

Psalm 91— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

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

Specific features of Psalm 91

- Like Psalms 90 and 92 – and e.g., Psalm 84 - Psalm 91 divides on two different levels into two equal halves (See Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 6](#).):

vs. 1-8	Canto I	8 verselines, with 56 (8 x 7) words
vs. 9-16	Canto II	8 verselines, with 56 (8 x 7) words.

For the significance of the number **56**, see Observation 5 below.
- The numerical structure is clearly regulated by the number of fullness, **7**, which may be explained as a desire to prelude Psalm 92, a Song for the Sabbath. Like Psalm 92, it is composed of **112** (16 x 7) words, a feature they share with Psalm 96. There are no less than 8 verses having **7** words: 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 15. Vs. 1-6 have **42** (6x7) words, and the **56** words in vs. 1-8 divide into **35** (5x7) before, and **21** (3x7) after atnach. The poem divides into **7** strophes in a menorah pattern. It is made up of **35** (5 7) cola. The middle strophe of the menorah, **vs. 7-8**, has **14** (2 x 7) words, and the pivotal colon, **vs. 8b**, comprises **14** letters.
- Like Psalm 90, it does not have a meaningful centre on word level, but in terms of the colon as poetic building block: **vs. 8b**, flanked by **17** cola (**35 = 17 + 1 + 17**). Additionally, the **9** middle cola, **vs. 7-10**, positioned astride the arithmetic centre, are enveloped by altogether **26** cola (**35 = 13 + 9 + 13**), which I consider the larger meaningful centre.
- A very significant feature is the ingenious way in which the author has structured his address to the king by means of the **9** words *directly addressed to God* (column **d**) – see Observations 3 and 4.

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

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, **7-8** || 9-10, 11-13, 14-16 (**7** strophes, 16 verselines, **35** cola).
- Fokkelman and Labuschagne: same as Van der Lugt.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words spoken about and by God; **d**: words directly addressed to God.

			Total		a		b		c		d
1	יֵשֶׁב בְּסֶתֶר עֲלֵיוֹן ^א	1	3		3				3		
	בְּצֵל שְׁרֵי יְתָלוֹן:		3				3		3		
	Total, v. 1		6	=	3	+	3	=	6	+	0
2	אָמַר לַיהוָה מַחְסֵי וּמְצוֹדָתַי	2	4		4				2		2
	אֶלֹהֵי אֲבֹתַי־בּוֹ:		3				3		3		3
	Total, v. 2		7	=	4	+	3	=	0	+	5
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2		13	=	7	+	6	=	8	+	5
3*	כִּי הוּא יִצְיֵלָה מִפֶּחַ יְקוּשׁ	3	5		5				5		
	מִדְבַּר הַחוּת:		2		2				2		
	Total, v. 3		7	=	7	+	0	=	7	+	0
4	בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסֵּךְ לָךְ	4	3		3				3		
	וְתַחַת־כְּנָפָיו תִּחְסֶה ^א		3		3				3		
	צְנֵה וְסַחֲרָה אִמְתּוֹ:		3				3		3		
	Total, v. 4		9	=	6	+	3	=	9	+	0
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4		16	=	13	+	3	=	16	+	0

5	לא־תִירָא מִפֶּחַד לְיָלֶהָ מִחֵץ יְעוֹף יוֹמָם: Total, v. 5	5	4	4	4		
			3		3	3	
			7	= 4 +	3	= 7 +	0
6	מִדְּבַר בְּאִפְלֵ יִהְלֶךְ מִקָּטֵב יָשׁוּד צְהָרִים: Total, v. 6	6	3	3	3		
			3		3	3	
			6	= 3 +	3	= 6 +	0
	Strophe 3	Total, v. 5-6	13	= 7 +	6	= 13 +	0
		Total, v. 1-6	42	= 27 +	15	= 37 +	5
7	Vs. 7-8 middle strophe יִפֹּל מִצְדָּה אֶלָּה וְרִבְבָה מִימִינָה אֶלָּה לֹא יָנֹשׁ: Total, v. 7	7	3	3	3		
			2	2	2		
			3		3	3	
			8	= 5 +	3	= 8 +	0
8	רק בענינה תביט וְשָׁלַמְתָּ רִשְׁעִים תִּרְאֶה: Middle colon meaningful centre: 35 = 17 + 1 + 17 Middle Strophe 4 Total, v. 7-8 Total, v. 3-8	8	3	3	3		
			3		3	3	
			6	= 3 +	3	= 6 +	0
			14	= 8 +	6	= 14 +	0
			43	= 28 +	15	= 43 +	0
	Canto I	Total, v. 1-8	56	= 35 +	21	= 51 +	5
	Arithmetic middle in terms of verselines: 8 + 8, and of words: 56 + 56.						
9	כִּי־אֲתָהּ יִתְּנָה מִחֶסֶד עָלֶיךָ שְׁמֵת מְעוֹנָה: Total, v. 9	9	4	4	4		
			3		3	3	
			7	= 4 +	3	= 3 +	4
10	Verses 7-10: nine middle cola: 35 = 13 + 9 + 13 The central core, the larger meaningful centre	לא־תֵאנֶה אֶלָּה רְעָה וְנָנַע לֹא־יִקְרַב בְּאֶהְלָה: Total, v. 10	10	4	4	4	
			4		4	4	
			8	= 4 +	4	= 8 +	0
	Strophe 5	Total, v. 9-10	15	= 8 +	7	= 11 +	4
		Total, v. 7-10	29	= 16 +	13	= 25 +	4
		Total, v. 1-10	71	= 43 +	28	= 62 +	9
11	כִּי מִלְּאֲכָוִי יִצְוֶה־לָּהּ לְשִׁמְרָהּ בְּכָל־דְּרָכֶיהָ: Total, v. 11 Total, v. 1-11	11	4	4	4		
			3		3	3	
			7	= 4 +	3	= 7 +	0
			78	= 47 +	31	= 69 +	9
12	עַל־כַּפַּיִם יִשְׁאוּנָהּ פֶּן־תִּגַּף בְּאֶבֶן רִגְלָהּ: Total, v. 12 Total, v. 1-12	12	3	3	3		
			4		4	4	
			7	= 3 +	4	= 7 +	0
			85	= 50 +	35	= 76 +	9
13	עַל־שַׁחַל נִפְתָּן תִּדְרֹהֶּהּ תִּרְמַס כְּפִיר וְתַגִּין: Total, v. 13 Strophe 6 Total, v. 11-13 Total, v. 9-13	13	4	4	4		
			3		3	3	
			7	= 4 +	3	= 7 +	0
			21	= 11 +	10	= 21 +	0
			36	= 19 +	17	= 32 +	4

14	14-16 Oracle	1	כִּי בִי חֶשֶׁק וְאַפְלִטָהוּ [^]	14	4	4	4	0
		2	אֲשַׁנְבְּהוּ כִּי־יָרַע שְׁמוֹ:		4		4	0
			Total, v. 14		8	= 4 +	4 = 8 +	0
15		3	יִקְרְאֵנִי וְאֶעֱנֶהוּ	15	2	2	2	0
			עֲמוּ־אֲנֹכִי בְצָרָה [^]		3	3	3	0
		4, 5	אֲחַלְצֶהוּ וְאֶכְבְּדֶהוּ:		2		2	0
			Total, v. 15		7	= 5 +	2 = 7 +	0
			Total, v. 9-15		51	= 28 +	23 = 47 +	4
16		6	אֲרָךְ יָמִים אֲשַׁבֵּיעֵהוּ [^]	16	3	3	3	0
		7	וְאֲרָאֵהוּ בִישׁוּעָתִי:		2		2	0
			Total, v. 16		5	= 3 +	2 = 5 +	0
	Oracle: Strophe 7		Total, v. 14-16		20	= 12 +	8 = 20 +	0
			Total, v. 11-16		41	= 23 +	18 = 41 +	0
	Canto II		Total, v. 9-16		56	= 31 +	25 = 52 +	4
			Total, v. 1-16		112	= 66 +	46 = 103 +	9

* In vs. 3, Christensen restores 'the missing atnach', following the Ginsburg Bible and the Letteris Bible. I maintain the Masoretic layout, for I see no reason to insert atnachs where they are missing. The Masoretes obviously had their reasons for omitting the atnach, which is quite often the case. It is therefore safer to leave MT as it is, despite the fact that the 'correction' here occasions the compositional formula 43 = 26 + 17 in vs. 3-8.

Observations

1. The structure of Psalm 91 is very similar to that of Psalm 90, which indicates that both stem from the same hand. Being made up of two equal halves of 56 words each, Psalm 91 lacks a meaningful centre on word level. Instead, there is one on colon level, vs. 8b (35 = 17 + 1 + 17):

וְשָׁלַמְתָּ רְשָׁעִים תְּרָאָה You will see the retribution on evildoers.

The punishment of the evildoers is very crucial to the security of the king, which is the essence of the psalm. This is exactly what makes the pivotal colon meaningful. Exactly 17 cola flank the pledge in the pivotal colon, which symbolically expresses the idea that the pledge is wrapped up – and therefore guaranteed - in God's name. The symbolism gains credibility in light of the solemn oracle at the end of the poem (vs. 14-16), in which God himself confirms the pledge.

2. In terms of the 35 cola of the poem, the 9 middle cola, vs. 7-10, constitute the central core, which I regard as the poem's larger meaningful centre (35 = 13 + 9 + 13). Its meaningfulness lies in the fact that this part of the psalm deals specifically with the personal security of the king in warfare, which is a matter of life and death. Compare the meaningful centres of Psalms 110 and 140 – see Observations 3-4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 110](#) and Observation 1 in that of [Psalm 140](#).

⁷ וּפַל מִצְדָּקָה אֱלֹהִים וּרְבֻבָה מִיְמִינֶךָ אֱלֹהִים לֹא יִגַּשׁ:
⁸ רַק בְּעֵינֶיךָ תִּבְיֹט אֱלֹהִים וְשָׁלַמְתָּ רְשָׁעִים תְּרָאָה:
⁹ כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה מְחַסֵּי אֱלֹהִים עַל־יוֹן שְׁמֹתָ מְעוֹנָה:
¹⁰ לֹא־תֵאָנֵה אֱלֹהִים רָעָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא־יִקְרַב בְּאֵהָלֶךָ:

⁷ A 1000 may fall at your side 10,000 at your right hand / but you it will not touch

⁸ Only with your eyes will you observe this / you will see the retribution on the wicked

⁹ Surely, you, YHWH, are my refuge! / Most High, you have made your habitation

¹⁰ No disaster will befall you / no calamity come near your tent.

In terms of words, the poem now divides into 42 + 29 + 41, a well-nigh perfectly balanced pattern. The central core is positioned astride the arithmetic middle of the poem, exactly as in Psalm 90 - see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 90](#).

3. In **Canto I** (vs. 1-8) the speaker introduces himself as one who is 'dwelling in the shelter of the Most High...' (vs. 1). He expresses his trust in God in a statement (the 5 words in vs. 2) *directly addressed to him*: "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I put my trust". Compare the meaningful centre of [Psalm 140](#), which is phrased in the same way. The direct address is a powerful rhetorical device to focus attention on the idea of personal trust in God. This is underscored by the use of יהוה and עֲלֵיוֹן, functioning apparently as attention-drawers - see Observation 6. By his personal trust in God, the speaker assures the king of God's protection. Therefore, there is no need for changing the verb אָמַר, 'I say', in vs. 2a, to read (with LXX) יֹאמֵר, 'he says'. On the contrary, precisely because the author used 5 words in the address to God, he caused the 56 words of Canto I to divide into 51 (3 x 17) spoken about God (c), and 5 words spoken to God (Column d). The 3 x 17 words spoken to the king about God are deliberately contrived to express symbolically the presence of God. I am indebted to Pieter van der Lugt, who restrained me from 'smoothing' the text in vs. 9a by reading (Van der Ploeg and Booij) קָרָאתָ, 'you call'.
4. **Canto II** (vs. 9-16) starts in the same way as Canto I with the speaker proclaiming his trust in God (the 4 words in vs. 9a), as in Canto I, in the form of a *direct address to God*: "Surely, YHWH, you are my refuge!" Once again, the speaker's trust in God is the firm ground on which he stands to continue assuring the king of God's protection. His pledge is confirmed by the oracle (vs. 14-16). In this case, in accordance with the pattern we found in Canto I, the 56 words divide into 52 (2 x 26) spoken about and by God (Col. c), and 4 words spoken to God (d).
5. The numerical structure of the poem is regulated throughout by the number of fullness, 7 (**bold** in the chart). The divine name numbers feature as follows:
- vs. 1-8 **56** words: 5 addressed to God, and 51 (3 x 17) spoken about God
 - vs. 1-11 **78** (3 x 26) words in total
 - vs. 1-12 **85** (5 x 17) words in total
 - vs. 9-13 **17** words after atnach
 - vs. 9-15 **51** (3 x 17) words in total
 - vs. 9-16 **56** words: 4 addressed to God, 52 (2 x 26) spoken about and by God.
- The number 56 (which is 28+28) is anything but mere coincidence for it represents the letter value of the root of the crucial key-root חָסָה, 'to find refuge' (8+15+5=28) occurring 3x in the psalm (2a, 4a, 9a). Pieter van der Lugt (his e-mail, 24-3-2012) drew my attention to the letter value of the root חָסָה, which brings to mind the complementary verb שָׁמַר, "to guard, keep' in Psalm 121. His conclusion is that there is a close relationship between Psalm 91 and 121. See there my [analysis](#)!
6. Interesting to note is that there are exactly 7 verbs denoting specific pledges given to the king in the oracle (Strophe 7) : YHWH will *deliver* him, *protect* him, *answer* him, *rescue* him, *honour* him, *satisfy* him, and *show* him his salvation – marked green in the chart. For other series of 7 in Book IV, all expressing the idea of fullness and abundance, see my Analysis of Psalms [101](#), [103](#), [104](#), and [105](#).
7. The name יהוה appears only at the beginning of the two cantos (in vs. 2a and 9a). The same applies to עֲלֵיוֹן in vs. 1a and 9b. The positioning of Elyon precisely in the meaningful centre of Psalm 91 is most significant, being the middle occurrence in the series of 7 (87:5, 89:28, 91:1, **91:9**, 92:2, 97:9 and 107:11) following the preceding series of 7 in the Asaphite Psalms (73:11, 77:11, 78:17, **78:35**, 78:56, 82:6 and 83:19). See Observations 1 and 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 78](#).

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