

Psalm 116,10-11: 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 fifth strophe. The others will follow in due course.

Strophe 10-11

The fifth strophe consists of two bicola:

		אני עניתי מאד	10
		אני אמרתי כי אדבר	
10	I trust for I will say:	‘Me, I am wretched, completely.	
		אני אמרתי בחפזי	11
		כל-האדם כזב	
11	Me, I think, bugging out:	“Everybody lies.”	

Prosodic structure

The division of these verses in two cola each is confirmed by the Masorettes, and is found in all editions. The Aleppo codex has the cola written down neatly, starting colon 10a in the left column. We are already accustomed to the inferior writing of the Leningrad codex:

אני עניתי מאד: אני	האמנתי כי אדבר
כל-האדם כזב: מה אשיב	אמרתי בחפזי

The cola consist of 2, 3, 3, and 2 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.¹ Colon 10a has two clauses, the other cola one.²

The four cola form two bicola, in accordance with the prosodic rule. The bicola have no line parallelism, but each bicolon shows a (weak!) phonemic balance at the end position of the cola: אדבר / מאד [אד], and בחפזי / כזב [b/p, h/k, z].

The strophe has two verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. It has a chiasmic composition. The metrical units form a chiasm: 2+3, 3+2 – the syllable length is nondescript: 7+7, 8+6 – and the themes do the same: the middle cola are about deep distress, the outer ones about trust and distrust.

The first and the last colon are bound by free balance: a semantic association and a phonemic balance in a chiasmic sequence.

11b \ 10a	כזב		כי אדבר		האמנתי
parallels	to lie		to trust		to trust
pattern	A		B		B A

The middle cola are linearly parallel in a formal way (see the diagram), and sequential in the ‘actions’. ‘I think’ follows ‘I am wretched’.

Semantically, אמרתי is parallel to אדבר in colon 10a, a little bit tricky because many readers prefer this semantic balance to the more important parallelism under discussion:³

11a \ 10b	בחפזי		אני		אני עניתי מאד
syntax	mod		verb		mod verb sub
balances			qatal-1s		qatal-1s
pattern	C		B A		C B A

The phrases מאד (adverb) and בחפזי (ב+infinitive +suffix^{1sg}) have a comparable syntactic function (modifier).

The verse lines are linked syntactically, in particular by the parallelism of the middle cola and the extension of the quote introduced by colon 10a. There is no syntactic connection with verse 12, which forms a syntactic unit with verses 13 and 14.

Text-syntactic structure

We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause.

	10.1
A [QATAL]clause.	
	10.1
A [SUBJECT-QATAL]clause, as direct speech the complement of the previous clause.	
	10.2
A [YIQTOL-QATAL]subordinate clause.	
	10.1
	10.2
	10.3

הַאֲמַנְתִּי	10.1
כִּי אֶדְבַר	10.2
אֲנִי עֲנִיתִי מֵאֵד	10.3
אֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי בַחֲפוּזִי	11.1

A second, linear parallel [SUBJECT-QATAL]clause, and therefore also part of the direct speech and complaint introduced in clause 10.2. The mother clause of 11.1 is not clause 10.2, so that one would have two parallel sequences of an introductory clause and a direct-speech clause (10.2-10.3//11.1-11.2 – A.B//A.B; see *Shebanq*,⁴ and many commentaries and translations). The [ׁנִס-QATAL^{1s}-modifier]parallelism shows another syntactic structure.⁵ The infinitive phrase ׁבַחֲפוּזִי may be seen as a clause atom (see *Shebanq*) but belongs as such to clause 11.1. As an aside, I did not find a good syntactic or pragmatic reason for the double fronting of ׁנִס.

הַאֲמַנְתִּי	10.1
כִּי אֶדְבַר	10.2
אֲנִי עֲנִיתִי מֵאֵד	10.3
אֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי בַחֲפוּזִי	11.1
כִּלְהֲאֵדָם כּוֹב	11.2

A [SUBJECT-PARTICIPLE]clause, as direct speech the complement of the previous clause.

The communicative domain has not changed. There is a new personage, EVERYBODY, in a subject role, but it is found in a low-level clause.

It is not possible to assess the time perspectives of the different clauses without a decision about the place of the paragraph in the text hierarchy. What is the mother clause of clause 10.1?

First-person-singular clause 10.1 has many potential mother clauses, like first-person-singular clause 9 (see *Shebanq*), but the choice is not difficult. The syntactic sequence of clauses 10.1-2 is also found at the start of the text in clauses 1.1-2: [QATAL^{1s} > כִּי-YIQTOL]. The semantics are close: both QATAL verbs express a state of mind,⁶ and the YIQTOL verbs belong to the same word field – *I love for YHWH will hear* > *I trust for I will say*. The syntactic, morphological, and semantic parallels between clauses 10.1-2 and 1.1-2, [QATAL^{1s-EMOTIVE} > כִּי-YIQTOL^{HEAR/SPEAK}], show that both sequences belong to the same hierarchical level. The parallel marks the start of the second part of the text.

There is no consensus at all on the interpretation of this paragraph. If we take the parallel of clauses 1.1-2 and 10.1-2 as the baseline of our interpretation, clause 10.1 should relate to the moment of speaking like clause 1.1: *I love* > *I trust*, and clause 10.2 should have an iterative connotation, future oriented, like clause 1.2: *for YHWH will hear* > *for I will say*.

The translation of the conjunction כִּי, *for*, is based on the parallel too. The protagonist says that he loves YHWH because he will hear his pleas, and that he trusts YHWH because he will complain to him, or, maybe better with a modal connotation, because he *can* complain to him.

Clauses 10.3 and 11.1 describe the situation at the moment of speaking that is implied in אֶדְבַר. There is no real notion of anteriority in the QATAL verbs. Clause 11.2 is a [SUBJECT-PARTICIPLE]clause, expressing the actual present.⁷

The syntactic structure of this paragraph is rather clear, but the interpretation is difficult, thanks to our understanding of trust. According to Booij trust cannot go together with desperation, but the experienced misery is man-made, the trust is in God. The trust that YHWH will hear, does not exclude this misery and the feelings inherent in it. Allen refers to Psalm 146,3 and ‘judges v 11b to be an (implicit) profession of faith’ (mentioning Klopfenstein and Alexander).⁸ Everybody is a liar, but God will help.

Interpretation

The protagonist comes back to his first and foremost statement and completes it. ‘I love (YHWH) for he will hear’ is followed now by ‘I trust (YHWH) for I will say.’ These states of mind differ in an essential way. Love is about what God does, trust is about what the protagonist does. He shows his trust in his prayers, in his pleas for mercy and his complaints. The pleas got attention in the first strophe and in the quote in colon 4b, the complaints get their exemplary treatment here.

The strophe has a chiasmic composition, also thematically:⁹ the middle cola are about deep distress, the outer ones about trust and distrust. The distress-cola are marked by the repetition of ׁנִס. The use of ׁנִס as an explicit and fronted subject has of course an emphatic nuance,¹⁰ but, above all, the repetition serves to connect the person of the protagonist with his distressful predicament, in preparation for the repeated ׁנִס in verse 16, where it is used to reveal another side of his person.

The first and the last word of the strophe contrast in a complementary way: *trusting* and *lying*. People are lying, that is, they do not what they promise to do. God does and can, therefore, be trusted. The point of the strophe is the trustworthiness of God in a world of liars.

Interstrophic repetitions in the first stanza

Arrived at the second half of the psalm, we may

look back at the interstrophic repetitions in the first half. We will start making an inventory and

introducing it.

no	lexeme \ strophe	11-10	9-7	6-5	4-3	2-1
1	ובשם־יהוה אִקְרָא [B] – וּבִימֵי אִקְרָא [A]				B	A
2	תְּחַנּוּנֵי – חַנּוּן [B]			B		A
3	לִי			X		X
4	נַפְשִׁי		XX		X	
5	מוֹת		X		X	
6	QATAL ^{1SG-EMOTIVE} – יָבִיחַ – YIQTOL ^{SPEAK/HEAR}	X				X

The repetitions and repetition clusters are numbered. We do not order the repetitions according to a supposed repetitive pattern, but present them in a linear way, from right to left. The strophe where the lexical item is repeated and the repetition comes into existence, is shaded. So we can observe how repetitions work strophe by strophe.

The repetitions are already discussed in the strophe where they came into existence, mostly concerning their thematic function. Now, in this overview, the focus is their contribution to structure.

The first repetition cluster is linking the first two paragraphs/strophes. The next two repetitions (no 2-3) are connecting the first and the third paragraphs/strophes. Repetitions 4 and 5 are joining verses 3-4 and 7-9.

If we would plot the repetitions on the four strophes of the first half of the psalm, we could observe that repetitions 2-5 give the four strophes a linearly parallel pattern (A.B//A.B).¹¹ There are two problems. Repetition cluster no 1 does not fit in this linear parallel, and the first half of the psalm does not consist of four strophes but of three plus one, if we follow the text-syntactic structure – and we should.

Of course, a 3+1 structure is far inferior to a 2+2 one, in the realm of poetry, which is about balance, but paragraphs/strophes 5-6 and 7-9 can in no way be combined in one stanza or sub stanza. They function at a different text-level. At the end of the psalm we will see that imbalance has not the last word.

If we plot the repetitions on the 3+1 structure, we have to interpret them in a different way. Repetitions 1-3 connect the first strophe with the other two strophes of the first sub stanza (vv. 1-6), while repetitions 4-5 link the middle strophe of the first sub stanza with the second sub stanza (vv. 7-9). We will find the same structure and repetitive

pattern in the second half of the psalm, in reverse order.

By the way, the structuring power of these repetitions is rather weak.

Meta-analysis

Three sequences structure the psalm up to verse 11:

1	I love for Yhwh will hear...
7	Return, my soul, to...
10	I trust for I can say...

The long-distance parallel between cola 1a and 10a, [QATAL^{1SG-EMOTIVE} > יָבִיחַ – YIQTOL^{HEAR/SPEAK}], marks the start of the second half of the psalm. It is important to note that the major turn of the text is of a paradigmatic nature.

Discursive texts lack the easy syntagmatic sequence of narrative texts. After a digression, the narrator can return to the main line of his story by using the next [WAYYIQTOL]clause. And, at the end of a section and the beginning of a new one, he may use [X-QATAL] and [NOMINAL]clauses. We do not know how ordinary people structured their speeches in ancient Israel, but litterateurs had paradigmatic links at their disposal, whether to structure longer speeches in a narrative or to organize poetic texts.

A nice example is found in Genesis 28,13-15, a speech of YHWH to Jacob. It starts with a nominal clause and subject יָבִיחַ, followed by an [X-YIQTOL]clause and [WEQATAL]clauses. Halfway the speech, another nominal clause with subject יָבִיחַ is found, marked by [waw-יָבִיחַ] and followed by [WEQATAL]clauses and an [X-YIQTOL]clause.

The first nominal clause, *I, Yhwh, am the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac*, introduces the known promise to the fathers, whereas the second one, *Be aware, I am with you*, starts the personal promise to Jacob.

¹¹ The prosodic rules and the reading rules are mentioned in the analysis of the first strophe. A full discussion is found in Van Grol, *Inleiding*, an English version in Van Grol, 'Classical Hebrew Metrics'.

² See below: *Text-syntactic structure*.

³ See below: *Text-syntactic structure* and especially note 4.

⁴ Kalkman's description on his companion website (see *Psalm 116,7-9 Syntax and Versification: Meta-analysis* for the presentation and address) clarifies that he supposes that the conjunction ׀ of clause 10.2 is also governing clause 11.1, and that there is a 'transition from Mainline to Retrospective Secondary line' in these coordinate clauses. The sentence could be translated as follows: 'for I speak: (...), [and] for I have said: (...)'.
The change of time perspective is strange in (these) coordinate clauses. Moreover, I could not find a convincing parallel in the concordance of patterns by Kalkman (xYqO > XQtI: no 781, cf. 782, 783).

Kalkman ignores the line-parallelism between clauses 10.3 and 11.1, maybe because the computer program does not recognize it given the different realizations of the modifier. But even without the modifier there is an explicit, fronted and repeated subject ׀ and a QATAL^{1SG}, that is a continuation of participant pattern and time perspective.

The psalm contains another pair of explicit and fronted subject ׀'s, in verse 16, placed on parallel positions (second colon and first colon), and starting two parallel nominal clauses. This line parallelism confirms our reading of the clauses under discussion.

⁵ See above: *Prosodic structure*, for a full description of this line parallelism.

⁶ See *Psalm 116,1-2: Syntax and Versification* note 9.

⁷ Joosten 234. This clause type can have a nominal nature in poetry: 'Everybody is a liar.' (424)

⁸ Booij 44; Allen 113.

⁹ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

¹⁰ Booij (44) refers to Joüon/Muraoka § 146 a.3. Besides, colon 11a is a quote from Psalm 31,23.

¹¹ See Van der Lugt, *Cantos*.