

Psalm 121— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book V](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the [Key to the charts](#).

Specific features of Psalm 121

- This psalm is a classic example of a particularly regular numerical composition. On all levels, it divides into two exactly equal parts (vs. 1-4 and 5-8): 1 + 1 cantos, 2 + 2 strophes, 4 + 4 verselines, 8 + 8 cola and 27 + 27 words. It shares the feature of having a bipartite structure with a considerable number of psalms – for examples, consult the [General Introduction](#), p. 9f.
- A special feature of Psalm 121 is that the two parts have identical compositional formulae, namely $27 = 16a + 11b$. Compare Psalms 6, 20, and 79, which divide similarly into two parts with identical compositional formulae – see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 6](#).
- The 54 words of the psalm proper are apparently defined by the fact that 54 is the numerical value of the keyword **שמר**, ‘guard, keep’ ($21 + 13 + 20 = 54$). This is most appropriate in a psalm about YHWH as Israel’s Guardian. In this respect, the psalm does not stand alone – for more examples, see the [General Introduction](#), “The numerical value of a keyword in the text”, p. 13ff.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3-4 || 5-6, 7-8 (2 cantos with 4 strophes, 8 verselines and 16 cola).
- Fokkelman and Labuschagne: similarly.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in part 1, Canto I; Column **d**: words in part 2, Canto II.
- The numbering of the verselines coincides with that of the Masoretic verses.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	שִׁיר לְמַעְלוֹת	2 = 2 + 2				
	אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים^	4	4		4	
	מֵאֵין יָבֵא עֲזָרִי:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 1	7 = 4 + 3			7 + 0	
2	עֲזָרִי מִעַם יְהוּדָה^	3	3		3	
	עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 2	6 = 3 + 3			6 + 0	
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2	13 = 7 + 6			13 + 0	
3	אֶל־יְתֵן לְמוֹט רַגְלִי^	4	4		4	
	אֶל־יָנוּם שֹׁמְרִי: שמר = 54 (21+13+20)	3		3	3	
	See Observation 3 Total, v. 3	7 = 4 + 3			7 + 0	
	Total, v. 1-3	20 = 11 + 9			20 + 0	
4	הִנֵּה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן	5	5		5	
	שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 4	7 = 5 + 2			7 + 0	
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4	14 = 9 + 5			14 + 0	
	Canto I Total, v. 1-4	27 = 16 + 11			27 + 0	

5	יְהִיָּה שְׁמֶרְךָ ^	2	2	2
	יְהִיָּה צִלְּךָ עַל־יַד יְמִינֶךָ :	5	5	5
	The 14 middle words: 20 + 14 + 20	Total, v. 5		7 = 2 + 5 = 0 + 7
	The 2 middle verselines: 3 + 2 + 3	Total, v. 4-5		14 = 7 + 7 + 7 + 7
	The 4 middle cola: 6 + 4 + 6	Total, v. 1-5		34 = 18 + 16 = 27 + 7
6	יּוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יִכָּכֵה	4	4	4
	וַיְרַח בְּלַיְלָה :	2	2	2
	Total, v. 6			6 = 6 + 0 = 0 + 6
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6			13 = 8 + 5 = 0 + 13
7	יְהִיָּה יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל־רָעָה	4	4	4
	יִשְׁמַר אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ :	3	3	3
	Total, v. 7			7 = 4 + 3 = 0 + 7
8	יְהִיָּה יִשְׁמַר־צִאתְךָ וּבּוֹאֶיךָ ^	4	4	4
	מִשַּׁעֲתָה וְעַד־עוֹלָם :	3	3	3
	Total, v. 8			7 = 4 + 3 = 0 + 7
	Strophe 4 Total, v. 7-8			14 = 8 + 6 = 0 + 14
	Total, v. 6-8			20 = 14 + 6 = 0 + 14
	Canto II Total, v. 5-8			27 = 16 + 11 = 0 + 27
	Total, v. 4-8			34 = 21 + 13 = 7 + 27
	Total, v. 1-8			54 = 32 + 22 = 27 + 27
	Including the heading, v. 1-8			56 = 34 + 22 = 29 + 27

Observations

- The psalm divides into two equal halves in terms of cantos, strophes, verselines, cola and words. The two cantos have identical compositional formulae determined by atnach:

Canto I vs. 1-4 2 strophes 4 verselines 8 cola **27 = 16 + 11** words
Canto II vs. 5-8 2 strophes 4 verselines 8 cola **27 = 16 + 11** words.

The exceptionally regular structure of the psalm manifests itself also on strophic level:

Strophe 1 vs. 1-2 13 words
Strophe 2 vs. 3-4 14 words
Strophe 3 vs. 5-6 13 words
Strophe 4 vs. 7-8 14 words.

It is worth noting that, like its predecessor, the psalm is to a great extent structured by the number of fullness, **7** (marked **bold** in the chart).

- The 2 middle verselines and 4 middle cola astride the arithmetic centre of the psalm, coinciding with the 14 middle words, vs. 4-5, may be regarded as the consciously designed meaningful centre expressing the gist of the poem (54 = 20 + **14** + 20):

יְהִיָּה לֹא־יִנָּמּוּ וְלֹא יִישָׁן ^ שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל :
יְהִיָּה שְׁמֶרְךָ ^ יְהִיָּה צִלְּךָ עַל־יַד יְמִינֶךָ :

Behold, he never slumbers, never sleeps // **the Guardian of Israel.**

YHWH is your Guardian // YHWH is your shade on your right hand.

The meaningful centre is 'embraced' by **34** (2 x **17**) words: 20 + 14 = **34** = 14 + 20. Though it may just be coincidence, the **14**-word centre has exactly **49** (7 x 7) letters.

Note also the beautiful chiasmic word-structure of the four cola: **5 + 2** and **2 + 5** words.

3. There is nothing significant about the two identical compositional formulae, but they may have been designed in this fashion in order to achieve the final compositional formula: $54 = 32 + 22$, which contains the *kabod* number **32**, symbolizing YHWH's presence. The fact that the inclusion of the heading brings the total number of words before atnach up to **34** (2×17) may just be coincidence, seeing the (almost) stereotyped 2-word heading. Ten of the fifteen Songs of Ascents have 2-word headings. Cf. Observation 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 120](#).

The total number of words, **54**, however, is indeed significant. It represents the numerical value of the root **שָׁמַר**, 'guard, keep' ($21 + 13 + 20 = 54$), which appears no less than 6 times in the poem (vs. 3b, 4b, 5a, 7a, 7b, 8a). Seeing the verbal content of the psalm dealing with YHWH the Guardian, **שָׁמַר** must be regarded as a key-word of paramount importance. This explains the choice of the author for **54** words, showing at the same time that the number 27 as such has no numerical significance.

It is interesting to note that Psalm 124, another psalm about YHWH's guardianship, is likewise made up of **54** words. See "Specific feature of Psalm 124" and Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 124](#). Compare also the **54** words surrounding the meaningful centre of the cognate Psalm 127 – see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 127](#).

Moreover, as Pieter van der Lugt has noted recently (private communication) the use of the numerical value (**54**) of the key-word **שָׁמַר** to structure the text here is very similar to the use of **56**, the numerical value of the complementary key-word **חָסָה**, 'to take refuge', in Psalm 91. This means that there is a close relationship between the two psalms.

4. Given the exceptionally regular structure of the psalm, it is not surprising to find barely any divine name numbers woven into the text. We encountered a similar situation in Psalm 120. The **17** words before atnach in vs. 4-7 may be mere coincidence. That there are **34** (2×17) words in vs. 1-5 and vs. 4-8 is apparently not caused by conscious design, but is contingent on the fact that vs. 5 and 4 happen to have 7 words, and the fixed number 27 (in $1-4$ and $5-8$) $+ 7 = 34$.
5. The name **יְהוָה** appears 5 times (vs. 2a, 5a, 5b, 7a and 8a), which brings the total number of occurrences of the divine name in Psalms 120 and 121 to exactly **7**.

© 2012
 Dr. C.J. Labuschagne Senior Lecturer in Semitic Languages (retired),
 Brinkhorst 44 University of Pretoria, South Africa
 9751 AT Haren (Gron) and
 The Netherlands Professor of Old Testament (retired),
labuschagne.cj@gmail.com University of Groningen, The Netherlands