

Psalm 53:1–7

[cf. Psalm 14]

Translation, Logoprosodic Analysis, and Observations

Wisdom Psalm: Meditation on the Fool

Ps 53:1–7

A. *The Fool Denies God's Existence* (53:1–2) [4.3]

53:1	To the <i>maestro</i> according to <i>Mahalath</i> / a <i>Maskil</i> of David /	<u>17 2</u>	<u>5 5 0</u>
		52:9–53:1	36 23 13
53:2	The fool says in his heart / there is no God //	<u>18 2</u>	<u>5 5 0</u>
		52:7–53:2a	57 40 17
	They are corrupt /	<u>5 1</u>	<u>1 0 1</u>
		52:4–53:2b	78 52 26
	And their ways are vile / there is none that does good //	<u>17 2</u>	<u>5 0 5</u>
		52:11–53:2	26 14 12

B. *God Looks Down to See Those Who Seek Him* (53:3) [2.4]

53:3	God / from heaven ^a looks down on the sons of Adam /	<u>21 2</u>	<u>6 6 0</u>
		52:11–53:2	32 20 12
	To see / if there are any who understand //	9 2	3 3 0
	who seek / after God //	<u>10 2</u>	<u>3 0 3</u>
		53:2–3	23 14 9

C. *Lacking Understanding the Fools are Evildoers* (53:4–5) [3.4.3]

53:4	All of them have turned aside / together they are depraved /	14 2	4 4 0
	there is none that does good //	<u>8 1</u>	<u>3 3 0</u>
		53:1–4b	35 26 9
	No / (there is) not one //	<u>6 2</u>	<u>3 0 3</u>
		53:1–4	38 26 12
53:5	Don't the doers of evil / understand? /	<u>16 2</u>	<u>4 4 0</u>
		53:3–5	26 20 6
	Who eat up my people ^a as they eat bread //	<u>15 1</u>	<u>4 4 0</u>
		53:1–5b	46 34 12
	(But) on God / they do not call //	<u>13 2</u>	<u>3 0 3</u>
		53:1–5	49 34 15

D. **The Wicked are in Terror for God “Scatters Their Bones”** (53:6–7) [4.2]

53:6	There ^a (they were) overwhelmed with dread / where there was nothing to dread //	9 1 <u> 9 1 </u>	3 3 0 <u> 3 3 0 </u>
		53:5–6b	17 14 3
	For God / scattered ^b the bones of those who attacked you //	<u> 16 2 </u>	<u> 5 5 0 </u>
		53:4–6c	32 26 6
	You put them to shame / for God despised them //	<u> 19 2 </u>	<u> 4 0 4 </u>
		53:5–6	26 19 7

E. **Deliverance Comes from Zion Where God Resides** (53:6–7) [3.4]

53:7	O that out of Zion / ^a would come /	<u> 10 2 </u>	<u> 3 3 0 </u>
		53:3–7a	51 38 13
	Salvation for Israel //	<u> 10 1 </u>	<u> 2 2 0 </u>
		53:2–7b	64 45 19
	When God restores / the fortunes of his people //	<u> 14 2 </u>	<u> 4 4 0 </u>
		53:2–7c	68 49 19
	Jacob will rejoice / Israel will be glad //	<u> 15 2 </u>	<u> 4 0 4 </u>
		53:3–7	61 44 17
		53:1–7	77 54 23

Scansion in SAS Units:

$$(4.3).(2.4).(3.4.3).(4.2).(3.4) = (7 + 6) + 10 + (6 + 7) = 13 + 10 + 13 = 36 \text{ SAS units}$$

Concentric Compositional Formula: 77 = 38 + 1 + 38 [word count—with heading]

Notes:

53:3^a Reading *deḥī* here as conjunctive.

53:5^a Reading *deḥī* here as conjunctive.

53:7^a Reading *sinnôr* followed by *galgal* here in BHS as conjunctive.

Summary of the Logoprosodic Analysis

1. Psalm 53 has five strophes: vv. 1–2, 3, 4–5, 6 and 7:

A	53:1a	{the heading is outside the structure of the psalm in terms of balance in mora-count}			
	53:1b–2	balanced dyad + pivot:	[18 + 5 + 17]	= 18 + 5 + 17	morae
B	53:3	balanced dyad:	[21 + (9 + 10)]	= 21 + 19	morae

X	53:4–5	2 balanced dyads + pivot:	[14 + 14] + 16 + [15 + 13]	= 28 + 16 + 28	morae
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B'	53:6	balanced dyad + pivot:	[(9 + 9) + 16 + 19]	= 18 + 16 + 19	morae
A'	53:7ab	balanced dyad:	[10 + 10]	= 10 + 10	morae
	53:7cd	balanced dyad:	[14 + 15]	= 14 + 15	morae

2. The 1st strophe (53:1–2) is in two parts with four subdivisions: 53:1–2b, 2c–3.
 - 52:9–53:1 **23** words before *atnach*
 - 52:11–53:2 **26** words
3. The 2nd strophe (53:3) is a single part with two subdivisions: 53:3a and 3b.
 - 53:2–3 **23** words
4. The 3rd strophe (53:4–5) is a single part with three subdivisions: 53:4, 5a and 5bc.
 - 53:1–4 **26** words before *atnach*
 - 53:1–5 **34** (= **17** x 2) words before *atnach*
5. The 4th strophe (53:6) is a single part with three subdivisions: 53:6ab, 6c and 6d.
 - 53:5–6 **26** words
 - 53:4–6 **26** words before *atnach*
6. The 5th strophe (53:7) is a single part with three subdivisions: 53:7ab and 7cd.
 - 53:3–7 **17** words after *atnach*
 - 53:1–7 **23** words after *atnach*

Observations

- The five strophes in Psalm 53 may be outlined in a menorah pattern, which is determined primarily on prosodic grounds, as follows:

A	Musical instructions: according to <i>Mahalath</i> —a <i>Maskil</i>	[4]	53:1
B	The fool denies God's existence	[3]	53:2
C	God looks down to see those who seek him	[3.4]	53:3
X	Lacking understanding fools are evildoers	[3.4.3]	53:4–5
C'	The wicked are in terror but the righteous find refuge in God	[4.3]	53:6
B'	Deliverance comes out of Zion where God resides	[3]	53:7ab
A'	When God restores the fortunes of Israel, his people will rejoice	[4]	53:7cd

- In terms of the 77 words in Psalm 53, the **arithmological center** falls on the word הלא ("do [they] not") at the beginning of verse 5, with 38 words on either side. The *Concentric Compositional Formula* is as follows:

$$77 = 38 + 1 + 38 \quad [\text{word-count—including heading in 53:1}]$$

A **meaningful center** is found by including three words on either side, as follows:

	אין גם אחד	There is not even one!
8	ידעו פעלי און הלא	Don't the doers of evil understand?

In this instance the **concentric compositional formula** becomes:

$$77 = 35 + 7 + 35 \quad [\text{word-count—including heading in 53:1}]$$

The **meaningful center** may be extended to include seven words on either side, as follows:

	נאלחו אין עשה טוב	They are depraved, there is none that does good,
	אין גם אחד	no, not one!
8	ידעו פעלי און הלא	Don't they understand, the doers of evil,
	אכלי עמי אכלו לחם	who eat up my people, as they eat bread?

These words highlight the meaning of Psalm 53 as a whole, which is a wisdom meditation on the fool described here. The *Concentric Compositional Formula* now becomes:

$$77 = 31 + 15 + 31 \quad [\text{word-count—including heading in 53:1}]$$

- The 26-word **meaningful framework**, with the 8-word framework highlighted in gray, reads as follows:

1	למנצח על-מחלת	To the music director, according to Mahalath,
	משכילם לדוד	A <i>Maskil</i> belonging to David.
	אמר נבל בלבו אין אלהים	The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
	השחיתו והתעיבו עול	They are corrupt and their ways are vile.

7	מי יתן מציון ישעות ישראל	O that out of Zion would come deliverance for Israel
	בשוב אלהים שבות עמו	When God restores the fortunes of his people
	יגל יעקב ישמח ישראל	Jacob will rejoice, Israel will be glad.

7. Summary of the concentric compositional formulae:

$$77 = 35 + 7 + 35 \quad \text{word-count}$$

$$77 = 31 + 15 + 31$$

{with others in between}

$$77 = 13 + \mathbf{51} + 13$$

$$77 = 4 + \mathbf{69} + 4$$

$$36 = 13 + 10 + 13 \quad \text{SAS units}$$

$$20 = 7 + 6 + 7 \quad \text{briques (primary SAS units)}$$

8. In the prosodic structure of Psalm 53, the basic building blocks (**briques**) in each poetic **verset** are the **primary SAS (syntactic accentual stress) units**. These sub-units are delineated by the Masoretes, who marked most of the boundaries with one of the following:

- **Soph Pasuq** A large colon following a word signifies the end of a verse, which does not always coincide with the end of a sentence.
- **Atnach** A small caret-like mark (like ^) beneath the consonantal text, pointing upward, is used to divide most verses. Its primary importance for our purposes concerns its use in the matter of numerical composition—i.e., the total word-count in each line is divided into the number of words before and after *atnach*.
- **Oleh weyored** A combination of two accentual signs: a caret-like mark above the consonantal text, pointing to the left, used together with the accent *merka* (an upright line beneath the consonantal text slanting to the right). These two marks usually appear on the same word, but when that word is monosyllabic the *merka* falls on the following word. This major divider is usually considered to be a stronger disjunctive accent than *atnach*.

In the prosodic analysis presented with the translation (above), the presence of these three primary disjunctive markers is indicated with a double slash (//). Psalm 53 has 20 **briques**, 18 of which are marked: by *soph pasuq* (7 times, at the end of each verse), *atnach* (6 times, in each verse, except v. 1), and *oleh weyored* (5 times, in vv. 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7). The boundary of the remaining two **briques** is marked by *rəḥîa^c muğraš* (v. 1) and *šinnor* (v. 7).

9. The prosodic structure of Psalm 53, in terms of its **briques** (primary SAS units), may be displayed as follows: ^ represents *atnach*; : represents *soph pasuq*; † represents *oleh weyored*; and † represents all other accent markers.

A ¹ *lamnaṣṣēah ʿal-māḥalat maškīl laḏāwīd :*
² ʾāmar nāḅāl baḅibbī ʾên ʾēlōhîm ^ *hišḥîṭû wəḥîṭʿîḅû ʿāwel †*
 ʾên ʿōsēh-tôḅ :

B ³ ʾēlōhîm miššamayim hišqîḅ ʿal-bəneʾādām ‡
lirôṭṭ ḥāyēš maškīl ^ dōrēš ʾeṭ-ʾēlōhîm :

X ⁴ *kullô sāg yaḥdāw neʾēlāḥû † ʾên ʿōsēh-tôḅ ^*
ʾên gam-ʾeḥād :
⁵ **hālōʾ** *yāḏəʿû pōʿālê ʾāwen ‡ oḳəlê ʿammî ʾāḳəlû leḥem ^*
ʾēlōhîm lôʾ qārāʾû :

B' ⁶ *šām pāḥādû-pāḥad lôʾ-ḥāyāḥ paḥad †*
kî-ʾēlōhîm pizzar ʿašmôt ḥōnāḳ ^ ḥēḅîšōṭāḥ kî-ʾēlōhîm məʾāsām :

A' ⁷ *mî yittēn miššiyôn † yəšūʿôṭ yisrāʾel †*
bəšûḅ ʾēlōhîm šəḅûṭ ʿammô ^ yāḡēl yaʿāqōḅ yismaḥ yisrāʾel :

10. The 20 **briques** are distributed in 5 strophes in Psalm 53 as follows:

$$(4 + 3) + 6 + (3 + 4) = 7 + 6 + 7 = 20$$

The **arithmological center** of Psalm 53 falls on the word **hālōʾ** (“does [he] not”) in 53:5a, with 38 words on either side. Psalm 53 has 36 SAS units, 20 **briques** (primary SAS), 8 versets and 5 strophes. The **arithmological center** is in the middle strophe, the middle two versets, the middle two **briques**, and the middle two SAS units.

11. Terrien finds 5 strophes in Psalm 53 (*The Psalms* [2003], pp. 414–15). Van der Lugt and Labuschagne find 5 strophes. Fokkelman has 4 strophes. The logoprosodic analysis indicates that there are five strophes in Psalm 53.

Christensen	Terrien	Van der Lugt & Labuschagne	Fokkelman
A 53:1–2	Heading (v. 1)	Heading (v. 1)	Heading (v. 1)
	1 53:2	I 1 53:2	1 53:2–3
B 53:3	2 53:3–4	2 53:3	
X' 53:4–5	3 53:5	II 3 53:4–5	2 53:4–5
B' 53:6	4 53:6	4 53:6	3 53:6
A' 53:7	5 53:7	III 5 53:7	4 53:7

12. The following is a list of compositional numbers that appear at the boundaries of the verses counting from the beginning:

53:1–4 **26** words before *atnach*
53:1–5 **34** (= 17 x 2) words before *atnach*
53:1–6 **64** (= 32 x 2) words
53:1–7 **23** words after *atnach*

It is not possible to utilize any of the four compositional numbers (**17**, **23**, **26** and **32**) until the end of v. 3, which leaves 5 possible boundaries to work with. In 4 out of 5 of these boundaries (or 80% of the time) a multiple of one of these four compositional numbers is present.

13. Determining the details of the musical and literary structures of Psalm 53 as a whole calls for input on the part of others in the BIBAL Forum, as we consider the rhetorical features in greater depth and further information contained in the *te'amim* of this particular text.

14. Bibliography: [see the file for Psalm 14]

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