

Psalm 127— 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 127

- This psalm has virtually the same structure as Psalm 126 and Psalm 121 – 2 cantos, 4 strophes, 8 verselines and 16 cola. The theme of Psalm 121, the guardianship of YHWH, who never sleeps, is reiterated here, both in terms of content, and logotechnically.
- The 3-word meaningful centre of the psalm, [יָתֵן לַיְדִירוֹ שְׁנָא](#) 'he provides his beloved with sleep', is surrounded by 54 words ($57 = 27 + 3 + 27$), which is the numerical value of the keyword [שָׁמַר](#), 'guard', in Psalm 121. Formally, the 3-word centre functions as a hinge between the two parts of the poem. At the same time, the interpretation of the psalm entirely hinges on the correct understanding of the meaningful centre.
- The psalm also resembles Psalm 124, e.g., in the triple repetition of [שָׁוָא](#), [שָׁוָא](#), [שָׁוָא](#), 'in vain... in vain... in vain...' Compare [אָזִי](#), [אָזִי](#), [אָזִי](#), 'then... then... then...' in Psalm 124.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt and Fokkelman: 1, 2 || 3-4, 5 (2 cantos, 4 strophes, 8 verselines, 16 cola; both divide the two bicolic verselines 5ab and 5cd into 4 + 3 and 4 + 3 words).
- Labuschagne: similarly, except that I divide verselines 5ab and 5cd into 2 + 5 and 2 + 5 words, taking the atnach in MT into account.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words expressing the main idea; **d**: words elaborating on the main idea.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְשִׁלְמֹה	3	= 3	+ 0		
	אִם-יִהְיֶה לֹא-יִבְנֶה בַּיִת	1	5	5	5	
	שָׁוָא עָמְלוֹ בּוֹנִיו בּוֹ		4	4	4	
	אִם-יִהְיֶה לֹא-יִשְׁמַר-עִיר	2	5	5	5	
	שָׁוָא שָׁקֵד שׁוֹמְרִים:	3	3	3	3	
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1	17	= 9	+ 8	= 17	+ 0
2	שָׁוָא לָכֶם מִשְׁכִּימֵי קוֹם	3	4	4		4
	מֵאַחֲרֵי-שָׁבַת		2	2		2
	אֲכָלִי לֶחֶם הַעֲצָבִים	4	3	3		3
	כֵּן יָתֵן לַיְדִירוֹ שְׁנָא:	4		4		4
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 2	13	= 9	+ 4	= 0	+ 13
	Canto I Total, v. 1-2	30	= 18	+ 12	= 17	+ 13
3	הִנֵּה נִחַלְתָּ יְהוָה בְּנִים	5	4	4		4
	שָׁכַר פְּרֵי הַבְּטָן:		3	3		3
4	כַּחֲצִים בִּידֵי-גִבּוֹר	6	3	3		3
	כֵּן בְּנֵי הַגְּעוּרִים:	3		3		3
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 3-4	13	= 7	+ 6	= 0	+ 13
	Total, v. 2-4	26	= 16	+ 10	= 0	+ 26

5 *		7	2	2	2
	אֲשֶׁרֵי תִּנְכַּר				
	אֲשֶׁר מָלֵא אֶת־אֶשְׁפָּתוֹ מִדָּהִם		5	5	5
	לֹא־יִבְשֶׁי	8	2	2	2
	כִּי־דִבְרוּ אֶת־אוֹיְבֵיִם בְּשֹׁעַר:		5	5	5
	Strophe 4	Total, v. 5	<u>14 = 9 + 5 = 0 + 14</u>		
	Canto II	Total, v. 3-5	<u>27 = 16 + 11 = 0 + 27</u>		
		Total, v. 1-5	<u>57 = 34 + 23 = 17 + 40</u>		
		With the heading, v. 1-5	60 = 37 + 23		

* In v. 5cd, my colon division is determined by the placement of *atnach*: 7 = 2 + 5 words. Accordingly, the preceding verseline, v. 5ab, may also be divided into 7 = 2 + 5. See my remark at the bottom of the chart in my Analysis of [Psalm 126](#).

Observations

- The logotechnical centre of the 57-word psalm is **לִידִידוֹ**, 'to his beloved' (28 + 1 + 28), in v. 2d, but the meaningful centre is to be found by including one word on either side of the pivot (**27 + 3 + 27**):

שָׁנָא לִידִידוֹ יָתֵן. 'he provides his beloved with sleep.'

The fact that the 3-word meaningful centre is surrounded by 54 words (27 + 27) need not be a matter of coincidence, for 54 is the gematric value of the keyword **שָׁמַר**, 'guard', in Psalm 121 (and Psalm 124), with which the present psalm has close ties. First, it has a similar structure: 2 cantos, 4 strophes, 8 verselines and 16 cola. Second, the leading theme of Psalm 121, the guardianship of YHWH, who never sleeps, reverberates here (cf. v. 1c-d), particularly in the meaningful centre. Moreover, the idea that YHWH is the only helper in Psalm 121 is reiterated here: without the help of YHWH all human endeavour is futile. See Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 121](#).

- The carefully contrived pivotal positioning of the three words at the boundary between **Canto I** (vs. 1-3) and **Canto II** deserves special attention, because the phrase appears to be the hinge between the two parts of the poem. **Canto I** is concerned with the human activities of building, guarding, toil and labour. **Canto II** is about having children, particularly sons, who can help safeguard the family from outside attacks.

The interpretation of the psalm hinges on the correct understanding of the 3-word phrase in the meaningful centre, and more specifically, the word **שָׁנָא**, 'sleep'. In my opinion, the word 'sleep' is grammatically the object of the verb 'give', and not an adverbial accusative meaning 'in sleep', as found in most modern translations and advocated by the great majority of scholars. The rendering in the NRSV, "for he gives sleep to his beloved", is an exception among the versions I scrutinized.

For a recent overview of the *status quaestionis*, see Th. Booij, "Psalm 127,2b: a Return to Martin Luther", in *Biblica* 81 (2000), pp. 262-268. Having written this Observation, I later found some references in Booij's article to a few modern scholars, who understand the text, in my view, correctly: V. Hamp, "Der Herr gibt es den Seinen im Schlaf", Ps 127,2d" in: *Festschrift für J. Ziegler* (FzB 2, Würzburg 1972); O. Keel, "Psalm 127: Ein Lobpreis auf Den, der Schlaf und Kinder gibt", in: *Festschrift für Notker Fuglister*, Würzburg 1991; and D.E. Fleming, "Psalm 127: Sleep for the Fearful, and Security in Sons", in: *ZAW* 107 (1995). Last, but not least, V. Stümke, *Den Seinen gibt der Herr...den Schlaf*, Waltrop 1998.

I see no reason for translating the phrase in another way than it stands: "Accordingly, he gives his beloved sleep", or "Accordingly, he provides his beloved with sleep". Neither is there any evidence for the supposition that **שָׁנָא** here means something else than 'sleep' in the literal sense of the word. Sleep is clearly considered a gift from God as a reward for a hard day's labour: the struggler and the toiler may enjoy a good night's rest in confidence that God watches over them - against the backdrop of Psalm 121! Why should we find a matter, plain in itself, perplexing?

Attempts by scholars to find a meaning for נָנַח other than 'sleep' are anything but convincing, such as M. Dahood's proposal (*Anchor Bible*, 1969): 'prosperity' and J.A. Emerton's suggestion: 'high estate, or honour' (*VT* 24, 1974, pp. 15-31), arguing that we have to do with a completely different root. Frankly, I fail to see any connection between 'prosperity' or 'honour' and the thought content of Canto I.

In my view, נָנַח denotes 'sleep' and nothing else, which means that I also reject the connotation 'sexual union' suggested by F. Bussby (*JThS* 35 (1934), pp. 306-307). The context clearly shows that the word is used here in its primary, *literal* sense: sleep. This is evidently the case in Canto I: it means a good night's sleep after the labour and toil of the day. However, being the hinge between Cantos I and II, it also *alludes* to what Canto II is all about: having progeny. And, as everybody knows – the Biblical writers are perfectly frank about this – getting progeny starts in bed with sexual intercourse between man and wife.

Therefore, we need not go as far afield as Dahood and Emerton do in looking for the precise connotation of נָנַח here. The thought content of Canto II indicates that the word 'sleep' implies *sexual union*, the prerequisite for having offspring. It does not necessarily follow that נָנַח *denotes*, or actually *means*, sexual union, because this would simply not fit the thought content of Canto I. Therefore, the connotation 'sexual intercourse' should be rejected out of hand. The word can *imply*, or *allude to*, sexual intercourse in the perception of the reader/listener, without really *meaning* sexual intercourse, or even having such an inherent *figurative* or *metaphorical* connotation, as suggested by Bussby.

The same applies to ὑπνοϛ used in the LXX, which simply means 'sleep'. It is only in later texts that it came to adopt a *figurative* sense (e.g., in *Wisdom* 4:6 and 7:2).

The figurative sense is seriously considered by Christensen, who translates: "Thus he will give to his beloved sleep (i.e., sexual intimacy)" - see also Observation 2 in his Analysis of [Psalm 127](#).

Let me sum up my interpretation of the word נָנַח:

First, I consider the translation 'in sleep' incorrect and reject all theories endeavouring to find a meaning for נָנַח other than 'sleep'.

Second, in terms of the thought content of **Canto I**, נָנַח signifies 'sleep' in the primary, *literal* sense of the word, 'a good night's sleep', the builder's, the guard's, the struggler's and the toiler's nocturnal rest. That is to say, 'sleep' as a primary gift from God: the *blessed inactivity* associated with sleep that entails *recreation*.

Third, in terms of the thought content of **Canto II**, however, נָנַח clearly (and only!) *alludes to* 'sleep' in the sense of 'sleep with', 'having sexual intercourse.' That is to say, 'sleep' as an additional gift from God: the *blessed activity* that entails *procreation*, the 'fruit of the womb', 'sons' as the 'inheritance from YHWH' (v. 3).

3. **Canto I**, with **17** words in v. 1 and **13** in v. 2, has been designed to reflect the alternative YHWH-'*echad* formula, $30 = 17 + 13$ (see also [Psalm 128](#)), obviously to emphasize that all human endeavour is futile without the blessing of the One and Only true God. As in Psalm 121, YHWH is also here visualized as the Guardian who never sleeps.

The presence of YHWH is additionally underscored by the divine name number **26** featuring in the total number of words in vs. 2-4, and by the overall compositional formula $57 = 34 + 23$, with **34** (2×17) words before and **23** after *atnach*.

4. The pivotal word in the meaningful centre of the psalm, לְיָדָיו, 'to his beloved', clearly relates to *any* human being who trusts in YHWH – not to the king, or to Solomon, in particular, as some scholars contend.

Significantly, some Hebrew manuscripts, the LXX, the Syriac Version and Jerome read the plural form: 'to his beloved ones'. In my opinion, the editors of the Psalter understood the word as a subtle reference to Solomon - being a pun with *yedido*, 'his beloved' and *Jedidiah*, Solomon's secondary name. When they added לְשִׁלְמֹה, 'for Solomon', to the 2-word heading (to be found in most psalms in this corpus), they obviously recalled 2 Sam. 12:24-25. There it is said that David had sexual intercourse with his wife Bathsheba, who bore him a son, whom he called Solomon.

And because YHWH loved him, he sent a message to Nathan the prophet that for YHWH's sake he should be given the name Jedidiah.

See Observation 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 124](#) in connection with the 3-word heading.

5. Strophe 1 stands out as an introduction to the discourse. It is made up of **17** words (Column c), leaving 40 words to the elaboration on the leading idea (Column d).
6. The name יהוה occurs 3x (vs. 1a, 1c and 3a).

© 2008

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