

# Psalm 139— 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 139

- Psalm 139 is the follow-up of Psalm 138 in so far as it elaborates on the idea of YHWH's omniscience (Ps. 138:6) and his just judgement of *the works of his hands* (Ps. 138:7-8). This does not imply that Psalm 139 is to be regarded as a philosophical treatise on God's omniscience – far from it: it deals specifically with the personal experience of an individual of God's omnipresence and omniscience. Throughout the poem the speaker addresses God directly and writes in the first person.
- The meticulously designed logotechnical structure is organized in such a way that the core of the poem, vs. 7-18, stands out from the surrounding text as specifically dealing with YHWH's omniscience and his *personal involvement* in the coming into being of the speaker. The framework is about the speaker's experience of YHWH's *fundamental knowledge of him as a distinct individual*, even before his birth.
- The surrounding 78-word framework (78 = 3 x 26) is strongly buttressed by the fact that 78 represents the numerical value of two verbal forms of the key-word יָדַעַ, 'to know' at the beginning and end of the psalm. It is not surprising that the root יָדַעַ occurs exactly 7 times, expressing the 'fullness' of YHWH's knowledge of the speaker.

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

- Van der Lugt: 1-4, 5-6 || 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-14, 15-16, 17-18 || 19-20, 21-22, 23-24 (4 cantos and 11 strophes, with 23 verselines and 51 cola, taking v. 16 as a tricolon).
- Fokkelman: 1-3, 4-6 || 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-14, 15-16, 17-18 || 19-20, 21-22 || 23-24 (5 cantos and further as Van der Lugt).
- Labuschagne: as Van der Lugt, except that I take v. 16 as two bicola (4 cantos and 11 strophes, with 24 verselines and 52 cola).

## Logotechnical analysis

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

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמַנְצַחַת לְדָוִד מִזְמוֹרָה <sup>1</sup> Heading	3 = 3 + 0				
	יְהִיָּה חֶקְרָתִי <sup>1</sup> וְיִתְדָעַ <sup>1</sup> 1	3	3		3	
2	אֵתָהּ וְיִדְעָתָּה <sup>2</sup> שְׁבִתִּי וְקוֹמִי <sup>2</sup> אֵתָהּ וְיִדְעָתָּה = 52	4	4		4	
	בְּנִתָּה לְרַעִי מִרְחוֹק <sup>3</sup> (10 + 4 + 16 + 22 = 52)	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 1-2	10 = 7 + 3			10	0
3	אֶרְחִי וְרַבְעֵי זְרִיתָּה <sup>2</sup> אֶרְחִי וְרַבְעֵי זְרִיתָּה <sup>2</sup> 2	3	3		3	
	וְכָל־דְּרָכֵי הַסְּכִנְתָּהּ <sup>3</sup> וְכָל־דְּרָכֵי הַסְּכִנְתָּהּ <sup>3</sup>	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 3	6 = 3 + 3			6	0
	Total, v. 1-3	16 = 10 + 6			16	0
4	כִּי אֵין מְלָה בְלִשׁוֹנָי <sup>3</sup> כִּי אֵין מְלָה בְלִשׁוֹנָי <sup>3</sup> 3	4	4		4	
	הֵן יְהִיָּה וְיִדְעָתָּה <sup>3</sup> כָּלָהּ <sup>3</sup> הֵן יְהִיָּה וְיִדְעָתָּה <sup>3</sup> כָּלָהּ <sup>3</sup>	4		4	4	
	Total, v. 4	8 = 4 + 4			8	0
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-4	24 = 14 + 10			24	0

5	אָחוּר וְקָדָם צִרְתָּנִי <sup>4</sup>	4	3	3	3	
	וְתִשֵּׁת עָלַי כִּפְכָּה:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 5		6	= 3 + 3	= 6	+ 0
6	פְּלִאִיהַ <b>יְדַעַת</b> <sup>4</sup> מִמְּנִי <sup>5</sup>	5	3	3	3	
	נִשְׁנְבָה לֹא־אוּכַל לָהּ:		4		4	4
	Total, v. 6		7	= 3 + 4	= 7	+ 0
	<b>Strophe 2 Total, v. 5-6</b>		13	= 6 + 7	= 13	+ 0
	Total, v. 4-6		21	= 10 + 11	= 21	+ 0
	Total, v. 2-6		34	= 17 + 17	= 34	+ 0
	<b>Canto I Total, v. 1-6</b>		37	= 20 + 17	= 37	+ 0
7	אָנָּה אֱלֹהִי מְרוּחָדָה <sup>6</sup>	6	3	3		3
	וְאָנָּה מִפְּנֵיךְ אֶבְרַח:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 7		6	= 3 + 3	= 0	+ 6
8	אִם־אֶסַּק שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אֶתְהַדֶּה <sup>7</sup>	7	5	5		5
	וְאֶצִּיעָה שְׂאוֹל הַנֶּגֶד:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 8		8	= 5 + 3	= 0	+ 8
	<b>Strophe 3 Total, v. 7-8</b>		14	= 8 + 6	= 0	+ 14
9	אֶשָּׂא כְנָפַי־שָׁחַר <sup>8</sup>	8	3	3		3
	אֶשְׁכֵּנָה בְּאַחֲרֵי־יָם:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 9		6	= 3 + 3	= 0	+ 6
10	גַּם־שֵׁם יִרְדֶּה תִּנְחַנְי <sup>9</sup>	9	4	4		4
	וְתִאֲחַזְנֵי יְמִינֶךָ:		2		2	2
	Total, v. 10		6	= 4 + 2	= 0	+ 6
	<b>Strophe 4 Total, v. 9-10</b>		12	= 7 + 5	= 0	+ 12
	Total, v. 7-10		26	= 15 + 11	= 0	+ 26
11	וְאָמַר אֶדְ־חֶשֶׁד יִשׁוּפְנִי <sup>10</sup>	10	4	4		4
	וְלִילָה אֹר בְּעַדְנִי:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 11		7	= 4 + 3	= 0	+ 7
12	גַּם־חֶשֶׁד לֹא־יִחַשֶׁד <sup>11</sup>	11	4	4		4
	מִמֶּךָ וְלִילָה כִּיּוֹם יֵאִיר <sup>11</sup>		4	4		4
	כִּחְשִׁיכָה כְּאוֹרָה:		2		2	2
	Total, v. 12		10	= 8 + 2	= 0	+ 10
	<b>Strophe 5 Total, v. 11-12</b>		17	= 12 + 5	= 0	+ 17
	<b>Canto II Total, v. 7-12</b>		43	= 27 + 16	= 0	+ 43
13	Middle cola: כִּי־אַתָּה קָנִיתָ כְּלִי־י <sup>12</sup>	12	4	4		4
	52 = 24 + 2 + 24 תִּסְכְּנֵי בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי:		3		3	3
	Middle words: 174 = 80 + 14 + 80 Total, v. 13		7	= 4 + 3	= 0	+ 7
	Total, v. 12-13		17	= 12 + 5	= 0	+ 17
	Total, v. 1-13		87	= 51 + 36	= 37	+ 50

Arithmetic middle of the poem: 12 + 12 verselines, 26 + 26 cola, and 87 + 87 words

14	אוֹרְךָ עַל כִּי נִזְרָאוֹת נִפְלִיתִי <sup>13</sup>	13	5	5		5
	נִפְלָאִים מַעֲשֵׂיךָ <sup>13</sup>		2	2		2
	וְנִפְשִׁי <b>יְדַעַת</b> <sup>5</sup> מְאֹד:		3		3	3
	Total, v. 14		10	= 7 + 3	= 0	+ 10
	Middle Strophe <b>Strophe 6 Total, v. 13-14</b>		17	= 11 + 6	= 0	+ 17

15	לֹא־נִכְחַד עֲצָמֵי מִמֶּנָּךְ אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי בַסֶּתֶר <sup>^</sup> רַקְמָתִי בְתַחֲתֵיֹת אֲרִיץ: Total, v. 15 Total, v. 12-15	14	4	4	4	3	3	3	$10 = 7 + 3 = 0 + 10$ $37 = 26 + 11 = 0 + 37$				
16	גָּלְמֵי רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וְעַל־סִפְרָךָ כָּלֵם וּפְתָבוּ יָמִים יִצְרוּ <sup>^</sup> וְלֹא אֶחָד בָּהֶם: Total, v. 16 Strophe 7 Total, v. 15-16	15	3	3	3	4	4	2	2	3	3	3	$12 = 9 + 3 = 0 + 12$ $22 = 16 + 6 = 0 + 22$
17	וְלִי מִה־יִקְרוּ רַעִיף אֱלֹ <sup>^</sup> מָה עֲצָמוּ רְאִשֵׁיהֶם: Total, v. 17	17	5	5	5	3	3	8	5	3	8	$8 = 5 + 3 = 0 + 8$	
18	אֶסְפָּרֶם מִחוּל יִרְבּוֹן <sup>^</sup> הַקִּיצִיתִי וְעוֹדֵי עִמָּךְ: Total, v. 18 Strophe 8 Total, v. 17-18 Total, v. 16-18 Canto III Total, v. 13-18 Total, v. 7-18	18	3	3	3	3	3	6	3	3	6	$14 = 8 + 6 = 0 + 14$ $26 = 17 + 9 = 0 + 26$ $53 = 35 + 18 = 0 + 53$ $96 = 62 + 34 = 0 + 96$	
19	אִם־תִּקְטַל אֱלֹהִי רִשְׁעֵ <sup>^</sup> וְאֲנֹשִׁי דָמִים סוּרוּ מִנִּי: Total, v. 19 Total, v. 16-19	19	4	4	4	4	4	8	4	4	8	$8 = 4 + 4 = 8 + 0$ $34 = 21 + 13 = 8 + 26$	
20	אֲשֶׁר יֵאמְרוּךָ לְמִזְמֵרָ <sup>^</sup> נִשָּׂא לְשׂוֹא עָרִיךְ: Total, v. 20 Strophe 9 Total, v. 19-20	20	3	3	3	3	3	6	3	3	6	$6 = 3 + 3 = 6 + 0$ $14 = 7 + 7 = 14 + 0$	
21	הֲלוֹא־מִשְׁנֵאִיךָ יִהְיֶה אֲשַׁנְּאֵ <sup>^</sup> וּבְתַקוּמָיךָ אֶתְקַוֶּטֶט: Total, v. 21 Total, v. 18-21	21	4	4	4	2	2	6	4	2	6	$6 = 4 + 2 = 6 + 0$ $26 = 14 + 12 = 20 + 6$	
22	תִּכְלִית שְׁנֵאָה שְׁנֵאֲתִים <sup>^</sup> לְאוֹיְבִים הָיוּ לִי: Total, v. 22 Strophe 10 Total, v. 21-22 Total, v. 19-22	22	3	3	3	3	3	6	3	3	6	$6 = 3 + 3 = 6 + 0$ $12 = 7 + 5 = 12 + 0$ $26 = 14 + 12 = 26 + 0$	
23	חֲקַרְנִי אֱלֹ <sup>^</sup> וְיָדַעַ <sup>^</sup> לְכַבִּי <sup>^</sup> בְּחַגְנִי וְיָדַעַ <sup>^</sup> שְׂרַעֲפֵי: וְרֵאָה אִם־דִּרְךָ־עֲצָב בִּי <sup>^</sup> (6 + 4 + 16 = 26) וּנְחַנִּי בְּדֶרֶךְ עוֹלָם: Coda Strophe 11 Total, v. 23-24 Canto IV Total, v. 19-24 Total, v. 14-24 Total, v. 1-24 With the heading, v. 1-24	23	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	5	5	4	$4 = 4 + 0 = 4 + 0$ $3 = 3 + 0 = 3 + 0$
24		24	5	5	5	3	3	15	5	3	15	$15 = 9 + 6 = 15 + 0$ $41 = 23 + 18 = 41 + 0$ $87 = 54 + 33 = 41 + 46$ $174 = 105 + 69 = 78 + 96$ $177 = 108 + 69$	

## Observations

- At first sight, Psalm 139 divides into two exactly equal parts on all three levels: in terms of verselines, cola and words (vs. 1-13 and vs. 14-24), a feature it shares with many other psalms - see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 6](#):

vs. 1-13	12 verselines	<b>26</b> cola	87 words
vs. 14-24	12 verselines	<b>26</b> cola	87 words
<b>vs. 1-24</b>	<b>24</b> verselines	<b>52</b> cola	<b>174</b> words.

Both Van der Lugt and Fokkelman find **23** verselines with **51** cola, because they disregard the atnach after the second word in v. 16b, taking v. 16 as a tricolon. In my opinion, the atnach should be respected, which means that v. 16 consists of two bicolic verselines. For similar cases, compare [Psalms 126](#) and [127](#) - see my remarks at the bottom of the charts in my Analyses of these psalms.

Unlike the poems with a real bipartite structure, e.g., Psalms 79, 90 and 91, where the strophic structure coincides with the underlying bipartite framework, here, the strophic structure overlies it. In any case, there is no caesura between vs. 13||14, but there is one between vs. 12||13.

[Vs. 13-14](#), the **17**-word middle strophe (**11** = 5 + **1** + 5), constitutes a literary unity, and may be regarded as the deliberately designed meaningful centre on strophic level. In terms of words, the centre is slightly off-centre: 174 = 80 + **17** + 77.

Strophe 1, vs. 1-4	24 words	Examine me, Yahweh, and know me!
Strophe 2, vs. 5-6	13 words	You beset me behind and before
Strophe 3, vs. 7-8	<b>14</b> words	You are everywhere present
Strophe 4, vs. 9-10	<b>12</b> words	You are with me where ever I go
Strophe 5, vs. 11-12	<b>17</b> words	You are a light in the darkness
<b>Strophe 6, vs. 13-14</b>	<b>17</b> words	<b>You formed my inward self</b>
Strophe 7, vs. 15-16	22 words	You know everything about me
Strophe 8, vs. 17-18	14 words	Your thoughts, God, are unfathomable
Strophe 9, vs. 19-20	<b>14</b> words	If only, God, you would slay the wicked
Strophe 10, vs. 21-22	<b>12</b> words	How I hate those that hate you, Yahweh
Strophe 11, vs. 23-24	15 words	Examine me, God, and know me!

Note how the divine name number **17** gives prominence to the meaningful centre, and how the other divine name number **26** gives prominence to vs. 7-10 and vs. 19-22.

- The meaningful centre on colon level is constituted by the **4** middle cola in [vs. 13-14b](#) astride the arithmetic centre, within the middle strophe (**52** = 24 + **4** + 24 cola). The **4** middle cola coincide precisely with the **14** middle words (174 = 80 + **14** + 80 words) giving prominence to the [middle strophe](#) as the consciously designed meaningful centre:

כִּי־אַתָּה קָנִיתָ כְּלֵי־תִי ^ תִסְכְּנִי בְּבֶטֶן אִמִּי:  
 אֲזַדְדֶּךָ עַל כִּי נִזְרָאוֹת נִפְלְיֹתִי נִפְלְאִים מַעֲשֵׂיֶךָ ^ וְנִפְשִׁי יָדַעַת מְאֹד:

For you yourself fashioned my inward parts // you sheltered me in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you, for I am awesomely distinct / wonderful are your works  
 and you know me through and through!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to render the alliteration and the pun in v. 14 satisfactorily: נִפְלְיֹתִי, 'I am distinct' (from פָּלָה, 'be treated specially', 'be distinct and unique'), and נִפְלְאִים, 'wonderful' (from פָּלָה, niphal 'to be unusual, wonderful'). For the meaning of נִפְלְיֹתִי, 'I am distinct/unique', a precise parallel is to be found in

The noun נִרְאֹת 'awesome things', which is here used as an adverb (with Christensen), 'awesomely', may also be translated 'awfully, strikingly, terrifically'.

In broad outline, my translation of vs. 13-14 is in agreement with that of Th. Booij, in his article "Psalm cxxxix: Text, Syntax, Meaning", VT 55 (2005), pp. 1-19:

For you yourself created my kidneys, screened me in my mother's womb.

I praise you, as I have been immensely distinguished: wonderful are your works,

And my soul knows right well.

The meaningful centre is an eloquent expression of the leading theme of the psalm, the intimate relationship between the speaker and YHWH: YHWH *knew* him from the very beginning. The depth and comprehensiveness of this relationship is symbolically expressed by the 7 occurrences (fullness!) of יָדַע, 'to know' (marked in the chart), with the striking statement, v. 6a, at the centre of the menorah pattern formed by the verbs:

- v. 1            You *know*<sup>1</sup> me
- v. 2            You yourself *know*<sup>2</sup> me when I sit and when I rise
- v. 4b          Well, you *know*<sup>3</sup> all about it
- v. 6a          Too wonderful for me is this *knowledge*<sup>4</sup>**
- v. 14c        Yes, my soul *knows*<sup>5</sup> this right well
- v. 23a        Examine me, God, *and know*<sup>6</sup> my heart
- v. 23b        Test me, *and know*<sup>7</sup> my thoughts.

In a private communication Bob Fleming from Britt, Iowa, sent me his outline on the psalm based not so much on the mechanics of the poem as on the flow of thought. Its charming symmetric, menorah-like pattern makes it attractive and worth considering:

- A Search me and know me (v. 1)
- B You watch over me (vs. 2-5)
- C Your great knowledge (v. 6)
- D My external life (vs. 7-12)
- D' My internal life (vs. 13-16)
- C' Your great thoughts (vs. 17-18)
- B' Watch over me (vs. 19-22)
- A' Search me and know me (vs. 23-24).

3. In any case, the basic structure of the psalm is not only determined by thought content, but also by its numerical features in terms of its 4 cantos:

- **the central section** (vs. 7-18), deals with YHWH's *inescapable omnipresence* and his *personal involvement* in the coming into being of the speaker;
- **the framework** (vs. 1-6 and 19-24) deals with the speaker's experience of YHWH's *fundamental knowledge of him as an individual*.

Canto I	vs. 1-6	YHWH's fundamental knowledge	37 words
Canto II	vs. 7-12	YHWH's inescapable omnipresence	43 words
Canto III	vs. 13-18	YHWH's personal involvement in his existence	53 words
Canto IV	vs. 19-24	YHWH's judgement is based on understanding	41 words.

---

Exodus 33:16: : וְנִפְלְיֵנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי מִכָּל־הָעַם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת: "So we shall be distinct, I and your people, from all the peoples on the face of the earth."

The framework is made up of  $37 + 41 = 78$  ( $3 \times 26$ ) words – in my opinion, deliberately. The number **78** represents the numerical value of **יָדַעְתָּ**, ‘you know’ in vs. 2a and v. 4b ( $10 + 4 + 16 + 22 = 52$ ) together with **וַיָּדַע**, ‘and know’ in vs. 23a and 23b ( $6 + 4 + 16 = 26$ ). Both have YHWH as subject, and both are key-words that occur twice. This is the logotechnical expression of the fact that the speaker, as a unique individual, feels himself literally encompassed by YHWH’s knowledge of him. Note that this is explicitly stated in v. 5a: “Behind and before you encompass me.” Compare the structure of [Psalm 23](#). Strophes 1 and 11 (vs. 1-4 and 23-24) function as a device for inclusion, which is reinforced by the **7** occurrence of the key-words.

4. Additionally, the divine name numbers feature in the following way:

vs. 2-6	<b>34</b> words in total, with <b>17</b> before and <b>17</b> after atnach
vs. 7-10	<b>26</b> words in total, with <b>15</b> (YH) before and <b>11</b> (WH) after atnach
vs. 11-12	<b>17</b> words in total
vs. 1-13	<b>51</b> ( $3 \times 17$ ) words before atnach
vs. 13-14	<b>17</b> words in total
vs. 16-18	<b>26</b> words in total, with <b>17</b> before atnach
vs. 16-19	<b>34</b> ( $2 \times 17$ ) words in total
vs. 18-21	<b>26</b> words in total
vs. 19-22	<b>26</b> words in total.

5. The name **יהוה** appears 3 times: vs. 1, 4b and 21a. The designation **אלוה** occurs in 19a, and **אל** in 17a and 23a.

© 2008  
 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@planet.nl](mailto:labuschagne.cj@planet.nl) University of Groningen, The Netherlands