

# Psalm 79— Logotechnical Analysis

## Guidelines

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

## Specific features of Psalm 79

- The most striking feature of the psalm is that it consists of two clearly differentiated parts of equal length, with 8 verselines and **65** words each, Canto I and Canto II, which form an incontestable unity in terms of structure and content:

vs. 1-7      national **lament** over the ruined city

vs. 8-13     **prayer** for forgiveness of Israel's sins and repayment of their enemies.

Moreover, the two cantos have identical compositional formulae in terms of the division by atnach: **65** = **43a** + **22b** – a feature Psalm 79 shares with Psalms 6, 20 and 121. See Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 6](#).

- Seeing its pronounced bipartite structure, which is defined by a marked diversity in content, the psalm does not have a persuasive meaningful centre on word level astride the arithmetic middle. However, there may be a consciously designed meaningful centre on colon level (v. 7, according to Van der Lugt), or on verseline/strophe level (vs. 8, or vs. 8-9, according to Fokkelman). What ever the case may be, the **lament** and the **prayer** have their own distinct meaningful centres: [vs. 4a](#) and [10c-d](#). The psalm shares this feature with, e.g., Psalms 55, 56, 57, 73, 74.
- From a logotechnical point of view, the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural 'we'-sections (vs. 4, 8-10 and 12-13) within a context in which the author speaks *about* the people of Israel in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, do not only have a rhetorical, highlighting function, but were also designed to weave additional divine name numbers into the fabric of the text. See Observation 6.

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

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3-4 | 5-6b, 6c-7 || 8, 9 | 10, 11-13 (2 cantos and 4 canticles, with 8 strophes (taking the prayer for forgiveness in vs. 8-9, as two separate strophes), 16 verselines and 36 cola, regarding v. 13 as a bicolic verseline).
- Fokkelman ignores the bipartite structure: 1-3, 4-5 || 6-7, 8-9 || 10, 11-12, 13 (3 stanzas, 7 strophes, 17 verselines, 37 cola, taking v. 3 as a bicolon and v. 13 as 2 verselines).
- Labuschagne: 1-3 | 4-5, 6-7 || 8-9, 10 | 11-12, 13 (mainly in terms of content, 2 cantos with 4 canticles, 7 strophes (taking the prayer for forgiveness in vs. 8-9, as one strophe), 16 verselines and 37 cola, regarding v. 13 as a tricolonic verseline and separate strophe).

# Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words spoken *about* the people of Israel; **d**: words in the 'we'-sections.
- The numbering of the verselines is in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	מְזִמּוֹר לְאַסָּף	2	= 2	+ 0		
	Heading					
	אֱלֹהִים בָּאוּ גוֹיִם בְּנִחְלָתָךְ	1	4	4	4	
	טָמְאוּ אֶת־הַיִּכָּל קִדְשְׁךָ		4	4	4	
	שָׁמוּ אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם לְעַיִים:		4	4	4	
	Total, v. 1	12	= 8	+ 4	= 12	+ 0
2	נָתַנוּ אֶת־נִבְלַת עֲבָדֶיךָ	2	4	4	4	
	מֵאֶכָּל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם		3	3	3	
	בְּשֵׁר חֲסִידֶיךָ לְחִיתוֹ־אֶרֶץ:		4	4	4	
	Total, v. 2	11	= 7	+ 4	= 11	+ 0
	Total, v. 1-2	23	= 15	+ 8	= 23	+ 0
3	שָׁפְכוּ דָמָם כַּמַּיִם	3	3	3	3	
	סָבִיבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם		2	2	2	
	וְאִין קוֹבֵר:		2	2	2	
	Total, v. 3	7	= 7	+ 0	= 7	+ 0
	<b>Canticle I.1 Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-3</b>	<b>30</b>	= 22	+ 8	= 30	+ 0
4	הֵינּוּ חֲרָפָה לְשִׁכְנֵינוּ	4	3	3		3
	לְעַג וְקָלָס לְסָבִיבוֹתֵינוּ:		3	3	3	3
	65 = 32 + 1 + 32					
	Middle colon: 19 = 9 + 1 + 9		6	= 3	+ 3	= 0 + 6
	Meaningful centre of Canto I		24	= 17	+ 7	= 18 + 6
	Total, v. 1-4	36	= 25	+ 11	= 30 + 6	
5	עֲדֹמָה יְהִי תֵּינִי תֵּינִי תֵּינִי לְנִצְחָה	5	5	5	5	
	תִּבְעַר כְּמוֹ־אֵשׁ קִנְאֶתְךָ:		4	4	4	
	Total, v. 5	9	= 5	+ 4	= 9	+ 0
	<b>Strophe 2 Total, v. 4-5</b>	15	= 8	+ 7	= 9 + 6	
6	שָׁפַךְ חֲמַתְךָ אֶל־הַגּוֹיִם	6	4	4	4	
	אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּךָ		3	3	3	
	וְעַל מִמְלְכוֹתָ	7	2	2	2	
	אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁמְךָ לֹא קָרְאוּ:		4	4	4	
	Total, v. 6	13	= 9	+ 4	= 13	+ 0
	Total, v. 4-6	28	= 17	+ 11	= 22 + 6	
7	Two middle cola	8	4	4	4	
	כִּי אָכַל אֶת־יַעֲקֹב		3	3	3	
	(Van der Lugt: 17 + 2 + 17)					
	וְאֶת־גִּיהוֹן הַשָּׁמוּ:					
	Designed meaningful centre?		7	= 4	+ 3	= 7 + 0
	Total, v. 7					
	<b>Strophe 3 Total, v. 6-7</b>	20	= 13	+ 7	= 29 + 0	
	<b>Canticle I.2 Total, v. 4-7</b>	<b>35</b>	= 21	+ 14	= 29 + 6	
	<b>Canto I Total, v. 1-7</b>	<b>65</b>	= 43	+ 22	= 59 + 6	

Arithmetic middle: 65 + 65 words and 8 + 8 verselines



\* The positioning of the *atnach* - within a colon - in vs. 11 and 13 is, to say the least, remarkable, but it can easily be explained. See below Observation 1. The colometric division of v. 13, however, remains uncertain. Van de Lugt divides the 11 words into 4 + 7, finding a bicolon; I divide the 11 words into 4 + 3 + 4, finding a tricolon, while Fokkelman finds two bicolic verselines, dividing them into 2+2 + 3+4. An objection against Van der Lugt's division is the extreme length of his second colon in 13b (7 words), and the fact that he ignores the beautiful chiasmic pattern of these 7 words. Fokkelman's division, as well as my own, do justice to the chiasmic pattern.

## Observations

1. On the level of words, the poem divides into two precisely equal halves of 8 verselines and 65 words each, vs. 1-7, Canto I, and vs. 8-13, Canto II:

vs. 1-7 **lament** over the ruined city

vs. 8-13 **prayer for forgiveness** of Israel's sins and **repayment for their enemies**.

Psalm 79 shares its bipartite structure with Psalms 6, 12, 20, 25, 40, and 121, amongst others. The close connection between the two parts of the text is strongly emphasized by the fact that the primary compositional formulae of both halves - in terms of the *atnach* - are strikingly identical: **65 = 43a + 22b**.

The author achieved this by omitting the *atnach* in v. 3, and by the unusual placement of the *atnach* in two verses of Canto II. In v. 11, we would expect the *atnach* after v. 11a (where we find an *`ole weyored*), and in v. 13, after 13b (where there is once again an *`ole weyored*). In my judgement the unusual placement of the *atnach* has to do with the author's wish to achieve identical compositional formulae in the two halves. Compare [Psalms 6](#) and [20](#), where we find the same phenomenon. [Psalm 121](#), the fourth psalm with two identical formulae, is an exception, given the normal placement of *atnach* in the text.

2. It appears to be rather difficult to find a meaningful centre, which must be situated astride the arithmetic centre. In terms of words, there is no suitable candidate. However, in Van der Lugt's view, who finds 36 cola (private communication), the two middle cola of v. 7 are a very plausible candidate ( $36 = 17 + 2 + 17$ ):

כִּי אָכַל אֶת־עַקְבֹּב ^ וְאֶת־נְהוּ הַשְּׂמוּ:

For they have devoured Jacob // and laid waste his homeland.

This is all the more persuasive, since the centre is flanked by 17 cola on either side and comprises 7 words, with the name **Jacob** significantly in the middle (3 + 1 + 3).<sup>1</sup>

Fokkelman, on the other hand, finds 17 verselines, with v. 8 in the middle (17 = 8 + 1 + 8), which is indeed an attractive alternative, because it is part of the passionate plea for forgiveness (vs. 8-9, the pivot of the 7 strophes):

אַל־תִּזְכֹּר־לָנוּ עֲוֹנוֹת רִאשֵׁינֵינוּ מִהֵרָ יִקְדָּמוּנֵנוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ ^ כִּי דָלוּנוּ מְאֹד:

Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers;

Let your compassion come swiftly to meet us,

For we have been brought so low.

Perhaps it is not a matter of either/or, which means that both verselines astride the arithmetic centre are meaningful in their own right. In any case, on strophic level, the middle strophe (vs. 8-9) represents the quintessential idea of the psalm: the passionate plea addressed to God by the humiliated people to meet them with compassion and forgive them their sins.

<sup>1</sup> The name **Jacob** is an important key-name in the Asaphite Psalms, since it occurs no less than **12x** (75:10; 76:7; 77:16; 78:5; 78:21; 78:71; 79:7; 81:2; 81:5; 84:9; 85:2, and 87:2), against **22x** in the rest of the Psalter. Significantly, this gives a total of **34** (2 x 17) occurrences in the Book of Psalms.

3. From a theological point of view, it is important to note that this meaningful centre is not to be found in the *lament*, but in the *prayer for forgiveness and retribution*. This means that the restoration of the disturbed relation between YHWH and his people, as well as the reparation of the unbalanced relations between Israel and the nations, should be a far greater concern than the mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem. This may turn the scales in favour of the latter option.
4. The question arises whether each of the two sections may perhaps have its own distinct meaningful centre (as in Psalms 73, 74, and in several others).

In **Canto I**, vs. 1-7, the middle word, לְשִׁכְנֵינוּ, 'to our neighbours', is situated precisely in the middle colon: v. 4a (19 cola = 9 + 1 + 9):

לְשִׁכְנֵינוּ הָיִינוּ תְרָפָה We have become a taunt to our neighbours.

This statement - highlighted by the middle word - has obviously been intended to be the meaningful centre of the lament. It draws attention to the embarrassing state of the humiliated people, particularly in the sight of the *neighbouring nations*. It is additionally highlighted by the fact that v. 4 is phrased in 'we'-form.

In **Canto II**, the 7 words of v. 10c-d constitute its arithmetic centre (65 = 29 + 7 + 29):

יָדַע בְּגוֹיִם לְעֵינֵינוּ נִקְמַת דָּם-עֲבָדֶיךָ תִּשְׁפּוּד׃

Let be known among the nations, before our very eyes,  
your vengeance for the slaughter of your servants.

I have no doubt that these words were consciously devised as the meaningful centre of Canto II, since they contain the gist of the prayer for YHWH's repayment of the gloating *foreign nations*. Note that the meaningful centres of the two cantos are closely linked by the common theme of the *foreign nations*.<sup>2</sup> Compare in Canto I, on the one hand, the words 'the heathen' (v. 1), 'our neighbours' and 'those around us' (vs. 4) and 'the nations' and 'the kingdoms' (v. 6) with, on the other hand, 'the nations' (2x in v. 10) and 'our neighbours' (v. 12) in Canto II.

5. The structural unity of the bipartite poem is effectively demonstrated by the divine name numbers, woven throughout the psalm into the fabric of the text:

vs. 2-4	<b>17</b> words before atnach
vs. 4-6	<b>17</b> words before atnach
vs. 5-8	<b>26</b> words before atnach
vs. 4-8	<b>17</b> words after atnach
vs. 3-10	<b>78</b> (3 x <b>26</b> ) words in total, with <b>51</b> (3 x <b>17</b> ) before atnach
vs. 9-11	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
vs. 7-11	<b>52</b> (2 x <b>26</b> ) words in total
vs. 9-12	<b>26</b> words before, <b>17</b> after atnach, with <b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) in Column <b>d</b>
vs. 8-12	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words before atnach
vs. 5-12	<b>52</b> (2 x <b>26</b> ) words before atnach
vs. 4-12	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words after atnach
vs. 1-12	<b>119</b> (7x17) words, <b>68</b> (4x17) in Col. c and <b>51</b> (3x17) in Col. <b>d</b>
vs. 6-13	<b>85</b> (5 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
vs. 1-13	<b>130</b> (5 x <b>26</b> ) words in total, as in Psalm 80.

6. The word-count of the 'we'-sections (vs. 4, 8-10, and 12-13) reveals 62 words in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person sections (Column c), and **68** (4 x **17**) in the 'we'-sections (Column **d**).

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<sup>2</sup> This reminds us of a similar device in Psalm 74 – see there the end of Observation 2.

7. The number **7** features not only in the **7** strophes, and the **7** words of the meaningful centre (v. 7) on verseline level (Van der Lugt), as well as the 7 words of the meaningful centre of Canto II (v. 10b-c), but also in the striking compositional formula of vs. 1-12, where we find **119** (**7 x 17**) words, with **77** (**11 x 7**) before and **42** (**6 x 7**) after *atnach*. The use of the number of fullness is certainly not a matter of chance, particularly in light of the *sevenfold* retribution explicitly referred to in v. 12a.
8. The name יהוה occurs only once (v. 5a) – as in Psalms 73-77; the word אֱלֹהִים features 3 times (vs. 1, 9, and 10); the designation אֲדֹנָי occurs only in v. 12.

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