

# Psalm 139— 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 139

- Psalm 139 is the follow-up of Psalm 138 in so far as it elaborates on the idea of YHWH's omniscience (Ps. 138:6) and his just judgement of *the works of his hands* (Ps. 138:7-8). This does not imply that Psalm 139 is to be regarded as a philosophical treatise on God's omniscience – far from it: it deals specifically with the personal experience of an individual of God's omnipresence and omniscience. Throughout the poem the speaker addresses God directly and writes in the first person.
- The meticulously designed logotechnical structure is organized in such a way that the core of the poem, vs. 7-18, stands out from the surrounding text as specifically dealing with YHWH's omniscience and his *personal involvement* in the coming into being of the speaker. The framework is about the speaker's experience of YHWH's *fundamental knowledge of him as a distinct individual*, even before his birth.
- The surrounding **78**-word framework (**78 = 3 x 26**) is strongly buttressed by the fact that **78** represents the numerical value of two verbal forms of the key-word יָדַע, "to know" at the beginning and end of the psalm. It is not surprising that the root יָדַע occurs exactly **7** times, expressing the 'fullness' of YHWH's knowledge of the speaker.

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

- Van der Lugt: 1-4, 5-6 | 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-14, 15-16, 17-18 | 19-20, 21-22, 23-24 (2 cantos, 4 canticles, 11 strophes, **23** verselines and **51** cola, taking v. 16 as a tricolon).
- Fokkelman: 1-3, 4-6 || 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-14, 15-16, 17-18 || 19-20, 21-22 || 23-24 (5 cantos and further as Van der Lugt).
- Labuschagne: as Van der Lugt, except that I take v. 16 as two bicola (2 cantos, 4 canticles, 11 strophes, with **24** verselines and **52** cola).

## 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 inner core.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמַנְצַח לְדָוִד מִזְמוֹרָה <sup>1</sup> Heading	3	= 3	+ 0		
	יְהוָה חִקְרֵתִנִּי וַיְדַע <sup>1</sup> : 1	3	3		3	
2	אֵתָהּ אֲדַע <sup>2</sup> שְׁבֵתִי וְקוּמִי <sup>2</sup> יְדַעַתָּ = 52	4	4		4	
	בְּנִתָּהּ לְרַעִי מִרְחוֹק: (10 + 4 + 16 + 22 = 52)	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 1-2	10	= 7	+ 3	= 10	+ 0
3	אֶרְחִי וְרַבְעִי זְרִיתָּ <sup>3</sup> 2	3	3		3	
	וְכָל־דְּרָכֵי הַסִּפְנֹתָהּ:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 3	6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Total, v. 1-3	16	= 10	+ 6	= 16	+ 0
4	כִּי אֵין מְלָה בְלִשׁוֹנִי <sup>4</sup> 3	4	4		4	
	הֵן יְהוָה יְדַעַתָּ <sup>3</sup> כָּלָה: 4	4		4	4	
	Total, v. 4	8	= 4	+ 4	= 8	+ 0
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-4	24	= 14	+ 10	= 24	+ 0

5	אָחוּר וְקָדָם צִרְתָּנִי <sup>4</sup> וְתִשֶׁת עָלַי כִּפְכָּה: Total, v. 5	4	3	3		3		
			3			3		3
			6	=	3	+	3	= 6 + 0
6	פְּלֹאִיהַ יְדֻעַת <sup>4</sup> מִמְּנִי <sup>4</sup> נִשְׁנָבָה לֹא־אוֹכֵל לָהּ: Total, v. 6	5	3	3		3		
			4			4		4
			7	=	3	+	4	= 7 + 0
	<b>Strophe 2 Total, v. 5-6</b>		13	=	6	+	7	= 13 + 0
	Total, v. 4-6		21	=	10	+	11	= 21 + 0
	Total, v. 2-6		34	=	17	+	17	= 34 + 0
	<b>Canticle I,1 Total, v. 1-6</b>		37	=	20	+	17	= 37 + 0
7	אָנָּה אֱלֹהִי מְרוֹחֶדָּה <sup>4</sup> וְאָנָּה מִפְּנֵיךְ אֶבְרָח: Total, v. 7	6	3	3				3
			3			3		3
			6	=	3	+	3	= 0 + 6
8	אִם־אֶסְק שְׁמִים שָׁם אֶתְהַדָּה <sup>4</sup> וְאֶצִּיעָה שְׂאוֹל הַנֶּגֶד: Total, v. 8	7	5	5				5
			3			3		3
			8	=	5	+	3	= 0 + 8
	<b>Strophe 3 Total, v. 7-8</b>		14	=	8	+	6	= 0 + 14
9	אֶשָּׂא כְּנֹפֵי־שָׁחַר <sup>4</sup> אֶשְׁכָּנָה בְּאַחֲרֵית יָם: Total, v. 9	8	3	3				3
			3			3		3
			6	=	3	+	3	= 0 + 6
10	גַּם־שֵׁם יִרְדֶּה תִּנְחַנֵּי <sup>4</sup> וְתִאחַזְנֵי יְמִינֶךָ: Total, v. 10	9	4	4				4
			2			2		2
			6	=	4	+	2	= 0 + 6
	<b>Strophe 4 Total, v. 9-10</b>		12	=	7	+	5	= 0 + 12
	Total, v. 7-10		26	=	15	+	11	= 0 + 26
11	וְאָמַר אֶדְּחֶשֶׂד יִשׁוּפְנִי <sup>4</sup> וְלִילָה אֹר בְּעַדְנִי: Total, v. 11	10	4	4				4
			3			3		3
			7	=	4	+	3	= 0 + 7
12	גַּם־חֶשֶׂד לֹא־יִחְשֶׂד <sup>4</sup> מִמֶּךָ וְלִילָה כִּי־וּם יֵאִיר <sup>4</sup> כְּחֻשִׁיכָה כְּאוֹרָה: Total, v. 12	11	4	4				4
			4			4		4
			2			2		2
			10	=	8	+	2	= 0 + 10
	<b>Strophe 5 Total, v. 11-12</b>		17	=	12	+	5	= 0 + 17
	<b>Canticle I,2 Total, v. 7-12</b>		43	=	27	+	16	= 0 + 43
	<b>Canto II Total, v. 1-12</b>		80		47		33	37 43
13	Middle cola: כִּי־אֶתָּה קָנִיתָ כְּלִי־תִי <sup>4</sup> תִּסְכְּנֵי בְּכֶטֶן אָמִי: Middle words: 174 = 80 + 14 + 80 Total, v. 13	12	4	4				4
			3			3		3
			7	=	4	+	3	= 0 + 7
14	אֹרְךָ עַל כִּי נִזְרָאוֹת נִפְלִיתִי <sup>4</sup> נִפְלָאִים מַעֲשֵׂיךָ <sup>4</sup> וְנִפְשֵׁי יְדֻעַת <sup>5</sup> מְאֹד: Total, v. 14	13	5	5				5
			2			2		2
			3			3		3
			10	=	7	+	3	= 0 + 10
	<b>Middle Strophe Strophe 6 Total, v. 13-14</b>		17	=	11	+	6	= 0 + 17

15	לֹא־נִכְחַד עֲצָמֵי מִמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי בַסֶּתֶר־ רַקְמָתִי בְּתַחְתֵּי־אָרֶץ:	14	4	4	4
	Total, v. 15		10	= 7 + 3	= 0 + 10
	Total, v. 12-15		37	= 26 + 11	= 0 + 37
16	גָּלְמֵי רָאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וְעַל־סִפְרָה כָּלֵם וּפְתַבּוּ יָמִים יִצְרוּ־ וְלֹא אֶחָד בָּהֶם:	15	3	3	3
	Total, v. 16		12	= 9 + 3	= 0 + 12
	<b>Strophe 7 Total, v. 15-16</b>		22	= 16 + 6	= 0 + 22
17	וְלִי מִה־יִקְרוּ רַעִידָאֵל מָה עֲצָמוֹ רֵאשִׁיהֶם:	17	5	5	5
	Total, v. 17		8	= 5 + 3	= 0 + 8
18	אֶסְפְּרֶם מַחֹל יִרְבּוֹן־ הַקִּיצִיתִי וְעוֹדֵי עִמָּה:	18	3	3	3
	Total, v. 18		6	= 3 + 3	= 0 + 6
	<b>Strophe 8 Total, v. 17-18</b>		14	= 8 + 6	= 0 + 14
	Total, v. 16-18		26	= 17 + 9	= 0 + 26
	<b>Canto III Total, v. 13-18</b>		53	= 35 + 18	= 0 + 53
	Total, v. 7-18		96	= 62 + 34	= 0 + 96
19	אִם־תִּקְטַל אֱלֹהִי רִשְׁעָא וְאֲנֹשֵׁי דְמִים סוּרוּ מִנִּי:	19	4	4	4
	Total, v. 19		8	= 4 + 4	= 8 + 0
	Total, v. 16-19		34	= 21 + 13	= 8 + 26
20	אֲשֶׁר יֵאמְרוּ לְמִזְמֵהֶם נִשְׂא לְשׂוֹא עָרִיד:	20	3	3	3
	Total, v. 20		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0
	<b>Strophe 9 Total, v. 19-20</b>		14	= 7 + 7	= 14 + 0
21	הַלּוֹא־מִשְׁנֵאִיהֶם יִתְּנֶה אֲשַׁנְאֵה וּבְתַקּוּמֵיהֶם אֶתְקַוֶּטֶט:	21	4	4	4
	Total, v. 21		6	= 4 + 2	= 6 + 0
	Total, v. 18-21		26	= 14 + 12	= 20 + 6
22	תִּכְבְּלִית שְׁנֵאָה שְׁנֵאָתֵיהֶם לְאוֹיְבֵיהֶם הָיוּ לִי:	22	3	3	3
	Total, v. 22		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0
	<b>Strophe 10 Total, v. 21-22</b>		12	= 7 + 5	= 12 + 0
	Total, v. 19-22		26	= 14 + 12	= 26 + 0
23	חֲקַרְנִי אֵל־ <sup>ו</sup> יִרְדַּע לְכַבֵּי־ בְּחֻנֵּי יִרְדַּע שְׂרַעֲפֵי:	23	4	4	4
	<b>יִרְדַּע = 26</b>		3	3	3
24	וְרֵאָה אִם־דִּרְדַּרְךָ־עֲצָב בֵּי־ וּנְחַנִּי בְּדַרְךָ עוֹלָם:	24	5	5	5
	Total, v. 23-24		3	3	3
	<b>Coda Strophe 11 Total, v. 23-24</b>		15	= 9 + 6	= 15 + 0
	<b>Canto IV Total, v. 19-24</b>		41	= 23 + 18	= 41 + 0
	Total, v. 14-24		87	= 54 + 33	= 41 + 46
	Total, v. 1-24		174	= 105 + 69	= 78 + 96
	With the heading, v. 1-24		177	= 108 + 69	

## Observations

1. **Vs. 13-14**, the **17-word** middle strophe ( $11 = 5 + 1 + 5$ ), constitutes a literary unity, and may be regarded as the deliberately designed meaningful centre on strophic level. In terms of words, the centre is slightly off-centre:  $174 = 80 + 17 + 77$ .

Strophe 1, vs. 1-4	24 words	Examine me, Yahweh, and know me!
Strophe 2, vs. 5-6	13 words	You beset me behind and before
Strophe 3, vs. 7-8	<b>14 words</b>	You are everywhere present
Strophe 4, vs. 9-10	<b>12 words</b>	You are with me where ever I go
Strophe 5, vs. 11-12	<b>17 words</b>	You are a light in the darkness
<b>Strophe 6, vs. 13-14</b>	<b>17 words</b>	<b>You formed my inward self</b>
Strophe 7, vs. 15-16	22 words	You know everything about me
Strophe 8, vs. 17-18	14 words	Your thoughts, God, are unfathomable
Strophe 9, vs. 19-20	<b>14 words</b>	If only, God, you would slay the wicked
Strophe 10, vs. 21-22	<b>12 words</b>	How I hate those that hate you, Yahweh
Strophe 11, vs. 23-24	15 words	Examine me, God, and know me!

Note how the divine name number **17** gives prominence to the meaningful centre, and how the other divine name number **26** gives prominence to vs. 7-10 and vs. 19-22.

2. The meaningful centre on colon level is constituted by the **4** middle cola in **vs. 13-14b** within the middle strophe ( $52 = 24 + 4 + 24$  cola). The **4** middle cola coincide precisely with the **14** middle words ( $174 = 80 + 14 + 80$  words) giving prominence to the **middle strophe**, the consciously designed meaningful centre:

כִּי־אַתָּה קָנִיתָ כְּלִי־יָדָי ^ תִּסְכְּנֵי בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי:  
 אֲזַדְדָה עַל כִּי נִזְרָאוֹת נִפְלִי־יָתִי נִפְלְאִים מַעֲשֵׂי־ךָ ^ וְנִפְשִׁי יָדַעַת מְאֹד:

For you yourself fashioned my inward parts // you sheltered me in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you, for I am awesomely distinct / wonderful are your works  
 and you know me through and through!<sup>1</sup>

The noun נִזְרָאוֹת 'awesome things', which is here used as an adverb (with Christensen), 'awesomely', may also be translated 'awfully, strikingly, terrifically'.

In broad outline, my translation of vs. 13-14 is in agreement with that of Th. Booij, in his article "Psalm cxxxix: Text, Syntax, Meaning", *VT* 55 (2005), pp. 1-19:

For you yourself created my kidneys, screened me in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you, as I have been immensely distinguished: wonderful are your works,  
 And my soul knows right well.

The meaningful centre is an eloquent expression of the leading theme of the psalm, the intimate relationship between the speaker and YHWH: YHWH *knew* him from the very beginning. The depth and comprehensiveness of this relationship is symbolically expressed by the **7** occurrences (fullness!) of יָדַע, 'to know' (marked in the chart), with the striking statement, **v. 6a**, at the centre of the menorah pattern formed by the verbs:

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to render the alliteration and the pun in v. 14 satisfactorily: נִפְלְי־יָתִי, 'I am distinct' (from פָּלַה, 'be treated specially', 'be distinct and unique'), and נִפְלְאִים, 'wonderful' (from פָּל, niphal 'to be unusual, wonderful'). For the meaning of נִפְלְי־יָתִי, 'I am distinct/unique', a precise parallel is to be found in Exodus 33:16: וְנִפְלְיֵנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי מִכָּל־הָעַם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ מֵהָ: "So we shall be distinct, I and your people, from all the peoples on the face of the earth."

- v. 1            You *know*<sup>1</sup> me
- v. 2            You yourself *know*<sup>2</sup> me when I sit and when I rise
- v. 4b           Well, you *know*<sup>3</sup> all about it
- v. 6a            Too wonderful for me is this *knowledge*<sup>4</sup>**
- v. 14c          Yes, my soul *knows*<sup>5</sup> this right well
- v. 23a          Examine me, God, *and know*<sup>6</sup> my heart
- v. 23b          Test me, *and know*<sup>7</sup> my thoughts.

In a private communication Bob Fleming from Britt, Iowa, sent me his outline on the psalm based not so much on the mechanics of the poem as on the flow of thought. Its charming symmetric, menorah-like pattern makes it attractive and worth considering:

- A Search me and know me (v. 1)
- B You watch over me (vs. 2-5)
- C Your great knowledge (v. 6)
- D My external life (vs. 7-12)
- D' My internal life (vs. 13-16)
- C' Your great thoughts (vs. 17-18)
- B' Watch over me (vs. 19-22)
- A' Search me and know me (vs. 23-24).

3. In any case, the basic structure of the psalm is not only determined by thought content, but also by its numerical features in terms of its 4 cantos:

- **the central section** (vs. 7-18), deals with *YHWH's inescapable omnipresence* and his *personal involvement* in the coming into being of the speaker;
- **the framework** (vs. 1-6 and 19-24) deals with the speaker's experience of *YHWH's fundamental knowledge of him as an individual*.

Canto I	vs. 1-6	YHWH's fundamental knowledge	37 w	} <b>78</b>
Canto II	vs. 7-12	YHWH's inescapable omnipresence	43 w	
Canto III	vs. 13-18	YHWH's personal involvement in his existence	53 w	
Canto IV	vs. 19-24	YHWH's judgement is based on understanding	41 w	

The framework is made up of  $37 + 41 = 78$  (3 x 26) words – in my opinion, deliberately. The number **78** represents the numerical value of **יָדַעְתָּ**, 'you know' in vs. 2a and v. 4b ( $10 + 4 + 16 + 22 = 52$ ) together with **וְיָדַעַ**, 'and know' in vs. 23a and 23b ( $6 + 4 + 16 = 26$ ). Both have YHWH as subject, and both are key-words that occur twice.

This is the logotechnical expression of the fact that the speaker, as a unique individual, feels himself literally encompassed by YHWH's knowledge of him.

Note that this is explicitly stated in v. 5a: "Behind and before you encompass me." Compare the structure of [Psalm 23](#).

Strophes 1 and 11 (vs. 1-4 and 23-24) function as a device for inclusion, which is reinforced by the **7** occurrence of the key-words.

4. Additionally, the divine name numbers feature in the following way:

- vs. 2-6            **34** words in total, with **17** before and **17** after atnach
- vs. 7-10           **26** words in total, with **15** (YH) before and **11** (WH) after atnach
- vs. 11-12          **17** words in total
- vs. 1-13           **51** (3 x **17**) words before atnach
- vs. 13-14          **17** words in total
- vs. 16-18          **26** words in total, with **17** before atnach

vs. 16-19     **34** (2 x **17**) words in total  
vs. 18-21     **26** words in total  
vs. 19-22     **26** words in total.

5. The name יהוה appears 3 times: vs. 1, 4b and 21a. The designation אֱלֹהִים occurs in 19a, and אֱל in 17a and 23a.

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