

Psalm 136— 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 136

- In the Jewish liturgical tradition, together with Psalm 135, Psalm 136 is known as the Great Hallel, particularly because the refrain “for his steadfast love endures for ever” is here repeated no less than **26** times. This refrain is to be found elsewhere in the Psalter only **7** times, namely in Pss. 106:1, 107:1, and Ps.118: 1, 2, 3, 4, 29, at the end of the Egyptian Hallel (113-118).
- The psalm has close ties not only with Psalms 105-107 and 118, but also with Psalm 135, which precludes it in many ways. See “Specific features of Psalm 135” in my Analysis of [Psalm 135](#).
- Psalm 136 is a textbook example of numerical composition showing a simple, regular compositional structure in which, at the same time, intricate literary devices have been employed. The canto structure of its **26** bicolic verselines is in 5 parts, which are clearly determined by ‘episodes’ as in Psalms 105-107.
- The meaningful centre (the middle two verselines of [vs. 13-14](#)) falls within the central section, which is the Egypt episode, [vs. 10-15](#), the middle canto.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt and Labuschagne: 1-3 || 4-6, 7-9 || 10-12, 13-15 || 16-18, 19-22 || 23-26 (5 cantos with 8 strophes, **26** verselines and **52** cola).
- Fokkelman: 1-3, 4-6, 7-9 || 10-12, 13-15 || 16-18, 19-20 || 21-22, 23-24, 25-26 (4 stanzas with 10 strophes, **26** 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 main clauses; **d**: words in the subordinate clauses.
- The numbering of the verselines coincides with that of the Masoretic verses.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	הֹדְרוֹ לִיהְנֶה כִּי־טוֹבֵי	4	4		4	
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 1	7	= 4	+ 3	= 4	+ 3
2	הֹדְרוֹ לְאֱלֹהֵי הַאֱלֹהִים	3	3		3	
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 2	6	= 3	+ 3	= 3	+ 3
3	הֹדְרוֹ לְאֶדְנֵי הָאֲדָנִים	3	3		3	
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:	3		3		3
	Total, v. 3	6	= 3	+ 3	= 3	+ 3
	Vs. 1-3, device for inclusion					
	Canto I Strophe 1 Total, v. 1-3	19	= 10	+ 9	= 10	+ 9

4	¹ לְעֵשָׂה נִפְלְאוֹת גְּדִלוֹת ¹ לְבַדָּוָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 4 Total, v. 1-4	4 4 4 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 4 + 3 26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12
5	² לְעֵשָׂה הַשָּׁמַיִם ² בְּתַבּוּנָהּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 5 Total, v. 5-6	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3 4 4 4
6	³ לְרֻקַּע הָאָרֶץ ³ עַל־הַמַּיִם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 6 Total, v. 5-6 Strophe 2 Total, v. 4-6 Total, v. 3-6 Total, v. 1-6	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 4 + 3 13 = 7 + 6 = 7 + 6 20 = 11 + 9 = 11 + 9 26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12 39 = 21 + 18 = 21 + 18
7	⁴ לְעֵשָׂה אוֹרִים גְּדִלִים ⁴ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 7 Total, v. 4-7	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3 26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12
8	אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם ⁵ לְמַשְׁלַת בְּיוֹם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 8	4 4 4 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 4 + 3
9	אֶת־הַיָּרֵחַ ⁶ וְכוֹכְבֵי ⁷ לְמַשְׁלוֹת בְּלִילָהּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 9 Total, v. 7-9 Strophe 3 Total, v. 5-9 Canto II Total, v. 4-9 Total, v. 1-9	5 5 5 3 3 3 <hr/> 8 = 5 + 3 = 5 + 3 21 = 12 + 9 = 12 + 9 34 = 19 + 15 = 19 + 15 41 = 23 + 18 = 23 + 18 60 = 33 + 27 = 33 + 27
10	⁵ לְמַכָּה מְצָרִים בְּכֹרֵיהֶם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 10 Total, v. 6-10	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3 34 = 19 + 15 = 19 + 15
11	וַיּוֹצֵא ¹ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 11	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
12	בְּיַד תְּזַקֶּה וּבְזֹרֹעַ נִטְוֶהָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 12 Strophe 4 Total, v. 10-12 Total, v. 8-12	4 4 4 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 4 + 3 19 = 10 + 9 = 10 + 9 34 = 19 + 15 = 19 + 15
13	⁶ לְגֹזֵר יַם־סוּף לְגִזְרֵיהֶם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 13 Middle verselines: 26=12+2+12 Total, v. 10-13	4 4 4 3 3 3 <hr/> 7 = 4 + 3 = 4 + 3 26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12
14	וַהֲעִבִיר ² יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹכָהּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו: Total, v. 14 Total, v. 13-14	3 3 3 3 3 3 <hr/> 6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3 13 = 7 + 6 = 7 + 6

	Total, v. 11-14	26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12
15	וַיַּעֲרֹב ³ פְּרַעַת וַחִילוֹ בַּיַּם־סוּף־אֶ	5 5 5
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 15	8 = 5 + 3 = 5 + 3
	Strophe 5 Total, v. 13-15	21 = 12 + 9 = 12 + 9
	Total, v. 11-15	34 = 19 + 15 = 19 + 15
	Central section Canto III Total, v. 10-15	40 = 22 + 18 = 22 + 18
16	לְמוֹלֵךְ ⁷ עִמּוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 16	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
17	לְמַכָּה ⁸ מְלָכִים גְּדֹלִים־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 17	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
	Total, v. 14-17	26 = 14 + 12 = 14 + 12
18	וַיַּתְרֵגוּ ⁴ מְלָכִים אֲדִירִים־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 18	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
	Strophe 6 Total, v. 16-18	18 = 9 + 9 = 9 + 9
19	לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 19	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
20	וַיִּלְעוּג מֶלֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 20	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
21	וַיִּנְתְּנוּ ⁵ אֶרֶצָם לְנַחֲלָה־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 21	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
22	נַחֲלָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדָיו־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 22	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
	Strophe 7 Total, v. 19-22	24 = 12 + 12 = 12 + 12
	Canto IV Total, v. 16-22	42 = 21 + 21 = 21 + 21
23	שָׁבַשְׁבְּלָנוּ זְכָרִי ⁶ לְנוֹי־אֶ	3 3 3
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
24	וַיִּבְרַקְנוּ מִצָּרֵינוּ־אֶ	2 2 2
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 22-24	17 = 8 + 9 = 8 + 9
25	נָתַן לָחֵם לְכָל־בְּשָׂר־אֶ	4 4 4
	כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 23-25	18 = 9 + 9 = 9 + 9
	Total, v. 16-25	60 = 30 + 30 = 30 + 30
26	Coda הוֹדִינוּ לְאֵל הַשָּׁמַיִם־אֶ	3 3 3
	Device for inclusion כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:	3 3 3
	Total, v. 26	6 = 3 + 3 = 3 + 3
	Canto V Strophe 8 Total, v. 23-26	24 = 12 + 12 = 12 + 12
	Total, v. 4-26	147 = 78 + 69 = 78 + 69
	Total, v. 1-26	166 = 88 + 78 = 88 + 78

Observations

1. The logotechnical centre falls between vs. 13a and 13b (166 = 83 + 83). Given the strict structure of the poem, there is no meaningful centre on word level. However, such a centre is to be found in terms of the poetical building blocks: the two middle verselines, vs. 13-14 (26 = 12 + 2 + 12):

לְגֹזֵר יַם־סוּף לְגֹזְרִים אֲ כִּי לְעוֹלָם תִּסְדֹּד׃
וְהַעֲבִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹכּוֹ אֲ כִּי לְעוֹלָם תִּסְדֹּד׃

To him who divided the Reed Sea in two // for his steadfast love endures for ever
And made Israel pass through it // for his steadfast love endures for ever.

The theme of the Exodus – here represented by the passing through the Reed Sea - is indeed fundamental, not only because of YHWH's crucial act of salvation itself, but more specifically because it signifies the Second Exodus, the return of the exiles – the leading theme of the preceding Songs of Ascents.

The meaningful centre on verseline level falls within the central section, the Egypt passage (vs. 10-15), which is the 40-word middle canto. Compare the pivotal position of the Egypt passage in [Psalm 105:23-38](#)! Leaving the coda (v. 26) out of consideration, the central position of the middle canto is strongly underscored by the perfectly balanced word structure of vs. 1-25 (160 = 60 + 40 + 60).

2. As defined by Van der Lugt, the canto structure, is exceptionally lucid and regular, being clearly determined by the easily discernable coherent thought units. The use of episodes to structure the text is very reminiscent of the three episodic Psalms 105-107, which obviously served as a model for Psalm 136:

Canto I	vs. 1-3	Call to give thanks to YHWH	3 verselines	19 w. +
Canto II	vs. 4-9	Who created heaven and earth	6 verselines	41 w. = 60
Canto III	vs. 10-15	Who delivered Israel from Egypt	6 verselines	40 words
Canto IV	vs. 16-22	Who provided Israel with a land	7 verselines	42 w. +
Canto Va	vs. 23-25	Who rescued us from our foes	2 verselines	18 w. = 60
Canto Vb Coda	v. 26	Call to give thanks to YHWH	1 verseline	6 w.

Claus Schedl, in his study “Die alphabetisch-arithmetische Struktur von Psalm cxxxvi”, in *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986), pp. 489-494, came to a similar division of the text.

Jacob Bazak, however, in his article “The Geometric-Figurative Structure of Psalm cxxxvi”, *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985), pp. 129-138, proposed a division into 4 parts: vs. 1-9, 10-18, 19-22 and 23-26, which is based on his view of the poem as having a figurative geometric structure: a reversed trapezium with a triangle in each of the trapezium's four angles. He finds two big triangles containing 9 verses each, and two small triangles with 4 verses each. Were it not for its complexity, Bazak's proposal would be an interesting alternative. Moreover, in my judgement, his division of vs. 10-18 (Exodus and Desert) and vs. 19-22 (Conquest and Settlement) is very unlikely, since there is no break in the thought content between vs. 18 and 19.

This criticism also applies to the menorah pattern proposed by Christensen in his logoprosodic analysis (1-4, 5-9, 10-11, 12-15, 16-17, 18-22, 23-26): the presumed breaks between vs. 4 || 5 and 17 || 18 are in tension with the evident caesurae based on thought content: 3 || 4 and 15 || 16.

3. **Canto I**, vs. 1-3, stands apart by its threefold call **הוֹדוּ לַ**, ‘Give thanks to’. It re-echoes in the **coda** in v. 26a, with which it functions as a device for inclusion delimiting the psalm. This is reminiscent of Psalm 118:1 and 29. For the relation between Psalm 118 and Psalms 135 and 136, see my Analysis of [Psalm 135](#), especially Observations 2 and 4.

Canto II, vs. 4-9, deals with YHWH as Creator and it is not surprising to find 6 verselines, which signifies the six days of creation. The verses 5-9 are made up of **34** (2 x 17) words, significantly divided to form the mysterious compositional formula **34 = 19 + 15**. This particular division of the 34 words might have been a matter of chance, were it not that it reverberates three more times in the psalm: in vs. 6-10, 8-12 and 11-15. It occurs in no less than ten cognate texts dealing explicitly or implicitly with the loss of the land through apostasy. For particulars, see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 95](#).

Canto III, vs. 10-15, is the pivotal canto, dealing with the Exodus and the defeat of Pharaoh and his host at the Reed Sea. The 40 words may have been consciously chosen to symbolically signify the 40 years in the desert.

Canto IV, vs. 16-22, consists of 7 verselines en 42 (6 x 7) words, which illustrates the deliberate use of the number of fullness.

Canto V, vs. 23-26, stands out because of the use, for the first time, of the 1st person form: 'we' in vs. 23-25. This is a subtle but nonetheless effective device to direct attention to the present situation, the return from exile: YHWH has remembered us and is now delivering us from our situation of distress. This once again reiterates the leading theme of the preceding Songs of Ascents.

4. In terms of form and content, v. 26 can easily be identified as a **coda**, the call to thank the *God of heaven* (cf. Ps. 115:3!). Compare the coda in Ps. 118:29 and Ps. 135:21, and consult Observation 4 in my Analysis of [Psalm 135](#). Together with the threefold call in **Canto I** starting with הודו ל', 'Give thanks to', the **coda** functions as a device for inclusion delimiting the psalm.
5. It is not surprising to find exactly 7 objects created by YHWH. I **marked** these objects and numbered them, with the numbers *after* the words in question in order to avoid confusion with the other series. The number 7 expresses the fullness of his creation:
 - i. great wonders (v. 4a)
 - ii. the heavens (v. 5a)
 - iii. the waters (v. 6a)
 - iv. the great lights (v. 7a)
 - v. the sun (v. 8a)
 - vi. the moon (v. 9a)
 - vii. the stars (v. 9a).

Compare the 7 cosmic elements in Ps. 19:2-5 – see Observation 7 in my Analysis of [Psalm 19](#) and the [General Introduction](#), "The menorah pattern".

Claus Schedl pointed out that there are 7 finite verbs with YHWH as subject. I **marked** them in the chart: vs. 11a, 14a, 15a, 18a, 21a, 23a and 24a, and numbered, with the numbers *after* the verbs. In order to achieve exactly 7 finite verbs the author deliberately used a *participle* in v. 25a (נִתֵּן), instead of an expected finite verb.

Schedl also drew attention to the series of 8 participles + לוֹ, 'to him who...', which I **marked** in the chart in vs. 4a, 5a, 6a, 7a, 10a, 13a, 16a and 17a, with the numbers *before* the words in question. The symbolic significance of the number 8 may be explained as 7 + 1, which signifies the idea of 'super fullness'. However, there is a more plausible explanation: the 8 participles refer to the most characteristic attributes of YHWH. Together with the 3 designations mentioned in **Canto I** and in the **coda** (v. 26), they constitute exactly 12 laudable qualities of YHWH in relation to creation and history. The symbolic significance of the number 12 may be that the Creator God is the One who acts in history for the benefit of all 12 tribes of Israel. Therefore, thanks are due:

- a. to YHWH (v. 1)
- b. to the God of gods (v. 2)
- c. to the Lord of lords (v. 3)
- d. to him who does *great wonders* (v. 4)
- e. to him who made the heavens (v. 5)
- f. to him who spread out the earth (v. 6)
- g. to him who made the great lights (v. 7)
- h. to him who smote the first-born of Egypt (v. 10)
- i. to him who divided the Reed Sea in two (v. 13)
- j. to him who led his people through the desert (v. 16)
- k. to him who smote *great kings* (v. 17)
- l. to the God of heaven (v. 26).

6. Here is a survey of all the divine name numbers woven into the fabric of the text:
- vs. 1-26 **26** bicolic verselines; the **52** cola coincide with the division by atnach
 - vs. 1-4 **26** constituting (with the **13** words in 5-6) the YHWH *echad* formula
 - vs. 3-6 **26** words in total
 - vs. 4-7 **26** words in total
 - vs. 10-13 **26** words in total
 - vs. 11-14 **26** words in total
 - vs. 14-17 **26** words in total
 - vs. 22-24 **17** words in total
 - vs. 4-26 **78** (3 x **26**) words before atnach
 - vs. 1-26 **78** (3 x **26**) words after atnach
 - vs. 5-9 **34** (2 x **17**) words in total, with **19** before and **15** after atnach
 - vs. 6-10 **34** (2 x **17**) words in total, with **19** before and **15** after atnach
 - vs. 8-12 **34** (2 x **17**) words in total, with **19** before and **15** after atnach
 - vs. 11-15 **34** (2 x **17**) words in total, with **19** before and **15** after atnach.
7. The name יהוה features only once: in v. 1a, and the designation אֱל only in v. 26a. אֱלֹהִים and אֲדֹנָיִם are used in connection with YHWH in vs. 2a and 3a respectively.

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