

## As God Is My Witness

### *Another Look at Psalm 12:6*

#### What, Precisely, Does God Promise the Psalmist?

**A**S HAS LONG BEEN recognized, the line *ʾašit beyešaʿ yapiaḥ lo* in Ps 12:6 is problematic. The construction *šyt + be-* has been taken to indicate that the object of the verb (in this instance unexpressed) is to be placed somewhere (in this instance “in safety”).<sup>1</sup> On the assumption that *yapiaḥ* is a Hiphil form of the verb *puḥ*, “breathe, blow,” the expression *yapiaḥ lo* has been thought to indicate that the deliverance which the psalmist has asked for (v. 2, *hošīʾah*) is something the psalmist has been “panting” or “longing” for. Alternatively, *yapiaḥ lo* has been connected with those who “speak *šaw*”<sup>1</sup> against the psalmist (v. 3) and taken to mean “breathe out” in rage or with malign intent.<sup>2</sup> Some proposals involve emendation.

In recent years, the form *yapiaḥ* in other passages has been construed on the basis of Ugaritic *yph*, as meaning “witness,” whether as a verb or as a substantive.<sup>3</sup> On this basis, Patrick D. Miller has offered a fresh analysis of the line in Psalm 12, which he translates, “I will place in safety the witness in his behalf.”<sup>4</sup> Miller’s explication of the meaning of the line may be summarized as follows: The psalmist is being subjected to “lies, deceit, and boasting.” In particular the complaint, “they utter lies [*šaw*] to each other,” is “reminiscent of the prohibition in Deut v. 20, ‘You shall not bear *ʿed šaw*’

1. As in, e.g., Ruth 4:16, a child *in* a woman’s bosom; Ps 88:7, the psalmist *in* the Pit; 2 Sam 19:29, a servant *among* diners.

2. A sampling of proposals is given in *HALAT* 3:917, under *puḥ* II.

3. See *ibid.*; also L. Alonso Schokel, *Diccionario biblico hebreo-espanol*.

4. Miller, “*yāpīaḥ* in Psalm xii 6,” 495–501.

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against your neighbor,” and of the concern in Deut 19:18. “Over against any such *‘ed šaw*,” according to Miller, Yahweh promises “to protect the one who is a witness in his or her behalf.” In support of the fact that such witnesses would need protection, Miller cites Amos 5:7, 10, with its reference to those who hate and abhor the one who speaks the truth in the gate; and he appeals to what he takes to be implicit in the situation surrounding the writer of the Yabneh Yam letter: potential witnesses on the writer’s behalf—such as his fellow workers—would be subject to the wrath of the powerful person at whose hands he is currently suffering. In such a reading of Ps 12:6, Yahweh’s assurance to the psalmist is that any who testify in his or her behalf will (to use a contemporary American expression) come under a divine Witness Protection Program.

I am persuaded by Miller’s arguments for the construal of *yapiaḥ* as “a witness.” But I find less convincing his interpretation of *’āšit beyeša’* as giving divine assurance of the safety of the witness. That God would respond to the cry, “Save me,” by assuring the psalmist of the safety of the witness on his behalf, strikes me as a peculiar piece of indirection. It is much more likely that *’āšit beyeša’* conveys, as previous interpretations have assumed, an assurance of the psalmist’s safety and, as such, constitutes a direct response to the petition in v. 2. But if Miller and others are right in taking *yapiaḥ* as “a witness,” how is the syntax of the line as a whole to be construed? It is the purpose of this paper to answer that question.

### Another Look at the Language of the Promise

It is clear that the construction *šyt + be-* can indicate the action of placing something or someone somewhere. But I propose that the syntax of Ps 12:6c is better analyzed in terms of the well-attested construction, (*šyt*) + (direct object) + (*le-* recipient of direct object). In this construction, the verb carries the connotation, “provide, appoint,” and the sentence has to do with “providing something for someone.” Consider the following examples:

Gen 4:25	<i>šat li . . . zera’ aḥer</i>
Hos 6:11	<i>šat qašir lak</i>
Ps 9:20	<i>šitah . . . morah lahem</i>
Ps 140:5	<i>moqešim šatu li</i>
Job 14:13	<i>tašit li ḥoq</i>

Construed in terms of this construction, *ʾašit . . . yapiaḥ lo* would mean, “I will provide/appoint a witness for him.”<sup>5</sup> How, in such a sentence, may we construe the function of the phrase, *beyeša’*?

I propose that the preposition *be-* functions here as a *beth essentiae*, and that the phrase *beyeša’* functions in the sentence as a secondary, predicate accusative. In my view, such an analysis receives support from the following types of usage:

1) The first is the repeated occurrence of the *beth essentiae* in the phrase *be’ezzer* where, in most cases, God is appealed to, or acts for the devotee, in God’s role as a helper. The texts are as follows:

Deut 33:26	There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens <i>as your helper</i> [ <i>be’ezreka</i> ]
Exod 18:4	The God of my father was my help [ <i>be’ezri</i> ].
Hos 13:9	I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you [ <i>be’ezreka</i> ]? <sup>6</sup>
Ps 146:5	Happy is he whose help [ <i>be’ezro</i> ] is the God of Jacob.

Compare also the participial construction:

Ps 118:7	The LORD is on my side <i>as my helper</i> [ <i>be’ozray</i> ].
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In the following passage, the affirmation without *beth essentiae* is paralleled by a phrase with it, possibly a case of the preposition doing double duty for both lines:

Ps 54:4	But surely, God is my helper [ <i>’ozer li</i> ]; the Lord is <i>the upholder of my life</i> [ <i>besomeke napši</i> ].
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5. In Gen 4:25 and Job 14:13 the sequence, as we would expect, is (verb) + (pronoun indirect object) + (noun direct object). In Hosea 6 and Ps 9:20 the noun direct object follows the verb and precedes the pronoun indirect object. In Ps 140:5 the indirect pronoun object follows immediately after the verb, but it has to because the noun direct object comes before the verb. This is to say that the sentence structure I am proposing for Ps 12:6 is not unusual in having *lo* come *after yapiaḥi* in a sentence meaning, “I will provide a witness for him.”

6. The translation follows those versions which presuppose *mi* for MT *bi*; see BHS *in loc*. Following MT here would not affect the relevance of the verse for my argument.

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To be sure, in all of the above instances the *beth essentiae* phrase occurs in the nominative case. But the close semantic connection and frequent collocation of the roots 'zr and yš<sup>7</sup> invite the suspicion that the phrase *beyeša'* may function like *be'ezer*.

2) In a number of instances, the verb *šyt* takes a double accusative, in which the secondary accusative (italicized in the following examples) indicates what character, status or function is accorded to the primary accusative through the action indicated in the verb.

- i) 2 Sam 22:12 He made darkness around him *a canopy*.
- ii) 1 Kgs 11:34 I will make him *ruler*.
- iii) Isa 26:1 He provides *as salvation* walls and bulwarks.<sup>8</sup>
- iv) Ps 84:6 They make [Baca] *a place of springs*.
- v) Ps 88:8 You have made me *a horror to [le-] them*.
- vi) Ps 110:1 I will make your enemies *a footstool* for [le-] your feet.

7. One may note especially the instances where both roots occur in the same verse: Deut 21:29; Josh 10:6; Job 26:2; Pss 37:40; 109:26; Isa 49:8; and Isa 63:5. Two of these passages are especially relevant to the analysis of Psalm 12 offered in this paper. Psalm 109 contains a prayer of one who claims to be unjustly accused by "lying tongues" (vv. 2–3; compare Ps 12:3–4; and note the idiom *dibber 'et*, "speak against," in Pss 12:2 and 109:2). In the face of these accusations, the psalmist appeals to God as one "poor and needy" (Ps 109:22, also in part v, 31; compare Ps 12:5). In this appeal, the psalmist prays, "But you, O LORD my Lord, / act on my behalf for your name's sake; / because your steadfast love is good, deliver me [*haššileni*] . . . Help me [*özreni*], O LORD my God! / Save me [*hoši'eni*] according to your steadfast love. / Let them know that this is your hand; / you, O LORD, have done it" (Ps 109:21, 26–27) It is unclear whether the supplicant in this psalm looks for divine help through a fellow Israelite who will arise as a witness for the defense. In Isa 63:5 the picture does seem clear: In the absence of any human agency God will intervene directly: "I looked, but there was no helper [*özzer*]; / I stared, but there was no one to sustain me;/so my own arm brought me victory [*toša'*] and my wrath sustained me."

8. Isa 26:1 is generally rendered, "he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks." But in view of the fact that Isa 60:10 envisages the rebuilding of Jerusalem's physical walls, and that in Isa 60:18 those walls are called *yešu'ah* and its gates *tehillah*, it is to me more likely that in Isa 26:1 the primary accusative, indicating what has been provided, is "walls and bulwarks," while the secondary accusative is "salvation," indicating their significance for the people. In both Ps 12:6 and Isa 26:1, then, as I analyze them, God is said to provide (*šyt*) something *as salvation*. Moreover, the *lo* phrase, "for him," in the psalm is paralleled by the earlier *lanu* phrase, "for us," in Isa 26:1. In other words, *yešu'ah* in Isa 26:1 and *beyeša'* in the Psalm are syntactic and semantic equivalents.

We may note that, just as in the previous set of examples where *šyt* is followed by an accusative direct object and an indirect object introduced by *le-*, indicating that something is being provided for someone, so here in the last two passages the action in the verb makes the primary accusative object serve as something for someone. Insofar as a *beth essentiae* functioning as a secondary predicate accusative falls in the same syntactic slot and performs the same semantic function as a secondary accusative, the above examples (especially iii, v and vi) give some indirect plausibility to my rendering of Ps 12:6.

The preceding analysis may help us to uncover a precise, if partial, syntactic parallel to Ps 12:6 in Jer 3:19. In RSV it is translated,

I thought how I would set you among my sons [*ʾašitek babbanim*],  
and give you a pleasant land,  
a heritage most beautiful of all nations.  
And I thought you would call me, My Father,  
and would not turn from following me.

As W. L. Holladay observes, such an understanding of *ʾašitek babbanim* poses the question, “who would the ‘sons’ be with whom the ‘wife’ is included?” He goes on to say, “given the vocative ‘sons/children’ in v. 22, it is best to translate ‘treat as’ (so also NAB). Yahweh wants to bequeath to the people land, just as a father bequeaths land to his sons.”<sup>9</sup> Though Holladay does not do so, we may support his interpretation by identifying a *beth essentiae* in the phrase *babbanim*.

With the above examples we may compare Deut 1:13, *waʾasimem berašekem*, “and I will make them *your heads*” where the verb *šym* (a close synonym of *šyt* in this instance) is followed by a pronominal accusative and then a *beth essentiae* phrase as secondary predicate accusative. If instead of *berašekem* the text were to read the semantic equivalent, *lakem beraš*, the parallel to Ps 12:6 would be complete.

It is possible that 1 Sam 8:11 also reflects such a usage. RSV translates, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots [*bemerkabto*] and to be his horsemen [*beparašaw*], and to run before his chariots.” This translation construes *beparašaw* as involving a *beth essentiae*, in which case we may isolate the syntax as follows: *wešam lo <’et benekem> beparašaw*, where the inserted component is understood elliptically from the preceding clause. Such a sentence would parallel my construal of Ps 12:6 exactly. However, the preceding *bemerkabto* is problematical, as apparently containing the

9. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 122.

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same preposition with a different connotation. If *merkabah* could be taken in the sense of *rekeb* where the latter term means “chariot crew, war-chariot troop,” in conjunction with *paraš* as meaning “cavalry,”<sup>10</sup> then both phrases might be taken to contain *beth essentiae*, “and appoint them as charioteers and horsemen.” But such a connotation in *merkabah* would be unique to this passage; so the identification of a *beth essentiae* in *beparašaw* is not certain.

3) To this point, I have been searching for phrasal and syntactical usages that would give direct or indirect support to my construal of the line in Ps 12:6 as having the structure, (verb) + (direct object) + (*le*-beneficiary) + (*beth essentiae* phrase identifying the significance of the direct object for the beneficiary). Such a sentence structure is unambiguously attested in the idiom used to speak of God’s gift of land to Israelites as an inheritance. Numbers 36:2 may serve as an example: *latet ’et-ha’areš benaḥalah . . . libne yiśra’el*.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this idiomatic expression is used only in reference to the motif of God’s gift of the land to Israel as an inheritance. But that its syntax reflects a more general usage is suggested by Ezek 40:16, which shows that the construction can occur in a looser, non-idiomatic fashion, and in a social rather than theological context: “If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons out of his inheritance, it shall belong to his sons, it is their property *benaḥalah*.” The past phrase, it seems to me, should be translated, not “by inheritance,” but “as an inheritance.”

Taking all these usages together, it seems clear that the sentence structure I am proposing for the line in Ps 12:6 was sufficiently common in Israel for it to be used by this psalmist and for it to be recognized without difficulty by contemporary hearers and readers of the psalm.

### God’s Promise and Job’s Hope-Against-Hope in Job 16:19

The fact that a prohibition against bearing false witness should be included among Israel’s “top ten” commandments is by itself sufficient indication that the social health of a community, insofar as it rests on the relations between its individual members, turns critically, in part, on the reliability, the truthfulness, of what people say about one another, whether formally

10. For these senses, see respectively *HALAT* 3:978, nos. 2 and 3, and *HALAT* 3:1233, no. 2.

11. Other instances: Num 18:26; 36:2; Josh 13:6, 7; 21:12; 23:4; Ezek 45:1; 46:16; 47:14, 22; 48:29. The verb may be a form of *natan*, *halaq* (Niphil or Piel), *napal* (Qal or Hiphil), or *hayak*.

in legal proceedings or less formally by way of interpretive commentary on or gossip about one another's actions and character. That false witness and slander were an all-too-common reality is attested in many other ways as well. It is reflected, for example, in the six proverbs in which the word *yapiaḥ/yapeaḥ* appears along with 'ed.<sup>12</sup> But it comes to most poignant expression in the Book of Job, and there especially in chapter 16 where, searching in vain within his community for one who will take his side against the accusations of his friends and the divine accusation which he takes to be implicit in his physical afflictions (Job 16:8), Job, hoping against hope, cries out in a desperate act of blind imagination, "even now my witness is in heaven,/ and he that vouches for me is on high . . . that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God,/ as one does for a neighbor" (16:19, 21).<sup>13</sup> Such, I suggest, is the plight of the speaker in Ps 12:2: he can find no one who is faithful to him in his circumstances. (Compare the collocation of *ḥesed* and *'emunim* in the sceptical query in Prov 20:6.) But *'emunim* here may carry a more specific nuance. In Prov 15:5 the phrase *'ed 'emunim* characterizes a reliable witness, one who speaks the truth; and in Prov 13:17 the phrase *šir 'emunim* characterizes a reliable, that is truth-telling envoy. These passages, together with the phrases *yapiaḥ 'emunah* (Prov 12:17), *'ed 'emet* (Prov 14:25), *'ed 'emet wene'eman* (Jer 42:5) and *'edim ne'emanim* (Isa 8:2), may suggest that the complaint in Ps 12:6 is over the absence of anyone who will counter the lies and slanders with reliable and true testimony.

In Ps 72:12 it is said of the king that "he delivers the needy [*'ebyon*] when he calls, / the poor [*'ani*] and him who has no helper [*'en 'ozar*]." But

12. Prov 6:19; 12:17; 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9.

13. In characterizing Job's words in this passage as a desperate act of blind imagination, I mean to suggest that it may be misguided to confine the reach or reference of his words to religious conceptions assumed to be conventional in the time in which the passage was written. Religious aspiration, especially under extreme duress, may outstrip the conventions of belief. Robert Browning has the painter Andrea del Sarto, in the poem by that name, exclaim, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?" In a metaphysical vein, Alfred North Whitehead concluded a justly famous paragraph on the nature of consciousness with the following lines: "Consciousness is the feeling of negation: in the perception of 'the stone as grey,' such feeling is in barest germ; in the perception of 'the stone as not grey,' such feeling is in full development. Thus the negative perception is the triumph of consciousness. It finally rises to the peak of free imagination, in which the conceptual novelties search through a universe in which they are not datively exemplified" (*Process and Reality*, 245). If Job 16:19–21 rises to such a peak of imaginative outreach, it is no wonder that efforts to pin down the meaning or reference of this passage precisely in terms of the religious categories and understandings current and familiar in its day are so various and so inconclusive.

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the poor and needy person in Ps 12:6 has no helper, royal or otherwise. As in Isa 63:5, God apparently is appalled that there is no helper; so God promises to provide a witness as deliverance; and in contrast to the lying words of the psalmist's adversaries, God's promises are affirmed as utterly trustworthy (v. 7).

The identity and whereabouts of this witness are not specified. It may even be that, like the speaker in Job 16, the conviction as to the existence of a supporting and saving witness, a conviction arising in the psalmist's awareness as a very word from God, is voiced in the teeth of every datum in the psalmist's world to the contrary. In such a case, the shift in consciousness (a) from v. 2 (b) through v. 6 (c) to vv. 7 and 8a, is like the shift in Habakkuk (a) from 1:1-4, 14-17 (b) through 2:2-4, with God's proffer of a vision for a later time, a vision that "does not lie" because it is reliable,<sup>14</sup> (c) to the prophet's prayer in chapter 3, which begins with a plea that the intervening interval of wrath be shortened and ends with an affirmation of joy in God's salvation in the teeth of all concrete evidence to the contrary. Indeed, one may wonder if, in the last analysis, it is not the promise that God makes to the psalmist in Ps 12:6, as affirmed in v. 7, that constitutes (in heaven, so to speak) the *yapiah* which the psalmist otherwise seeks in vain. For the psalm ends as it began, with the psalmist still surrounded by the wicked, and the human community (*bene 'adam*) still, as in v. 2, united in vile opposition (v. 8). In such a situation, the psalmist's hope is in God alone, as protector and guard (v. 9), and even as witness.

14. For an analysis of Hab 2:2-4 in which *'emunato* is taken to refer to the reliability of the aforementioned *hazon*, the pronoun in *'emunato* thus continuing the reference of the pronoun subjects of the third-person verbs in v. 3, and of the pronoun in the phrase *lo* in that verse, see Janzen, "Habakkuk 2:2-4 in the Light of Recent Philological Advances."