

Psalm 137— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

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

Specific features of Psalm 137

- Being the follow-up to Psalm 136, Psalm 137 is a sister psalm of 135 and 136; together they constitute a group within the Second Group of Eleven Psalms in Book V (135-145). In terms of content, Psalm 137 clearly elaborates on the theme of Psalm 120, the first Song of Ascents: the situation of distress in which Israel lived “among those who hate peace” (120:6), and explains why it was difficult there to praise YHWH properly. This is symbolically expressed by the fact that Psalm 137 (with only **26** cola and 84 words) is half the size of Psalm 136 (with **52** (2 x **26**) cola and 166 words). The despondent question in 137:4 contains the quintessential thought of the poem: “How could we sing YHWH’s song in a foreign land?”.
- The subjects concerned basically determine the poetic structure of the psalm: Babylon, on the one hand, and Jerusalem and YHWH on the other. The ensuing division of the text (vs. 1-4, 5-6, 7 and 8-9) is strongly supported by the form of address: 1st person plural (vs. 1-4), 1st person singular (vs. 5-6), direct address to YHWH (v. 7) and once again 1st person plural in the direct address to Babylon (vs. 8-9).
- As a numerical composition Psalm 137 is a real showpiece. As in many psalms, e.g., in all 15 Songs of Ascents, the total number of words, **84**, is defined by the numerical value of a key-word in the text. In this case, the repeated key-word **עָרוּ עָרוּ**, ‘Raze it, raze it!’, occurring in v. 7c. Moreover, the number of words devoted to Babylon, **52** (Column **c**), represents the numerical value of the other key-word **אַשְׁרֵי**, ‘happy’, in vs. 8b and 9a.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3 || 4-5, 6 || 7, 8-9 (3 cantos, 6 strophes, 12 verselines and **26** cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7, 8-9 (5 strophes with 12 verselines and **26** cola).
- Labuschagne: 1-2, 3-4 || 5-6, 7 || 8-9 (3 cantos and 5 strophes (as Fokkelman), with 12 verselines and **26** cola).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words devoted to Babylon; **d**: words devoted to Jerusalem and YHWH.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	עַל נְהָרוֹת בְּבֶל	1 3	3		3	
	שֵׁם יְשָׁבְנוּ גַם־בְּכִינֹוֹ	4	4		4	
	בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 1	10	= 7	+ 3	= 10	+ 0
2	עַל־עָרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהָ	2 3	3		3	
	תְּלִינֹו כְּנִרוֹתֵינוּ:	2		2	2	
	Total, v. 2	5	= 3	+ 2	= 5	+ 0
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2	15	= 10	+ 5	= 15	+ 0

3	כִּי שָׁם שְׁאַלֵנוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר־יְשִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׁמַחְהָּ שִׁירוֹ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:	3	3	3	3		
	Total, v. 3					12	= 8 + 4 = 12 + 0
	Total, v. 2-3					17	= 11 + 6 = 17 + 0
	Total, v. 1-3					27	= 18 + 9 = 27 + 0
4	אִיךָ נָשִׁיר אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדַמַּת נֹכַר: Total, v. 4 Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4 Canto I Total, v. 1-4	5	5	5	5		
	Total, v. 4					8	= 5 + 3 = 8 + 0
	Total, v. 3-4					20	= 13 + 7 = 20 + 0
	Total, v. 1-4					35	= 23 + 12 = 35 + 0
5	Middle cola: 26 = 11 + 4 + 11 Off-centre pivot: 84 = 35 + 11 + 38	6	3	3	3		
	אִם־אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמֵינִי: Total, v. 5					2	= 2 = 0 + 2
	Total, v. 5					5	= 5 + 0 = 0 + 5
6	Middle words: 84 = 41 + 2 + 41	7	3	3	3		
	תִּדְבַק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻפּוֹ אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׁמַחְתִּי: Total, v. 6 Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-6 Total, v. 4-6					3	= 3 = 0 + 3
	Total, v. 6					14	= 11 + 3 = 0 + 14
	Total, v. 5-6					19	= 16 + 3 = 0 + 19
	Total, v. 4-6					27	= 21 + 6 = 8 + 19
7	זְכַר יְהוָה לְבַנֵּי אָדָם אֶת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ = 84 עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ: Strophe 4 Total, v. 7 Canto II Total, v. 5-7	9	4	4	4		
	Total, v. 7					13	= 10 + 3 = 0 + 13
	Total, v. 5-7					32	= 26 + 6 = 0 + 32
8	בֵּת־בְּבַל הַשְׁדֻּדָה אֲשֶׁר־י שִׁישָׁלִם־לָךְ אֶת־זְמוֹלָךְ שְׁנַמְלֶתָ לָנוּ: אֲשֶׁר־י = 52 Total, v. 8 Total, v. 7-8	11	3	3	3		
	Total, v. 8					4	= 4 = 0 + 4
	Total, v. 7-8					10	= 6 + 4 = 10 + 0
	Total, v. 7-8					23	= 16 + 7 = 10 + 13
9	אֲשֶׁר־י שִׁיאַחֲזוּ וְנִבֵּץ אֶת־עַלְלִיךָ אֶל־הַפֶּלַע: Total, v. 9 Canto III Strophe 5 Total, v. 8-9 Total, v. 7-9 Total, v. 6-9 Total, v. 5-9 Total, v. 1-9	12	3	3	3		
	Total, v. 9					4	= 4 = 0 + 4
	Total, v. 8-9					7	= 7 + 0 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 7-9					17	= 13 + 4 = 17 + 0
	Total, v. 6-9					30	= 23 + 7 = 17 + 13
	Total, v. 5-9					44	= 34 + 10 = 17 + 27
	Total, v. 1-9					49	= 39 + 10 = 17 + 32
	Total, v. 1-9					84	= 62 + 22 = 52 + 32

Observations

1. The 2 middle words are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִבִּי, 'my tongue to my palate' (84 = 41 + 2 + 41), in v. 6a, but the consciously designed meaningful centre is constituted by the 4 middle cola in vs. 5-6a (26 = 11 + 4 + 11):

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:

תִּדְבַק-לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִבִּי אִם-לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither away!

May my tongue cling to my palate, if I do not remember you!

In terms of words, the poetic pivot is slightly off-centre: 84 = 35 + 11 + 38, in much the same way as in Psalms 118 and 135 – see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 135](#). The meaningfulness of this beautiful chiasmically arranged protestation lies in the fact that the remembrance of Jerusalem was crucial to Israel's survival in the exile.

2. There is difference of opinion about the strophic structure of the psalm – see above under "Strophic structure". Van der Lugt's division of the text is based on the regularity of the poetic framework: 3 cantos, 6 strophes, 12 verselines and 26 cola. He presumes a caesura between vs. 5 and 6, dividing the text into two equal halves (3+3 strophes, 6+6 verselines and 13+13 cola). Additionally, his canto division is partly underscored by a certain regularity on word level, Cantos I and II being of equal length:

Canto I,	vs. 1-3	2 strophes	4 verselines	27 words
Canto II,	vs. 4-6	2 strophes	4 verselines	27 words
Canto III,	vs. 7-9	2 strophes	4 verselines	30 words.

In my opinion, however, in terms of thought content, there is no caesura either between vs. 3 and 4, or between vs. 5 and 6. This division of the text on purely formal grounds is overruled by what I consider to be the basic strophic structure of the psalm. This framework is determined by two factors corroborating each other: first, *the subjects* concerned: **Babylon**, on the one hand, and **YHWH and Jerusalem**, on the other, and second, *the form of address*: the 'we'-form and the 2nd person form of address. In other words, the division of the text based on the subjects concerned coincides precisely with the two forms of address:

Strophe 1 vs. 1-2	Babylon: the general situation there	'we' form
Strophe 2 vs. 3-4	Babylon: the harassment by the captors	'we' form
Strophe 3 vs. 5-6	Jerusalem, I shall always remember you	1 st pers. sing.
Strophe 4 vs. 7	YHWH, please remember what Edom did	2 nd pers. sing.
Strophe 5 vs. 8-9	Babylon: retribution for the devastator	'we' form.

The canto- and strophic structure presented here, is logotechnically underscored by the fact that **52** (2 x **26**) words are devoted to Babylon (35 in Canto I and 17 in Canto III), while **32** are devoted to Jerusalem (19) and YHWH (**13**).

3. There are two considerations behind the compositional formula 84 = 52c + 32d: first, the fact that **52** represents the numerical value of the important key-word in vs. 8-9, אֲשֵׁרִי, 'happy' (1 + 21 + 20 + 10 = **52**). The 'happiness' concerns the just punishment for the Babylon empire in retribution for what she has done to Jerusalem. Second, the *kabod* number **32** in vs. 5-7 signifies YHWH's presence and his involvement in the expected requital of the devastator. This is buttressed by the **13** words addressed to YHWH and the **17** addressed to Babylon, which constitute the 'minor' *YHWH echad* formula: **30** = **17** + **13**. The 'minor' formula is reinforced by the 'major' one, **39** = **26** + **13**, occurring in vs. 5-9 (**26** words before atnach in vs. 5-7 and **13** before atnach in vs. 8-9).

4. Psalm 137 is one of the many psalms – e.g., all 15 Songs of Ascents - of which the number of words is determined by the numerical value of a key-word in the text. Here, it concerns the repeated key-word עָרֵנוּ עָרֵנוּ, “Raze it, raze it!” (16 + 20 + 6) x 2 = **84** (v. 7c). The cry is supposed to have been uttered by the Edomites at the fall of Jerusalem. Interestingly, unlike the requital of Babylon, which is anticipated with glee, the repayment of Edom is not elaborated on.
5. Here is a survey of the divine name numbers woven into the fabric of the text:
- | | |
|----------|--|
| vs. 1-9 | 26 cola in total |
| vs. 2-3 | 17 words in total |
| vs. 5-7 | 26 words before atnach |
| vs. 8-9 | 17 words in total |
| vs. 6-9 | 34 (2 x 17) words before atnach |
| Column c | 52 (2 x 26) words in total. |
6. The name יהוה appears twice: in vs. 4a and 7a.

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