

The Unsolved Riddle of the Structure of Psalm 49

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In two of his many studies on the Psalms, Oswald Loretz contributed to the ongoing debate about the form and meaning of Psalm 49. In his view we can distinguish different layers coinciding with a development of ideas concerning the נַפְשׁ in life and death. Within the recent history of scholarly research this is a minority opinion, mostly of German scholars. Despite numerous attempts and even a number of monographs² on this specific psalm, scholars are far from reaching some kind of consensus on its interpretation. Scholars are extra motivated to analyse its structure because of the fact that the psalm contains a clear indication about its intended structure by the almost verbatim repeated verses 13 and 21, which seem to function as a refrain. With regard to the meaning of the psalm the motivating factor is the question whether verse 16 should be regarded as an indication of a belief in the god of Israel acting on behalf of the believer in the afterlife. All this has turned the exegesis of Psalm 49 in a battle field with three frontiers: 1. the struggle about the structure of the poem; 2. the struggle about the unity of the poem; 3. the struggle about the underlying ideas about life and death. In this situation the question about the right method is of prime importance, because no exegete will enter this battlefield unbiased. Everyone will carry one or more trusted weapons and has some ideas about structural analysis or biblical theology to defend. In the present contribution I want to honour the memory of Oswald Loretz by continuing the discussion he started on the right approach to the exegesis of Psalm 49. After presenting and evaluating his contribution I shall pay attention to some other attempts to interpret the psalm on a strictly formal basis, considering the possibility to combine some of the results.

Loretz on Psalm 49

In 1982 Pierre Casetti published his dissertation on Psalm 49, in which he eloquently defended the theory that the poem is built up of different layers. The “Grundpsalm” comprises vv. 11–15, whereas the prologue (vv. 2–5) and vv. 6–10 and 16–20 would have been added later, as a reaction to the original pessimistic

¹ Thank are due to Wilfred Watson for correcting the English.

² Casetti: *Leben*; Delkurt: *Mensch*; Smith: *Dust*; Park: *Durchbruch*.

view on life and death. Loretz reacted to this in a lengthy article published in 1986, in which he focused on methodological aspects. He did not deny that a diachronic approach is the best way to answer the questions that arise in respect of the tensions and contradictions within the text. His problem with the work by Casetti is that he does not take seriously the basic rule of ancient Israelite poetry, namely the use of *parallelismus membrorum*. Loretz uses this as the criterion to reconstruct the original poem: “Wenn wir einen normalen, traditionellen Maßstab anlegen, dann sind nur V. 8. 11bc. 12. 17. 18. 20 als parallel strukturierte Bikola anzuerkennen”.³ In this reconstructed text, he finds represented the well-known view in ancient Israel about death as the way of all people, without any hope of some kind of resurrection and judgement. In the course of time different elements would have been added.

In his contribution to the volume in memory of Timo Veijola in 2008, Loretz returned to this topic, partly changed his earlier view on the length of the original text and made some more suggestions about the reconstruction of the development of the poem. The first additions were comments in vv. 9, 11c, 12c, 15 and 21.⁴ They remain close to the traditional ideas about the *נֶפֶשׁ*. With v. 16, a later commentator would have added a new perspective concerning God taking the *נֶפֶשׁ* out of the netherworld. The reference to the *נֶפֶשׁ* in v. 9a could very well be related to this new idea. In the final stage the introductory vv. 2–5 would have been added. The different layers are indicated in his translation (with the assumed additions between brackets), which also shows the division of the text into four strophes consisting of four bicola each:

1. Für den Chorleiter: Von den Qorachiten. Ein Lied.
2. Hort zu, ihr Völker alle,
merkt auf, ihr Bewohner der Welt,
3. sowohl gewöhnliches Volk als auch Herren,
zusammen Reich und Arm!
4. Mein Mund soll Weisheit reden,
meines Herzens Sinnen ist Verstand.
5. Ich neige dem Spruch mein Ohr,
zur Leier löse ich mein Rätsel.

³ Loretz: Ugaritisches, 204.

⁴ Loretz: Befreiung, 389; he now sees also vv. 2-7 and v. 19 as part of the original psalm.

6. Warum soll ich mich 'am bösen Tag' fürchten,
wenn der Frevel meiner Verfolger mich umgibt,
7. die auf ihre Schätze vertrauen,
der Fülle ihres Reichtums sich rühmen?
8. Einer kann nicht den anderen loskaufen,
nicht 'Jahwe' sein Lösegeld zahlen,
9. [Und: Zu teuer ist der Loskauf ihrer Seelen,
Und: Er wird für immer aufhören!]
10. damit er auf ewig weiterlebe
und die Grube nicht schaue!
11. Denn man sieht, daß Weise sterben,
zusammen Tor und Narr zugrundegehen!
[Und: Sie lassen anderen ihren Reichtum zurück!]
12. 'Gräber' sind ihre Häuser für ewig,
ihre Wohnstätten für alle Zeit.
[Sie riefen Ihre Namen über Länder an/aus!]
13. Doch der Mensch 'ist wie ein Rind, bedenkt es nicht',⁵
er gleicht dem stummen Vieh.
14. Das ist der Weg derer, denen Torheit zu eigen,
und hinter ihnen sind, die an ihrem Mund Gefallen finden.
15. [Wie Schafe für die Unterwelt gesetzt, der Tod weidet sie,
und es herrschen über sie Gerechte am Morgen;
Und ihre Gestalt zum Verlöschen: die Unterwelt ist ihm ein *mzbl*]
16. [Doch Gott wird meine Seele freikaufen
aus der Gewalt der Unterwelt wahrlich mich holen!]
17. Schau nicht, wenn ein Mann reich wird,
wenn der Reichtum seines Hauses sich mehrt.
18. Denn bei seinem Tod nimmt er das alles nicht mit,
nicht steigt hinter ihm hinab sein Reichtum!
19. Wenn er sich selbst in seinem Leben glücklich preist
und man ihn lobt, daß es ihm gut geht,
20. er muß doch zur Schar seiner Väter,
wird ewig das Licht nicht mehr sehen!
21. [Doch der Mensch 'ist wie ein Rind', bedenkt es nicht,
er gleicht dem stummen Vieh.]

Because of its well-balanced combination of arguments concerning both form and content, this reconstruction of the psalm is attractive. It is more convincing than

⁵ Loretz: Befreiung, 387, n. 50, has taken over Gunkel's suggestion to change the text according to v. 21 and read רִבִּי instead of רִלִּי. This reading is also found in Qumran scroll 4QPs^c; cf. Flint: Psalms, 234.

Hossfeld's proposal, who in line with Casetti bases his diachronic approach primarily on a change of perspective in the psalm.⁶ Whereas Casetti and Hossfeld find the original poem in vv. 11-15, Seybold assumes that precisely vv. 11, 12b, and 14-15, together with probably vv. 7 and 9 have to be seen as later added explanations.⁷ According to Park vv. 1, 6-10, 17-20 form the original song of lament, to this would have been added vv. 2-5, 11-15, 21, turning it into a wisdom psalm. Finally, the addition of v. 16 made it an eschatological psalm.⁸ The problem with these redaction-critical analyses is not only that they result in so very different reconstructions, but also that they are primarily based on arguments concerning content.⁹ The critical remarks by Loretz in his discussion with Casetti should have been taken more seriously.

The message of the psalm as reconstructed by Loretz is clearly given in the verses that are emphasised in the structure of the poem: by the repetition of a number of words and by their position within the strophes. The wisdom that is of interest for all mankind (strophe 1, vv. 2-5) concerns "fearing" (ירא in vv. 6 and 17) "being rich" (עשיר in v. 7 and 17): at the beginning of the second and the fourth strophes, the question arises as to whether one should be intimidated by the pride of the rich. The answer is that in death all men are equal. This is specified in vv. 10 and 20 at the end of the second and fourth strophes with the statement that also the rich will not live forever (repeating the words נצח, "forever" and ראה, "to see").

According to Loretz, the message of the psalm was not fundamentally changed when in the course of time the lines in vv. 9, 11c, 12c, 15 and 21 were added. Only with v. 16 was a completely new perspective given. Loretz did not pay attention to the structural features of the poem in its final form. Apparently he was of the opinion that those responsible for the added lines were not interested in retaining or renewing a balanced structure.

The strophic structure of the Masoretic text of Psalm 49

Loretz assumes a clear strophic structure of the reconstructed original poem. Other scholars come to a similar conclusion, but in keeping with the Masoretic

⁶ "Für die Annahme eines Wachstums in zwei Stufen (ein Grundpsalm mit einer gewichtigen Neuinterpretation durch einer Redaktion) gibt es Indizien. Metrisch-kolometrische Gründe stehen nicht an erster Stelle. (...) Schwerer wiegt eine thematische Akzentverschiebung innerhalb des Psalms", Hossfeld/Zenger: Psalmen, 300.

⁷ Seybold: Psalmen, 198-203.

⁸ Park: Durchbruch, 40-52.

⁹ Cf. the critical remarks by Witte: Gott, 547-9, on the work of Hossfeld and Seybold.

text. In my dissertation, defended in 1986¹⁰, I suggested the following translation and structure¹¹:

2. Hear this, all you peoples;
 give ear, all who inhabit the world,
3. all mankind, every living man,
 rich and poor alike!
4. My mouth shall speak wisdom:
 the meditation of my heart is insight.
5. I will incline my ear to a proverb;
 I will solve my riddle with the lyre.
6. Why do I have to be afraid in the days of evil?¹²
 (why) does the guilt of my past surround me?
7. There are those who trust in their wealth
 and boast of their great richness.
8. However, no man can ransom himself;
 he cannot pay his price to God:
 9. The ransom of their life is too precious.
 and forever will stop (their boast)
10. that one would live forever
 and never see the Pit.
11. For one sees wise men die;
 at the same time the fool and the stupid perish;
 and they leave their wealth to others.
12. Their graves¹³ are their eternal homes,
 their dwellings for generation to generation;
 people will call their names on earth.
13. Yea, a man with wealth does not abide;
 he is like the beasts that are destroyed.
14. This is the way of those who have confidence for themselves
 and the end of those who have delight in their own words.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Oswald Loretz who not only accepted the manuscript for publication in the series *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, but also did me the honour of participating in the discussion at its public defence in Kampen.

¹¹ Cf. Spronk: *Afterlife*, 327–334.

¹² This phrase can also be regarded as a positive statement: there is no need to be afraid. Some commentators even interpret it as a quote of the rich people mentioned in the next verse. This, however, is not likely, because in the Psalms, quotations are usually clearly marked. It is more probable that v. 6a is meant negatively, as a reversal of the common expression of trust “I shall not fear” (as in Ps. 46:3). Moreover, we also find the answer to this question in Ps. 49 in v. 17.

¹³ Reading (with the BHS) קברים instead of קרבים.

15. Like sheep they are placed in Sheol;
 death shall pasture them;
 the just shall rule over them.
 In the morning their stature¹⁴ shall be devoured
 Sheol is its ruler.
16. However, God will ransom my life;
 He will surely take me from the hand of Sheol.
17. Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich;
 when the glory of his house increases.
18. For at his death he shall take nothing;
 his glory shall not go down after him.
19. Though he may bless his soul during his life:
 “They praise you because you do well for yourself”,
20. Yet it shall go to the generation of his fathers,
 who shall never see the light.
21. A man with wealth, but who does not understand,
 is like the beasts that are destroyed.

According to this analysis, the poem consists of eleven strophes, forming two stanzas (vv. 2–12 and 13–21), each divided into two substanzas (vv. 2–5, 6–12, 13–16, 17–21). In this way the strophes show the following pattern of verse lines: 2.2 / 2.2.2 // 2.2.1 / 2.2.1. This formal structure corresponds with the contents: the first part (vv. 2–5) has a slightly different structure compared to the rest of the poem, coinciding with the difference in content as a general introduction. The second substanza (vv. 6–12) is the description of the problem of riddle. The solution announced in the first part is given in the third substanza (vv. 13–16). This leads to a correction in the final substanza (vv. 17–21) of what was formulated in the second substanza. In particular, the relationship between the second and the fourth substanza is clear from the many words they have in common: ירא (vv. 6a, 17a), רב (vv. 7b, 17b), עֶשֶׂר (vv. 7b, 17a), אִישׁ (vv. 8a, 17a), יקר (vv. 9a, 13a, 21a), נֶפֶשׁ (vv. 9a, 16a, 19a), נֹצַח (vv. 10a, 20b) and רֹאֵה (vv. 10b, 20b). According to this analysis, verses 13 and 21 do not function as a refrain, but as an inclusio of the second stanza. In their play on the verbs לִין and בִּין, they offer a solution to the problem described in the second substanza in the form of proverb, as announced in the first substanza: יֵם לֹא יִבִּין כִּי בֹל יִלִּין “if one does not understand, one will not stand”. It can be compared to the wordplay in Isa. 7:9.

Since 1986, many new analyses of Psalm 49 have been produced. In one of his monographs on the structural features of the Psalms, Pieter van der Lugt gives a rather discouraging overview of the many different proposals in the history of

¹⁴ Reading יצורם instead of וצירם (Ketibh) or וצורם (Qere). Cf. Job 17:7 “(“my stature is like a shadow”) where the word is used in a similar context of being in the power of death.

research.¹⁵ According to his own very detailed analysis, there are eight strophes, forming three cantos (or stanzas): vv. 2–3, 4–5 / 6–7, 8–10, 11–13 / 14–15, 16–18, 19–21. Counting the lines one gets the following scheme: 2.2 / 2.3.3 / 3.3.3 lines. He points to the close connection between vv. 8–10 and 16–18 and between vv. 11–13 and 19–21; that is: between the second and third strophes of canto 2 and the second and third strophes of canto 3. Especially the important formal and thematic correspondences between vv. 8–10 and vv. 16–18 indicate that these are the pivotal strophes containing the central message of the poem: the rich cannot pay the price for redemption from the netherworld, but God pays it for the poor and wise.

Although the conclusion about the central message makes sense, the doubts about the suggested strophic structure remain. The fact that even scholars who agree on the principle that, as a rule, ancient Hebrew poetry shows some kind of balanced strophic structure, cannot come to a consensus, raises the question whether this principle should be applied to this particular psalm.¹⁶

Could it also be possible that a poem like Psalm 49 with such clear characteristics of a wisdom text was constructed more like a plea than a song? In a lecture for the *Societas Hebraica Amstelodamensis* in 1998¹⁷, I therefore reconsidered my own analysis, by no longer trying to trace strophes of more or less equal length and focusing instead on lines of reasoning:

heading: a psalm (v. 1)

introduction: a universal question will be answered (vv. 2–5)

A. the question: why do I have to fear the proud rich? (vv. 6–7)

B. reaction: everyone will die (vv. 8–12)

C. conclusion: man is like the beasts that are destroyed (v. 13)

A'. explanation of the conclusion: this concerns the proud (v. 14)

B'. clarification: their dreadful fate in the netherworld (v. 15)

D. kernel: God will take me from the netherworld (v. 16)

A''. consequence: do not fear the proud rich (v. 17)

B''. clarification: wealth is of no avail in death (vv. 18–20)

C'. final conclusion: insight makes the difference (v. 21)

The final conclusion is related to the introduction by the corresponding words תבונה, “insight” (v. 4b) and בין, “to understand” (v. 21a). It is reached in three times

¹⁵ Van der Lugt: Cantos, 69–81, esp. 74–5.

¹⁶ An illustrative example of the uncertainty is that Terrien: *Psalms*, 388, remarks about Psalm 49: “a poetic structure is not evident”, but nevertheless suggests “a succession of quatrains”: vv. 2–5, 6–9, 10–13, 14–16, 17–21. Cf. also Grimm: *Menschen*, 38: “Von dem Versuch einer Einteilung in Strophen (...) wird Abstand genommen”.

¹⁷ Spronk: *raadsel*, 39–44. In reconsidering my earlier points of view, I am in the good company of Oswald Loretz, because comparison of his articles from 1986 and 2008 shows that he also changed his mind on some points.

three steps, indicated above with by letters A, B, C and D. Through the repetition of keywords and specific themes they are related. A–A'–A'' is about the rich fools, B–B'–B'' is about death and C–C' about the comparison between man and beast. D stands out as the kernel of the argument. It is the insight formulated there that makes the difference.

Holger Delkurt has a similar approach to outlining the structure of Psalm 49. Unfortunately – although it will come not as a surprise within the survey of the research on this psalm – he comes to different conclusions. Based on the close relationship between vv. 13 and 21 and between vv. 8 and 16, he describes the structure as follows. The letters at the beginning indicate how the different parts of the poem are related.

1. Einleitung (vv. 2–5)
 - Aufmerksamkeitsruf (vv. 2–3)
 - Ankündigung der weisheitlichen Beantwortung einer Frage (vv. 4–5)
2. Das Thema des Psalms: Welche Bedeutung besitzt Reichtum für das Ergehen nach dem Tod? (vv. 6–21)
 - 2.1 Aspekt I: Es gibt Reiche, die versuchen, sich vom Tod freizukaufen (vv. 6–10)
 - a. Zitat dieser Reichen: Reichtum bewahrt vor dem Tod (vv. 6–7)
 - A. Entgegnung des Psalmisten: Vor dem Tod kann kein Lösegeld retten (v. 8)
 - a'. Unterfall: Auch das größte Lösegeld kann nicht bewirken (vv. 9–10)
 - 2.2 Aspekt II: Das Schicksal der Menschen: Alle müssen sterben (vv. 11–15)
 - b. Weise und Tore müssen sterben, ohne etwas mitnehmen zu können (vv. 11–12)
 - B. „Kehrvers“: Der Reichtum des Menschen bleibt nicht auf Dauer (v. 13)
 - b'. Das Ergehen der Reichen (vv. 14–15)
 - 2.3 Aspekt III: Einsicht: Nur Gott kann vom Tod freikaufen, und Folgerung für die Adressaten: Furcht vor dem ~~Aufstief~~Aufstieg Anderer ist nicht nötig (vv. 16–21)
 - A'. Die Lösung der Frage für den Beter: Gewissheit der Errettung (v. 16)
 - a''. Mahnung, sich nicht zu fürchten, und Begründung: Vergänglichkeit des Besitzes (vv. 17–18)
 - b''. Kontrast: Verhalten – Ergehen des Reichen (vv. 19–20)
 - B''. „Kehrvers“: Der Reiche durchschaut ~~siene~~seine Lage nicht.¹⁸

It can be concluded that it is not easy to find a strophic structure of Psalm 49 which makes sense to anyone other than oneself. Also if you give up trying and

¹⁸ Delkurt: Mensch, 23.

simply wish to follow the line of reasoning, it appears to be difficult to take into account convincingly all the signals in the text, especially the repetition of important words.

Chiastic structures

What should also be taken into account when trying to establish the structure of Psalm 49 is the fact that one can also discern some chiasmic elements. This has recently been indicated again by Gianni Barbiero. He divides the poem into an introduction (vv. 2–5), two strophes (vv. 6–12 and 14–20) and two refrains (vv. 13 and 21). The two strophes are subdivided into three parts, which are chiastically arranged: 6–7 // 17–20, 8–10 // 15cde–16, 11–12 // 14–15ab.¹⁹ Next to this he notes a correlation between some of these parts within the two strophes: 6–7 // 11–12²⁰ and 14–15ab // 17–20.²¹

Introduction (vv. 2–5)

First strophe

A. vv. 6–7

B. vv. 8–10

C. vv. 11–12

Refrain (v. 13)

Second strophe

C'. vv. 14–15ab

B'. vv. 15cde–16

A'. vv. 17–20

Refrain (v. 21)

David Pleins also sees a chiasmic structure here, but in a different way. In his analysis he does not refer to regular larger units like strophes and in his view the chiasmic structure already starts in v. 2. Taking the last word of the psalm נדמו to mean “(wild animals that) are silenced”, he sees an inclusio with “hear!”, the first word of v. 2. Verses 3–4 and 20–21a share the theme of wisdom for the people. The link between vv. 5 and 19 is: “one increases in understanding to the extent that one listens to the Wisdom Psalm (v. 5) but loses insight to the extent that one listens to false views about oneself (v. 19)”.²² Verses 6–7 are connected to vv. 17–18 by identical words for “fear” and “wealth”. Both vv. 8 and 16 discuss redemption and wealth, using identical words for “God”, “redeeming” and “self”. Verses 9b–11a and 15 deal with the issue of the grave and share language of worship. In

¹⁹ Barbiero: Rätsel, 42. Similar observations were made by Auffret: crains, 16–7 and Girard: Psaumes, 392–400.

²⁰ Barbiero: Rätsel, 46–7.

²¹ Barbiero: Rätsel, 49.

²² Pleins: Death, 21.

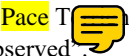
vv. 11b and 14 there is the contrast between what will endure with what cannot endure, with the repetition of the words כסל, “fool/foolly” and אחרים, “others/descendants”. This leaves vv. 12 and 13 as the central pivot of the chiasm: “while buildings and monuments may endure, their rich owners simply do not”.²³

- A. Hear this, all peoples (v. 2)
- B. Children of Adam / wise things (vv. 3–4)
- C. Listen to wisdom (v. 5)
- D. Fear / riches (vv. 6–7)
- E. Redeem / God / self (vv. 8–9a)
- F. Grave (vv. 9b–11a)
- G. Fool / others (v. 11b)
- H. Pivot (vv. 12–13)
- G'. Folly / descendants (v. 14)
- F'. Netherworld (v. 15)
- E'. God / redeem / self (v. 16)
- D'. Fear / riches (vv. 17–18)
- C'. Listen to false views about oneself (v. 19)
- B'. Generation of the fathers / understanding (vv. 20–21a)
- A'. Wild animals that are silenced (v. 21)

Although Plein's reconstruction is not convincing in every respect, it cannot be denied that the poem shows clear chiasmic patterns, which have to be taken into account in the analysis of the structure.²⁴ One of my students suggested the following structure, which can be seen as an improvement on the one by Pleins, because it is primarily based on the repetition of keywords.

- A. משל / תבונות (vv. 2–5)
- B. עשרם / אירא (vv. 6–7)
- C. נפש / הלהים / פדה / אה (vv. 8–9a)
- D. words about the grave and death (vv. 10–11)
- E. “they call” (v. 12)
- F. kernel connected with A–A' (v. 13)
- E'. “their mouth” (v. 14)
- D'. words about death and the netherworld (v. 15)
- C'. פדה / הלהים / נפש / אך (v. 16)
- B'. יעשר and תירא (v. 17; with explanation in vv. 18–20)
- A'. נמשל / יבין (v. 21)²⁵

²³ Pleins: Death, 26.

²⁴ : Psalms, 388, who states: “No chiasmus, either verbal or thematic, may be observed”.

²⁵ Based on a paper written in 2015 by Aaldert van Soest.

In this connection, it is also interesting to note that the way vv. 13 and 21 are related also shows an instance of chiasmus.²⁶ This becomes clear when the parts in which they differ are placed next to each other: *וְלֹא יִבִּין x בְּלִיַּלִּין*. Of course, delineating the structure of a text has consequences for its interpretation.

Within this framework one could also mention the way that the enigmatic v. 15 is constructed. The translation of this verse is a matter of ongoing dispute. With regard to the structure it is clear, however, that by mentioning *שְׁאוֹל* as the second and penultimate word we find here an envelope figure, related to chiasmus, to emphasise this reference to the netherworld.

When it comes to the problem of the meaning of v. 16, the value of the structural analysis appears to be limited. Although both Barbiero and Pleins find a chiasmic structure in Psalm 49 and emphasise the importance of this for the interpretation of the text, they come to opposing conclusions. According to Barbiero, the way in which v. 16 is connected to its context points to a belief in liberation from death by God for the believer in the same way as happened with Enoch and Elijah.²⁷ On the basis of the chiasmic framework he established, Pleins states that Ps. 49 is not concerned with an afterlife, but “with death as the philosophic scale for measuring what endures on this side of the grave”²⁸.

Quantitative structural aspects

In recent research also some observations have been made regarding quantitative structural aspects. Van der Lugt notes that Ps. 49 has 21 (= 3x7) verse lines and 161 (= 23x7) words, whereas the refrain in vv. 13 and 21 consists of 7 words and 28 (= 4x7) letters. In his view, this indicates that the number 7 has a structuring function and that it is no coincidence that this occurs in Ps. 49 (= 7x7).²⁹ Van der Lugt finds support in the conclusion by another Dutch scholar, Smit Sibinga, who counted 163 words (including two times *סֵלָה* in vv. 14 and 16) and noted that the poem is centred around the repeated reference to *אֱלֹהִים* in vv. 8 and 16: $49 + \text{אֱלֹהִים} + 63 + 49 = 163$ words.³⁰ This, however, does not support the theory about the use of the number 7. It is not convincing when in the one counting the *סֵלָה* words are omitted and in the other taken along.

As with other psalms, Van der Lugt assumes a special meaning for the verse at the centre of the poem. In Ps. 49 this is v. 12, with 10 lines before and 10 lines after it. The explicit description of the rich boasting would be the central message of the psalm. This, however, seems somewhat farfetched. Labuschagne, who in

²⁶ Cf. Spangenberg: Context, 204.

²⁷ Barbiero: Rätsel, 51–53.

²⁸ Pleins: Death, 27.

²⁹ Van der Lugt (2011): Psalm, 111. For this view and other logotechnical remarks see also Fokkelman: Poems, 85–6, and Labuschagne: Psalm.

³⁰ Smit Sibinga: Observations, 480, n. 11.

general shares the idea of the meaningful centre, tries to make the case more convincing by extending it to the middle strophe (vv. 11–13).³¹ Smit Sibinga considered vv. 12–13 as the centre of the poem, counting 73 + 17 + 73 words.³²

With other scholars, Van der Lugt also points to the fact that it may be no coincidence that the poem consists of exactly 44 cola (19 bicola and 2 tricola)³³, i.e. twice the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which means that Psalm 49 can be labelled as a “nonalphabetic acrostic”.³⁴ More than with the previous quantitative observations, one can imagine that a writer used this way of underlining his message as a complete whole. It is a literary technique that is also found elsewhere. The best example is Lam. 5, which is not an alphabetic acrostic like the previous chapters, but the number of verse lines is reminiscent of the alphabet.³⁵

A fresh attempt


After this accumulation of opposing and changing views, it takes some courage to continue to attempt anew to make sense of the combination of formal signals in the text. The best starting-point is to analyse the use of repetition.³⁶ Not only is repetition a hard fact, it is also typical of the style of this particular psalm. There is hardly any other psalm with more repetition in it. As the survey given above shows, there are different possibilities to use this as a means to relate the different parts of the poem to each other. Therefore, it may be better to go one step further and focus on the repetition of combinations of words within one verse. Next to the repetitions in vv. 13 and 21 these are פדה + אלהים in vv. 8 and 16, and נצח + ראה in vv. 10 and 20. To the words mentioned in vv. 8 and 16 one might add אך used in v. 16, because in some Hebrew manuscripts the word אה in v. 8, which has the same meaning, is replaced by אך. If the given interpretation of vv. 8–9a as a tricolon is correct, one could also add the word נפש to the combination. One might also add to the list the very similar words כסל / כסיל + אחרים / אחריהם in vv. 11 and 14.

These repeated combinations of words can be regarded as the framework of the poem according to the third chiasmic structure outlined above. The repeated lines 13 and 21 are connected with the introduction (vv. 2–5) via the combination of the words תבונות / תבין and משל / גמשל. The central place of verses 8(–9a) and 16

³¹ Labuschagne: Psalm, 4; cf. also Fokkelman: Poems, 80.

³² Smit-Sibinga: Gedicht, 191–2, n. 19.

³³ Cf. Fokkelman: Poems, 85, n. 31, discussing the fact that according to some translations the number of the cola is 45. This is usually the result of the interpretation of v. 15.

³⁴ Van der Lugt: , 73, n. 1. Cf. also De Meyer: Science, 164; Raabe: Psalm, 79. The term was coined by Freedman: Poems, 415.

³⁵ Cf. Watson: Poetry, 199.

³⁶ Cf. Estes: Artistry, 58–60. An exhaustive overview can also be found in Van der Lugt: Cantos, 71–73.

is emphasised by the fact that only in these verses God is mentioned. This also underlines the contrast with man (אָדָם) in vv. 3, 13 and 21. Also the noted combination of words in vv. 11 and 14 fits in very well, especially when we take into account the clear parallels between vv. 10–11 and vv. 14–15.

However, there is a problem with the combination of words that is repeated in vv. 10 and 20, because it does not fit in with the assumed chiasmic structure. Because of the attention paid to the theme of life and death in this psalm, these verses about one's eternal fate and the uncertainty of seeing either light or destruction, are of central importance. One would expect them also to have a strategic place within the formal structure. Of particular interest is that these verses do have this special place in the poem as reconstructed by Loretz. As can be seen in his translation given above and as was indicated in the comments, vv. 10 and 20 are placed at the end of the second and fourth strophes. These verses **is p** to words the insight of the wise concerning how foolish the rich are to think that they can manipulate death. **Things** me to the idea that both Loretz with his diachronic approach and those who defend the unity of the poem on the basis of their synchronic approach can be right. This is confirmed by the fact that precisely the verses that form the framework of the text in its present form are for the most part regarded by Loretz as later additions, which include vv. 9, 16 and 21. Apparently, at a certain moment³⁷ the poem as described by Loretz was supplemented by a number of verses in which the theme of life and death was described from a new point of view. An editor, who wished to put more emphasis on God having an active role, took up the remark in v. 8 that no man can pay the price of his life to God. He added the complementary line in what is now v. 16 formulating his belief in how God acts in this matter. In v. 15 he preceded it with a statement emphasising the difference this makes when compared to the fate of the rich boasting about their wealth. The laboured style of verse could very well have been caused by the wish of the editor to fit it into a frame of 44 cola.

All this leads me to the conclusion that there are good reasons to differentiate between an original poem and an edited version of Ps. 49. The original poem had a well-balanced strophic structure, but also whoever was responsible for the additions to the text had a keen eye for the structure of the text. He turned the old strophically ordered text into a sophisticated chiasmic poem having the length of a non-alphabetic acrostic.

³⁷ A precise date is difficult to give. Spangenberg: Context, 210–12, suggests a date in the middle of the third century BCE. This is primarily based on the parallel between Ps. 49:11ab and Qoh. 2:16. The critical view on riches would fit very well in the situation of tensions between the rich upper class and the poor lower class in that period. If it is correct that we have to distinguish between an original poem and a later addition, Spangenberg's dating would concern the original poem.


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