

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 8 verselines, with **56** (8 x 7) words
 vs. 9-16 8 verselines, with **56** (8 x 7) words.
- 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.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

			Total		a		b		c		d
1		יֵשֶׁב בְּסֶתֶר עֲלִיוֹן ¹	1		3		3		3		
		בְּצֵל שָׁדַי וְתַלְוִן:			3		3		3		
		Total, v. 1			6	= 3 +	3	= 6 +		0	
2		אָמַר לַיהוָה מַחְסֵי וּמְצוּדָתַי ²	2		4		4		2		2
		אֱלֹהֵי 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 יִצְיִלְךָ מִיַּד יְקוּשׁ ³	3		5		5		5		
		מִדְבַר תְּוֹת:			2		2		2		
		Total, v. 3			7	= 7 +	0	= 7 +	0		
4		בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסֵּךְ לְךָ ⁴	4		3		3		3		
		וְתַחַת־כַּנְפָּיו תִּחְסֶה ⁴			3		3		3		
		צָנָה וְסִחְרָה אֲמַתּוֹ:			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 מִפְּחַד לְיָלֶהָ מִחֵץ יַעֲוֶף יוֹמָם: Total, v. 5	5	4	4	4	
			3		3	3
			<hr/>			
			7	= 4 +	3 = 7 +	0
6	מִדְּבַר בְּאִפְלֵ יִהְלֶדָּה מִקָּטָב יִשׁוּד צְהָרִים: Total, v. 6	6	3	3	3	
			3		3	3
			<hr/>			
			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
			<hr/>			
			8	= 5 +	3 = 8 +	0
8	רק בעיניך תביט וְשָׁלַמְתָּ רַשְׁעִים 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
			<hr/>			
			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 עֲלִיּוֹן שְׁמֹתָ מְעֻנָּה: Total, v. 9	9	4	4	4	
			3		3	3
			<hr/>			
			7	= 4 +	3 = 3 +	4
10	Verses 7-10: nine middle cola: 35 = 13 + 9 + 13 The central core, the larger meaningful centre	10	4	4	4	
			4		4	4
			<hr/>			
			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 מִלְּאֲכִיו יִצְוֶה־לָּהּ לְשִׁמְרָהּ בְּכָל־דְּרָכֶיהָ: Total, v. 11 Total, v. 1-11	11	4	4	4	
			3		3	3
			<hr/>			
			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
			<hr/>			
			7	= 3 +	4 = 7 +	0
			85	= 50 +	35 = 76 +	9
13	עַל־שַׁחַל נִפְתָּן תִּדְרֹדָּה תִּרְמַס כְּפִיר וְתַגִּין: Total, v. 13 Strophe 6 Total, v. 11-13 Total, v. 9-13	13	4	4	4	
			3		3	3
			<hr/>			
			7	= 4 +	3 = 7 +	0
			21	= 11 +	10 = 21 +	0
			36	= 19 +	17 = 32 +	4

14	Vs. 14-16 Oracle	1	כִּי בִי חֶשֶׁק וְאַפְלִטָהוּ	14	4	4	4	0
		2	אֲשַׁנְבְּהוּ כִּי־יָרַע שְׁמוֹ:		4	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	2	0
			Total, v. 15		7	= 5 + 2	= 7 + 0	
			Total, v. 9-15		51	= 28 + 23	= 47 + 4	
16		6	אֲרַךְ יָמִים אֲשִׁבִיעֵהוּ	16	3	3	3	0
		7	וְאֲרָאֵהוּ בִישׁוּעָתִי:		2	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 (Canto I and II, having 56 words and 8 verselines each), Psalm 91 lacks a meaningful centre on word level. Instead, there is one on colon level, **vs. 8b** ($35 = 17 + \boxed{1} + 17$):

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 מִצְדָּדָה אֱלֹהִים וּרְבִבָה מִיְמִינָהּ אֱלֹהִים לֹא יִגַּשׁ:

⁸ רַק בְּעֵינֶיךָ תִּבְיֹט אֱלֹהִים וְשָׁלַמְתָּ רְשָׁעִים תְּרָאָה:

⁹ כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה מְחַסֵּי אֱלֹהִים עָלְיוֹן שְׁמֹתָ מְעוֹנָה:

¹⁰ לֹא־תֵאָנֶה אֱלֹהִים רָעָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא־יִקְרַב בְּאַהֲלָהּ:

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**, the first-person speaker introduces himself as one who is 'dwelling in the shelter of the Most High...' (vs. 1). He expresses his trust in God in the form of 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. It is against the backdrop of his personal trust in God that 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) יֵאמֵר, '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. Compare what is said in the following Observation! I am indebted to Pieter van der Lugt, who restrained me from 'smoothing' the text in vs. 9a by reading (Van der Ploeg and Booi) קָרָאתָ, 'you call', instead of אָתָּה, 'you'.
4. **Canto II** 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.
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 of this important designation in the series of 7 (87:5, 89:28, 91:1, 91:9, 92:2, 97:9 and 107:11) after the preceding series of 7 (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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