

Hebrew Whiteboard

Biblical Hebrew and the Psalms

Psalm 120

Objectives

- 1. Identify verse structure by means of major disjunctive accents.**
- 2. Display verse structure by means of logical line diagramming.**
- 3. Interpret verse structure.**
- 4. Identify poetic devices.**
- 5. Interpret poetic device function(s).**
- 6. Identify the psalm's structure.**

Psalm 120:1

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

'oleh-veyored, major poetic
disjunctive marking logical
midpoint of verse

topical *rebi'a*

1 שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

'athnach, second in
poetic disjunctive
ranking

אֶל־יְהוָה בִּצְרָתָהּ לִי

rebi'a, quarter marker
among poetic disjunctives

קָרָאתִי

soph pasuq, “end of verse”—this double
diamond is not a formal accent.

וַיַּעֲנֵנִי:

silluq = end of v. 1; formal accent for end of verse

Psalm 120:1

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Psalm superscription: “A
song of ascents”

Two adverbial prepositional
phrases modifying the
following verb (arrow).

Lamed genitive of possession, “my”

Qal perfect 1cs in past time by context, “I
called”—see the following *wayyiqtol*.

Waw-consecutive Qal imperfect 3ms + 1cs
pronominal suffix, “so He answered me”

1 שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

אֶל־יְהוָה

בַּצָּרָתָה לִּי

קָרָאתִי

וַיַּעֲנֵנִי:

Psalm 120:2

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

topical *rebi'a*

2 יְהוָה הִצִּילָהּ בְּפָנָי

tipchah, secondary poetic
disjunctive

מִשְׁפַּת-שָׁקָר

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

מִלְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה:

silluq = end of v. 2

Psalm 120:2

Hiphil imperative with
paragogic *he* (נצל)

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Vocative

Direct object noun with
1cs pronominal suffix

2 יְהוָה הַצִּילָהּ בְּפָנַי

מִשָּׁפַת-שָׁקָר

מִלְשׁוֹן רַמְיָה:

Two adverbial
prepositional
phrases modifying
preceding verb.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Translation

1 A song of ascents.

Unto YHWH in my distress

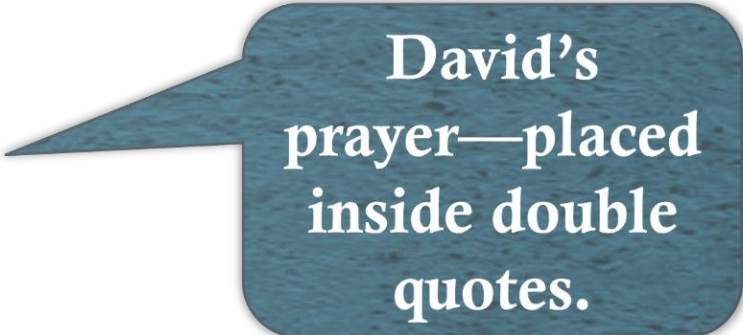
I called,

So He answered me.

2 “YHWH, rescue me

From lying lips,

From the deceitful tongue.”



David's
prayer—placed
inside double
quotes.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Translation

1 A song of ascents.

Psalm superscription

Unto **YHWH** in my distress

I called,

Key verb series

So He answered me.

2 “YHWH, rescue me

Stair step repetition.

Arranged to
demonstrate
emphases and
relationships.

From **lying lips,**

Next stair step
repetition (v. 3).

From the **deceitful tongue.”**

Double parallel description of
David’s distress.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

- Psalm superscriptions are authorial, literary, and historical. See Hab 3:1; Ps 18:1 // 2 Sam 22:1; Isa 38:9.
- This superscription identifies the psalm as one to be sung on a person's ascent to Jerusalem for the major annual feasts (v. 1a; see Exod 23:14–19; Deut 16:16).
- First of fifteen psalms in this collection.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

	I	II	III	IV	V
<i>Trouble – Problem</i>	Psalm 120 Anonymous	Psalm 123 Anonymous	Psalm 126 Anonymous Zion	Psalm 129 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Zion Blessing	Psalm 132 Anonymous Zion Blessing
<i>Trust – Power</i>	Psalm 121 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 124 <i>David</i> <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 127 Solomon Blessing	Psalm 130 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 133 <i>David</i> Zion Blessing
<i>Triumph – Protection</i>	Psalm 122 <i>David</i> <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem “house of the LORD”	Psalm 125 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem Zion	Psalm 128 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem Zion Blessing	Psalm 131 <i>David</i> <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 134 Anonymous Zion “house of the LORD” Blessing

The Psalms of Ascents can be arranged in five sets of three psalms each.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

- Adverbial prepositional phrases placed before the verb for emphasis (v. 1b).
- First, the psalmist prayed *to Yahweh*. He turned to Him for relief from his distress.
- Second, the psalmist prayed *while in his distress*.
- The perfect form of the verb makes a simple statement of fact: “I called.”

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

- The *waw*-consecutive imperfect provides the sequential result of having called on Yahweh: “So He answered.”
- The imperfect represents the action as having begun or being in process—the full answer might not have yet been fulfilled. The psalmist must patiently wait—even while in distress.

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

- After identifying to whom and when he prayed (v. 1b), and that Yahweh had initiated an answer, the psalmist reveals the content of his prayer (v. 2).
- For the second time the psalmist gives “Yahweh” the place of emphasis (vv. 1b, 2). Such repetitions in stair step fashion are characteristic of the psalms of ascents. The next one is “the deceitful tongue” (vv. 2, 3).

Psalm 120:1–2 — Observations

- “Rescue me” expresses urgency by means of the lengthened imperatival form. The verb root (נצַל) means to “snatch away” or “extract from” or “draw out of”—rescue out of the midst of the psalmist’s distress.
- “Me” is literally “my soul”—a way to make the plea very personal.
- The two adverbial phrases identify the distress as caustic lies, verbal vilification.

Psalm 120:3–4

tipchah, secondary poetic
disjunctive

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

rebi'a, disjunctive

silluq = end of v. 3

'athnach, major disjunctive in
this verse

silluq = end of v. 4

3 מַה-יִּתֵּן לִי

וּמַה-יִּסְיֶיךָ לִי

לָשׂוֹן רְמִיָּה:

4 חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוֹנִים

עַם גִּחְלִי רְתָמִים:

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 120:3–4

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Parallel questions

Identical to previous prepositional
phrase though pointing altered due
to major disjunctive accent.

3 מַה- יִתֵּן לִי
וּמַה-יִסְּרֶיךָ לִי

לָשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה:

Vocative of address

V. 4 = answer to previous
questions.

4 תִּצֵּי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוֹנִים
עִם גִּחְלִי רִתְּמִים:

Adjectival prepositional
phrase modifying תִּצֵּי.

Psalm 120:3–4

Rhetorical questions for which the one addressed knows the answer—
judgment awaits him.

3 מַה-יָּתֵן לָךְ
וּמַה-יִּסְיָךְ לָךְ

לָשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה:

Genitive of source

Near assonance between the
final words in each verse.
“Poetic justice,” so to
speak.

4 חֲצִי גִבּוֹר שְׁנוּנִים
עַם גִּתְּלִי רְתָמִים:

Psalm 120:3–4 — Translation

3 What will He give to you?

What more *will He give* to you,
you deceitful tongue?

4 Sharpened arrows from a warrior,
together with burning broom tree
coals!

Psalm 120:3–4 — Translation

Ellipsis of expected infinitive implies verb in previous line.

3 What will He give to you
What more *will He give* to you,
you **deceitful tongue**?

4 Sharpened arrows from a warrior
together with baying broom tree
animals!

Stair step repetition from v. 2.

Vocative of address—understood 2nd person.

Psalm 120:3–4 — Observations

- Short, rhetorical questions emphasize that the wicked person knows fully the God-appointed consequences of his actions (v. 3a,b).
- Nearest and best antecedent for 3ms verb יִתֵּן (v. 3a) is “Yahweh” (v. 2).
- That verb could also be indefinite as passive: “What will be given to you?”
As a divine passive, Yahweh would still be the intended subject.

Psalm 120:3–4 — Observations

NOT “complimentary”!

- Absence of normal complementary infinitive with **יָדָבֵר** in v. 3b merely indicates that the verb of 3a is understood as an implied complement.
- Vocative of address sits in a normal position at the end of the construction. Emphatic only due to the stair step repetition from v. 2.

Psalm 120:3–4 — Observations

- A verbless answer to the question makes the answer emphatic. If a translator wished to do so, the verb in v. 3a could be supplied in italics: “*He will give you . . .*”
- “Warrior” (v. 4a) could also be translated as “mighty man.”
- Topical *rebia*‘ on דַּבְּרִי indicates that the Masoretes saw it as emphatic: “together with.”

Psalm 120:3–4 — Observations

- The warrior's sharpened arrows indicates death in war (v. 4a).
- The broom tree's burning coals (v. 4b) indicate that burial might not follow such a death. Instead, like broken weapons of conflict, the body would be consumed by fire. The wicked will be treated as garbage.
- Broom tree wood provided hot, lasting coals.

Psalm 120:5

tipchah, secondary poetic
disjunctive

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

'athnach, major disjunctive in
this verse

rebi'a, disjunctive, maintaining
four poetic lines

silluq = end of v. 5

5 אוֹיְה־לִּי
כִּי־גִרְתִּי מִצָּדָה
לְשׁוֹנֹתַי
עִם־אֶהְיֶה קָדָר:

Psalm 120:6

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

'athnach, major disjunctive
in this verse

6 רַבַּת שְׁכֵנָה-לָּהּ נַפְשִׁי
עִם שׁוֹנֵא שְׁלוֹם:

silluq = end of v. 6

Topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 120:5

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Interjection + preposition + 1cs
pronominal suffix = exclamation:
“Woe is me!”

Adverbial causal clause

Adverbial locative phrase with
understood “in” and proper noun

Repetition of synonyms

Parallel adverbial locative
prepositional phrase with
proper noun

5 אֲוִיָּה-לִי

כִּי-גִרְתִּי

מִשָּׂדֶךְ

שְׂכִנְתִּי

עַם-אֱהִלִּי קִדְרִי:

Psalms 120:6

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Adverbial adjective; probable superlative
force, literally “large amount of [time]”
= “too long”

Qal perfect 3fs (feminine
subject, נִפְּשִׁי) + preposition
+ 3fs pronominal suffix;
dative of benefit

Adverbial prepositional phrase, locative:
preposition + participle (singular = collective) +
direct object (sets up next stair step parallelism)

רַבַּת 6
↓
שְׁכָנָה-לָּהּ נִפְּשִׁי
עִם שׁוֹנֵא שְׁלֹם:

Stair step
repetition
—cf. v. 5

Psalm 120:5–6 — Translation

- 5** Woe is me! because I reside in
Meshech;
I dwell among the tents of Kedar.
- 6** Too long!—I have dwelt
with those who hate peace.

Collective singular
participle

Psalm 120:5–6 — Translation

5 Woe is me!

Emphatic elements highlighted in arrangement of translation

because I **reside** in Meshech;

I **dwell**

Parallel synonyms

among the tents of Kedar.

6 Too long!—

I have **dwelt**

Stair step parallelism—
repetition of “dwell”

with those who hate **peace!**

Sets up next stair step
parallelism

Psalm 120:5–6 — Observations

- The emphatic interjection (אֵיזָהָלִי, v. 5a) expresses the psalmist's feelings regarding living in a stressful environment.
- As a resident alien (גֵּר, v. 5a) he temporarily resides in Meshech (warlike people in a region between the Black and Caspian Seas).
- His more permanent residence (שֹׁכֵן, v. 5b) is in Kedar (belligerent tribe in northern Arabia).

Psalm 120:5–6 — Observations

- “Tents of” (v. 5b) might indicate a nomadic tribe.
- Verbal synonyms (גֹּר and שָׁכַן) provide distinguishing detail and set up another stair step parallelism (שָׁכַן, vv. 5, 6).
- Beginning v. 6 with the temporal adjective (רַבָּה) indicates emphasis and thus implies the superlative “too long.”
- Vv. 5 and 6 are thus tied together by their individual emphatic beginnings.

Psalm 120:5–6 — Observations

- “I dwell”: literally, “my soul dwells for its benefit” (v. 6a).
- Difficult to convey all the implications of the Hebrew in translation:
 - ✓ “my soul”—makes the statement more personal = “I myself”
 - ✓ “for its benefit” (dative of advantage = *dativus commodi*)—implies some beneficial reason for the psalmist’s choice of residence.

Psalm 120:5–6 — Observations

- Emphatic *rebia*‘ (v. 6b) associates the adverbial prepositional phrase with the verb שָׁכַן just like v. 5b to identify those two occurrences of the verb as the stair step parallelism.
- The participle (שׂוֹנֵא, v. 6b) acts as a characteristic participle; the psalmist uses the singular as a collective (perhaps grammatical attraction to the singular proper nouns “Meshech” and “Kedar”).
- “Peace” (שְׁלוֹם) sets up the next stair step parallelism to be concluded in v. 7.

Psalm 120:7

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

tipchah, secondary poetic
disjunctive

7 אֲנִי-נָשָׁלוּם

'athnach, major disjunctive in
this verse

וְכִי אֶדְבָּר

rebi'a, topical

הֵמָּה לַמִּלְחָמָה:

silluq = end of v. 7

Psalm 120:7

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Apposition = psalmist
characterized by “peace”

7 אֲנִי-שָׁלוֹם

Adversative conjunction with
adverbial temporal clause

וְכִי אֶדְבֹּר

Contrasting personal pronoun

הֵמָּה לַמִּלְחָמָה:

Noun clause with
prepositional phrase as
the predicate parallel to
and contrasting with
שָׁלוֹם in first line

Psalm 120:7 — Translation

7 I am *for* peace,
but when I speak,
they are for war.



Or, “I am peaceful”

Psalm 120:7 — Translation

7 I am *for* **peace**,
but when I speak,
they are for war.

Concluding member of
final stair step
parallelism—see last
word of v. 6.

Psalm 120:7 — Observations

- The first clause is an independent declarative verbless clause with adverbialized substantival predicate: “I am *for* peace” (אֲנִי-שָׁלוֹם) — cp. Ps 109:4, “But I am *in* prayer” (וְאֲנִי תַפִּלָּה).
- Peace characterizes the godly psalmist; war characterizes his harassers.
- The psalmist’s desire for peace forms a fitting introduction to the remaining Psalms of Ascents in which peace appears as a major theme.

Psalm 120:7 — Observations

- The second clause commences with a *waw*-adversative connected to a temporal כִּי: “But when.”
- The verb (אָנִיכֵּן) consists of the normal Piel imperfect used as a characteristic present: “I speak.”
- The final half of this verse reuses the construction with which it begins: personal pronoun + adverbial predicate.

Psalm 120:7 — Observations

- The לִ- (l-) preposition indicates that the first clause of the verse implies an unstated preposition—thus, “*for* peace.”
- This psalm begins with “trouble” and concludes with “war”—an inclusion, or envelope figure.

Psalm 120 — Structure

- This psalm's structure appears by means of several factors:
 - 1) Difference in focus: vv. 1–4 = psalmist's prayer response to his circumstances, vv. 5–7 = the circumstances themselves.
 - 2) The first stair step parallelism connects the middle verses of the first section (vv. 2, 3: “deceitful tongue”); the remaining stair steps link vv. 5 with 6 and 6 with 7.

Psalm 120 — Structure

- This psalm's structure appears by means of several factors:
 - 3) Direct address: “O LORD” (v. 2) and “You deceitful tongue” (v. 3) connect first section.
 - 4) Dominant first person speech in vv. 5–7 with a final contrast to the psalmist's enemies implies one unit.
 - 5) The assonance of *shin* is internal in first section, but initial in the second.

Stair Step Parallelism

שָׁלוֹם, v. 7

שָׁלוֹם, v. 6

שְׁכֵנָה, v. 6

שְׁכֵנָתִי, v. 5

לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה, v. 3

לְשׁוֹן רְמִיָּה, v. 2



Psalm 120 — Structure

- Effective outline for the structure:
 - I. The Reality of the Psalmist's Prayers**
(vv. 1–4)
 - II. The Reality of the Psalmist's Problems** (vv. 5–7)

Psalm 120 — Summary

- As Psalm 119 closes, the psalmist is like a lost sheep (v. 176).
- In Psalm 120 the psalmist is like a sheep among wolves (vv. 3–7).
- When we tire of this lying and hostile world in which we live, we long for the fellowship of worship.
- Thus, Psalm 120 is a fitting start for the pilgrim's journey.



Psalm 120 — Summary

- **v. 1a:** The psalm heading identifies its purpose or intended use—in pilgrimage to the Temple or Tabernacle.
- **v. 1b:** The psalmist's focus is theocentric—he speaks first of God.
- **v. 1b:** The psalmist depicts his trouble as distress or a stressful situation.
- **v. 1c:** He first calls on YHWH and YHWH answered him—the psalm becomes a testimony.

Psalm 120 — Summary

- **v. 2a:** He prayed that YHWH would rescue him.
- **v. 2a:** The form of the imperative indicates a sense of urgency, a fervent plea.
- **v. 2a:** The root for “rescue” implies a timely snatching out of harm’s way.
- **v. 2a,b:** The repetition of “from lying lips” and “from a deceitful tongue” emphatically identifies the distress.

Psalm 120 — Summary

- **v. 3a,b:** The wording echoes an oath formula—“May God do so to you, and more also, . . .” It expresses the certainty that God will bring retribution.
- **v. 3c:** The stair step parallelism with v. 2 emphasizes the deceitful speech of the psalmist’s enemies.

Psalm 120 — Summary

- **v. 4:** In reality, the psalmist's villifiers are in danger—boomerang justice: that which they desire for the psalmist will come back upon them.
- **v. 4a:** The psalmist's enemies are for war (v. 7c), so a warriors sharpened arrows may find them.
- **v. 4b:** They are playing with fire and will be burned like discarded weapons of war.

Psalm 120 — Summary

- **v. 5:** The psalmist expresses his feelings, his grief (אֲוִיָּהּ-לִי). He is transparent about his living conditions among hostile, pagan peoples.
- **v. 6:** The psalmist longs for a different place to live—different conditions and different neighbors.
- **v. 7:** This verse presents the ultimate explanation of the psalmist's miserable circumstances.

Preaching Propositions for Psalm 120

- Like the pilgrim psalmist, when we face trouble our first act should be prayer.
- As pilgrims in this world, we ought to be characterized by peace.

Romans 12:18

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

