

Psalm 90— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book IV](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the [Key to the charts](#).

Specific features of Psalm 90

- The poem is characterized by its singularly regular, ingenious numerical structure. Like Psalms 91 and 92, it divides into two equal halves, in terms of verselines and words:
 - vs. 1-9 9 verselines and **68** (4 x **17**) words
 - vs. 10-17 9 verselines and **68** (4 x **17**) words.
- The **136** (8 x **17**) words divide into **85** (5 x **17**) before and **51** (3 x **17**) after atnach. However, its canto structure (vs. 1-6, 7-12, 13-17) does not coincide with the bipartite framework. For a similar phenomenon, see [Psalm 84](#).
- The poem as a whole has an unmistakable meaningful centre on the level of its **39** cola, namely **vs. 9b** (**39** = 19 + **1** + 19). The number **39** represents the numerical value of the name 'Moses' – see Observation 1.
- Each of the three cantos has its own meaningful centre. That of Canto I (vs. 1-6) is constituted by the four words personally pronounced by God in **vs. 3b** (48 = 22 + **4** + 22): "**Turn back, you children of men**". That of Canto II (vs. 7-12), the central core of the poem is the **9** words in **vs. 10a-b** (49 = 20 + **9** + 20), and the asymmetric centre of Canto III is constituted by the three words in **vs. 15b** (39 = **17** + **3** + 19).

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary = ||

- Van der Lugt: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 || 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-15, 16-17 (8 strophes, with 18 verselines and 39 cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-12, 13-14, 15-16, 17 (9 strophes, 18 verselines and 39 cola).
- Labuschagne: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 || 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 || 13-14, 15-16, 17 (same as Fokkelman).
- Christensen: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10b, 10c-11, 12-13, 14-15, 16-17 (9 strophes). On "prosodic grounds", however, he finds 7 deviating strophes: 1-2, 3-6, 7-8, 9-10b, 10c-11, 12-15, 16-17), which makes one wonder what the 'prosodic' analysis really contributes to the understanding of the structure of a given psalm. The presumed prosodic structure is mostly at variance with the logotechnical and rhetorical structure. This is clearly illustrated by the analyses of Psalms 90, 91 and 92 and by the great majority of the other psalms. Moreover, in his 'logoprosodic' analysis, which is, in my view, a combination of conflicting approaches, Christensen is adamant that we have to include the headings in the the word-count. This makes matters even worse.

The result is that the basic, inherent structure of the psalms proper is seriously blurred, and worse still, disregarded and left out of consideration – to the detriment of the biblical authors' meticulously contrived compositional works of art.

In my opinion, we are confronted with a methodological crisis, which has been lurking for a long time. An in-depth comparative examination of the logotechnical and 'logoprosodic' approaches to these three psalms may be a case study providing us with the litmus test for their compatibility and for the viability of the latter approach. From the very beginning, I had serious doubts about its feasibility, and having studied the results of more than hundred psalms, I am more concerned than ever. See also Observations 1 and 6 in my Analysis of [Psalm 92](#) and Observation 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 105](#).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Columns **c**: the words in the first half of the poem; **d**: the words in the second half.
- The numbering of the verselines is shown in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	מִשֶׁה = 39	תִּפְלָה לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִים	4	4		4
		אֲדָנִי מָעוֹן אֶתָּה הָיִיתָ לָנוּ	5	5		5
		בָּרַר וְדָר:	2	2		2
		Total, v. 1	7	= 7	+ 0 = 0	+ 7
2		בְּטָרִם הָרִים יָלְדוּ	3	3		3
		וַתְּחַוֵּלֵל אֶרֶץ וַתְּבַלֵּל	3	3		3
		וּמְעוֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם אֶתָּה אֵל:	5		5	5
		Total, v. 2	11	= 6	+ 5 = 0	+ 11
	Strophe 1	Total, v. 1-2	18	= 13	+ 5 = 0	+ 18
3		תָּשָׁב אָנוּשׁ עַד־דְּכָא	4	4		4
	Middle words of	וַתֹּאמֶר שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי־אָדָם:	4		4	4
	Canto I 48 = 22 + 4 + 22	Total, v. 3	8	= 4	+ 4 = 0	+ 8
		Total, v. 1-3	26	= 17	+ 9 = 0	+ 26
4		כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ	4	4		4
		כִּיּוֹם אֶתְמוֹל כִּי יַעֲבֶרָ	4	4		4
		וְאֲשַׁמְרָה בְּלִילָה:	2		2	2
		Total, v. 4	10	= 8	+ 2 = 0	+ 10
	Strophe 2	Total, v. 3-4	18	= 12	+ 6 = 0	+ 18
5		זָרְמַתֶּם שָׁנָה יְהוּי	3	3		3
		בַּבֶּקֶר כְּחֹצִיר יִחַלֵּף:	3		3	3
		Total, v. 5	6	= 3	+ 3 = 0	+ 6
6		בַּבֶּקֶר יִצִּיץ וַחֲלָף	3	3		3
		לְעֶרֶב יִמּוֹלֵל וַיִּבֶשׁ:	3		3	3
		Total, v. 6	6	= 3	+ 3 = 0	+ 6
	Strophe 3	Total, v. 5-6	12	= 6	+ 6 = 0	+ 12
	Canto I	Total, v. 1-6	48	= 31	+ 17 = 0	+ 48
7		כִּי־כָלִינוּ בְּאַפְּךָ	3	3		3
		וּבְחֻמָּתֶךָ נִבְהָלָנוּ:	2		2	2
		Total, v. 7	5	= 3	+ 2 = 0	+ 5
		Total, v. 5-7	17	= 9	+ 8 = 0	+ 17
8		שֵׁת עֹנֵתִינוּ לְנִגְדֶּךָ	3	3		3
		עַל־מְנוּ לְמֵאוֹר פְּנֶיךָ:	3		3	3
		Total, v. 8	6	= 3	+ 3 = 0	+ 6
		Total, v. 6-8	17	= 9	+ 8 = 0	+ 17
	Strophe 4	Total, v. 7-8	11	= 6	+ 5 = 0	+ 11

9	Vs. 9-10: the middle verselines (18=8+2+8) Middle colon: 19 + 1 + 19	כי כל־ימינו פָּנוּ בְּעֶבְרֵתָּךְ בְּלִינוּ שְׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ־הֶגְחַהּ	9	5	5	5	4	4	4	9 = 5 + 4 = 0 + 9
	Total, v. 9									26 = 14 + 12 = 0 + 26
	Total, v. 6-9									68 = 42 + 26 = 0 + 68
	Total, v. 1-9									
Arithmetic middle of the poem: 9 + 9 verselines and 68 + 68 words										
10	Middle words of Canto II: 49 = 20 + 9 + 20	יְמֵי־שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ בְּהֵם שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֹת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה וְרִהָבָם עָמַל וְאַוָּן כִּי־נָז חֵישׁ וְנִעְפָּה:	10	5	5	5	4	4	4	16 = 12 + 4 = 16 + 0
	Total, v. 10									25 = 17 + 8 = 16 + 9
	Middle Strophe 5 Total, v. 9-10									
11		מִי־יִוְדַע עֵז אֶפְדָּךְ וְכִיר־אֶתָּךְ עֶבְרֵתָּךְ:	12	4	4	4	2	2	2	6 = 4 + 2 = 6 + 0
	Total, v. 11									
12		לְמַנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ בֶּן הַזְרַע וְנִבֵּא לְבָב חֲכָמָה:	13	4	4	4	3	3	3	7 = 4 + 3 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 12									13 = 8 + 5 = 13 + 0
	Strophe 6 Total, v. 11-12									49 = 31 + 18 = 29 + 20
	Canto II Total, v. 7-12									
13		שׁוֹבָה יְהוָה עַד־מִתִּי וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־עֲבָרֶיךָ:	14	4	4	4	3	3	3	7 = 4 + 3 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 13									52 = 32 + 19 = 43 + 9
	Total, v. 9-14									
14		שְׁבַעֲנוּ בַּבֶּקֶר חֲסִדֶּךָ וְנִרְנְנָה וְנִשְׁמְחָה בְּכָל־יָמֵינוּ:	15	3	3	3	4	4	4	7 = 3 + 4 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 14									14 = 7 + 7 = 14 + 0
	Strophe 7 Total, v. 13-14									
15	Canto III seems to have an asymmetric centre 39 = 17 + 3 + 19	שְׁמַחְנוּ כִּי־מוֹת עֲנִיתָנוּ שְׁנוֹת רָאִינוּ רָעָה:	16	3	3	3	3	3	3	6 = 3 + 3 = 6 + 0
	Total, v. 15									
16		יִרְאֶה אֶל־עֲבָרֶיךָ פֶּעֶלְךָ וְחִדְרְךָ עַל־בְּנֵיהֶם:	17	4	4	4	3	3	3	7 = 4 + 3 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 16									34 = 18 + 16 = 34 + 0
	Total, v. 12-16									13 = 7 + 6 = 13 + 0
	Strophe 8 Total, v. 15-16									
17	3 rd person	וַיְהִי נָעַם אֲדָנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ וַיַּעַשׂה יְדִינוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ וַיַּעַשׂה יְדִינוּ כּוֹנְנָהוּ:	18	5	5	5	4	4	4	3 = 4 + 3 = 7 + 0
	Total, v. 17									12 = 9 + 3 = 12 + 0
	Strophe 9 Total, v. 13-17									39 = 23 + 16 = 39 + 0
	Total, v. 12-17									45 = 26 + 19 = 45 + 0
	Total, v. 10-17									68 = 43 + 25 = 68 + 0
	Total, v. 7-17									88 = 54 + 34 = 68 + 20
	Total, v. 1-17									136 = 85 + 51 = 68 + 68
	With the heading									140 = 89 + 51

Observations

1. Like Psalm 84, and in accordance with Psalms 91 and 92, the poem divides into two equal halves (vs. 1-9 and 10-17) consisting of 9 verselines and **68** (4×17) words. See Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 6](#). In line with practically all psalms in Book III and Book IV, it has its meaningful centre, [vs. 9b](#), in terms of the poetical building blocks: the middle colon (**39** = $19 + 1 + 19$), falling within vs. 9-10, the two middle verselines ($18 = 8 + 2 + 8$), the middle strophe.

[בְּלֵינוּ שָׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ-הֵנָּה](#), We bring our years to an end like a sigh.

By stressing the transitoriness of human beings, this statement expresses the gist of the poem, and has obviously been designed to constitute its meaningful centre.

The fact that there are **39** cola is not simply a matter of chance, since **39** represents the numerical value of the name 'Moses', to whom the poem is ascribed in the heading ([מֹשֶׁה](#): $13 + 21 + 5 = 39$). Apart from this occurrence of the name of Moses in the heading, it appears altogether **7x** in the Book of Psalms: 77:21, 99:6, 103:7, 105:26, 106:16, 23, and 32, significantly only in Books II and IV.

Fokkelman discerns **38** cola by taking the 7-word first verseline as one single colon, which is highly improbable. I side with Van der Lugt in regarding vs. 1 as a bicolic verseline, despite the absence of an atnach at the end of colon 1a. In my judgement, the lack of an atnach has everything to do with the deliberate aim of the author to achieve his final compositional formula: **136** = **85** + **51** ($8 \times 17 = 5 \times 17 + 3 \times 17$).

Including the 4-word heading, the four extra words cause the pivotal colon, [vs. 9b](#), to coincide precisely with the arithmetic centre of the entire text: $140 = 68 + \boxed{4} + 68$, *leaving the structure of the psalm proper intact*. It was evidently for logotechnical reasons that the heading had been designed to contain exactly *four* words. This explains the remarkable 2-word qualification of Moses as 'God's man'.

For the relationship between the headings and the psalm proper, see Observation 1 in my Analysis of [Psalm 3](#) and the Introduction to [Book I](#), p. 12.

2. Each of the three cantos have its own meaningful centre on word level, of which that of Canto III is asymmetric:

In **Canto I** (vs. 1-6) it is the **4** words of God's verdict in [vs. 3b](#) ($48 = 22 + 4 + 22$):

[וְהֵאמַר שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי-אָדָם](#), You say: "Turn back, children of men!".

In **Canto II** (vs. 7-12) it is the **9** words in [vs. 10a-b](#) ($49 = 20 + 9 + 20$):

[יְמֵי-שָׁנֹתֵינוּ כָּהֶם שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֹת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה](#)

The years of our life are seventy and if our strength holds, eighty years.

The number of letters in the latter centre amount to exactly **39**, the numerical value of the name Moses. This should certainly not be brushed aside as mere coincidence, especially in light of the poem's **39** cola and the **39** words in Canto III.

In **Canto III** (vs. 13-17), in terms of content, the **3** words in vs. 15b,

[שָׁנֹת רָאִינוּ רָעָה](#): 'the years when we have experienced misfortune',

certainly qualify as a genuine meaningful centre, but since they are not exactly flanked by two equal parts, they constitute an asymmetric centre: **39** = **17** + **3** + 19.

It is important to note that the section preceding the centre (13-15a) have **17** words, which may have been contrived in order to highlight these three words.

3. In terms of the 18 verselines of the poem, the two middle verselines, **vs. 9-10b**, constitute another possible meaningful centre: $18 = 8 + 2 + 8$, which in terms of words is **136 = 59 + 18 + 59**. In this case, the meaningful centre is situated astride the arithmetic centre between the two halves of the poem. Compare e.g., Psalm 84. No matter from whatever angle we view the text, the meaningful centres of the poem as a whole and that of Canto II (7-12) converge in **vs. 9-10** at the heart of the poem. The overall, primary compositional formula, **136 = 85a + 51b** – all multiples of **17** – clearly illustrates the meticulously calculated numerical structure of the poem, which is regulated throughout by the number **17**. Additionally, this also appears to be the case in the number of words in the two equal halves: **68 (4 x 17) words** in each half.
4. In the first colon of the last verseline, vs. 17a, the poet uses the sudden switch from 2nd to **3rd person** as a rhetorical device to indicate the end of the poem. Note also that, in vs. 16-17, these **5 words** are flanked by 7 words on each side: $19 = 7 + 5 + 7$, by which they receive special emphasis. The emphasis applies also to **יְהוָה** in vs. 17a, which is positioned at the centre of these 5 words.
5. The divine name numbers are woven into the text in the following way:
- | | |
|-----------|---|
| vs. 1-3 | 26 words in total, with 17 before atnach |
| vs. 1-6 | 17 words after atnach |
| vs. 5-7 | 17 words in total |
| vs. 6-8 | 17 words in total |
| vs. 6-9 | 26 words in total |
| vs. 1-9 | 68 (4 x 17) words in total, with 26 after atnach |
| vs. 9-10 | 17 words before atnach |
| vs. 9-14 | 52 (2 x 26) words in total |
| vs. 12-16 | 34 (2 x 17) words in total |
| vs. 12-17 | 26 words before atnach |
| vs. 10-17 | 68 (4 x 17) words in total |
| vs. 7-17 | 34 (2 x 17) words after atnach |
| vs. 1-17 | 136 (8 x 17) in total: 85 (5 x 17) before, 51 (3 x 17) after atnach |
| vs. 1-17 | the Masoretes achieved 17 verselines by accommodating two poetic verselines in vs. 10. |
6. The name **יהוה** is to be found only in vs. 13a; **יְהוָה** occurs twice: in the first and last verseline, where it functions as a device of enclosure.

© 2010

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	University of Groningen, The Netherlands