Psalm 51— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the General Introduction as well as the Introduction to Book I and Book II.
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "Key to the charts".

Specific features of Psalm 51

- This is the first poem in a series of 7 closely coherent Davidic psalms (51-57) in Book II, having together exactly **104** (4 x **26**) verselines, followed by another series of 8 (58-65), likewise with **104** verselines. For particulars see the Introduction to Book II, Table VI.
- The significant 12-word heading explains the situation in which this prayer of contrition is supposed to have originated: David's sin and crime in connection with Bathsheba.
- The psalm lacks a meaningful centre on word level; instead, like Psalm 50, it has one in terms of the poetic building blocks: the two middle cola in v. 12. As in quite a number of psalms, an important section of the poem has its own meaningful centre, which is to be found in Canto I: the striking keyword חָטָאתִי, 'I have sinned', in v. 6a (42 = 21 + 1 + 21).
- Particularly ingenious is the use of the number **7** in various ways to express the idea of the 'fullness' of the guilt and contrition of the speaker in the prayer.

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

- Van der Lugt: 3-5 | 6, 7-8 || 9-11, 12-14 || 15-17 | 18-19, 20-21 (3 cantos - of which the first and third divide into two canticles - with 8 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola).
- Fokkelman: 3-5, 6 || 7-8, 9-11 || 12-13 || 14-15, 16-17 || 18-19, 20-21 (5 stanzas, 9 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola).
- Labuschagne: 3-5 | 6, 7-8 || 9-11, 12-14 || 15, 16-17 | 18-19 | 20-21 (3 cantos with 9 strophes, 20 verselines and 42 cola, taking vs. 20-21 as a coda).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: framework; **d**: central section: prayer for purification and restoration.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in brown.

		Total		a	b	c	d
1	לַמְנַצֵּחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד׃	3		3			
2	בְּבוֹא־אֵלָיו נָתָן הַנָּבִיא^	4		4			
	כַּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא אֶל־בַּת־שָׁבַע׃	5			5		
	Heading, v. 1-2	12	=	7	+ 5		
3	חָנֵּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחַסְדֶּךָ^	1	3	3		3	
	כְּרֹב רַחֲמֶיךָ מְחֵה פְשָׁעָי׃		4		4	4	
	Total, v. 3	7	=	3	+ 4	= 7	+ 0
4	הַרְבֵּה כַּבְּסֵנִי מֵעֲוֺנִי^	2	3	3		3	
	וּמֵחַטָּאתִי טַהֲרֵנִי׃		2		2	2	
	Total, v. 4	5	=	3	+ 2	= 5	+ 0
5	כִּי־פְשָׁעַי אֲנִי אֵדָע^	3	4	4		4	
	וְחַטָּאתִי נֶגְדִּי תָמִיד׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 5	7	=	4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
	Canticle I.1 Strophe 1 Total, v. 3-5	19	=	10	+ 9	= 19	+ 0

Note	Hebrew	v.	Total				
6 Middle word of Canto I:	לְךָ לְבַדְּךָ ³חָטָאתִי	4	3	3		3	
43 = 21 + 1 + 21	וְהָרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עָשִׂיתִי		3	3		3	
within its middle verseline	לְמַעַן תִּצְדַּק בְּדָבְרֶךָ	5	3	3		3	
v. 6a-b (7 = 3 + 1 + 3)	תִּזְכֶּה בְשָׁפְטֶךָ׃		2	2		2	
Strophe 2	Total, v. 6		11	= 11	+ 0	= 11	+ 0
7	הֵן־בְּעָווֹן חוֹלָלְתִּי^	6	3	3		3	
	⁴וּבְחֵטְא יֶחֱמַתְנִי אִמִּי׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 7		6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
8	הֵן־אֱמֶת חָפַצְתָּ בַטֻּחוֹת^	7	4	4		4	
	וּבְסָתֻם חָכְמָה תוֹדִיעֵנִי׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 8		7	= 4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
Strophe 3	Total, v. 7-8		13	= 7	+ 6	= 13	+ 0
Canticle I.2	Total, v. 6-8		24	= 18	+ 6	= 24	+ 0
Canto I	**Total, v. 3-8**		**43**	= 28	+ 15	= 43	+ 0
9 Initial word of Canto II	⁵תְּחַטְּאֵנִי בְאֵזוֹב וְאֶטְהָר^	8	3	3			3
	תְכַבְּסֵנִי וּמִשֶּׁלֶג אַלְבִּין׃		3		3		3
	Total, v. 9		6	= 3	+ 3	= 0	+ 6
10	תַּשְׁמִיעֵנִי שָׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה^	9	3	3			3
	תָּגֵלְנָה עֲצָמוֹת דִּכִּיתָ׃		3		3		3
	Total, v. 10		6	= 3	+ 3	= 0	+ 6
11	הַסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ ⁶מֵחֲטָאָי^	10	3	3			3
	וְכָל־עֲוֹנֹתַי מְחֵה׃		3		3		3
	Total, v. 11		6	= 3	+ 3	= 0	+ 6
Strophe 4	Total, v. 9-11		18	= 9	+ 9	= 0	+ 18
12 Middle cola,	לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי אֱלֹהִים^	11	5	5			5
meaningful centre:	וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חַדֵּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי׃		4		4		4
42 = 20 + 2 + 20	Total, v. 12		9	= 5	+ 4	= 0	+ 9
13 Middle word of psalm:	אַל־תַּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ^	12	3	3			3
141 = 70 + 1 + 70	וְרוּחַ קָדְשְׁךָ אַל־תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי׃		5		5		5
	Total, v. 13		8	= 3	+ 5	= 0	+ 8
	Total, v. 12-13		17	= 8	+ 9	= 0	+ 17
14	הָשִׁיבָה לִּי שְׂשׂוֹן יִשְׁעֶךָ^	13	4	4			4
	וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִסְמְכֵנִי׃		3		3		3
	Total, v. 14		7	= 4	+ 3	= 0	+ 7
Strophe 5	Total, v. 12-14		24	= 12	+ 12	= 0	+ 24
Central core **Canto II**	**Total, v. 9-14**		**42**	= 21	+ 21	= 0	+ 42
on verseline level: 20 = **7** + 6 + **7**	Total, v. 3-14		**85**	= 49	+ 36	= 43	+ 42
15	אֲלַמְּדָה פֹשְׁעִים דְּרָכֶיךָ^	14	3	3		3	
	⁷וְחַטָּאִים אֵלֶיךָ יָשׁוּבוּ׃		3		3	3	
Strophe 6	Total, v. 15		6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Total, v. 3-15		91	= **52**	+ 39	= 49	+ 42

#	Hebrew / Label	v					
16	הַצִּילֵנִי מִדָּמִים אֱלֹהִים	15	3	3		3	
	אֱלֹהֵי תְּשׁוּעָתִי^		2	2		2	
	תְּרַנֵּן לְשׁוֹנִי צִדְקָתֶךָ׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 16		8	= 5	+ 3	= 8	+ 0
17	אֲדֹנָי שְׂפָתַי תִּפְתָּח^	16	3	3		3	
	וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתֶךָ׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 17		6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Strophe 7 Total, v. 16-17		14	= 8	+ 6	= 14	+ 0
	Canticle III.1 Total, v. 15-17		20	= 11	+ 9	= 20	+ 0
18	כִּי לֹא־תַחְפֹּץ זֶבַח וְאֶתֵּנָה^	17	5	5		5	
	עוֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 18		8	= 5	+ 3	= 8	+ 0
19	זִבְחֵי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נִשְׁבָּרָה	18	4	4		4	
	לֵב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְכֶּה^		3	3		3	
	אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה׃		3		3	3	
	Total, v. 19		10	= 7	+ 3	= 10	+ 0
	Canticle III.2 Strophe 8 Total, v. 18-19		18	= 12	+ 6	= 18	+ 0
	Total, v. 7-19		93	= **51**	+ 42	= **51**	+ 42
	Total, v. 3-19		123	= 72	+ **51**	= 81	+ 42
20	הֵיטִיבָה בִרְצוֹנְךָ אֶת־צִיּוֹן^	19	4	4		4	
Vs. 20-21	תִּבְנֶה חוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלָ͏ִם׃		3		3	3	
Coda	Total, v. 20		7	= 4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
21	אָז תַּחְפֹּץ זִבְחֵי־צֶדֶק עוֹלָה וְכָלִיל^	20	6	6		6	
	אָז יַעֲלוּ עַל־מִזְבַּחֲךָ פָרִים׃		5		5	5	
	Total, v. 21		11	= 6	+ 5	= 11	+ 0
Canticle III.3 Strophe 9	Total, v. 20-21		18	= 10	+ 8	= 18	+ 0
Canto III	Total, v. 15-21		56	= 33	+ 23	= 56	+ 0
	Total, v. 3-21		141	= 82	+ 59	= 99	+ 42
	With the heading, v. 1-21		**153**	= 89	+ 64		

Observations

1. The middle word אַל, 'not', in v. 13a (141 = 70 + 1 + 70), cannot possibly be regarded as a meaningful centre. Such a centre is to be found on colon level: the two middle cola of v. 12 (**42** = 20 + 2 + 20), which are a most appropriate expression of the gist of this prayer of contrition.

<div dir="rtl" align="center">לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי אֱלֹהִים ^ וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חַדֵּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי</div>

Create in me a pure heart, O God, // and renew within me a steadfast spirit.

The meaningful centre falls within the central core on verseline level, vs. 9-14, the middle canto, surrounded by **14** verselines, with **7** on either side (20 = **7** + 6 + **7**), which is significantly made up of **42** words (3 x **14**, the numerical value of David).

2. As in quite a number of psalms, Psalm 51 has a second meaningful centre in a sub-section of the text: in this case, in Canto I (vs. 3-8), the prayer of contrition, where the verb חָטָאתִי, 'I have sinned' (v. 6a), is positioned at the arithmetic centre, surrounded by **42** words, with **21** (3 x **7**) on either side (43 = **21** + **1** + **21**). Note that the verb תְּחַטְּאֵנִי, 'purge me' ('de-sin me'), is the very first word of the **42**-word prayer for purification in Canto II. The root חטא, 'sin', is clearly a keyword of paramount importance. It is not surprising to see that it occurs exactly **7** times in the prayer.

   In light of this and the fact that the psalm as a whole is made up of **42** (6 x **7**) cola, and that there are **7** references to God, we have to conclude that the author used the number **7** as a compositional device to highlight the keyword 'sin', and to express symbolically the 'fullness' of the speaker's confession of sin and guilt.

3. In an earlier analysis, I found four cantos, based on distinct facets of the prayer:

Canto I	vs. 3-8	Confession of guilt and prayer for forgiveness
Canto II	vs. 9-14	Prayer for purification and restoration (central core)
Canto III	vs. 15-19	Prayer for help to teach sinners and proclaim God's praise
Canto IV	vs. 20-21	Show favour to Zion and delight in the right sacrifices.

   However, Van der Lugt (manuscript not yet published) has convinced me that the psalm has a tripartite structure based on rhetorical considerations:

Canto I	vs. 3-8	with **7** verselines and **14** cola
Canto II	vs. 9-14	with 6 verselines and 12 cola (central core)
Canto III	vs. 15-21	with **7** verselines and 16 cola.

   I only differ from him in dividing Canto III into 3 canticles, vs. 15-17, 18-19 and 20-21, and taking vs. 20-21, Canticle III.3, as a coda. It clearly stands apart from the main body of the poem as a concluding prayer in which Zion and Jerusalem are explicitly brought into the picture. It is anything but a later addition, as many scholars maintain. Compare the coda in Psalm 50 – see Observation 4 in my Analysis of Psalm 50.

   The coda clearly refers back to the theme of Psalm 50, the right sacrifices. This strongly suggests that the Asaphite Psalm was consciously chosen and adapted to form a bridge between the Korahite psalms (42-49) and the Davidic psalms (51-65). See my Analysis of Psalm 50 and "The Compositional Structure of Book II."

4. Seeing the consistent use of the number **7** as structuring device, the divine name numbers merely serve to weave God's name into the fabric of the text. They feature only in the second half of the psalm:

vs. 12-13	**17** words in total
vs. 3-14	**85** (5 x **17**) words in total
vs. 3-15	**52** (3 x **26**) words before atnach
vs. 7-19	**51** (3 x **17**) words before atnach
vs. 3-19	**51** (3 x **17**) words after atnach
vs. 1-21	**153** (9 x **17**, and the summation of 1-**17**) words in total.

5. The name YHWH is absent but אֱלֹהִים, 'God', occurs 6x (vs. 3, 12, 16a, 16b, 19a, 19b) and אֲדֹנָי, 'my Lord', once (v. 17), giving **7** references to God.

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