

Hebrew Whiteboard

Biblical Hebrew and the Psalms

Psalm 121

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 121:1

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

Identify major disjunctive accents and divide into poetic lines.

topical *rebi'a*

1 שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת

'athnach, second in poetic disjunctive ranking

אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל-הַהָרִים

silluq = end of v. 1

מֵאֵין יָבֹא עֲזָרִי:

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 121:1

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Psalm superscription: “A
song of ascents”

Imperfect verbs:
characteristic presents

נָשִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת 1

אֶעֱצֵא עֵינַי

Adverbial prepositional phrase—
dative of direction

אֶל-הַהָרִים

Adverbial prepositional phrase—
ablative of source

מֵאֵין

Grammatical/contextual issue:
interrogative or declarative?

יָבֹא עֲזָרִי:

Psalm 121:2

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

2 עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

עֲשֵׂה לִּי
שְׂמִים וְאֶרֶץ:

silluq = end of v. 2

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 121:2

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Repetition = stair step parallelism from v. 1;
a noun clause of identification

עֲזָרִי 2

Adverbial prepositional phrase—
ablative of source

מֵעַם יְהוָה

עֹשֶׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:



Noun apposition identifying
יהוה's office

Psalm 121:1–2 — Translation

1 A song of ascents

I look to the hills—

From where does my help come?

2 My help *comes* from YHWH,

Maker of heaven and earth.

Idiom—literally, “I lift
my eyes”

Gapped verb (ellipsis of
preceding verb)

Psalm 121:1–2 — Translation

Psalm superscription

1 A song of ascents.

I look to the hills—

From where does **my help** come?

Stair step repetition

2 My help comes from YHWH,
Maker of heaven and earth.

Repetition of noun and
preposition to provide answer
to question.

Arranged to
demonstrate
emphases and
relationships.

Psalm 121:1–2 — Observations

- Psalm superscription—see observations on Psalm 120:1–2.
- Context indicates that the imperfect verbs in these verses carry the characteristic present concept—they do not represent one-time occurrences.
- The idiom “lift the eyes” = “look” or “look up.”

Psalm 121:1–2 — Observations

- “To the hills” might reflect the Israelite expectation of divine help sent from above—an angel? a theophany?
- Evidence in v. 2 to treat the next clause as a question:
 - 1) Answer repeats key element(s) of the question (GKC §150*n*).
 - 2) Gapping of verb (ellipsis) ties the question and answer closely together.

Psalm 121:1–2 — Observations

- Apposition of יהוה with עֹשֶׂה identifies YHWH's office as Creator (Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert*, §1.8.2a).
- YHWH is Maker of all things (“heaven and earth” = a merism).

Psalm 121:3

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

3 אֶל-יְיָ לַמּוֹט רַגְלֶךָ

disjunctive *rebi'a*

אֶל-יָנוּם

שָׁמְרֶךָ:

silluq = end of v. 3

Psalm 121:3

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Imperfect verbs:
characteristic presents

Complementary infinitive
(Niphal passive)

Repetition of 2ms
pronominal suffix—
assonance

Subject of verb; stair step
repetition of key root

3 אֶל-יָמֵן

לַמָּוֶט רַגְלֶיךָ

Repeated
subjective
negative

אֶל-יְנוּם

Next stair step
repetition

שָׁמְרֶךָ:

Psalm 121:4

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

tipcha, secondary disjunctive

4 הִנֵּה לֹא-יָנוּם

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

וְלֹא יִישָׁן

שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

silluq = end of v. 4

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 121:4

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Interjection emphasizing the
following phrase(s)

4 הַיְּהִי

Repeated objective
negatives

לֹא-יָנוּם

Stair step repetition from
previous verse

וְלֹא יִישָׁן

שׁוּמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Synonymous parallel

Stair step repetition of key root

Psalm 121:3–4 — Translation

3 He does not let your foot be moved;
Your Guardian does not become
sleepy.

4 Indeed, He never becomes sleepy,
And Israel's Guardian never
slumbers.

Since this synonym is from a different root than “becomes sleepy,” translate with a different English word.

Psalm 121:3–4 — Translation

A **3** He does not let your foot be moved;

B Your **Guardian** does not **become**
sleepy.

4 **B** Indeed, He never **becomes sleepy,**

A And Israel's **Guardian** never
slumbers.

Chiastic arrangement of lines so
that focus falls upon the central
elements.

Psalm 121:3–4 — Observations

- Subjective negatives (v. 3) often occur with jussive (subjunctive) verbs—here to express conviction that something cannot happen (GKC §107*p*).
- Context indicates characteristic present use of the imperfect verbs—the psalmist does not refer to a single occurrence.

Psalm 121:3–4 — Observations

- Vv. 1–2 use the first person (= the psalmist); starting at v. 3 the third person (= God) becomes the focus.
- Often נתן (*nathan*) means “give,” but here it means “allow” or “permit.”
- Not allowing “a foot to be moved” (v. 3) indicates stability, being steadfast, unshakeable—not a reference to physical balance, but to a steady life.

Psalm 121:3–4 — Observations

- The verb יָנוּם (from נָוַם) conveys the idea “fall asleep,” “be sleepy,” or “be drowsy.”
- Imperfects of stative verbs often refer to a state of *becoming*, rather than *being*.
- The root שָׁמַר (*shamar*) means “keep” or “guard.” It occurs 6 times in this brief psalm (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)—a thematic element.

Psalm 121:3–4 — Observations

- The particle הֵנִיָּה (v. 4) expresses emphasis when referring to a phrase that follows.
- Especially when it follows an identical phrase with the subjective negative (לֹא), the objective negative (לֹא־) expresses permanence (“never”).
- The previous use of “Guardian” was personal (2ms); the second is national (“Israel’s Guardian”).

Psalm 121:3–4 — Observations

- The participle שומר/שֹׁמֵר identifies the vocation of the referent.
- The chiasm of lines in vv. 3–4 focuses on the divine Guardian’s continual watchfulness.

Psalm 121:5

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

5 יְהִנֵּה שְׁמִיךָ

disjunctive *rebi'a*

יְהִנֵּה צִלְּךָ

עַל־יַד יְמִינְךָ:

silluq = end of v. 5

Psalm 121:5

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Noun clause of
identification

5 יְהוָה שְׁמִירָהְךָ

Thematic repetition;
stair step parallelism

יְהוָה צִלְּךָ

Noun clause of
identification

עַל-יַד יְמִינְךָ:

Adverbial prepositional phrase
of location

2ms
pronominal
suffixes--
assonance

Psalm 121:6

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

disjunctive *rebi'a*

יֹמָם 6

disjunctive *rebi'a*; some
verses, as here, use only
the *rebi'a*

הַנֶּשְׁמָשׁ לֹא-יָכֹחַ

וַיָּרֶם בְּלִילָה:

silluq = end of v. 6

Psalm 121:6

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Temporal adverb (modifies
following verb) = “daily”
or “by day”

Emphatic word
order—subject
before verb

6

Objective negative with Hiphil
imperf 3ms (לֹא) + 2ms pron
suff—characteristic present

יוֹמָם

הַנֶּשְׁמָשׁ לֹא-יָפֹּךָ

וַיָּרֶם

Temporal adverbial
prepositional phrase
forming merism with
previous adverb

בְּלַיְלָהּ:

Forms merism
with previous
noun

Modifies gapped verb

Psalm 121:6

Special adjustment to
display perfect chiasmic
structure.

6 יוֹמָם

A

הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ

B

לֹא-יָפֹךָ

C

וַיָּרֶם

B

בְּלֵילָה:

A

Center of chiasm is
the emphasis

Psalm 121:5–6 — Translation

5 YHWH is your Guardian;
YHWH is your protection at your
right hand.

Or, “shadow”

6 By day the sun does not smite you;
Nor the moon by night.

Psalm 121:5–6 — Translation

5 YHWH is your Guardian;
YHWH is your protection
at your right hand.

A **6** By day
 B the sun
 C does not smite you;
 B Nor the moon
A by night.

Psalm 121:5–6 — Observations

- Verse 5 presents synonymous parallelism in two lines plus an added adverbial prepositional phrase at the end of the second line.
- That parallelism emphasizes YHWH Himself—He is the believer's Guardian, so He protects.
- Shadow (or shade) acts as a metaphor for protection in vv. 5–6.

Psalm 121:5–6 — Observations

- The believer's "right hand" comprises yet another metaphor referring to the position of favor, advocacy, and strength. In other words, YHWH is the believer's strength and advocate.
- In v. 6 the merisms ("by day"/"by night" and "sun"/"moon") speak of totality = all the time. No time exists during which YHWH is not Guardian.

Psalm 121:5–6 — Observations

- Verse 6 displays a perfect chiastic structure:
 - Grammatically: adverb – subject – verb – subject – adverb
 - Lexically (antonyms): day/night, sun/moon
 - Linguistically: the longest element (לֹא-יִפָּקֵה, pronounced as one word—note *maqqeph*) is linguistically heaviest and placed at the end, often for emphasis.

Psalm 121:5–6 — Observations

- The center of the chiasm (“not-it-smite-you”) carries the emphasis.
- In other words, the emphasis falls upon the result of the Guardian’s protection: no smiting of the believer—no harm, no death, no defeat.
- Thus far Psalm 121 has not identified any specific danger or threat.

Psalm 121:6 — Syntax Note

יִכָּכֶה

- Hiphil—the root נכה occurs in Niphal 1x, Pual 1x, Hiphil 480x, Hophal 16x. Thus, Hiphil = Qal, without causative force.
- As a I-נ and III-ה root, the נ assimilates (*dagesh* in first כ) and the ה elides, leaving only the כ (2nd letter in the root).
- The text preserves the fuller orthography for the 2ms pronominal suffix (כָּה vs. כֵּ).

Psalm 121:7

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

topical *rebi'a*

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

7 יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֶךָ מִכָּל-רָע

יִשְׁמַר אֶת-נַפְשְׁךָ:

silluq = end of v. 7

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 121:7

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

Emphatic word order (subject before
verb) + topical *rebi'a* indicate a major
focus, as well as potentially an
additional stair step repetition.

7 יְהוָה

Stair step repetition of
thematic root.

יִשְׁמְרֶךָ

Repetition of 2ms
pronominal suffix.

מִכָּל-יָדָע

Adverbial
prepositional
phrase

יִשְׁמְרֶךָ אֶת-נַפְשְׁךָ:

Direct object.

Psalm 121:8

Identify major
disjunctive accents and
divide into poetic lines.

topical *rebi'a*

8 יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֵךְ-צִאתְךָ וּבֹאֲךָ

'athnach, major
disjunctive in this verse

לִמְעַתָּה וְעַד-עוֹלָם:

silluq = end of v. 8

topical *rebi'a*

Psalm 121:8

Adjust to display
grammatical and
parallel relationships.

See 2nd diagram and
note on יהוה for v. 7.

Repetition of 2ms
pronominal suffix.

Thematic repetition of
key root.

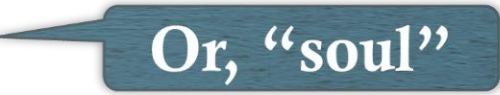
Two temporal adverbial
prepositional phrases.

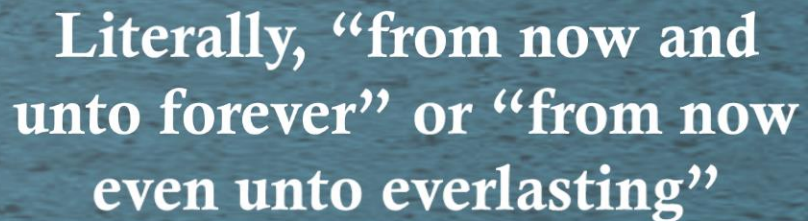
8 יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֶ-צִאתְךָ וּבֹאֲךָ

לְמַעַנָּה

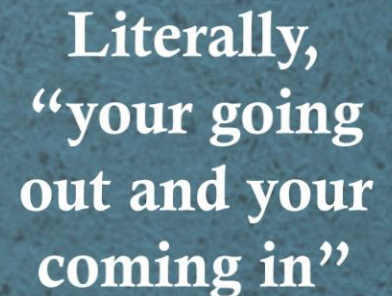
וְעַד-עוֹלָם:

Psalm 121:7–8 — Translation

- 7** YHWH guards you from all malice;
He guards your life.  Or, “soul”
- 8** YHWH guards your daily activities
now and always.



Literally, “from now and
unto forever” or “from now
even unto everlasting”



Literally,
“your going
out and your
coming in”

Psalm 121:7–8 — Translation

7 YHWH guards you

from all malice;

He guards your life.

8 YHWH guards your daily activities

now and always.

Translation note: “malice”—the Hebrew word encompasses the concepts of wickedness and evil, as well as disaster and harm. “Malice” seems to allow for both categories—the moral and the physical.

Psalm 121:7–8 — Observations

- Verses 2, 5, 7, and 8 refer to YHWH five times.
- Verses 5, 7, and 8 all begin with YHWH.
- Interestingly, vv. 5–8 all begin with *yod*—just a minor poetic flourish to heighten the poem’s beauty—perhaps to draw attention to the daily presence of the believer’s Guardian, YHWH.

Psalm 121:7–8 — Observations

- The synonymous parallelism in v. 7 emphasizes the One who guards as well as the guarding itself.
- The first line refers to that from which the believer is guarded—“malice” (see translation note above).
- The second line identifies the object of YHWH’s guarding—“your life” (or, “your soul”; or, “you yourself”).

Psalm 121:7–8 — Observations

- Therefore, v. 7 explains the imagery involved in vv. 5–6.
- Verse 8 brings the topic of the psalm back to pilgrimage—“your going out and your coming in” idiomatically refers to one’s daily activities—for the pilgrim that means his journey (both his going to Jerusalem and his return home).

Psalm 121:7–8 — Observations

- The end of v. 8 confirms that the better translation remains “daily activities,” because this prayerful blessing covers the remainder of the believer’s life: “now and always.”

Psalm 121 — Structure

- This psalm's structure appears by means of several factors:
 - 1) Change in grammatical person: vv. 1–2 = first person, referring to the psalmist; vv. 3–8 = third person, referring to YHWH.
 - 2) Another grammatical person occurs: vv. 3, 5–8 = second person, referring to the believer and/or Israel. It still ties vv. 3–8 together as a larger unit.

Psalm 121 — Structure

- This psalm's structure appears by means of several factors:
 - 3) Vv. 3–4 are tied together by the stair step repetition of “does not become sleepy” and “never becomes sleepy.”
 - 4) Vv. 5–8 each begin with a *yod*—vv. 5, 7, and 8 being “YHWH.”

Psalm 121 — Structure

- This psalm's structure appears by means of several factors:
 - 5) Vv. 5–8 also alternate references to the object of protection and the time of protection:
 - ✓ v. 5 “you . . . your right hand”
 - ✓ v. 6 “by day . . . and by night”
 - ✓ v. 7 “you . . . your life”
 - ✓ v. 8 “now and forever”

Psalm 121 — Structure/Outline

Psalm Superscription (v. 1a)

I. The Psalmist's Question (vv. 1b–2)

II. The Believer's Guardian (vv. 3–8)

A. The Guardian's Watchfulness (3–4)

B. The Guardian's Protectiveness (5–8)

Stair Step Parallelism

Etc.

שמר, v. 7

שמר, v. 5

שמר, v. 4

שמר, v. 3

עזרי, v. 2

עזרי, v. 1



Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 1a:** The psalm heading identifies its purpose or intended use—in pilgrimage to the Temple or Tabernacle.
- **v. 1b:** The psalmist senses a need for help and uses a question to determine the source for his help.
- **v. 1b:** The psalmist looks to the hills—either for help or as the direction of his danger.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 1b:** Psalm 125:2 would seem to indicate that when the pilgrim looks at the hills he thinks of YHWH's protection.
- **v. 1b:** The issue regarding question or declaration is resolved by the grammar of the Hebrew interrogative and its answer, as well as by the subsequent context with its focus on YHWH as the pilgrim's Guardian.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 2a:** “My help” not only comprises the first stair step repetition, but also an anadiplosis (beginning second verse with same word as ending of previous verse—a hinge word).
- **v. 2a:** The psalmist’s help comes from YHWH.
- **v. 2b:** YHWH is “the Maker of heaven and earth”—Creator of all the universe.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 2b:** “Maker” serves as only one vocational title for YHWH in this psalm—He is also “Guardian,” the title dominating the remainder of the psalm.
- **v. 3a:** The characteristic present usage of the imperfects in this psalm give it daily reality throughout the pilgrim’s life.
- **v. 3a:** That YHWH does not allow the pilgrim’s “foot to be moved” refers to stability in life—a similar concept involved in v. 8 with the pilgrim’s “daily activities.”

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 3a:** These two references to all of life's experiences/activities form an inclusion around the second section of the psalm (vv. 3–8).
- **v. 3b:** The pilgrim's Guardian does not become sleepy or drowsy—He is always alert and watchful.
- **v. 4a:** The emphatic particle (“Behold,” “Look,” or “Indeed”) basically announces that “It is indeed true that . . .” YHWH is always alert and watchful.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 4a:** The switch to the objective negative after v. 3b's subjective negative declares that YHWH “never” becomes drowsy or unwatchful.
- **v. 4b:** The psalmist's use of a synonym referring to sleep (“slumber”) intensifies the imagery and allows the concept to sink into the hearers' or readers' thought.
- **v. 4b:** Mention of Israel enables the psalmist to identify the people of God in his day. It also makes the Guardian's protection national, as well as personal.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 5a:** The final section of this psalm (the second subsection in vv. 3–8) uses “YHWH” four times and “guard” or “Guardian” four times.
- **v. 5a:** That theocentric focus continues to emphatically answer the question asked in v. 1b.
- **v. 5b:** The imageries of “shade/shadow” and “right hand” enable the psalmist to depict YHWH’s protectiveness in both a poetic and a personal fashion.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 6:** Time becomes the focus in this entire verse—it emphasizes YHWH’s constant guarding—it never lapses—just as He never becomes drowsy or unalert.
- **v. 6a:** The central element of the chiasm becomes the first direct reference to the psalmist’s or the pilgrim’s danger—“smite” in the sense of causing harm or defeat.
- **v. 7a:** The second direct reference to the danger (or threat) comes with “from all malice”—carrying with it a hint of potential enemies in the human realm.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 7b:** The mention of “your life” (or, “your soul”) identifies the object of potential malice—the individual, the pilgrim, or the believer.
- **v. 8a:** “Daily activities” closes the inclusio begun in v. 3 and allows an implied reference to the pilgrim’s journeying.
- **v. 8b:** Returning to the time element of v. 6 concludes another inclusio.

Psalm 121 — Summary

- **v. 8b:** That time stamp, so to speak, makes the psalm's theological implications applicable throughout a believer's life.
- We cannot ignore the fact that Psalm 121 comprises the theological response to Psalm 120's focus on the pilgrim's adversaries. Yes, the pilgrim faces adversity and adversaries, but he has an ever-watchful Guardian to protect him throughout his pilgrimage—indeed, throughout his life.

Preaching Propositions for Psalm 121

- Like the pilgrim psalmist, we need help—divine help.
- God (Yahweh) Himself is our ever-watchful Guardian throughout our entire life.

Hebrews 13:5–6

“I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,” . . . “The LORD is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?”

