Psalm 53— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the General Introduction as well as the Introduction to Book I and Book II.
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "Key to the charts".

Specific features of Psalm 53

- The envelope technique is used to frame the central core of the poem, vs. 4-5.
- As in the preceding and following psalms, the total number of words in Psalm 53 is determined by the numerical value of a key-word: הִשְׁקִיף, 'he (God) looks down', **72**.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt and Labuschagne: 2, 3 || 4-5, 6 || 7 (3 cantos, 5 strophes, 10 verselines and 22 cola, taking vs. 2, 3, 6 and 7 as 2-line bicola and vs. 4 and 5 as tricola).
- Fokkelman: 2-3, 4-5, 6, 7 (4 strophes with 8 verselines and 18 cola, regarding vs. 2 and 3 as tricola and v. 4 as a bicolon).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the framework; **d**: words in the central core.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in brown.

		Total	a	b	c	d
Heading לַמְנַצֵּחַ עַל־מָחֲלַת מַשְׂכִּיל לְדָוִד: 1		5	5			
אָמַר נָבָל בְּלִבּוֹ 1	2	3	3		3	
אֵין אֱלֹהִים^		2	2		2	
הִשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עָוֶל 2		3		3	3	
אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב:		3		3	3	
Strophe 1 Total, v. 2		11	= 5	+ 6	= 11	+ 0
אֱלֹהִים מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף 3	3	3	3		3	
עַל־בְּנֵי אָדָם 72 = הִשְׁקִיף		3	3		3	
לִרְאוֹת הֲיֵשׁ מַשְׂכִּיל^ 4		3	3		3	
דֹּרֵשׁ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים:		3		3	3	
Strophe 2 Total, v. 3		12	= 9	+ 3	= 12	+ 0
Canto I Total, v. 2-3		**23**	= **14**	+ 9	= **23**	+ 0
כֻּלּוֹ סָג יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ 5	4	4	4			4
אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב^		3	3			3
אֵין גַּם־אֶחָד:		3		3		3
Total, v. 4		10	= 7	+ 3	= 0	+ 10
Total, v. 2-4		33	= 21	+ 12	= 23	+ 10
Middle words הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן 6	5	4	4			4
See Observation 1 אֹכְלֵי עַמִּי אָכְלוּ לֶחֶם^		4	4			4
אֱלֹהִים לֹא קָרָאוּ:		3		3		3
Vs. 4-5 middle verselines and cola Total, v. 5		11	= 8	+ 3	= 0	+ 11
Central core Strophe 3 Total, v. 4-5		21	= 15	+ 6	= 0	+ **21**

6	שָׁם פָּחֲדוּ־פַחַד	7	3	3		3
	לֹא־הָיָה פָחַד		3	3		3
	כִּי־אֱלֹהִים פִּזַּר עַצְמוֹת חֹנָךְ^	8	5	5		5
	הֱבִשֹׁתָה כִּי־אֱלֹהִים מְאָסָם:		4		4	4

Strophe 4	Total, v. 6	**15**	= 11	+ 4	= 15	+ 0
	Total, v. 5-6	**26**	= 19	+ 7	= 15	+ 11
Canto II	Total, v. 4-6	**36**	= **26**	+ 10	= 15	+ 21
	Total, v. 2-6	59	= 40	+ 19	= 38	+ 21

7	מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן	9	3	3		3
	יְשֻׁעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל		2	2		2
	בְּשׁוּב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ^	10	4	4		4
	יָגֵל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:		4		4	4

Strophe 5 **Canto III**	Total, v. 7	**13**	= 9	+ 4	= 13	+ 0
	Total, v. 6-7	**28**	= 20	+ 8	= 15	+ 13
	Total, v. 4-7	**49**	= **35**	+ **14**	= **28**	+ **21**
	Total, v. 2-7	72	= **49**	+ 23	= **51**	+ 21
	With the heading, v. 1-7	**77**	= 54	+ 23		

Observations

1. In terms of the 72 words of the poem, the arithmetic centre is constituted by the two words פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן, 'evildoers', in v. 5a, yielding the formula: 72 = 35 + 2 + 35. Together with the 4 words flanking them, the ensuing 6-word centre may have been devised as the meaningful centre on word level (72 = 33 + 6 + 33):

   הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן אֹכְלֵי עַמִּי

   Have they no understanding, those evildoers who devour my people?

   On the level of verselines and cola, however, a larger meaningful centre is formed by the entire text of vs. 4-5, the charge against the evildoers in the 2 middle verselines:

   All are unfaithful, altogether corrupt;   no one does good,   nobody, not even one.
   Have they no understanding, those evildoers,   who devour my people - as if eating bread - and never call upon God?

vs. 2-3	4 verselines	8 cola	23 words	
vs. 4-5	2 verselines	6 cola	21 words	**51**
vs. 6-7	4 verselines	8 cola	28 words	
Total:	10	22	**51** + 21 = 72 words.	

   The larger meaningful centre is enveloped by **51** (3 x **17**) words, and the middle instance of the **7** occurrences of אֱלֹהִים significantly highlights the meaningful centre. See the General Introduction, "Special devices to highlight the meaningful centre."

2. If these **7** instances of אֱלֹהִים (vs. 2b, 3a and d, **5c**, 6c and d, 7c) were indeed consciously devised by the author, they symbolize the 'fullness' of God's presence.

   Incidentally, though the psalm lacks the divine name itself, it is situated between two psalms in which 'your name' is explicitly referred to (see Ps. 52:11 and 54:3 and 8).

   In the parallel Psalm 14 there are also **7** references to God, in a different way: the name YHWH occurs 4 times and אֱלֹהִים 3 times.

3. It is likely that the numerical value of the word הִשְׁקִיף, 'he looks down' (v. 3a), **72**, has prompted the choice for **72** words in the poem. Compare Psalms 52 and 54.

4. In the parallel Psalm 14 the divine name numbers feature in 6 instances:

vs. 1-2	**17** words in the main clauses
vs. 2-4	**34** (2 x **17**) words in total
vs. 2-6	**34** words in the main clauses
vs. 5-7	**26** = **15**a + **11**b and **15**c + **11**d
vs. 1-7	**17** words in the subordinate clauses
vs. 1-7	**26** words after atnach.

In vs. 5-7 the divine name number **26** divides twice in its primary component parts: **15** (YH) and **11** (WH) – see Observation 2 in the Analysis of Psalm 1.

In Psalm 53, however, the divine name numbers feature in only 4 instances:

vs. 2-3	**17** words in the main clauses
vs. 5-6	**26** words in total, with **17** in the main clauses
vs. 4-6	**26** words before atnach.

In terms of numerical composition Psalm 14 appears to be superior to Psalm 53, but the latter has a more regular poetic structure with a clear central core.

5. The two psalms differ also in the following way:

Psalm 14 has 71 words in the poem and 73 including the heading, while Psalm 53 has 72 and 77 words respectively.

In Psalm 14 the short 2-word heading is integrated into the initial verse, while the longer 5-word heading of Psalm 53 constitute a separate verse, in line with the great majority of the psalms in Book II. See the introduction to Book II, Table VIII.

Nonetheless the entire text of both psalms (including the headings) divide into 7 masoretic verses, which must have been intentional. Moreover, both have 10 verselines with 22 cola. The siginificant number of occurrences of multiples of **7** (in bold) in Psalm 53 may also be regarded as consciously designed.

6. A comparison of the two texts also shows a number of striking textual variations. Compare: Ps. 14:1 with 53:2, Ps. 14:3 with 53:4, Ps. 14:4 with 53:5, and Ps. 14:5, 6 with 53:6. These and other variations clearly reflect different traditions.

7. The name YHWH is lacking, but אֱלֹהִים, 'God', occurs **7** times – see Observation 2.

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