

Psalm 116: Prosodic structure

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This paper is an exemplary analysis of Psalm 116. It offers full text-syntactic and prosodic analyses and an elementary interpretation. The text-syntactic and prosodic analyses will show analytical procedures, methodical problems and reflections on the functions of syntax and versification. The elementary interpretation will show what an integrated analysis of classical Hebrew poetry has to offer.

With the strophic analyses completed, the present papers contain meta-analytical reflections. The first one was about the text-syntactic structure of Psalm 116, the second about Kalkman's text-syntactic analysis of the psalm, and this one is about the prosodic structure of Psalm 116. The reader is supposed to consult *Psalm 116 Supplement 2.0*, as it offers the full text-syntactic and prosodic structures.

We will discuss the following subjects:

- *Balanced unbalance*
- *Repetitions*

Balanced unbalance

Psalm 116 consists of eight strophes. Because prosody is about balance, and combinations of two are the most frequent, the expected prosodic structure of Psalm 116 is 2.2/2.2: two parts that consist of two stanzas of two strophes each. In fact, Psalm 116 is unbalanced: 3.1/1.3: both halves or stanzas consist of two sub-stanzas of three strophes and two sub-stanzas of one strophe.

Balance is found on the top level: 4/4 – both halves or stanzas consist of four strophes. But more importantly, the unbalance is balanced. The sub-stanzas are chiasmically arranged: 3+1 // 1+3. This arrangement is based on the two repetition clusters, 1.1-2/10.1-3 and 7.1-2/12, which form a linear-parallel structure: A.B//A.B.¹ The sub-stanzas are linked alternately, so that the A-units count 4 strophes and the B-units count 4 strophes too. The A-strophes are about the present state of mind of the protagonist, the B-strophes about the challenges he faces.

A-strophes	3	> 1		vv. 1-2.3-4.5-6	> 10-11
B-strophes	1	> 3		vv. 7-9	> 12-14.15-16.17-19

There is still more balanced unbalance. The A-strophes count two verse lines each, the B-strophes three!

A-strophes	2.2.2	> 2		vv. 1-2.3-4.5-6	> 10-11
B-strophes	3	> 3.3.3		vv. 7-9	> 12-14.15-16.17-19

Balance is delicate and dangerous. Prosody is about balance, but numerical balance should not be an argument in the prosodic analysis – and it is such a convenient one... Numerical balance of cola, verse lines, strophes and stanzas may be the result of the analysis, but should not be part of it.²

An even, balanced structure will tempt the analyst. Would one recognize the unbalanced structure of Psalm 116, when one is looking for numerical balance and regular structure? Both Fokkelman and Van der Lugt present a balanced structure:

Fokkelman:	vv. 1-2.3-4 / 5-6.7-8 // 9-11.12-14 / 15-16.17-19
	two sections of two stanzas of two strophes each; the first section contains small strophes (two verse lines, the first one a bicolon, the second a tricolon), the second large ones (three verse lines): ³
	2.2 / 2.2 // 3.3 / 3.3 verse lines

¹ Note how the same four-part structure has both a chiasm-parallel pattern and a linear-parallel one – depending on, in this case, strophic composition and paradigmatic links – and needs both of them to reach its full potential!

² Against Fokkelman 232: 'Finally, it is the numerical aspects which decide the matter.'

³ Fokkelman's description of the balance of Psalm 116 goes far beyond these numbers (see 232-234 and 372).

Van der Lugt, *Structuren*:

vv. 1-2.3-4.5-6 / 7-8.9-10.11-12 / 13-14.15-16.17-19

three stanzas of three strophes each; all strophes have two verse lines, except the last one: 2.2.2 / 2.2.2 / 2.2.3 = 6.6.7 verse lines

Van der Lugt, *Cantos*:

vv. 1-2.3-4 / 5-6.7-9 // 10-11.12-14 / 15-16.17-19

two stanzas of two sub-stanzas of two strophes each; in each sub-stanza the first strophe counts two verse lines and the second three, except in the first sub-stanza:

9		10							verse lines / stanzas
4	5	5	5						verse lines / sub-stanzas
2 + 2	2 + 3	2 + 3	2 + 3						verse lines / strophes

Numerical balance can take the place of less tempting and more neutral, descriptive arguments. Fokkelman points to the even distribution of cola and the great syllable counts, Van der Lugt to the regular alternation of two-line and three-line strophes. We kept away from these arguments in the analysis and evaluate the numerical results here, in the meta-analytical reflections. Numerical balance is a bonus, nothing more.

Repetitions

Lexical repetitions play an important role in classical Hebrew literature, both thematic and structural. They raise awareness of major themes and motives – as *Leitwörter* – and, in many poems, they support the prosodic structure by marking its parts.

We discussed the lexical repetitions of Psalm 116 in our strophic analyses. In each strophe, we went into detail about the *thematic* importance of the repetitions surfacing there. At the end of each stanza, we investigated the *structural* function of the local repetitions.⁴ Here, we will discuss the interstanzaic repetitions and argue for a sound methodology.

We started the analyses of interstrophic repetitions with making an inventory. This may be self-evident, but it is not practice among prosodists. Fokkelman will certainly make an inventory, but, never discussing the results as such, he will take his pick and incorporate only that into his close reading. A naive reader will not be aware of his selective procedures.⁵ Van der Lugt will make an in principle full inventory, but does not present it as such. He will plot the results on the prosodic structure he has found and present them together with other paradigmatic material.⁶ The reader who

wants to check Van der Lugt's choices, has to make the stand-alone inventory him/herself. We may conclude that one should make a full inventory and that one should present it in a neutral way.

A neutral inventory may be organized as follows (see *Inventory I*: page 4):

- One should not order the repetitions according to a supposed repetitive pattern, but present them in a linear way, from right to left. The verse where the lexical item is repeated and the repetition comes into existence, is shaded. So one can observe how repetitions work verse by verse.
- One should look for repetition clusters (no 6, 7, 11, 13), for combinations with variation (no 1, 8), and for root repetition (no 2, 9).
- One should number each entry, and repeat the entry every time the lexical item is found. If it is repeated more than once, the number is ***in bold and italics***. So one can observe how multiple repetitions of one lexical item function on their various positions and text levels.

Two annotations: Number 6, the parallel between cola 1a and 10a, is not much of a lexical repetition, but is a syntactic, morphological and semantic parallel on a prominent position. At number 14, the repetitions of the name of God are recorded, but outside the inventory, because they would spoil it.

With the inventory made, we will examine the repetitions that are mentioned in the analysis of Fokkelman. He draws attention to linear patterns of repetitions. In both halves of the text, the four strophes show a A.B / A.B pattern. Strophes 1-2 and 5-6 are linked by a repetition of $\sqrt{\text{חגון}}$, and strophes 3-4 and 7-8 by repetitions of נפשי and מוה .⁷ In the second half, strophes 9-11 and 15-18 have both twice נני , and strophes 12-14 and 17-19 have three whole cola in common.⁸

These repetitions are, of course, found in our inventory too. Items no 2, 4 and 5 in the first half of the psalm, and entries no 12, 1 and 13 in the second half (see *Inventory III*). They form indeed linear patterns (see below).

Van der Lugt notes a chiasmic pattern of sub-stanzas (A.B / B.A). Sub-stanzas 1-4 and 15-19 share the word בוה , the phrase אנה יהוה , and the

⁴ See *Psalm 116,10-11: Syntax and Versification*, § Interstrophic repetitions in the first stanza, and *Psalm 116,17-19: Syntax and Versification*, § Interstrophic repetitions in the second stanza.

⁵ Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*.

⁶ Van der Lugt, *Strofische structuren en Cantos and Strophes*.

⁷ Fokkelman 229; the distribution of the name of God is not linear but chiasmic: $1x + 2x // 2x + 1x$. By the way, the position of verse 9 is important; it belongs to the second section in Fokkelman's prosodic structure.

⁸ Fokkelman 230 and 232.

clause **וּבְשֵׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא**; sub-stanzas 5-9 and 10-14 the roots **שָׁע**, **שׁוּב**, and **גָּמַל**.⁹

This chiasmic pattern can be recognized, but it is spoiled by items that are repeated more than once. Numbers 1 and 5 are found in three of the four sub-stanzas.

Usually lexical repetitions have a structural function, and if so, especially above strophe level.¹⁰ It is, therefore, possible – and advisable – to determine the strophes before analyzing the lexical repetitions. The next step is to enter the strophes in the neutral inventory (see *Inventory II*: page 4).

Analyzing the repetitions starts with determining the levels on which repetitions function. So one gets (in Psalm 116) interstrophic repetitions – a lexical item is repeated in another strophe of the same sub-stanza; intersubstanzaic (sorry!) repetitions – a lexical item is repeated in another sub-stanza of the same stanza; interstanzaic repetitions – a lexical item is repeated in another stanza. The levels are important because repetitions interact with repetitions on the same level.

The description of this interaction is the essential part of the analysis. If repetitions on the same level show readable patterns, they are thought to contribute to the coherence and the working of the prosodic structure on that level. Even then, this contribution may be rather weak, depending on the number and the nature of the repetitions involved. And finally, if repetitions do not show any readable patterns, they have no structural function. The result of the analysis should be entered in the inventory (see *Inventory III*: page 5).

We already analyzed the repetitions in each stanza (the interstrophic and intersubstanzaic repetitions), so that we can enter the results in the inventory (see the upper two parts: no 1-5 and no 8, 12, 1, 13, 8). We found the same pattern in both stanzas: the first two strophes are connected, and all four strophes are connected in a linear parallel pattern (Ac.Bc/A.B). This linear arrangement does not conform with the strophic one – the solid lines show the strophic structure, the dashed line the linear p pattern. In fact, this linear patterning gives us the balanced structure we missed. These repetitions deviate from the unbalanced text-

syntactic and prosodic structure and create a more balanced ‘shadow structure’.

The analysis of the interstanzaic repetitions brought us the two complex repetition clusters that mark the two stanzas and the four sub-stanzas, in short the whole structure of the psalm (see the third part of the inventory: no 6-7).

The same analysis resulted in five repetitions that do not fit in any readable pattern (see the fourth part: no 5, 11, 9, 10, 14). These repetitions play their part but not structurally.

We may conclude that the two large repetition clusters (no 6 and 7) mark the prosodic structure of Psalm 116, its division in two stanzas of each two sub-stanzas. Further, that the majority of repetitions function at stanza-level, and suggest an even and linear arrangement of strophes in each stanza (A.B / A.B), which does not fit the uneven text-syntactic and prosodic structure and is a kind of ‘shadow structure’. Finally, that the minority of repetitions are present on interstanzaic level but without any structural function. This research shows in combination with an analysis of the work of Van der Lugt and Fokkelman that it is impossible to combine *all* repetitions of Psalm 116 in (a) convincing pattern(s).

⁹ Van der Lugt, *Cantos*. The three-part structure in Van der Lugt, *Structuren* (399), was based on the repetition of verse 7 in verse 12 (number 7) and that of verses 13-14 in verses 17-18 (numbers 1 and 13).

¹⁰ Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 87-88.

Inventory I: Lexical repetitions, linear – neutral presentation

no	lexeme \ verse	19	18	17	cd	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]																	B		A	
2	תַּחֲנוּנֵי [A] – חֲנוּן [B]																	B			A
3	לִי																X				X
4	נַפְשִׁי													X	X				X		
5	מוֹת													X						X	
6	QATAL ^{1SG-EMOTIVE} -כִּי-YIQTOL ^{SPEAK/HEAR}											X									X
7	עֵל + גַּמַּל + וְיָהוּהָ + שׁוּב ^{ref IK} √									X						X					
8	כָּל־הָאָדָם [A] – כָּל־תֵּי [B] – לְכָל־עַמּוֹ [C]									B	A										
9	יְהוֹשִׁיעַ [A] – יְשׁוּעוֹת [B]									B						A					
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]									B								B		A	
8	כָּל־הָאָדָם [A] – כָּל־תֵּי [B] – לְכָל־עַמּוֹ [C]									C	B	A									
10	עֵינַי						X						X								
5	מוֹת						X						X							X	
11	אֵנָה יְהוָה						X													X	
12	אֲנִי					X	X				X	X									
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]																		B		A
13	נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁלֶם נִגְדָה־נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ		X					X													
8	כָּל־הָאָדָם [A] – כָּל־תֵּי [B] – לְכָל־עַמּוֹ [C]									C	B	A									
14	יְהוָה	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Inventory II: Lexical repetitions above strophe level, linear – strophic presentation

no	lexeme \ strophe	19-17	16-15	14-12	11-10	9-7	6-5	4-3	2-1
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]							B	A
2	תַּחֲנוּנֵי [A] – חֲנוּן [B]						B		A
3	לִי						X		X
4	נַפְשִׁי					XX		X	
5	מוֹת					X		X	
6	QATAL ^{1SG-EMOTIVE} -כִּי-YIQTOL ^{SPEAK/HEAR}				X				X
7	עֵל + גַּמַּל + וְיָהוּהָ + שׁוּב ^{ref IK} √			X		X			
8	כָּל־הָאָדָם [A] – כָּל־תֵּי [B] – לְכָל־עַמּוֹ [C]			CB	A				
9	יְהוֹשִׁיעַ [A] – יְשׁוּעוֹת [B]			B			A		
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]			B				B	A
10	עֵינַי		X			X			
5	מוֹת		X			X		X	
11	אֵנָה יְהוָה		X					X	
12	אֲנִי		XX		XX				
1	ובשם־יהוה אֶקְרָא [B] – ובימי אֶקְרָא [A]	B		B				B	A
13	נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁלֶם נִגְדָה־נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ	X		X					
8	כָּל־הָאָדָם [A] – כָּל־תֵּי [B] – לְכָל־עַמּוֹ [C]	C		CB	A				
14	יְהוָה	XXX	XX	XXX		XX	XX	XX	X

Inventory III: Lexical repetitions above strophe level, functional – presentation of the results

no	lexeme \ strophe	19-17	16-15	14-12	11-10	9-7	6-5	4-3	2-1
1	ובימי אקרא [A] – ובשם יהוה אקרא [B]							B	A
2	תחנוני [A] – חנון [B]						B		A
3	לי						X		X
4	נפשי					XX		X	
5	מות					X		X	
8	כל־האדם [A] – כל־ת' [B] – כל־עמו [C]			CB	A				
12	אני		XX		XX				
1	ובימי אקרא [A] – ובשם יהוה אקרא [B]	B		B					
13	נדרתי ליהוה אשלם נגדה־נא לכל־עמו	X		X					
8	כל־האדם [A] – כל־ת' [B] – כל־עמו [C]	C		C					
6	QATAL ^{1SG-EMOTIVE} כִּי־YIQTOL ^{SPEAK/HEAR}				X				X
7	על ^{ref IK} + גמל ^{ref IK} + יהוה + שוב ^{ref IK} √			X		X			
5	מות		X			X		X	
11	אנה יהוה		X					X	
9	יהושׁיע [A] – ישועות [B]			B			A		
10	עיני		X			X			
14	יהוה	XXX	XX	XXX		XX	XX	XX	X

no 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: the linear pattern in the first half: Ac.Bc/A.B;

no 8, 12, 1, 13, 8: the linear pattern in the second half: Ac.Bc/A.B;

no 6-7: the two grand parallels;

no 5, 11, 9, 10, 14: repetitions without patterning.