second to the first person. Some scholars translate verse 9 as: "For you, Lord, are *my* safe retreat."³¹ Others keep it in the second person: "Because *You* have made the Lord *your* refuge."³² The second is a conflict between the more definitive statement: "You, Lord, *are* my safe retreat," and a more conditional one: "*If* you consider YHWH himself your refuge..." In the latter sense, **verse 10** is the result of fulfilling that condition: "If you consider YHWH himself your refuge...[then] no evil shall befall you..."³³ Others interpret it as a positive assertion of the previous verses. While it may be a repeat of verse 1, it is a more assertive declaration following upon the climax in verse 8. "You *have* made the most high your shelter," therefore no harm comes to the one who puts his trust in God.³⁴ The *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* seems to make use of both interpretations of the first conflict in verse 9. In the second conflict it appears to support the conditional sense: "*If* you make the Most High your dwelling -- even the Lord who is *my* refuge --."³⁵

In **verse 11** the word *mal'âk* (messenger, angel) is used in the Old Testament to refer both to human and divine messengers. The term *mal'âk yhwh* -- "angel of the Lord" -- refers to the most important figure among the heavenly messengers, who often appears as a manifestation of God Himself. In Psalm 91, however, the term used is *mal'âk*. The fact that they guard the individual "in all [their] ways" is assuming that they are in accordance with the will and purpose of God and put their trust in him. Whereas in Exodus the angel is seen as guarding the people as a whole, in Psalm 91 it is applied to the individual worshipper.³⁶ Some scholars see this as the primary Biblical reference to the tradition of guardian angels. The angels are superior to humans, but are, nonetheless, instruments of God's love and continuous concern for each person.³⁷

In **Verse 12** the depiction of God's care is interpreted in different lights. One interpretation considers God to be delicately depicted. The phrase "upon their hands they will bear you up" depicts God giving special care to those who trust, carrying them protectively like children.³⁸ However, the depiction could also be seen as more royal than childlike treatment. The welfare of those who trust in God is vouchsafed by the angels who act as bodyguards against mishap.

There are a number of translations in **verse 13** for the dangers from which the individual is protected. While some scholars render the word *šahal* and *k'pîr* as 'asp' and 'viper,' other translations, such as the RSV, render the words to be 'lion' and 'young lion.' The former translation might be considered much more plausible in which the images are more consistent:

³¹Rogerson, 203.

³²Wayne A. Meeks, gen. ed., *The Harper-Collins Study Bible: NRSV* (New York, Harper-Collins Publishers, 1989) 887.

³³Dahood, 333.

³⁴Weiser, 610-611.

³⁵Kohlenberger, 450.

³⁶A.A. Anderson, 658-659.

³⁷Stuhlmüller, 74.

³⁸Weiser, 611.

“asp and cobra...snake and serpent.” Some, however, translate verse 13 to read: “the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent.”³⁹ In other translations the ‘serpent’ of the second half of the verse is translated as ‘dragon.’⁴⁰ The *Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* translates “lion and cobra...*great* lion and the serpent.”⁴¹ In any case the image of courage rising from trust in God so that one is able to “trample” over such dangers sharply contrasts the childlike security of verses 11 and 12.

In **verses 14 - 16** the speaker of Psalm 91 shifts from the psalmist to God. In **verse 14** humanity’s faithfulness to and intimacy with God are described as ‘cleaving in love.’ The word *h-š-k* may be a Deuteronomic term indicating one of three things: 1) A person’s love for another person, 2) God’s love for Israel or 3) a person’s devotion to God. In this context the third meaning is the case.⁴² Here, the state of loving God is synonymous with knowing the Divine Name which is only revealed by God.⁴³ In ancient times knowing God’s name implied an intimate relationship based on obedient loyalty. This, along with the idea of abiding in the shadow of the wings of the Almighty in the Holy of Holies would imply such intimacy with God as would be comparable to Moses.

In **verse 15** God’s delivery and answer are spoken of with a confident degree of certainty. The anguish or distress spoken of may be the anguish (*sârâh*) of approaching death from which God rescues the person who trusts. Hence God rescues from the clutches of approaching death. Some scholars interpret this verse in a messianic context in which God rescues his anointed one from death itself.⁴⁴ Finally, in **verse 16**, “long life” or “length of days” is traditionally the outward sign of divine favor.⁴⁵ Therefore the trusting servant is assured a long life of rich fulfillment. In the messianic context, trust in God leads to a freedom from death, or immortality. The psalm is thus wrapped up with God’s divine oracle to those who trust in him, given in answer to the oration of the psalmist.

IV

In the Christian use of Psalm 91 there are two direct quotations of the psalm in the New Testament. A certain problem arises in its use in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew 4:6 and Luke 4:10-11 the evangelists take the promise of salvation at the center of Psalm 91 and use it as one of the means whereby the tempter tries to persuade Jesus to display his divine royalty. Such use, however, is not likely intended to put a negative spin on Psalm 91, but perhaps emphasize that Christ lived the Psalm itself.⁴⁶ In addition, the tempter’s use of the psalm may also serve to parallel the testing which the psalm itself entails in its relating the experience of the threats from which God protects. Just as God upholds those who trust in Him amid many dangers, so too did he uphold Christ amid His temptations, suffering and death.⁴⁷ The tempter’s use of Psalm 91 with the same assurance that the angels would protect Jesus, may also serve as a

³⁹Stuhlmüller, 72.

⁴⁰Weiser, 604.

⁴¹Kohlenberger, 450

⁴²A.A. Anderson, 659.

⁴³Rogerson, 205.

⁴⁴Dahood, 334.

⁴⁵A.A. Anderson, 659.

⁴⁶Quesson, 148

⁴⁷Kraus, 225.

recognition, by the powers of evil, in the Messianic identity of Jesus as Messiah.

There are also two indirect references to the themes of Psalm 91. One appears in Luke 10:19. Here Christ appears to make an indirect reference in his statement to his disciples that he had given them “power to tread upon snakes and scorpions and all the forces of the enemy” (NAB) This is similar to the theme expressed in Psalm 91:13. In The Letter to the Hebrews 1:14 the author makes reference to the “ministering spirits sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation.” This passage is cross-referenced with Psalm 91:11 (NAB).

In his sermon on Psalm 91 St. Augustine compares the trust and journey of the Christian with that of Christ. He preaches that those who imitate Christ, and endure all the world’s troubles, hoping in God to protect them from danger will remain confident in the face of fear (3).⁴⁸ He focuses intensely on the wings spreading over the one who trusts. He understands the terror of the night and the arrow of the day to signify one who sins in ignorance and one who sins in full knowledge of his or her actions (7). Augustine compares the demon that prowls at noonday to the persecution Christians of his day might have experienced and fallen victim to (8).⁴⁹ He even compares the serpents and the lion to the agents of persecution. Those who openly killed the martyrs were the lion while he related the plotting heretics to the serpents (17). Finally he sees God’s words of verses 14-16 as addressing the Church (18).⁵⁰

In the liturgical life of the Church, Psalm 91 does not appear frequently. In the four times it does appear, verses 7-9 are never included. The only Sunday in which it is used in the Mass is the First Sunday of Lent, Year C (verses 1-2, 10-15). It is used twice in the weekday liturgies: Monday, Week 9 in Ordinary Time (verses 1-2, 14-16) and Monday Week 14 in Ordinary Time (verses 1-4, 14-15). Finally it is used for the Mass on October 2, the feast of the Guardian Angels (verses 1-6, 10-11) indicating the strong influence the psalm has had in the Church’s tradition regarding Guardian Angels. In the Liturgy of the Hours, Psalm 91 is used only for Sunday Night Prayer. So while it does not appear with any particular feast or memorial celebration it is a psalm that is prayed every Sunday of the year, making it among the most frequently prayed psalm in the Liturgy of the Hours.

V

On final reflection, having reviewed the resources I consulted, I believe it to be possible that Psalm 91 may have been a Temple psalm if it existed in the years before the Babylonian exile. If that is the case, then the references to shelter and to dwelling under the wings of the Almighty may have referred to the wings of the Cherubim of the Holy of Holies or to the Temple structure itself. Hence, those who dwelt there would have been the priests, particularly the High Priest who entered the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement. It could also have been addressed to the king as he worshipped in the Temple or to a pilgrim as he entered the Temple precincts. With the Temple as the principle reference the focus of the psalm would have moved from the Temple, where the individual dwelt under God’s protection, into the world, where he encountered the dangers from which God protected him. God’s protection originated in and with

⁴⁸A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D., Expositions on the Book of Psalms by St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Vol. VIII of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979) 446.

⁴⁹Coxe, 448.

⁵⁰Coxe, 451-452

the Temple, but extended to the world.

Following the Babylonian captivity, with the Temple destroyed and the Davidic dynasty ended, the principle reference of Psalm 91 might have shifted from the shelter of the Temple to the general shelter of God's protection. In this reference, there would be no shift in focus. Rather than moving from the shelter of the Temple to the world of danger, the individual dwelt in God's protective shelter *amid* the world and its dangers. The idea of intimacy with God may have also shifted from the context of the Temple sanctuary to one's everyday living. Wherever one was, he or she lived with the complete and profound trust in God. It would be believed that God's power to protect extended to those in exile, under occupation or who are grappling with the day to day struggles of life.

On a more personal level, the psalm strikes me as one of almost stubborn faith. The one who truly believes he or she is under God's protection constantly sees God as refuge. They may experience trouble, trials, and danger. Even though "thousands may fall" around the individual, he or she stubbornly holds onto faith that God will see them through. Therefore they have no fear. The notion of a Guardian Angel guiding and watching over the faithful gives the idea that one is not alone even though it may seem that way. This follows up on similar themes in the Old Testament of one against the many (i.e. Moses against Egypt, Samson against the Phillistines, David against the forces of Saul and the prophets against their respective kingdoms). This is also similar to the notion of "soul friend" in Celtic spirituality.

Finally, Psalm 91 presents an extremely idealistic approach to faith in and intimacy with God. If dwelling under the shelter of the Almighty did refer to the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, such intimacy would have been considered impossible, if not extremely idealistic in ancient Israel. Only the High Priest entered the sanctuary and even he only once a year on the Day of Atonement. If he was not ritually pure when he entered the Holy of Holies, it was believed that he did not atone for the sins of the people and his life would be forfeited as a result. Therefore the idea of such intimacy with God as to dwell under the wings of the sanctuary had to have struck the ancient Israelite as being profoundly ideal. Also, the notion of not fearing the many terrors and threats which are named in the psalm would seem to be more than human. As all humans experience fear when in dangerous situations, the trust in God expressed in Psalm 91 had to also be very idealistic.

Nevertheless, such idealism would be comparable to that of Christ, some of whose teachings also appear ideal, or even impossible to achieve (i.e., "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect"). However, like Christ's teachings, Psalm 91 may be presenting the ideal as something one must seek to attain throughout one's life. As all things are possible with God, even the impossible ideal can still be a viable goal in the mind of those who seek to put their trust in God in an ever more profound way.

Hence, even today, Psalm 91 serves as both a prayer and a reminder of God's love and care for all those who trust. It reminds us that, in the trials we face, God is still there to guide and protect us and that the trials serve to help strengthen the faith and trust we have. It also serves as a challenge to continually deepen and strengthen that faith in God and the relationship we have with our creator and protector.

Bibliography

- Anderson, A.A. The Book of Psalms, Volume II. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 655.
- Anderson, Bernhard W. Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.
- Brueggemann, Walter. The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.
- Coxe, A. Cleveland, D.D. Expositions on the Book of Psalms by St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Volume VIII of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Philip Schaff, ed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979.
- Dahood, Mitchell, S.J. Psalms II. Volume XVII of The Anchor Bible. Garden City: Doubleday, 1968.
- Kohlenberger, Joh R., III. The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament. Volume III. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982.
- Kraus, Hans-Joachim. Psalms 60-150: A Commentary. Mineapolis: Augsburg, 1989.
- Meeks, Wayne A., gen. ed. The Harper-Collins Study Bible: NRSV. New York, Harper-Collins Publishers, 1989.
- Quesson, Noël. The Spirit of the Psalms. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Rogerson, J.W. and J.W. McKay. Psalms, Volume II. London: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Stuhlmüller, Carol, C.P. Psalms II. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983.
- Weiser, Artur. The Psalms: A Commentary. Trans. Hervert Hartwell. London: SCM Press, 1959.