

# Psalm 39— Logotechnical Analysis

## Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "[Key to the charts](#)".

## Specific features of Psalm 39

- Psalm 39 is clearly the follow-up to Psalm 38 in terms of the idea of hope (38:16 and 39:7) in a situation of distress. Its defining characteristic is the use of the numerical value of the keyword **הַבָּבֶל**, 'vanity' (**37**) to determine the number of words in the passage about the struggle of a mortal human being to come to grips with his feelings of gloom and doom (vs. 3-6). It is not surprising to find that the psalm is composed of **37** cola.
- The author also used the keyphrase, 'every mortal being is only a breath of wind', in vs. 6b and 12b to delimit the central core (vs. 7-12) and to determine the canto structure of the psalm. The core, Canto II, is additionally defined by the ingenious symmetric pattern of its **52** words (divided into **26 + 26**) and clearly marked in MT by *selah*.

## Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: || Canticle boundary: |

- Van der Lugt: 2, 3-4 | 5-7 || 8-9, 10-11 | 12, 13, 14 (2 cantos and 4 Canticles, with 9 strophes, 15 verselines and 37 cola).
- Fokkelman: 2, 3-4 || 5-6b, 6c-7, 8-10 || 11-12, 13-14 (3 cantos, 7 strophes, 17 verselines and 37 cola, taking vs. 6c-7a as a bicolic verseline and v. 12 as a separate verseline).
- Labuschagne: 2, 3-4 | 5-6 || 7, 8-9 | 10-11, 12 || 13-14 (3 cantos, 4 Canticles, 8 strophes, 15 verselines and 37 cola, based on rhetorical and numerical considerations).
- For an overview of other divisions of the text, see Van der Lugt, CAS, Psalm 39, § 6.

## Logotechnical analysis

- Column **a**: words before atnach; **b**: words after atnach.
- Column **c**: words describing feelings of gloom and doom.
- Column **d**: a fleeting mortal prays for deliverance.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמִנְצַח לִידוּתוֹן מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד : 1	4	4			
2	אָמַרְתִּי אֲשַׁמְרָה דְרָכַי 1	3	3		3	
	מִחַטָּא בַלְשׁוֹנִי	2	2		2	
	אֲשַׁמְרָה לְפִי מִחַסּוֹבִם 2	3	3		3	
	בְּעַד רָשָׁע לְנִגְדִי :	3		3	3	
	<b>Strophe 1</b>	<b>Total, v. 2</b>	11	= 8	+ 3	= 11 + 0

3		נֶאֱלַמְתִּי דוּמְיָהּ 3	2	2	2	
		הַחֲשִׁיתִי מִטּוֹב־	2	2	2	
		וּכְאַבִּי נֶעְכָּר:	2	2	2	
		Total, v. 3	6	= 4	+ 2	= 6 + 0
4		חֶסֶד־לִבִּי בְקִרְבִּי 4	3	3	3	
		בְּהִגִּינִי תִבְעַר־אֲשֶׁ	3	3	3	
		דְּבַרְתִּי בְלִשׁוֹנִי:	2	2	2	
		Total, v. 4	8	= 6	+ 2	= 8 + 0
		<b>Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4</b>	14	= 10	+ 4	= 14 + 0
		<b>Canticle I.1 Total, v. 2-4</b>	25	= 18	+ 7	= 25 + 0
5		הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה קִצֵּי 5	3	3	3	
		וּמִדַּת יָמֵי מַה־הִיא־	4	4	4	
		אֲרַעַח מַה־חֲדַל אָנֹכִי:	4	4	4	
		Total, v. 5	11	= 7	+ 4	= 11 + 0
6*		הִנֵּה טְפַחֹת נִתְתָּה יָמֵי 6	4	4	4	
		וְחִלְדֵי כְּאִין נִגְדְּדָֿ	3	3	3	
		אֲדָֿ (כָּל)־הַבֵּל כָּל־אָדָם נִצָּב סֵלָה:	5	5	5	
		Total, v. 6	12	= 7	+ 5	= 12 + 0
		<b>Canticle I.2 Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6</b>	23	= 14	+ 9	= 23 + 0
		Total, v. 3-6	37	= 24	+ 13	= 37 + 0
		<b>Canto I Total, v. 2-6</b>	48	= 32	+ 16	= 48 + 0
7		אֲדָֿ־בְצֵלָם יִתְחַלְּדָֿ־אִישׁ 7	4	4	4	
		אֲדָֿ־הַבֵּל יִהְיֶינָֿ	3	3	3	
		יִצָּבֵר וְלֹא־יִדַּע מִי־אֶסְפָּם: (5 + 2 + 30 = 37)	5	5	5	
		<b>Strophe 4 Total, v. 7</b>	12	= 7	+ 5	= 0 + 12
8	Middle verseline:	וְעַתָּה מַה־קִּוִּיתִי אֲדָנָיִ 8	4	4	4	
		תּוֹחַלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא:	3	3	3	
		(15 = 7 + 1 + 7)	7	= 4	+ 3	= 0 + 7
	Meaningful centre	Total, v. 8	7	= 4	+ 3	= 0 + 7
9		מִכָּל־פִּשְׁעֵי הַצִּילָנִי־	3	3	3	
		חֲרַפְתָּ נָבֵל אֶל־תְּשִׁימֵנִי:	4	4	4	
		Total, v. 9	7	= 3	+ 4	= 0 + 7
		<b>Strophe 5 Total, v. 8-9</b>	14	= 7	+ 7	= 0 + 14
		<b>Canticle II.1 Total, v. 7-9</b>	26	= 14	+ 12	= 0 + 26
10		נֶאֱלַמְתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח־פִּי־	4	4	4	
		כִּי אֶתָּה עֲשִׂיתָ:	3	3	3	
		Total, v. 10	7	= 4	+ 3	= 0 + 7
11		הָסֵר מֵעָלַי נִגְעָדָֿ 11	3	3	3	
		מִתַּגִּרַת יָדְךָ אָנֹכִי כָל־יָמֵי:	4	4	4	
		Total, v. 11	7	= 3	+ 4	= 0 + 7
		Numerical Total, v. 8-9	14	= 7	+ 7	= 0 + 14
		<b>Strophe 6 Chiasmus Total, v. 10-11</b>	14	= 7	+ 7	= 0 + 14
		Total, v. 8-11	28	= 14	+ 14	= 0 + 28

12	בתוכחות על-עון יִסְרֹתָ אִישׁ	12	5	5	5
	וְתָמַס כְּעֵשׂ חַמּוּדֵי־אֵל		3	3	3
	אֲדָהּ הַבֵּל כָּל-אָדָם סֵלָה:		4	4	4
	<b>Strophe 7</b> <b>Total, v. 12</b>		<b>12</b>	<b>= 8 + 4 = 0 + 12</b>	
	<b>Canticle II.2</b> <b>Total, v. 10-12</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>= 15 + 11 = 0 + 26</b>	
	<b>Canto II</b> <b>Total, v. 7-12</b>		<b>52</b>	<b>= 29 + 23 = 0 + 52</b>	
13	<b>Coda</b> שְׁמַעַתְּ תִּפְלִתִי יְהוָה	13	3	3	3
	the concluding prayer וְשִׁיעֵתִי הַאֲזִינָה		2	2	2
	אֶל-דְּמִעֵתִי אֶל-תִּהְרֹשׁ		4	4	4
	כִּי גַר אֲנֹכִי עַמּוּדֵי־אֵל	14	4	4	4
	תּוֹשֵׁב כָּל-אֲבוֹתַי:		3	3	3
	<b>Total, v. 13</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>= 13 + 3 = 16 + 0</b>	
14	הֲשַׁע מִמֶּנִּי וְאִבְלִיגָהּ	15	3	3	3
	בְּטָרָם אֵלֶיךָ וְאִיגָנִי:		3	3	3
	<b>Total, v. 14</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>= 3 + 3 = 6 + 0</b>	
	<b>Canto III Strophe 8</b> <b>Total, v. 13-14</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>= 16 + 6 = 22 + 0</b>	
	<b>Total, v. 12-14</b>		<b>34</b>	<b>= 24 + 10 = 22 + 12</b>	
	<b>Total, v. 2-14</b>		<b>122</b>	<b>= 77 + 45 = 70 + 52</b>	
	With the heading and סֵלָה (2x), v. 1-14		<b>128</b>	<b>= 81 + 47</b>	

\* A slight emendation of the text in v. 6b is necessary: I read אֲדָהּ הַבֵּל, or אֲדָהּ כְּהַבֵּל, instead of אֲדָהּ כָּל-הַבֵּל (see *BHS*), not only on the basis of the evident dittography and the awkwardness of the MT phrase, but also in light of the two other occurrences of the term אֲדָהּ הַבֵּל in vs. 7 and 12. Naturally, this emendation will have an effect on the word-count.

## Observations

1. The arithmetic centre of the poem on the level of words is constituted by the two words וְעַתָּה מָה, 'And now, what...?', in v. 8a (122 = 60 + 2 + 60). It is unlikely that they were consciously designed as the meaningful centre, seeing the incompleteness of the phrase. The middle verseline, v. 8, would be a most appropriate meaningful centre, because it contains the quintessential idea of the psalm: waiting for YHWH in hope despite adversities and suffering. It clearly harks back to the theme of hope in a distressing situation, so strongly expressed in Ps. 38:16 – see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 38](#).

וְעַתָּה מָה-קוֹיִתִּי אֲדָנִי תוֹחֵלְתִּי לָךְ הִיא

And now, YHWH, what do I wait for? My hope is in you!

Significantly, the pivotal verseline is not only flanked by 7 verselines (15 = 7 + 1 + 7) but also made up of 7 words consisting of altogether 26 letters. For a similar situation, see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 40](#).

2. Like Psalm 38, the psalm has a tripartite canto structure: vs. 2-6, 7-12, and 13-14, which is based on rhetorical and logotechnical considerations.<sup>1</sup>

Canto I, vs. 2-6      Complaint about the transience of human existence  
 Canto II, vs. 7-12    Despite this, my hope is in you, YHWH  
 Canto III, vs. 13-14   Conclusion: hear my prayer, God, before I cease to be.

The two hard breaks between vs. 6||7 and 12||13 caused by the refrain-like phrase אֵדָה הַכֹּל כָּל-אָדָם, 'every mortal being is only a breath of wind', divide the text into three sections: Cantos I, II, and III, which is in MT underscored by the *selahs*.

3. **Canto I** is an unmistakable coherent structural unity as shown by the fact that it contains a strict numerically devised 37-word passage, vs. 3-6 – see Observation 4.

**Canto II** is likewise a coherent unity, but divides into 2 Canticles, vs. 7-9 and 10-12. It is made up of exactly 52 words, with 26 in each section, symmetrically arranged in the following way:

v. 7	12 words	}	26 words in total in vs. 7-9 (Canticle II.1)
8-9	14 words		
10-11	14 words	}	26 words in total in vs. 10-12 (Canticle II.2)
v. 12	12 words		

Note the perfect numerical chiasmus, which firmly links the two Canticles:

$$26 = 12 + 14 \text{ in vs. 7-9}$$

$$26 = 14 + 12 \text{ in vs. 10-12.}$$

**Canto III** (vs. 13-14), the final prayer, is clearly a coda. It is significantly made up of 22 (2 x 11) words – see Observation 5 in my Analysis of [Psalm 38](#).

4. Canto I, vs. 2-6, is significantly made up of 37 words, which represents the numerical value of the keyword הַכֹּל, 'vanity', occurring in vs. 6b, 7a and 12b (5 + 2 + 30 = 37).<sup>2</sup> See the General Introduction, "The numerical value of a keyword in the text", for more examples of this intriguing device.

The deliberate use of 37 words here vividly brings to mind the structuring role of the number 37 on verse level in the book of Ecclesiastes, which deals explicitly with 'vanities'. The book is made up of 222 (6 x 37) verses!

5. The name יהוה occurs only twice: in vs. 5a and 13a.

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 Dr. C.J. Labuschagne    Senior Lecturer in Semitic Languages (retired),  
 Brinkhorst 44            University of Pretoria, South Africa  
 9751 AT Haren (Gron)    and  
 The Netherlands        Professor of Old Testament (retired),  
[labuschagne.cj@planet.nl](mailto:labuschagne.cj@planet.nl)    University of Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>1</sup> Van der Lugt, who finds a bipartite structure, does not take into account the demarcating function of the refrain in vs. 6 and 12, which is supported by the two selahs. This also applies to Fokkelman, who finds a tripartite structure that differs from mine: vs. 2-4, 5-10, and 11-14.

<sup>2</sup> The number 37 is based on the *decimal value* of the word – see the General Introduction, p. 5.