

Psalm 138— 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 138

- Psalm 138 opens the series of eight Davidic psalms (138-145), which conclude the last Sub-Group of Eleven Psalms (135-145).
- It is the first psalm in Book V in which the syntax (main- and subordinate clauses) is used to weave divine name numbers into the text: **17** words in the main clauses of vs. 2-3 and **34** (2x17) in the subordinate clauses of the entire psalm. The last examples I encountered were [Psalms 98](#) and [100](#).
- The Masoretic text of verse 1 is evidently not in order: YHWH is addressed in the 2nd person but his name is missing (compare Pss. 135, 136, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143 and 144 where the name YHWH occurs in the first verse); moreover, we miss the reason why he deserves to be praised. Therefore, there is every reason to insert *yhwh* (following 11QPs^a, the ancient versions, and some Hebrew manuscripts), as well as the missing clause *ky šm't 'mry py* (following LXX).

Strophic structure - Canto boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt (emended text): 1-2a, 2b-3 || 4-6, 7-8 (2 cantos, 4 strophes with 10 verselines and 22 cola, taking vs. 1-2 as 4 bicola and 7-8 as 2 tricola).
- Fokkelman: 1-3, 4-6, 7, 8 (4 strophes, 9 verselines and 21 cola, taking v. 7 as 2 bicola).
- Labuschagne (emended text): 1-3 || 4-6, 7-8 (2 cantos and 3 strophes: 1-3, 4-6 and 7-8, since 4-6 dealing with the foreign kings require a separate strophe; 9 verselines and 21 cola, regarding v. 2 as 2 bicola and vs. 7-8 as 2 tricola).

Logotechnical analysis

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

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	Heading לְדָוִד	1	= 1	+ 0		
	אֲזַדְּךָ <יְהוָה> בְּכָל-לִבִּי	1	4	4	4	
	<כִּי שָׁמַעַת אֲמַר־פִּי	4		4		4
	נִגַּד אֱלֹהִים אֲזַמְרָךְ:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 1	11	= 4	+ 7	= 4	+ 7
2	אֲשַׁתְּחִנֶּה אֶל-הַיָּבֹל קְדָשְׁךָ	2	4	4	4	
	וְאֹדָה אֶת-שִׁמְךָ	3	3		3	
	עַל-חַסְדֶּךָ וְעַל-אַמְתֶּךָ	3	4	4	4	
	כִּי-הִגְדַּלְתָּ עַל-כָּל-שִׁמְךָ אֲמַרְתָּךְ:	6		6		6
	Total, v. 2	17	= 11	+ 6	= 11	+ 6
3	בְּיוֹם קָרָאתִי וַתִּעֲנֵנִי	4	3	3	3	
	תִּרְהַבְנִי בַנְּפֹשִׁי עֹז:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 3	6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Total, v. 2-3	23	= 14	+ 9	= 17	+ 6
	Canto I Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-3	34	= 18	+ 16	= 21	+ 13

4	יִדְוֹף יְהוָה כָּל־מְלִכֵי־אֲרָץ ^	5	5	5	5
	Middle verseline: כִּי שָׁמְעוּ אִמְרֵי־פִיךָ :		4	4	4
	9 = 4 + 1 + 4	Total, v. 4	9	= 5 + 4	= 5 + 4
5	וַיִּשְׁירוּ בְּדַרְכֵי יְהוָה ^	6	3	3	3
	כִּי גָדוֹל כְּבוֹד יְהוָה :		4	4	4
	כְּבוֹד = 23	Total, v. 5	7	= 3 + 4	= 3 + 4
6	כִּי־רַם יְהוָה וְשָׁפַל יִרְאֶה ^	7	5	5	5
	וְגִבַּהּ מִמֶּרְחֶק יִידַע :		3	3	3
	Total, v. 6		8	= 5 + 3	= 0 + 8
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 4-6		24	= 13 + 11	= 8 + 16
7	אִם־אֵלֶּךָ בְּקֶרֶב צָרָה תִּחְיֶינִי	8	5	5	5
	עַל אֵף אִיבֵי תִשְׁלַח יָדְךָ ^		5	5	5
	וְתוֹשִׁיעֵנִי יְמִינְךָ :		2	2	2
	Total, v. 7		12	= 10 + 2	= 7 + 5
8	יְהוָה יִגְמַר בְּעַדִּי	9	3	3	3
	יְהוָה חִסְדְּךָ לְעוֹלָם ^		3	3	3
	מִעֲשֵׂי יָדֶיךָ אֶל־תִּרְחַף :		4	4	4
	Total, v. 8		10	= 6 + 4	= 10 + 0
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 7-8		22	= 16 + 6	= 17 + 5
	Canto II Total, v. 4-8		46	= 29 + 17	= 25 + 21
	Total, v. 2-8		69	= 43 + 26	= 42 + 27
	Total, v. 1-8		80	= 47 + 33	= 46 + 34
	With the heading, v. 1-8		81	= 48 + 33	

Observations

- The middle verseline, v. 4 (according to Van der Lugt the 2 middle cola) may be considered the consciously designed meaningful centre (9 = 4 + 1 + 4):

יִדְוֹף יְהוָה כָּל־מְלִכֵי־אֲרָץ ^ כִּי שָׁמְעוּ אִמְרֵי־פִיךָ :

All the kings of the earth will praise you, YHWH, when they hear the words of your mouth.

In terms of content, the section dealing with the homage the foreign kings are expected to pay to YHWH, vs. 4-6, may be considered the larger meaningful core of the poem. That YHWH regards the lowly and knows the haughty, clearly refers to the kings.

- Though Psalm 138 is not a typical royal psalm, it is the first of a series of 8 psalms designed as Davidic compositions (138-145), as indicated by the headings. The speaker is supposed to be David, the archetype of the Israelite king. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the meaningful centre is about 'all the kings of the earth'. Because David's rule depends on their acceptance of his rule and that of YHWH: they are expected to acknowledge YHWH's dominion and to praise him.
- In many psalms, the change from words addressed to God to words spoken about him, and *vice versa*, has a structuring role. Here, it was not feasible, because the author clearly used syntax to structure his text numerically: 46 words in the main clauses and 34 (2x17) in the subordinate clauses introduced by כִּי and אִם. The structure based on the change in the direction of address is as follows:

vs. 1-4	addressed to God	43 words	
vs. 5-6	spoken about him		15 words
vs. 7	addressed to God	12 words	
vs. 8a	spoken about him		3 words
vs. 8bc	addressed to God	7 words	
Total		62 words	18 words

The change from words addressed to God to words spoken about him only functions as an attention-drawing device marking especially in 8a the end of the poem as a whole. Compare, e.g., Pss. 20:10, 68:36, 73:28, and 90:17.

4. Since the word **כְּבוֹד**, 'glory' numerical value **23** (11 + 2 + 6 + 4) appears explicitly in the text (v. 5b), I list its occurrences together with those of the divine name numbers. See the [General Introduction](#), "Special patterns" for the function of the *kabod* numbers, which I do not regard as having a regular, but only an incidental structural function.

vs. 2	17 words in total
vs. 2-3	23 words in total and 17 words in the main clauses
vs. 1-3	34 words in total
vs. 2-8	69 (3 x 23) words in total, with 43 before and 26 after atnach
vs. 4-8	46 (2 x 23) words in total, with 17 words after atnach
vs. 1-8	34 (2 x 17) words in the subordinate clauses.

5. The name **יהוה** occurs **7** times in the emended text: vs. 1a, 4a, 5a, 5b, 6a, 8a and 8b.

© 2012
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@gmail.com University of Groningen, The Netherlands