

# Psalm 115— 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 115

- In Codex L and many Hebrew manuscripts, as well as in LXX, Theodotion, Syriac Version and Vulgate, Psalm 115 is combined with Psalm 114 to form a single psalm. However, in other editions of the text, e.g. Letteris and Ginsburg, they are regarded as separate poems. In fact, they are distinct, not only in terms of form but also of content. If there is a connection with a preceding psalm, then it is not with Psalm 114, but with Psalm 113, of which the leading theme, YHWH's incomparability, is here elaborated on. The author contrasts the futility of the *earthly* idols with the unrivalled *heavenly* highness of YHWH, in order to proclaim him as the only God and to encourage Israel to put their trust in him. It is no wonder that the call on Israel to trust in YHWH is positioned precisely in the meaningful centre in the middle of the menorah (vs. 9-11).
- The framework of the psalm is fundamentally determined by the direction of address, a feature this psalm shares with Psalms 108 and 109 and many other psalms. In addition, the number of fullness, **7**, has an unmistakable regulating function: primarily through the **7** strophes structured in a menorah pattern, but also in the number of words in the three cantos. Note also the **7** characteristics of the idols. The theme 'idols' reverberates in [Psalm 135](#), with which it shares significant features. For features shared with Psalm 118, see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 118](#).
- In Codex L, Psalm 115 is the first of three psalms (115-117) marked by *hallelu-yah* at the bottom of the text, which is used as a device to conclude the First Eleven Psalms in Book V (107-117). Please consult the Introduction to [Book V](#).

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

- Van der Lugt: 1-3 | 4-6, 7-8 || 9-11 | 12-14, 15-16 || 17-18 (3 cantos, 7 strophes, 18 verselines and 39 cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-3, 4+8, 5-7 || 9-11, 12-13 || 14-16, 17-18 (3 stanzas, 7 strophes, 18 verselines and 39 cola).
- Labuschagne: 1-2 | 3-4, 5-8 || **9-11**, 12-13, 14-15 || 16-18 (3 cantos with **7** strophes in a menorah pattern, 18 verselines and 39 cola).

## Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words specifically addressed to YHWH and to Israel.
- Column **d**: words spoken about YHWH in comparison with the idols.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

			Total	a	b	c	d
1	לא לָנוּ יְהוָה	לא לָנוּ	1 5	5		5	
	כִּי־לְשֹׁמֵד תֵּן כְּבוֹדֶ֑ךָ		4	4		4	
	עַל־חַסְדֶּיךָ עַל־אַמְתָּךְ:		4		4	4	
	Total, v. 1		13	= 9	+ 4	= 13	+ 0
2	לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ חַגְוִים־		2 3	3		3	
	אֵי־הֵנָּה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם:		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 2		6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	<b>Canticle I.1 Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2</b>		<b>19</b>	= 12	+ 7	= 19	+ 0

3	ואלהינו בשמים <sup>^</sup>	3	2	2		2
	כל אשר-הפץ עשה:		4		4	4
4	עצביהם כסף וזהב	4	3	3		3
	מעשה ידי אדם:		3		3	3
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3-4		12	= 5 + 7	= 0 + 12	
5	1 פה-להם ולא ידברוי <sup>^</sup>	5	4	4		4
	2 עינים להם ולא יראו:		4		4	4
	Total, v. 2-5		26	= 12 + 14	= 6 + 20	
6	3 אזנים להם ולא ישמעו	6	4	4		4
	4 אף להם ולא יריחון:		4		4	4
	Total, v. 2-6		34	= 16 + 18	= 6 + 28	
7	5 ידיהם ולא ימישו	7	3	3		3
	6 רגליהם ולא יהלכו		3	3		3
	7 לא יתקו בגרונם		3		3	3
	Total, v. 6-7		17	= 10 + 7	= 0 + 17	
	Total, v. 4-7		31	= 17 + 14	= 0 + 31	
8	כמוהם יהיו עשיהם <sup>^</sup>	8	3	3		3
	כל אשר-בטח בהם:		4		4	4
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-8		32	= 17 + 15	= 0 + 32	
	Canticle I.2 Total, v. 3-8		44	= 22 + 22	= 0 + 44	
	Canto I Total, v. 1-8		63	= 34 + 29	= 19 + 44	
9	ישראל בטח <sup>^</sup> ביתנה <sup>1</sup>	9	3	3		3
	עזרם ומגנם הוא:		3		3	3
	Middle word: 133=66+1+66		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0	
	Middle colon: 19 + 1 + 19		Total, v. 9			
10	בית אהרן בטחו <sup>^</sup> ביתנה <sup>2</sup>	10	4	4		4
	עזרם ומגנם הוא:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 10		7	= 4 + 3	= 7 + 0	
	Total, v. 6-10		37	= 20 + 17	= 13 + 24	
11	יראי <sup>^</sup> תנה <sup>3</sup> בטחו <sup>^</sup> ביתנה <sup>4</sup>	11	4	4		4
	עזרם ומגנם הוא:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 11		7	= 4 + 3	= 7 + 0	
	Middle strophe: Strophe 4 Total, v. 9-11		20	= 11 + 9	= 20 + 0	
	Meaningful centre Total, v. 5-11		52	= 28 + 24	= 20 + 32	
12	ינה <sup>^</sup> זכרנו יברך	12	3	3		3
	יברך את-בית ישראל		4	4		4
	יברך את-בית אהרן:		4		4	4
	Total, v. 12		11	= 7 + 4	= 11 + 0	
	Total, v. 8-12		38	= 21 + 17	= 31 + 7	
13	יברך יראי <sup>^</sup> ינה <sup>6</sup>	13	3	3		3
	תקטנים עם-הגדלים:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 13		6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0	
	Strophe 5 Total, v. 12-13		17	= 10 + 7	= 17 + 0	

14	יִסַּף <sup>7</sup> לִיתְנָה עֲלֵיכֶם עֲלֵיכֶם וְעַל־בְּנֵיכֶם: Total, v. 14 Total, v. 12-14 Total, v. 9-14	14	3	3	3	3
			3	3	3	3
			6 = 3	+ 3 = 6	+ 0	
			23 = 13	+ 10 = 23	+ 0	
			43 = 24	+ 19 = 43	+ 0	
15	בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם <sup>8</sup> לִיתְנָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: Total, v. 15 Strophe 6 Total, v. 14-15 Canto II Total, v. 9-15	15	3	3	3	3
			3	3	3	3
			6 = 3	+ 3 = 6	+ 0	
			12 = 6	+ 6 = 12	+ 0	
			49 = 27	+ 22 = 49	+ 0	
16*	הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִ הַשָּׁמַיִם <sup>?</sup> לִיתְנָה וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי־אָדָם: Total, v. 16 Total, v. 12-16	16	3/4	3/4	3	3
			4	4	4	4
			7/8 = 3/4	+ 4 = 0	+ 7	
			36/37 = 19/20	+ 17 = 29	+ 7/8	
17 Vs. 17-18 Coda	לֹא הַמַּתִּים יִתְלַו־יָהּ וְלֹא כָל־יִרְדֵי דוּמָה: Total, v. 17 Total, v. 13-17	17	4	4	4	4
			4	4	4	4
			8 = 4	+ 4 = 0	+ 8	
			33/34 = 16/17	+ 17 = 18	+ 15/16	
18	וְאַנְחֵנוּ נִבְרַךְ יָהּ מִעֲתָה וְעַד־עוֹלָם הַתְּלֻו־יָהּ: Total, v. 18 Coda Total, v. 17-18 Canto III Strophe 7 Total, v. 16-18 Total, v. 1-18 Including הַתְּלֻו־יָהּ: total, v. 1-18	18	3	3	3	3
			3	3	3	3
			6 = 6	+ 0 = 0	+ 6	
			14 = 10	+ 4 = 0	+ 14	
			21/22 = 13/14	+ 8 = 0	+ 21/22	
			133/134 = 74/75	+ 59 = 68	+ 65/66	
			135/136 = 76/77	+ 59 = 68	+ 67/68	

\* The LXX reads v. 16a as though the Hebrew text had שָׁמַיִ הַשָּׁמַיִם instead of הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם of MT. The MT reading is not incomprehensible, but rather odd, to put it frankly: “the heavens are the heavens of YHWH”. Therefore, the question arises whether both phrases are perhaps to be considered misreadings of the original text, which was obviously based on Deut. 10:14, which reads:

הֲנֵן לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִ הַשָּׁמַיִם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ:

To YHWH your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.

Presuming that the ‘original’ reading of v. 16a had been הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִ הַשָּׁמַיִם, this would not only make excellent sense, but would also have a significant influence on the numerical structure of the text. The extra word would change the compositional formula of vs. 13-17 to  $34 = 17a + 17b$ . It would also bring the total number of words in the text including *hallelu-yah* to **136** ( $8 \times 17$ ) and the total number of words in Column **d** to **68** ( $4 \times 17$ ), exactly as in Column **c**. However, although the numerical evidence may suggest an emendation, there is no cogent reason to doubt the present MT reading as the final form of the text. My analysis is therefore based on MT.

## Observations

1. The middle word in v. 9b is עֲזָרָם, ‘their help’ ( $133 = 66 + 1 + 66$ ) and seeing that the purpose of the psalm is to instill confidence in YHWH into the people of Israel, this is a most appropriate meaningful centre. It is the first word of the middle colon (v. 9b), which may be regarded as a meaningful centre on colon level:

עֲזָרָם וּמִגְדָּלֵם הוּא

Their help and their shield is he.

In its turn, this refrain phrase is part of the threefold appeal to Israel to trust in YHWH, vs. 9-11, the middle strophe ( $7 = 3 + 1 + 3$ ) at the centre of the menorah. Compare the rather similar threefold call to praise YHWH in [Psalm 118](#) (vs. 2-4)!

There is no doubt that the middle strophe, vs. 9-11, is the consciously designed meaningful centre of the psalm, precluding all endeavours to seek other meaningful centres on word level.

יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטַח בִּיהוָה ^ עֲזָרָם וּמִגְּנָם הוּא:  
 בֵּית אַהֲרֹן בְּטַחוּ בִיהוָה ^ עֲזָרָם וּמִגְּנָם הוּא:  
 יְרֵאֵי יְהוָה בְּטַחוּ בִיהוָה ^ עֲזָרָם וּמִגְּנָם הוּא:

- Israel, trust in **YHWH!** // Their help and their shield is he!
- House of Aaron, trust in **YHWH!** // Their help and their shield is he!
- You who fear **YHWH**, trust in **YHWH!** // Their help and their shield is he!

It is important to note that the passionate call to trust in YHWH contains the gist of the psalm. The call to trust in YHWH and no other god is strongly reinforced by the cluster of 4 occurrences of the divine name. In fact, the purpose of the psalm is to contrast the untrustworthy *earthly* idols with the trustworthy *heavenly* High God, YHWH, and to urge Israel to trust only in him. Elaborating on the theme of Psalm 113, which deals with the incomparability of YHWH, the author emphasizes that, in comparison with YHWH, the idols are absolutely futile, being nothing but earthly concoctions of silver and gold fabricated by humans.\*

2. The structure of Psalm 115 is fundamentally determined by the change in the direction of address, which causes the following hard caesurae: vs. 2||3, vs. 8||9 and vs. 15||16.

The basic framework of the psalm can be outlined in the following canto structure:

- vs. 1-2 Canto I.1 God is urged to display the glory of his name before the nations
- vs. 3-8 Canto I.2 Discourse on the futility of the idols
- vs. 9-15 Canto II Appeal to Israel to trust in YHWH, their trustworthy help and shield
- vs. 16-18 Canto III Concluding statement: resolution to praise YHWH for ever.

The menorah pattern on strophic level overlies this basic framework in such a way that the underlying larger segments of the text are carefully taken into account:

- vs. 1-2 Strophe 1 God, display the glory of your name before the nations
- vs. 3-4 Strophe 2 Our God is in heaven; the idols are man-made fabrications
- vs. 5-8 Strophe 3 Description of the futile idols and the warning not to trust them
- vs. 9-11 **Strophe 4 The urgent appeal to the Israelites to trust only in YHWH**
- vs. 12-13 Strophe 5 The first motivation: YHWH is mindful of us and will bless us
- vs. 14-15 Strophe 6 The second motivation: YHWH will give you increase
- vs. 16-18 Strophe 7 Concluding statement: resolution to praise YHWH for ever.

The concluding statement is in two parts. The first part refers back to v. 3 dealing with YHWH's heavenly abode in order to clarify the bipartite division of the cosmos: God is in heaven where he does whatever he wills; humankind is on earth where they have to take their responsibilities.

The second part, vs. 17-18, is clearly a coda, because it introduces a new aspect: the idea that not the dead but the living should praise YHWH for ever. The coda is strikingly emphasized by the sudden use of the divine name יהוה, YH. For the coda, see the [General Introduction](#), "The use of a coda as a device for conclusion."

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\* For more information about the notion of YHWH's incomparability, I may refer the reader to my dissertation, *The Incomparability of YHWH in the Old Testament* (Pretoria Oriental Series 5), E.J. Brill, Leiden 1966.

3. The number of fullness, **7**, determines not only the strophic structure of the poem, which can be outlined in a menorah pattern, but also its canto structure: Canto I has **63** (9 x 7) words, Canto II **49** (7 x 7), and Canto III **21** (3 x 7) words. Moreover, the psalm is made up of **133** words, which is a multiple of **7** (19 x 7).

In addition, **7** serves to enumerate all the futilities displayed by the idols (vs. 5-7):

- a) they have a mouth, but do not speak
- b) they have eyes, but do not see
- c) they have ears, but do not hear
- d) they have a nose, but do not smell
- e) they have hands, but do not feel
- f) they have feet, but do not walk
- g) they do not make a sound in their throat.

For similar series of seven, see the [General Introduction](#), p. 7, “The menorah pattern.”

4. The divine name numbers feature in the following way in the psalm:

vs. 2-5	<b>26</b> words in total
vs. 2-6	<b>34</b> (2 x <b>17</b> ) words in total
vs. 6-7	<b>17</b> words in total
vs. 4-7	<b>17</b> words before atnach
vs. 5-8	<b>17</b> words before atnach
vs. 6-10	<b>17</b> words after atnach
vs. 5-11	<b>52</b> (2 x <b>26</b> ) words in total
vs. 8-12	<b>17</b> words after atnach
vs. 12-13	<b>17</b> words in total
vs. 12-16	<b>17</b> words after atnach
vs. 13-17	<b>17</b> words after atnach
vs. 1-18	<b>68</b> (4 x <b>17</b> ) words in Column c.

5. The divine name appears altogether **13** times in the psalm (10x יהוה and 3x יה). The full name יהוה is to be found **1x** in v. 1, then **8x** in a cluster in Canto II, with no less than **4** instances in the meaningful centre in vs. 9-11 (numbered in vs. 9 a, 10a, 11a (2x), 12a, 13a, 14a, 15a), and **1x** in Canto III (16a). The form יה occurs **2x** in the coda (17a and 18a) and **1x** in the *hallelu-yah* (18b). The word אֱלֹהִים, ‘God’, occurs only in 2b and 3a.

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