

Amazing Compositional Techniques in the Hebrew Bible

The purpose of this article is to present four specimens of numerical literary artistry illustrating that the Biblical writings are numerical compositions of which the structure is determined by a limited number of symbolic numbers. In my opinion, this is the most important discovery since the Dead Sea Scrolls were found sixty eight years ago. This insight may prove to be a breakthrough and a major innovation in the study of the compositional structure of the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

The structural numbers in question are primarily the number **7** symbolizing fullness, the number **11** symbolizing fulfilment, and the two numbers representing the numerical value of the divine name YHWH, **17** and **26**. In addition to these, the number **10**, derived from the number of plagues or the number of commandments, and the number **12**, derived from the number of tribes in Israel, are incidentally used as structuring devices depending on the context.

What follows is the tip of an iceberg of sophisticated works of art in the Hebrew Bible, which can be classified as compositional gems illustrating the creative skill of the scribes. They occur not only in poetical passages but in prose texts as well. The reader can verify my assertion by a cursory glance at the quantitative structural analysis of a great number of texts published on my website: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/>. I would advise the reader, who is not familiar with my work, first to read the General Introduction to [Quantitative Structural Analysis](#).

Numerical Literary Artistry in Psalm 23

This well-known psalm has a very lucid structure: in terms of its 55 words it has a clear arithmetic focal point constituting its meaningful centre: “for you are with me” (in v. 4). The three Hebrew words at the centre are surrounded by **26** words on either side: $55=26+3+26$. Moreover, there is a series of **7 beneficial divine acts** concerning the first person speaker. The divine name **YHWH** in the first and last verse functions as a device for inclusion encompassing the contents.

The sudden switch from 3rd person to 2nd person in v. 4c marks the **focal point** of the text.

Independently from me, Jacob Bazak has also pointed out the typical numerical structure. See his article “Numerical Devices in Biblical Poetry”, VT 38 (1988), 333-337, and my analysis of [Psalm 23](#).

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| <p>1 מְזִמֹּר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר: 2 בְּנֵאֲוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מַי מְנַחֲוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי: 3 נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְהַלֵּנִי בְּמַעְגַּל־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ: 4 גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטֶךָ וּמַשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ תְּמַחֵ וְיִנְחַמְנִי: 5 תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שְׁלֹחַן נֹגֵד צַרְרִי דֶּשֶׁנֶת בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסֵי יְרֵיחַ: 6 אֵדָּא טוֹב וְחַסֵּד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית יְהוָה לְאֶרְךְ יָמִים:</p> | <p>¹ A Psalm of David Heading. YHWH is my shepherd, I am not missing. ² He ¹makes me lie down in green pastures; he ²leads me beside still waters. ³ He ³restores my soul; he ⁴leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. ⁴ Even were I to walk through the darkest valley, I would fear no evil, for you ⁵are with me! Arithmetic centre: $55=26+3+26$ Your rod and your staff they comfort me. ⁵ You ⁶prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you ⁷anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of YHWH my whole life long.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">26 Hebrew words</p> <p style="text-align: right;">26 Hebrew words</p> |
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Numerical Literary Artistry in Psalm 92

The Psalm for the Sabbath has a perfectly balanced structure with the conspicuously short verse in pride of place at the arithmetic centre on four different levels: "You, YHWH are on high for ever!"

The focal point is flanked by **52 (2x26)** words on either side: **52+4+52=108** words, **7+1+7=15** verselines, **15+1+15=31** cola, **3+1+3=7** strophes, and **3+1+3=7** instances of the name **YHWH**.

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| 1 מְזִמֹּר שִׁיר לַיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: | |
| 2 טוֹב לְהַדְרוֹת לַיהוָה וּלְזַמֵּר לְשִׁמְךָ עֲלִיּוֹן: | |
| 3 לְהַנְדִּיר בַּבֶּקֶר חֶסֶדְךָ וְאִמּוּנָתְךָ בַּלַּיְלוֹת: | |
| 4 עַל־עֲשׂוֹר וְעַל־נֶבֶל עַל־הַנְּנוּן בְּכִנּוֹר: | 3x YHWH |
| 5 כִּי שִׂמְחַתְנִי יְהוָה בַּפְּעִלְךָ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יְדֶיךָ אֲרַגֵּן: | 3 strophes |
| 6 מִהֲגִדְּךָ לִי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ יְהוָה מֵאֵד עִמָּקוֹ מִחֻשְׁבֹּתֶיךָ: | 7 verselines |
| 7 אִישׁ־בָּעַר לֹא יִדְעֵ וְכֹסִיל לֹא־יִבִּין אֶת־זֹאת: | 52 (2x26) words |
| 8 בַּפֶּלַח רְשָׁעִים כִּמּוֹ עֵשֶׂב וַיִּצְיָצוּ כָּל־פְּעֵלֵי אֲנֹן לְהַשְׁמָדֵם עַד־עֵד: | |
| 9 וְאַתָּה מְרוֹם לְעֵלָם יְהוָה: | 1x YHWH, 1 strophe, 1 verseline, 4 words |
| 10 כִּי הִנֵּה אִיבִיךָ יְהוָה כִּי־הִנֵּה אִיבִיךָ יֹאבְדוּ וְיִתְפָּרְדוּ כָּל־פְּעֵלֵי אֲנֹן: | |
| 11 וְתִרְם כְּרֵאִים קִרְנֵי בִלְתֵי בְשָׁמֵן רִעָנָן: | 3x YHWH |
| 12 וְתִבְטַט עֵינֵי בְשׂוּרֵי בִקְמִים עַל־יְמֵרֵים תִּשְׁמַעְנָה אֲזִנֵּי: | 3 strophes |
| 13 צַדִּיק כַּתְמָר יִפְרַח כְּאַרְזוֹ בְּלִבְנוֹן יִשְׁגָּה: | 7 verselines |
| 14 שְׁתוּלִים בְּבֵית יְהוָה בְּחֻצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִפְרִיחוּ: | 52 (2x26) words |
| 15 עוֹד יִנְיָבוֹן בְּשִׁיבַת דְּשָׁנִים וְהָעֲנָנִים יִהְיוּ: | |
| 16 לְהַנְדִּיר כִּי־יִשָּׁר יְהוָה צוּרֵי וְלֹא־עוֹלָתָה בּוֹ: | |

1 A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day.

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| 2 It is good to give thanks to ¹ YHWH, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; | |
| 3 to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, | |
| 4 to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. | 3x YHWH |
| 5 For you, ² YHWH, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. | 3 strophes |
| 6 How great are your works, ³ YHWH! Your thoughts are very deep! | 7 verselines |
| 7 The dullard cannot know, the stupid cannot understand this: | 52 (2x26) words |
| 8 though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to total destruction! | |
| 9 You, ⁴ YHWH, are on high for ever! | 1x YHWH, 1 strophe, 1 verseline, 4 Hebrew words |
| 10 For your enemies, ⁵ YHWH, for your enemies shall perish; all evildoers shall be scattered. | |
| 11 But you have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; you have poured over me fresh oil. | |
| 12 My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies; my ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants. | 3x YHWH |
| 13 The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. | 3 strophes, 7 verselines |
| 14 They are planted in the house of ⁶ YHWH; they flourish in the courts of our God. | 52 (2x26) words |
| 15 In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, | |
| 16 showing that ⁷ YHWH is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. | |

The brackets at the left mark the 7 strophes. For full particulars, see my analysis of [Psalm 92](#). Compare also Israel Knohl's observations in his article "Sacred Architecture: The Numerical Dimensions of Biblical Poems", VT 62 (2012), 189-197, especially 194f.

Numerical Literary Artistry in Deuteronomy 8,7-10

This passage stands out as a numerical composition in which the description of the Promised Land is skilfully positioned *within* the command to enjoy its resources and bless YHWH for it. Moreover, the resources and fruits of the land are arranged in series of seven, the number of fullness.



7a. Since YHWH your God is bringing you into a **good LAND** -

7b. a **LAND** with ¹streams, ²springs, and ³underground waters gushing out in valleys and hills,

8. a **LAND** with ¹wheat, and ²barley, ³vines, ⁴fig trees, and ⁵pomegranates,

a **LAND** with ⁶oil-rich olive trees, and ⁷honey;

9. a **LAND** ⁴in which you will eat food without scarcity, ⁵in which you will lack nothing;

a **LAND** ⁶whose stones are iron, ⁷from whose hills you shall mine copper—

10. you must eat and be sated and bless YHWH your God for the **good LAND** he has given to you.

The laudatory description of the good land in 8,7-10 is a coherent literary entity in its own right. It is delimited by the two inclusions 'good land' in the first and last sentences respectively. The inclusion happens to have altogether $7+10 = 17$ words. This means that the description of the land is surrounded by 17 words symbolizing YHWH's presence in the land. The symbolism is reinforced by the fact that the other divine name number, 26, is to be found in the words before *atnach*: the 55 words divide into 26a and 29b.

There are no less than three series of 7, the number of fullness: the land 7x, its qualities 7x, and its fruits 7x. Sevenfold series were very popular in Biblical times. For another significant example of three series of seven, see [Psalm 19](#), and for more, my book *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, pp. 22-56, which is out of print but downloadable from: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/z%26oz/book.htm>.

It is important to note that *Deut. 8,7a* opens with a subordinate clause: "Since...", of which the main clause: "you must eat..." follows in v. 10, with the description of the land in between in v. 7b-9. The conjunction כִּי does not relate to what precedes (v. 6), but to what follows (v. 10). Therefore, it is not *the reason why*, but *the fact that*, YHWH is bringing his people in a *good land* that they must eat their fill and bless him! This is, in my opinion, the only correct rendering of the passage. Most translators have: "For the YHWH your God is bringing you..." and inevitably miss the main clause at the end by translating "And you shall eat..."

In other words, the description of the land is *embedded* in the command to eat, be sated and bless YHWH: "Since YHWH your God is bringing you into a good land.....you must eat and be sated and bless YHWH..."

In much the same way, the marathon speech by Moses in Deuteronomy (1,6-33,29) is embedded in the Prologue (1,1-5) and Epilogue (34,1-12) encompassing it. This has been done very skilfully, because the speech is surrounded by 17 verses (5 in the Prologue and 12 in the Epilogue) with altogether 255 (15x17) words (79 and 176 respectively). In this way, the words of Moses are in two ways embraced by the divine name number 17 symbolically representing God's presence and, perhaps more importantly, his authorisation of Moses' words.

It is interesting to note that the 7 paragraphs dealing with the curses in *Deut. 28,20-45* are made up of altogether 26 verses with 340 (20x17) words! See pages 3-5 in my analysis of [Deuteronomy 27-28](#).

Numerical Literary Artistry in Jeremiah 51,20-24

This passage stands out as a skilfully designed composition of which the literary unity is buttressed by two strings of **10** items. Additionally the intended action by YHWH is made up of **52 (2x26)** words.

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| | 5 Introduction + 52 Action = 57 | מִפֶּיךָ-אַתָּה לִי כְּלִי מִלְחָמָה ¹ 20a |
| | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ² בְּךָ גּוֹיִם וְהִשְׁחַתִּי ² בְּךָ מַמְלָכוֹת: 20b |
| 10x the root נפץ | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ³ בְּךָ סוֹס וְרֹכְבוֹ ⁴ וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁴ בְּךָ רֶכֶב וְרֹכְבוֹ: 21 |
| 10x preposition בך | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁵ בְּךָ אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה ⁶ וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁶ בְּךָ זָקֵן וְנָעָר 22 |
| 52 (2x26) words. | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁷ בְּךָ בָחֹר וּבַתּוֹלָה: 23 |
| | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁸ בְּךָ רֹעֵה וְעֵדְרוֹ ⁹ וְנִפְצַתִּי ⁹ בְּךָ אֶבְרָ וְצֹמְדוֹ 23 |
| | | וְנִפְצַתִּי ¹⁰ בְּךָ פְּחוֹת וּסְנַנִּים: 24 |
| | | וְשַׁלַּמְתִּי לְכָבֵל וּלְכָל אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבֵי כַשְׂדִּים 24 |
| | | אֵת כָּל-דַּעְתָּם אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ בְצִיּוֹן לְעֵינֵיכֶם נְאֻם יְהוָה: 24 |

20a You are my ¹shatter-hammer, my weapon of war:

20b and ¹with you will I ²shatter nations,
and ²with you will I destroy kingdoms;

21 and ³with you will I ³shatter horse and (his) rider;
and ⁴with you will I ⁴shatter chariot and (his) rider;

22 and ⁵with you will I ⁵shatter man and woman;
and ⁶with you will I ⁶shatter old and young;

and ⁷with you will I ⁷shatter young man and maiden;

23 and ⁸with you will I ⁸shatter shepherd and (his) flock;
and ⁹with you will I ⁹shatter ploughman and (his) team;
and ¹⁰with you will I ¹⁰shatter captains and governors.

24 And I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea
for all their evil that they have done in Zion before your eyes, says YHWH.

V. 20a is the preamble to the actions described in 20b-24, which is made up of **52 (2x26)** words. Since **26** represents the numerical value of the name of YHWH, it symbolizes his presence in the actions he intends to carry out. The two series of **10** run as unifying threads through the text of 20b-23.

This sophisticated device is, e.g., also used in Deuteronomy 5-11, where we find a string of **20** instances of יהוה אלהינו, 'YHWH our God', which occurs in two strings of **10**, one in Chapters 1-3, the other in Chapter 4: 1,6.19.20.25.41; 2,29.33.36.37; 3,3 (10x) and 4,7; 5,2.24.25.27a.27b; 6,4; 6,20.24.25 (10x). Here the use of **10** obviously stems from the Ten Words.

Another example, among many others, is the series of **10** curses in Deut. 28,15-19 evidently by analogy with the Ten Plagues of Egypt:

¹upon you in the city, ²upon you in the field, ³upon your basket, ⁴upon your kneading-trough, ⁵upon the fruit of your body, ⁶upon the fruit of your land, ⁷upon the offspring of your herds, ⁸upon the offspring of your lambing flocks, ⁹upon your coming in, ¹⁰upon your going out.