

Psalm 116,1-2: Syntax and Versification

Dr. Harm van Grol

This paper is an exemplary analysis van 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.

This paper is about the first strophe. The others will follow in due course.

Strophe 1-2

The first strophe consists of two bicola:

| | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| אתְּדַקְוִי תַחֲנוּנִי | אֶהְבֵּתִי כִּי־יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה | 1 | I love for YHWH will hear | my voice, my pleas for mercy, |
| וּבִימֵי אֶקְרָא | כִּי־הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי | 2 | for he has turned his ear to me, | and all my days I will call. |

Versification: line 1

Verse line 1 consists of two clauses, but they are distributed in a distinctive way. The second clause is split in two; the first half, the verb and the subject, is combined with the first clause in colon 1a, and the second half, the complement, fills colon 1b.

The consulted text-editions and the Leningrad and Aleppo codices show this division, in accordance with the Masoretic accentuation, showing an *atnach* under יהוה.

The traditional division is motivated by prosody. The first clause, אֶהְבֵּתִי, has one stress unit and is too short to constitute a colon. According to the prosodic rule, cola consist of two (regularly), three (more often), or four metrical units (incidentally).¹ The poet could fill up the colon with another short clause, or, as in this line, the first part of a longer clause. The result is a regular 3+2 stressed verse line.

The poet has chosen the distinctive composition of colon 1a to mark the two parts of the psalm. The composition of אֶהְבֵּתִי כִּי־יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה will be repeated and varied semantically at the start of the second half of the psalm, הִאֲמַנְתִּי כִּי אֶדְבֹר:²

QATAL^{1S-EMOTIVE} + כִּי-YIQTOL^{HEAR/SPEAK}.

Prosodic structure

Studying a prosodic structure, we must reckon with three factors: rules, balance patterns, and syntax. The prosodic structure of a poem has to comply with prosodic rules on each prosodic level. We already mentioned the prosodic rule of the cola. Other rules will follow. The elementary constituent of the prosodic structure is balance on all linguistic levels, rhythmic, phonemic, morphologic, syntactic, and semantic balances, brought together in line parallelism or a more fluid free balance pattern. Finally, syntax is important in the form of syntactic constraints and syntactic coherence.

Verse lines consist of two cola (very frequent), three cola (frequent), or one colon (most incidentally).³ Both lines of the strophe comply with this prosodic rule and are bicola. They show rhythmic balance: 3+2, 2+2 metrical units and 8+6, 6+6 syllables,⁴ but no internal line parallelism or free balance patterns. The prosodic manipulation of clause syntax in line 1 is already discussed. The cola of line 2 each consist of a clause.

Strophes consist of two verse lines (very frequent), three verse line (frequent), or one verse line (incidentally).⁵ The strophe complies with this

¹ A stress unit or better metrical unit consists of a word (graphic unit) of two or more syllables or of a one-syllable word and another word, together having one strongly stressed syllable and one or more weakly stressed syllables. The detailed rhythmic reading rules are found in Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 15-17; an English version with discussion is published in Van Grol, 'Classical Hebrew Metrics'.

The cola of Psalm 116 fall neatly within the given boundaries: 24 cola of three metrical units (1a.3a.b.c.4a.5a.6a.b.7a.b.-8a.9a.10b.11a.12a.13b.14a.b.15a.16c.17a.b.18a.b), 17 cola of two metrical units (1b.2a.b.5b.8b.c.9b.10a.11b.12b.13a.15b.16a.b.d.-19a.b), and 1 colon of four metrical units (4b).

² Colon 10a has two clauses – different from the one and a half clause of colon 1a – but the second clause has its complement, a direct speech, in the second colon – like the second clause in colon 1a.

³ See Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 15; an English version with discussion is published in Van Grol, 'Classical Hebrew Metrics'. In Psalm 116, eighteen verse lines are bicola, two tricola.

⁴ One could read colon 2a with three metrical units, but that would imply a collision of accents: o-oó oó ó. Nesiga does not help because it creates a new collision: o-oó óo ó. Both collisions are not functional. I prefer a reading with two metrical units: o-oó oó-o. For collision and nesiga see Van Grol, *Versbouw*, 70-76.

⁵ See Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 15; an English version with

prosodic rule and has two verse lines. There is no external line parallelism, but there are some balances.

Cola 1a and 2b have a clause without complement.⁶ The other two cola show a morphologic and semantic balance: אָזְנוֹ // קוֹלִי, Nsg^{+suffix}, *my voice // his ear*. This balance is the result of remarkable phrasing. The usual expression is קוֹל תְּחַנּוּנַי, but the construct relation is changed in an appositional one, and a suffix is added.⁷

The A-cola have the conjunction כִּי, and maybe a rhythmic and phonemic balance: אָהַבְתִּי // לִי אָזְנוֹ, oó-o, ׀...א. The B-cola show a chiasmatic balance pattern:

| | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|------------|
| אָקְרָא | וּבִימִי | | תְּחַנּוּנַי | אֶתְקוּלִי |
| אָקְרָא | NpI ^{suffix1sg} | | NpI ^{suffix1sg} | אָקְרָא |

The function of this kind of balances is double. They form a network that binds together the cola of the strophe, and they draw attention to aspects that may influence the interpretation (characters, themes). There is no point in probing each individual balance for relevance.

The strophe is a syntactic unit, the four clauses of which are connected by the conjunctions כִּי and וְ. There is no such connection with verse 3, that forms a syntactic unit with verse 4.

Text-syntactic structure

Generally, text-syntactic structures are not discussed in detail. Therefore, the analyses of textual hierarchies in *Shebanq* are rather unique.⁸ They are based on procedures and computer programs developed by Eep Talstra. Our text-syntactic analysis will follow similar procedures and it is therefore a natural thing to compare and discuss the text-syntactic structure of Psalm 116 in *Shebanq*. In view of our criticism it should be noted that the textual hierarchies in *Shebanq* do not represent the views of the ETCBC, but are the result of choices individual analysts have made.

The four clauses of strophe 1-2 are connected, but in which way? In *Shebanq*, the following

discussion is published in Van Grol, 'Classical Hebrew Metrics'. In Psalm 116, four strophes have two verse lines, four three.

⁶ The complement of the [QATAL]clause is only mentioned in the second clause as the subject of that clause, YHWH. One should not supplement it in clause 1.1 (e.g. BHS), because its absence is a feature of the text – compare verse 10. An alternative interpretation is to read the [כִּי]clause as an object clause (see Van der Ploeg 281; Booij 41).

⁷ 'Elsewhere we always (5 times) find 'קול ה' (Joüon/Muraoka §93p, calling the phenomenon 'suspect'). One could read a *chireq compaginis* (e.g. Booij 41), but that would spoil poetry.

⁸ *Shebanq*, System for HEBrew Text: ANnotations for Queries and Markup, is an online environment for studying the Hebrew

hierarchy is offered:

| | |
|---|-----|
| אָהַבְתִּי | 1.1 |
| כִּי־יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶתְקוּלִי תְחַנּוּנַי | 1.2 |
| כִּי־הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי | 2.1 |
| וּבִימִי אָקְרָא | 2.2 |

We will comment on the choices made in this flow diagram starting with the first clause, and develop our own syntactic hierarchy.

| | |
|------------|-----|
| אָהַבְתִּי | 1.1 |
|------------|-----|

[QATAL]clause 1.1 relates to the moment of speaking: 'I love'.⁹ We have discussed the 'missing' complement in note 6.

| | |
|---|-----|
| אָהַבְתִּי | 1.1 |
| כִּי־יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶתְקוּלִי תְחַנּוּנַי | 1.2 |

The [כִּי-YIQTOL-SUBJECT]clause 1.2 is subordinate to the preceding clause, and it is future oriented: 'for Yhwh will hear my voice, my pleas for mercy.'

| | |
|---|-----|
| אָהַבְתִּי | 1.1 |
| כִּי־יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶתְקוּלִי תְחַנּוּנַי | 1.2 |
| כִּי־הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי | 2.1 |

The [כִּי-QATAL]clause 2.1 is subordinate to the preceding clause, and it is past oriented: 'for he has turned his ear to me'.

In *Shebanq*, the clause is linked to the first clause, as is the preceding clause. Because there is no point in giving two reasons for one statement, the supposition will be that clauses 1.2 and 2.1 are parallel. Are they?

Clause 1.2 is a [כִּי-VSO]clause, clause 2.1 a [כִּי-VOI]clause. Both clauses have כִּי, a verb and an object, and they have their differences too, the explicit subject and the indirect object, but the real problem is the change of tense. If the clauses would be parallel, why do they differ in tense?

According to current text-syntactic theory one should take differences in tense seriously. YIQTOL is usually future oriented, QATAL past oriented, and many commentaries respect this difference.¹⁰ Vesco translates accordingly: 'J'aime, car Yhwh écoute / la voix de mes appels à la pitié, / car il a penché son oreille pour moi', but he notes that parallelism

Bible. Its core is a syntactic database developed and maintained by the ETCBC, the *Eep Talstra Centre for Bible and Computer*.

⁹ אָהַבְתִּי is a stative verb and therefore the primary meaning of the QATAL is that of the presence. The same applies for אֶתְקוּלִי in verse 10, an active verb that expresses a state of mind (cf. Joüon/Muraoka §112a). These verbs can point to the past (§112b), but not in this context. Joosten (201) suggests that 'perhaps [this use of the QATAL] should be qualified as formulaic: with the verbs אָהַבְתִּי and יָדַעְתִּי, the use of QATAL in present-tense statements is conventional.'

¹⁰ E.g. Booij 38, Hossfeld 292, Van der Ploeg 278, and Vesco 1090.

tempts him to change the YIQTOL into a QATAL.¹¹ Allen does not withstand this temptation and translates both clauses with past tenses.¹²

We may conclude that the clauses are parallel in many respects but that they do not say the same (with different words), and that the second is subordinated to the first, so that the past motivates what is said about the future.

| | | |
|---|----------------------------|-----|
| | אהבתי | 1.1 |
| נ | כי־שמע יהוה את־קולי תחנוני | 1.2 |
| | כי־הטמ אונני לי | 2.1 |
| | ובימי אקרא | 2.2 |

The [*waw*-SPECIFIER-YIQTOL]clause 2.2 is linked to clause 1.2, and it is future oriented with an iterative connotation: ‘and all my days I will call.’

In *Shebanq*, the clause is linked to the preceding clause. Unfortunately, commentaries do not give much thought to clause relations and translations are elusive in this respect. Some scholars propose an emendation of ובימי, following the Peshitta.¹³ We will not go there.

The link in *Shebanq* is problematic because it connects a future-oriented YIQTOL with a past-oriented QATAL.¹⁴ Looking for the mother clause of the [*waw*-SPECIFIER-YIQTOL]clause 2.2, we prefer another [X-YIQTOL]clause. There is one, clause 1.2. The link is sequenced by the conjunction *waw*, and, semantically seen, it is obvious: ‘he will hear and (therefore) I will call.’

Interpretation

The first-person protagonist expresses his adherence to God (love), expecting him to hear his pleas for mercy. His expectation is based on the fact that God has been giving him attention in the near past – a remark that asks for some elucidation – and it stimulates him to keep calling him – a statement that may be developed as well.

The first colon draws our attention, because it is longer than the other three,¹⁵ and contains one and a

half clause, each clause missing its complement (within the colon).¹⁶ The colon combines the two major characters of the psalm, but in separate clauses. It makes their relation the essential theme of the first three strophes, the adherence of the protagonist and his expectation that God will hear his calls.

Hearing and calling belong together, but their co-occurrence is by no means a foregone conclusion. They are prosodically separated. Both A-cola speak about YHWH’S hearing, both B-cola about MY calling. The special relation of the A-cola is strengthened by balances, as is that of the B-cola.¹⁷

The communicative relation between the two characters is foregrounded by the superfluous suffix in קולי. *My voice* is expecting *his ear*.¹⁸

Meta-analysis

Writing about prosody and syntax is difficult, because wrong perspectives intrude themselves easily into it. We are inclined to start with syntax, unintentionally creating the image that the poet has a bunch of clauses and faces the challenge to turn them into poetry. He would be doomed to fail. The poet does not work in two phases.

It is hard to say where the poet will start. It could be a word, a phrase, a clause, or a sound, an image, a theme. But then he will go on writing verses or, in classical Hebrew poetry, cola, lines, and strophes. Clauses are part of it like a lot of other linguistic and stylistic stuff. But they do not exist as such. Cola do, but clauses not.

Things are different for an analyst. He/she has to make a through text-syntactic analysis. The inter-clausal relations are crucial for interpretation. Clauses do exist for the analyst.

We may conclude that analysts should prevent the paradigm of analysis from influencing their view of poetry. Therefore, we have chosen to start our *description* of the psalm with the prosodic structure.

¹¹ Vesco 1090 note 1; cf. BHS.

¹² Allen 111 and note 1b on page 112.

¹³ Cf. BHS; e.g. Booij 38 and 42: ‘ten tijde dat’; Gunkel 499 and 502: ‘am Tage, da’.

¹⁴ The YIQTOL is future oriented, note the specifier ובימי ‘in my days’ > ‘as long as I live’ (RSV).

¹⁵ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

¹⁶ See above: *Versification: line 1* and *Prosodic structure* (note 6).

¹⁷ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

¹⁸ See above: *Prosodic structure*.