

Psalm 131— 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 131

- Psalm 131 is clearly the follow-up of Psalm 130 since it reiterates the central theme of that psalm: waiting for YHWH in hope. As in Psalm 130, the canto structure is defined by the direction of address: words addressed to YHWH (vs. 1-2) and to Israel (v. 3).
- As with most psalms in the Songs of Ascents, the total number of words here, **30**, is determined by a keyword in the text: **יְחַל**, 'hope' (10 + 8 + 12 = 30).

Strophic structure - Canto boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt and Fokkelman 1, 2, 3 (3 strophes with 5 bicolic verselines and 10 cola).
- Labuschagne: 1, 2 || 3 (similarly, but I find 2 cantos defined by the direction of address).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: words addressed to God; **d**: words spoken about God, addressed to Israel.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד Heading	3	= 3	+ 0		
	1 יְהִיָּה לֹא־נֹבֵה לְבִי	4	4		4	
	וְלֹא־רָמוּ עֵינָי	3	3		3	
	2 וְלֹא־הִלַּכְתִּי בְגִדְלוֹת	3		3	3	
	וּבְגָפְלֹת מִמְּנִי:	2		2	2	
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1	12	= 7	+ 5	= 12	+ 0
2	Middle verseline: 5 = 2 + 1 + 2 אִם־לֹא שְׁוִיָּתִי	3	3		3	
	Middle 2 cola: 10 = 4 + 2 + 4 וְדוֹמְמֹתַי נִפְשִׁי	2	2		2	
	Meaningful centre כְּנֹמֶל עָלַי אֲמוּנָה	4	3		3	
	כְּנֹמֶל עָלַי נִפְשִׁי:	3		3	3	
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 2	11	= 8	+ 3	= 11	+ 0
	Canto I Total, v. 1-2	23	= 15	+ 8	= 23	+ 0
3	יְחַל = 30 (10 + 8 + 12 = 30)					
	5 יְחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה	4	4		4	
	מַעֲתָה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:	3		3	3	
	Canto II Strophe 3 Total, v. 3	7	= 4	+ 3	= 0	+ 7
	Total, v. 1-3	30	= 19	+ 11	= 23	+ 7
	With the heading, v. 1-3	33	= 21	+ 11		

Observations

1. The arithmetic centre falls between the 3rd and 4th word in v. 2a-b, dividing the text into 5+5 cola and 15+15 words. In Codex L there is a *paseq* (|) between the two words, a Masoretic sign denoting a slight pause. The meaningful centre is to be found on verseline level, v. 2ab: (5 = 2 + 1 + 2):

אִם-לֹא שָׁוִיתִי | וְדוּמַמְתִּי נִפְשִׁי

On the contrary, I have remained calm | and quieted my soul.

The positioning of the meaningful centre on word level: 30 = 12 + 5 + 13, spells the YHWH *echad* formula: 30 = 17 + 13, which we also encountered in Psalms 127 and 128. See Observation 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 128](#).

The statement by the first-person speaker in the meaningful centre may certainly be regarded as expressing the gist of the psalm. After denying that he has been haughty and arrogantly pretentious, he now avows that he has always remained composed, kept a low profile and quieted himself. The striking metaphor of the infant, tranquil and quieted on its mother's back, illustrates his personal equanimity of soul. This is set as an example for his people to follow.

Excursus on the metaphor of the child on its mother's back

The metaphor of the child on its mother's back has not always been properly understood. The misunderstanding concerns not only the preposition עָלַי and the word נִמְלֵל but also the interpretation of the metaphor itself. The usual translation "like a weaned child with its mother" (כְּנִמְלֵל עָלַי אִמּוֹ) will be shown to be incorrect. In my opinion, the preposition does not mean "with" in the sense of "in company with" but "on" or "upon". If the author intended to say "with", he would have used עִמִּי, "with". I shall also argue that the word נִמְלֵל does not denote "weaned child" but "breast-feeding infant".

Some translators felt the need to specify the *location* of the child: 'at its mother's *breast*' (RSV), or 'in its mother's *arms*' (the Dutch *Groot Nieuws Bijbel*), or 'on its mother's *arm*' (the Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbel Vertaling*). The *Revised English Bible* does not mention a location: 'like a weaned child *clinging to* its mother'; neither does Christensen: 'like a weaned child *carried by* its mother' (my *italics*). However, in his Analysis of Psalm 131, he specifies the carrying: 'on the *shoulders* of its mother' (my *italics*).

My interpretation of the image of the so-called "weaned child" is primarily based on first-hand knowledge in non-Western societies of the practice of carrying an infant: the child sits on the back of its mother, between her shoulder blades, wrapped in a sling or in the folds of her garment. The mother has her hands free and can do her work, with her child (always the youngest and still breast-feeding) securely on her back. If the child has to be fed, she can easily shift it forward to give it the breast. To this day, this is common practice among the indigenous people in South Africa, the country of my birth. The Koikoi, who have lived there for thousands of years, have coined the term *abba*, "to carry a child on the back", which is used in Afrikaans to denote this particular practice.

Iconographic evidence shows that this practice was also known in the Ancient Near East. There is a Sumerian Clay Relief (19th century BCE) showing the Mother Goddess with one child at her breast and two (twins?) on her shoulder blades, with their heads on either side of their mother's. See Othmar Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen* (WB, Darmstadt), Köln/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, p. 182, picture 277a. English translation: *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, Seabury Press, New York, 1978.

Additionally, a wooden figure of a non-Egyptian woman from the grave of Useri at Beni Hasan (19th century BCE - in the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh) with a child on her back, wrapped in the folds of her garment, with its head just above its mother's shoulders (see the picture below).

Finally, there is the scene of Syrian prisoners depicted in the 18th-Dynasty Egyptian grave of Hor-em-heb, which includes a Semitic woman, carrying a child on her shoulders and a baby in a sling behind its brother (*ANEP*, no. 49; cf. Isa. 49:22). In his commentary on the Psalms, Leslie Allen (*WBC* 22, 2002) also refers to later Jewish evidence for the carrying of a child to a festival on its father's shoulders or by its mother (see Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 5b-6a and the Mishnah, Hagigah 1:1). For the latter information I am indebted to Duane Christensen.

More importantly, there is also unmistakable documentary evidence for this practice from Biblical times. In Isa. 49:22 we read: “they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulder blades”. Additionally, there is the evidence to be found in the metaphor used in the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33. In Deut. 33:12 it is said of Benjamin:

יָדִיד יְהוָה יִשְׁכֵּן לְבֶטֶחַ עָלָיו חִפָּה עָלָיו כָּל-הַיּוֹם וַיְבִין כְּתִיפָיו שָׂכָן:

The beloved of YHWH dwells securely on his back // embracing him all the day long, yes, he dwells between his shoulder blades.

Those who can read Dutch are invited to consult my commentary *Deuteronomium* (De Prediking van het Oude Testament), Volume 3, pp. 300-301, where I explain the metaphor in more detail.

T.H. Gaster was the first, as far as I know, to point out that we have here to do with the image of a person who carries someone on his back - compare Y. Avishur, “Expressions of the Type *byn ydym* in the Bible and Semitic Languages”, *Ugarit Forschung* 12 (1980), pp 125-130. Avishur understands the image as relating to YHWH sitting on the shoulders of Benjamin to protect him. However, since in Ancient Israel the idea of a human being carrying God on his shoulders is totally unthinkable, I argued that in Deuteronomy it is the other way round: YHWH carries his people as a person carries his child (Deut. 1:31). This is precisely the case in Deut. 33:12.

This means that Benjamin is the subject of all the verbs, which has been rightly understood by M.C.A. Korpel (see her Kampen Dissertation *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine*, Münster 1990, pp. 95f.). She translates:

“The beloved of the Lord, he dwells in safety by him; he (Benjamin) is embracing him all the day long, and he will dwell between his shoulderblades.”

In his commentary on Deuteronomy (*WBC* 6b, 2002, p. 841) Christensen translates:

“The beloved of YHWH tents securely by him He enfolds him all the day long indeed between his shoulders he tents.”



Christensen takes Benjamin as the subject of the first and last verbs, but YHWH as subject of the verb ‘enfold’ (pp. 850f.). In my opinion, there is no change of subject. My translation shows that I regard Benjamin as the subject of all three of the verbs. Moreover, I maintain the basic meaning of the preposition עָלָיו, ‘upon him’, i.e., ‘on his back’, as well as עָלַי, ‘upon me’, i.e., ‘on my back’.

This understanding of the image enables us to picture Benjamin (the youngest, and called YHWH’s ‘beloved’ – cf. Ps. 127:2!) sitting securely on YHWH’s back, between his shoulder blades, embracing him all the time. Moreover, it sheds new light on the metaphor in Psalm 131.

That brings us to the real meaning of the word נִמְל, which is traditionally, but wrongly, here rendered “a weaned child”. The root נִמַּל as such has nothing to do with weaning,

i.e., the accustoming of an infant to food other than its mother's milk. The verb means basically 'to deal fully, adequately or bountifully with', 'to deal out to', 'to benefit' (see 1 Sam. 24:18 and Prov. 31:12, and cf. Ps. 13:6, 119:17 and 142:8).

In connection with a child, the verb means 'to nurse' – compare 1 Ki. 11:20, where it is said of queen Tahpenes and Hadad's baby-son, Genubath, that "she nursed him in Pharaoh's house" (וַתִּגְמַלְהוּ תַחְפִּינִס בְּתוֹךְ בַּיִת פַּרְעֹה). The passive participle גָּמַל, means primarily 'dealt fully or bountifully with', i.e., 'having been fed', or more specifically, 'breast-fed', 'nursed'. In my opinion, it is this connotation that fits the context in Psalm 131 perfectly: a breast-fed suckling, satisfied and quieted. In terms of content, H.-J. Kraus's rendering is correct, but his substituting כְּגִמְלָה with תִּגְמַל, is unnecessary (BK): "Wie ein gestilltes Kind bei seiner Mutter, so ist gestillt in mir meine Seele."

The term 'weaned child' denotes that breast-feeding is completed: here it is still continuing. The completion of a child's nursing can vary from its 2nd to its 5th year; only then it gets the status of a 'weaned child' (גָּמַל). Examples are Isaac (Gen. 21:8) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:22ff.) – compare also Isaiah 11:8 and Hos. 1:8). The child in Psalm 131, however, is not a 'weaned' child but a breast-feeding infant that has just been fed, satisfied and quieted. This interpretation, which is crucial to our understanding of the metaphor, is buttressed by the fact that the metaphor of 'the quieted soul bountifully dealt with' explicitly occurs also in Ps. 116:7: "Return, O my soul, to your rest, for YHWH has dealt bountifully with you" (שׁוּבִי נַפְשִׁי לְמִנוּחַיִּי כִּי־יְהוָה גָּמַל עָלַי־כִּי).

Accordingly, in my interpretation of the metaphor, v. 2cd is an elaboration on 2ab: it is *the soul* of the first-person speaker that is likened to the quieted suckling on the back of its mother. The metaphor depicts him as the mother of his quieted soul. The text as it stands is perfectly clear and there is no reason whatsoever to emend anything. Here is my translation of the entire v.2:

אִם־לֹא שָׁוִיתִי | וְדוּמְמֹתַי נַפְשִׁי
כְּגִמְלָה עָלַי אִמוֹ ^ כְּגִמְלָה עָלַי נַפְשִׁי:

On the contrary, I have remained calm | and quieted my soul;
like an infant on its mother's back, ^ like an infant on my back, so is my soul.

Repetitions, like כְּגִמְלָה ... כְּגִמְלָה..., are a favourite stylistic device in the Songs of Ascents – compare 121:3 and 4; 122:8-9; 123:2; 124:1-2, 3-5; 126:2; 127:1; 129:1-2; and especially 133:2-3, as here, with the preposition כִּי... כִּי: "It is like the fragrant oil ..., It is like the dew of Hermon..." *

2. I concur with Mitchell Dahood's observation that v. 2ab "serves as a hinge joining the two parts of the psalm." Compare the hinge function of the meaningful centre of Psalm 127. See "Specific features" and Observation 2 in my Analysis of [Psalm 127](#).

In Dahood's view, v. 2ab is addressed "both to Yahweh and to Israel", while v. 1 is supposed to be addressed to God, and vs. 2c-3 to the congregation. However, in my opinion, the entire text is addressed both to God and to Israel, but we have to differentiate between the words specifically addressed to God and those addressed to Israel in particular. The boundary between the two directions of address clearly falls between vs. 1-2, where YHWH is addressed, and v. 3, where Israel is addressed and explicitly mentioned by name.

This determines the canto structure:

* I am indebted to Jim McMillan, doctor and poet, for having helped me to express my view in clear terms and to get my translation of the verse in place, and I owe gratitude to Pieter van der Lugt for having drawn my attention to the stylistic device of repetition. A slightly different version of this excursus has been published as "The Metaphor of the So-Called 'Weaned Child' in Psalm cxxxii", in *VT* 57 (2007), pp. 114-118.

Canto I vs. 1-2 23 words specifically addressed to YHWH (Column c)
Canto II v. 3 7 words addressed to Israel in particular (Column d).

The canto structure is numerically corroborated by the compositional formula **23c + 7d**. Compare Psalm 130, where also **23** words are used to address YHWH. The *kabod* number **23** symbolizes the presence of God, while the number **7** signifies the fullness of Israel's hope and trust in YHWH.

3. Being a follow-up to Psalm 130, the poem reiterates its central theme: waiting for YHWH in trust and hope. The passionate exhortation **יְהוָה יִשְׁרָאֵל אֶל-יְהוָה**, 'Israel, wait in hope for YHWH', occurring in Ps. 130:7a, is repeated here to conclude the psalm.
4. The first word in the address to Israel, **יְהוָה**, 'wait for in hope', is the keyword of the poem. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that its numerical value determines the total number of words: **30** (10 + 8 + 12 = 30). See Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 130](#).
5. The 2 occurrences of the name **יְהוָה** in vs. 1a and 3a clearly function as an inclusion.

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