

Psalm 120— 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 120

- The compositional structure of Psalm 120, the first of the 15 Songs of Ascents, is evidently determined by the number of fullness: **7** verselines corresponding with the **7** Masoretic verses, **49** (7 x 7) words in total, **42** words spoken about God and **7** words cited as addressed to him (v. 2, as in Ps. 116:4), **14** words in vs. 3-4, etc. This seems to be the reason for the conspicuous lack of divine name numbers woven into the text.
- The total number of words in the text, including the heading (**51**), is determined by the numerical value of the first word of the label, **שִׁיר**, 'Song'; see Observation 5. It appears that Psalm 120 sets the tone for all Songs of Ascents, of which the numerical value of key-words in the text determines in one way or another their number of words.

Strophic structure

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3-4 | 5-6, 7 (2 cantos, 4 strophes, **7** verselines and **14** (2 x 7) cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-2, 3-4, 5-7 (3 strophes, **7** verselines and 15 cola, taking v. 7 as tricolon).
- Labuschagne: like Van der Lugt, taking v. 7 as a mono-line strophe.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words spoken about God; **d**: words cited as addressed to YHWH.
- The numbering of the verselines coincides with that of the Masoretic verses.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת	2	= 2	+ 0		
	אֶל־יְהוָה בִּצְרָתָהּ לֵאמֹר	4	4		4	
	קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי:	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 1	6	= 4	+ 2	= 6	+ 0
2*	יְהוָה הִצִּילָה נַפְשִׁי מִשְׁפַּת־שָׁקֶר	5	5			5
	מִלְּשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה:	2		2		2
	Total, v. 2	7	= 5	+ 2	= 0	+ 7
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2	13	= 9	+ 4	= 6	+ 7
3	מִה־יָתֵן לָךְ וּמִה־יִסֶּיף לָךְ	6	6		6	
	לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה:	2	2		2	
	Total, v. 3	8	= 8	+ 0	= 8	+ 0
	Total, v. 1-3	21	= 17	+ 4	= 14	+ 7
4	תִּצֵּי גְבוּר שְׁנוֹנִים	3	3		3	
	עַם נִחְלֵי רְתָמִים:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 4	6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4	14	= 11	+ 3	= 14	+ 0
	Canto I Total, v. 1-4	27	= 20	+ 7	= 20	+ 7

5	אֹיְהִי־לִי כִּי־גִרְתִּי מִשָּׂדֶה שְׁכַנְתִּי עִם־אֱהֲלֵי קָדֶר: Total, v. 5 Total, v. 3-5	5 5 5 4 4 4 <hr/> 9 = 5 + 4 = 9 + 0 23 = 16 + 7 = 23 + 0
6	רַבַּת שְׁכָנֶה־לָּהּ נִפְשִׁי עִם שׁוֹנֵא ¹ שְׁלוֹם: See Observation 7 in my Analysis of Psalm 122 . Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6	4 4 4 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 7 + 0 16 = 9 + 7 = 16 + 0
7	אֲנִי־ ² שְׁלוֹם וְכִי אֲדַבֵּר הַמָּה לַמְּלָחָמָה: Strophe 4 Total, v. 7 Canto II Total, v. 5-7 Total, v. 1-7 Including the heading, v. 1-7	4 4 4 2 2 2 <hr/> 6 = 4 + 2 = 6 + 0 22 = 13 + 9 = 22 + 0 49 = 33 + 16 = 42 + 7 51 = 35 + 16

* In v. 2, some scholars ignore the *atnach* and divide the verseline after the 3rd word, with 4 words in the second colon, instead of 2 as in MT. However, in light of the verse structure of v. 3, with 2 words in the second colon, I see no reason for deviating from the reading of MT.

Observations

1. The middle verseline, v. 4, which contains the middle word, appears to be the meaningful centre of the psalm (7 = 3 + 1 + 3 verselines):

חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים ^ עִם גִּתְּלֵי רְתָמִים:

Sharpened arrows of a warrior! // Moreover, red-hot coals of broom!

Irrespective whether we interpret these words as describing the malicious tongue, or as the weapons of its punishment, they contain the gist of the poem, dealing with the cry of the first person speaker to YHWH to save him from lying lips and the deceitful tongue.

The 7 verselines may be regarded as consciously arranged to form a menorah pattern, with v. 4 at the centre. This is underscored by the conspicuous use of the number 7 to structure the poem numerically (7 and its multiples are marked **bold** in the chart).

2. Significantly, the 7 words in v. 2 are the only words directly addressed to God, causing the formula **49 = 42 + 7**, 42 words spoken about God and 7 words addressed to God. For a similar use of the second person form to achieve a desired formula, see Observation 6 in my Analysis of [Psalm 118](#).
3. I see no justification for Christensen's proposal to combine the heading with the first four words of the poem (www.bibal.net):

“A song of ascents – directed to YHWH in my distress:
I cried out – and he answered me.”

This unusual interpretation rests, on the one hand, on his presupposition in regards the headings as integral to the bodies of the psalms, and on the other hand, on prosodic grounds “in terms of balance in mora-count and in the distribution of SAS units.” For my view of the relationship between the psalm headings and their poetic bodies, see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 3](#).

There is no justification either for ignoring the *atnach* and translating, as Terrien does:

“In my deep distress, to YHWH I cried and he answered me.”

or as in most modern versions:

“I called to YHWH in my distress, and he answered me.”

Presuming that the words of the text have been arranged as they stand in MT for well-considered rhetorical reasons, we have to conclude that they make excellent sense. The positioning of אֶל־יְהוָה, ‘to YHWH’, at the beginning of the verseline is clearly for reasons

of prominence. Thereby, the words **בְּצַרְתִּי לִי**, ‘when I was in distress’, specifically marked by atnach, get all the more emphasis:

“To YHWH, when I was in distress, // I cried and he answered me.”

Dahood translates: “To YHWH when I was besieged, I called and he answered me.”

4. In vs. 6 and 7 appears the first two instances of **שָׁלוֹם**, ‘peace’, in a series of **7** in the Songs of Ascents. Please consult Observation 7 in my Analysis of [Psalm 122](#).
5. Significantly enough, there is only one occurrence of a divine name number in the psalm: the **17** words before atnach in vs. 1-3. This is clearly due to the fact that **7** is used as the major structuring number. However, since the psalm is composed of altogether **49 (7 x 7)** words, the 2-word heading raises the total number of words in the entire text to **51**, which is the numerical value of **שִׁיר**, ‘Song’, the first word of the label of the Songs of Ascents. This matches the **51 (3 x 17)** occurrences of the divine name in the 15 Songs of Ascents! See Table XVII in the [Introduction to Book V](#).
6. The name **יְהוָה** appears only 2x (vs. 1a and 2a).

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