

Psalm 124— 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 feature of Psalm 124

- Psalm 124 is clearly a follow-up to Psalm 121. Note also the use of the statement from Ps. 121:2 in the coda of Psalm 124 (v.8). Its structure is rather similar to that of Psalm 121: both have **54** words, divided on word level into two equal parts. The reason behind the use of exactly **54** words is that they have a common theme: YHWH's guardianship. **54** represents the numerical value of the keyword in Psalm 121, שָׁמַר, 'keep, guard'.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt: 1-3, 4-6, 7-8 (3 strophes, 9 verselines and 18 cola).
- Fokkelman: he finds 2 stanzas: 1-2, 3-5 || 6-7, 8.
- Labuschagne: as Van der Lugt, except that I discern 3 cantos with 6 strophes: 1-2, 3 || 4-5, 6 || 7, 8.

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words in the main body; **d**: words in the 'framework'.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד	3 = 3 + 0				
	לוֹלֵי יְהוָה שְׁהִיָּה לְנוֹי	4	4			4
	יֹאמַר־נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 1	7 = 4 + 3			0	7
2	לוֹלֵי יְהוָה שְׁהִיָּה לְנוֹי	4	4			4
	בְּקוֹם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 2	7 = 4 + 3			0	7
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-2	14 = 8 + 6			0	14
3	אָזִי חַיִּים בְּלַעֲוֹנֹי	3	3			3
	בְּחַרֹּת אַפָּם בָּנוּ:	3		3		3
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 3	6 = 3 + 3			6	0
	Canto I Total, v. 1-3	20 = 11 + 9			6	14
4	אָזִי חַיִּים שְׁטַפּוֹנֹי	3	3			3
	נִחַלָּה עִבֵּר עַל־נַפְשֵׁנוּ:	4		4		4
	Total, v. 4	7 = 3 + 4			7	0
	Total, v. 1-4	27 = 14 + 13			13	14
5	אָזִי עִבֵּר עַל־נַפְשֵׁנוּ	4	4			4
	חַמְּסֵי הַיַּדְוָנִים:	2		2		2
	Total, v. 5	6 = 4 + 2			6	0
	Strophe 3 Total, v. 4-5	13 = 7 + 6			13	0
	Total, v. 2-5	26 = 14 + 12			19	7
6*	חַמְּסֵי הַיַּדְוָנִים	4	4			4
	טָרַף לְשֹׁנֵיהֶם:	2		2		2
	Strophe 4 Total, v. 6	6 = 4 + 2			6	0
	Canto II Total, v. 4-6	19 = 9 + 10			19	0

7		נִפְשָׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר גְּמֻלָּה	7	3	3	3
		מִפַּח יוֹקָשִׁים		2	2	2
		הַפַּח נִשְׁפָּר	8	2	2	2
		וַאֲנַחְנוּ גְּמֻלָּתָנוּ:		2	2	2
		Strophe 5	Total, v. 7	<u>9 = 9 + 0 = 9 + 0</u>		
			Total, v. 3-7	34 = 23 + 11 = 34 + 0		
8	Coda	עֲזָרְנוּ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה	9	3	3	3
		עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:		3	3	3
		Strophe 6	Total, v. 8	<u>6 = 3 + 3 = 0 + 6</u>		
		Canto III	Total, v. 7-8	15 = 12 + 3 = 9 + 6		
			Total, v. 5-8	27 = 20 + 7 = 21 + 6		
		שמר = 54	Total, v. 1-8	54 = 34 + 20 = 34 + 20		
			With the heading, v. 1-8	57 = 37 + 20		

* I concur with Van der Lugt and Fokkelman who relocate the *atnach* after the 4th word in verse 6a. This means that the compositional formula now becomes 54 = 34a + 20b, rendering it similar to the formula 54 = 34c + 20d – compare [Psalm 122](#)! It is not clear why the Masoretes positioned the *atnach* after YHWH in v. 6a.

Observations

- The meaningful centre of the psalm is constituted by the middle verseline (9 = 4 + 1 + 4), v. 5, which coincides with the 2 middle cola (18 = 8 + 2 + 8):

אֲזַי עָבַר עַל־נַפְשָׁנוּ ^ הַמַּיִם הַזֹּרְחִים:

Then over us would have swept // the raging waters.

Being the apogee of the three images of impending destruction introduced by the conjunction אֲזַי, ‘then’ (vs. 3a, 4a and 5a), this statement is a most appropriate meaningful centre.

- My canto division is based on the rhetorical analysis by Pieter van der Lugt in the third volume of his *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, which is underscored by the material content:

Canto I vs. 1-3 Had it not been for YHWH, we would have perished!

Canto II vs. 4-6 Blessed is YHWH for having rescued us!

Canto III vs. 7-8 We have escaped and our help is in YHWH’s name!

Canto I is characterized by the repetition of the initial words of Strophe 1 (vs. 1-2): לִי־לִי, לִי־לִי, followed by 6 words in Strophe 2 (v. 3), of which the initial word אֲזַי preludes on Canto II. Strophe 1 is very reminiscent of the beginning of Psalms 118 and 129. It is also worth noting that the words Israel is invited to speak, amount to exactly 26 (vs. 2-5).

Canto II is a self-contained unit characterized by the initial words אֲזַי, אֲזַי in Strophe 3, followed by 6 words in Strophe 4 (v.6).

Canto III contains the praise to YHWH, who rescued Israel (the 2 verselines of v. 7), followed by the 6-word concluding statement, the coda (v. 8). For the coda, see the [General Introduction](#), “The use of a coda as a device for conclusion”.

- In terms of content Psalm 124 is clearly a follow-up to Psalm 121, of which the leading theme, YHWH’s guardianship, is elaborated here. The two psalms are similar in form, made up of 54 words divided into two equal parts of 27 words. My suggestion in the Analysis of [Psalm 121](#), that the numerical value of the keyword שָׁמַר, ‘keep, guard’ (54) determines the number of words, applies also here.

4. In Psalm 124 the author has intentionally woven as many as possible divine name numbers into the fabric of the text:

vs. 2-5 **26** words in total

vs. 3-7 **34** (2 x **17**) words in total

vs. 1-8 **34a** + 20b = **34c** + **20d** (excluding the heading).

Given the numerical structure of the poetical body of the psalm as it stands, the inclusion of the 3-word heading in the word-count gives the following picture:

vs. 1-2 14 words in total: + 3 in the heading = **17** words

vs. 1-4 14 words before atnach: + 3 in the heading = **17** words

vs. 6-8 14 words before atnach: + 3 in the heading = **17** words

vs. 1-7 48 words in total: + 3 in the heading = **51** (3 x **17**) words.

I think it likely that the editors of the Psalter consciously contrived a 3-word heading – by adding לְדָוִד, ‘for David’, to the standard 2-word heading – in order to achieve these extra divine name numbers. It was at the editorial stage of the formation of the Psalter that the editors composed - or rewrote the headings if they were already present - and incorporated them into the individual poems. There is ample evidence showing that the number of words in the headings was carefully contrived to generate extra divine name numbers. For my view of the relation between the headings and the poetical bodies of the psalms, please consult Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 3](#).

In light of the great similarity between Psalm 121 and 124, it is indeed strange to find that *only* Psalm 124 was attributed to David. Both psalms stem evidently from the same hand, which of course holds true for all Psalms of Ascents. However, the reason given above for the anomaly explains the addition of לְדָוִד.

5. As in many psalms, a **framework** (word-count in Column **d**) surrounding a central section (Column **c**) has been used to weave an extra divine name number into the fabric of the text: 54 = **14** + **34** + **6** (**34** = 2 x **17**).
6. The word בְּרִיךְ, ‘blessed’, which occurs here for the first time in the Songs of Ascents (in v. 6a), introduces the series of **10** occurrences of בָּרַךְ, ‘to bless’, which culminate in Psalm 134 at the end of the corpus: 124:6, 128:4,5, 129:8 (2x), 132:15 (2x), 134:1, 2, 3. See the Introduction to Book V, p. 4 and Observation 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 134](#).
7. The name יְהוָה occurs 4 times (vs. 1a, 2a, 6a and 8a). There are altogether **51** (3 x **17**) occurrences of the divine name in the Songs of Ascents. Their distribution is most significant and therefore clearly deliberately designed:
- 16** occurrences in 120-124 (5 psalms)
 - 17** occurrences in 125-129 (5 psalms)
 - 18** occurrences in 130-134 (5 psalms).

This underscores the division of this corpus into three sub-groups, e.g. by Zenger and Van der Lugt (private communication). For particulars, see the Introduction to [Book V](#).

© 2012
 Dr. C.J. Labuschagne Senior Lecturer in Semitic Languages (retired),
 Brinkhorst 44 University of Pretoria, South Africa
 9751 AT Haren (Gron) and
 The Netherlands Professor of Old Testament (retired),
labuschagne.cj@gmail.com University of Groningen, The Netherlands