

# Psalm 116,12-14: 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 sixth strophe. The others will follow in due course.

## Strophe 12-14

The sixth strophe consists of three bicola:

כל־תגמולוהי עלי	מה־אשיב ליהוה	12
ובשם יהוה אקרא	כוס־ישועות אשא	13
נגדהנא לכל־עמו	נדרי ליהוה אשלם	14

12	How will I return to YHWH	all his generosities to me?!
13	I will raise the cup of helps,	I will call the name of YHWH,
14	I will pay my vows to YHWH	facing, indeed, all his people.

### 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 12a in the left column, but the Leningrad codex has it all mixed up.

כל־האדם כזב: מה אשיב ליהוה כל־תגמולוהי עלי: כוס־ישועות אשא ובשם יהוה אקרא: נדרי ליהוה לבל־עמו: יקר בעיני אשלם נגדהנא
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belong together as parts of one clause, as well as those of bicolon 14. Bicolon 13 has line parallelism, although a rather weak one (see the diagram). By the way, the conjunction *waw* in colon 13b is a B-colon marker.<sup>3</sup>

13b \ 13a	אקרא	ובשם יהוה		כוס־ישועות אשא
syntax	verb	complement		verb complement
morph.	yiqtol <sup>1sg</sup>	N <sup>sg</sup> cN		yiqtol <sup>1sg</sup> N <sup>sg</sup> cN
phon.	א..א			א..א
pattern	B	A		B A

Is this design or sloppy writing? The Talmud tractate *Soferim* says: ‘A skilled scribe spaces them (the texts) out symmetrically according to the beginnings, the middle pauses, and the endings of the verses.’<sup>1</sup>

The cola consist of respectively 3, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.<sup>2</sup> The cola of verse 13 have each one clause. The clauses of verses 12 and 14 are too long to fit into one colon – a colon counts up to 4 metrical units max. The B-colon of verse 12 contains the object/complement of the clause, the B-colon of verse 14 a specifier/adjunct of place.

The six cola form three bicola, in accordance with the prosodic rule. The cola of bicolon 12

The strophe has three verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. All clauses, that is verse lines 12 and 14 and cola 13a and 13b, are parallel as [X-YIQTOL]clauses. The internal parallelism of verse 13 is discussed in the previous paragraph, but the external one between verses 12 and 14 is stronger. These verse lines/clauses have the same syntactic structure, although reversed:

				14						12
A	B	C	D			D	C	B	A	
S <sup>P</sup>	VERB	C <sup>10</sup>	C <sup>0</sup>			C <sup>0</sup>	C <sup>10</sup>	VERB	S <sup>P</sup>	
	YIQT <sup>1SG</sup>		N <sup>PL-SF</sup>			N <sup>PL-SF</sup>		YIQT <sup>1SG</sup>		
			ליהוה אשא			ליהוה		אשא		

They consist of a YIQTOL and an object-complement [C<sup>0</sup>] like the other clauses/cola of this strophe, but they also have an indirect object-complement (C<sup>10</sup>: מה ליהוה) and a specifier: the adjunct of manner נגדהנא לכל־עמו and the adjunct of place ליהוה.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Soferim* XIII, 1, in Cohen, *Tractates*, Volume 1. Cf. Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> 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’.

<sup>3</sup> For the prosodic *waw* or B-colon marker see Van Grol, *Syntagma*, 61-103.

<sup>4</sup> We will discuss the thematic function of this parallelism below: *Interpretation*.

These rather formal line parallelisms are outclassed in a way by repetitions and phonemic parallels, which form a complex fabric involving all cola and all words of the strophe.

The three verbs of the A-cola alliterate:  $\text{שׁוּב}$ , but the same phonemes participate in a double chiasmic parallel of cola 12a, 13b and 14a:  $\text{מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה}$  //  $\text{וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה}$  //  $\text{לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם}$ , featuring the repetition of  $\text{יהוה}$  and  $\text{ל}$ ,  $\text{ב}$ , and  $\text{מ}$ . The diagram shows these links as [A].<sup>5</sup>

B-cola	3	2	1	3	2	1	A-cola
						A	12
		A					13
					A		14

Colon 12b has a chiasmic link with colon 13a and a linear one with colon 14b: compare  $\text{מִה־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ}$  with  $\text{כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת}$ ,  $\text{N}^{\text{SG}}\text{cN}^{\text{PL}}$ ,  $\text{ko...-oe-o}$ , and  $\text{מִה־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ}$  with  $\text{כּל־עֲמוֹ}$ , the repetition of  $\text{כל}$  and the alliteration of the 'ayin. The diagram shows these links as [B].

B-cola	3	2	1	3	2	1	A-cola
			B			A	12
		A				B	13
	B				A		14

The last words of cola 13a and b do not participate in this structure, but parallel each other: the [YIQTOL]  $\text{אָקְרָא}$  parallels the [YIQTOL]  $\text{אָשַׁף}$  with its double 'alef. Likewise, the first words of cola 14a and 14b. They are linked themselves:  $\text{n}^{\text{d}}\text{daray l-}$  //  $\text{n}^{\text{e}}\text{gda-na l-}$ .<sup>6</sup> We show them in the diagram as [X] and [Y].

B-cola							A-cola
			B			A	12
	X		A		X	B	13
		B	Y		A	Y	14

The strophe is a syntactic unit, in which all clauses are [X-YIQTOL]clauses, the first one being a question to which the others are the answer. There is no obvious syntactic connection with verse 15, which forms a syntactic unit with verse 16.

### Text-syntactic structure

The paragraph has four clauses, a question and three answers. We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause.

מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כּל־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ עָלַי 12

A [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause. The question can be rhetorical with a modal connotation of the YIQTOL:

<sup>5</sup> The numbers indicate the (rhythmical) positions within each colon. Cola 12a, 13b, 14a and 14b have three positions, cola 12b and 13a two.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the notes of Booi (Psalmen IV, 46-48) on the unique form of  $\text{ל־נִגְדָה}$ .

*How can I return...?! (answer: I cannot), but it seems to be just an introduction of the answers.*

מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כּל־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ עָלַי 12  
כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת אֲשַׁף 13.1

A [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause. The three answers are parallel [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clauses.

מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כּל־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ עָלַי 12  
כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת אֲשַׁף 13.1  
וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אָקְרָא 13.2

A [waw-COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause. The conjunction *waw* is a B-colon marker.

מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כּל־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ עָלַי 12  
כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת אֲשַׁף 13.1  
וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אָקְרָא 13.2  
נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נִגְדָה־נָא לְכָל־עֲמוֹ 14

A [COMPLEMENT-COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause,

The time frame is the present/near future. The communicative domain is the same as before. A new personage is introduced at the end, ALL HIS PEOPLE.

In *Shebanq* the paragraph is linked to clause 9, a first-person [YIQTOL]clause, in our reading an impossible connection because that clause belongs to the first part of the text whereas clause 10.1 opens the second part. The mother clause of clause 12 has to be in the preceding paragraph and it will be first-person [QATAL]clause 10.1.

The clauses have not much in common – the subject – and are linked by hierarchical necessity. Nevertheless, they can be understood as two related parts of the same utterance. The feeling of trust expressed in the preceding paragraph leads to the question how to respond.

A real appreciation of this relation is only possible if we mix text-syntactic with compositional analysis. The two parts of the psalm start both with an expression of feeling: love and trust, syntactically and semantically marked as a [QATAL<sup>1s-EMOTIVE</sup> > כִּי-YIQTOL<sup>HEAR/SPEAK</sup>]sequence. In the first part of the psalm, the feeling of love leads to a self-exhortation to relax. In the second part, we find the feeling of trust and the question how to respond.

The expressions of feeling are related but the follow-ups of both feelings, the self-exhortation and the question are linked too, again by a mix of syntax, morphology and semantics. Compare clauses 7.1-2 with clause 12:

שׁוֹבֵי נַפְשֵׁי לְמִנְחוֹכֵי כִי־יְהוָה גַּמַּל עָלֵיכֶם 7.1-2  
מִה־אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כּל־תִּגְמַלְוֵהוּ עָלַי 12

They have a lexical repetition cluster in common:

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√ יהוה<sup>ref ME</sup> + שׁוּב<sup>ref ME</sup> + √ גַּמַּל + עַל<sup>ref ME</sup>

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and show a deep-structure parallel, as far as the second part is concerned:

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כִּי־יְהוָה גַּמַּל עַל־כֹּל־תַּגְּמוּלוֹהִי עָלַי

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with YHWH as subject, גַּמַּל as act and YOU/ME as complement.

Moreover, we may note that both clauses have a strongly deictic character, and that they will be, therefore, close to the upper level of the text.

This composition implies by its parallels that the second part of the second part of the text starts with clause 12.

#### *Interstrophic repetitions*

The most important lexical repetition cluster is discussed in the previous section. We will sum up the other repetitions here, to deal with their thematic importance in the next section:

the word כָּל in cola 11b, 12b and 14b;

the root שָׁע in cola 6b and 13a;

the sequence וּבְ[שֵׁם יְהוָה] אֶקְרָא in cola 2b, 4a and 13b.

#### *Interpretation*

The protagonist reflects on or shares his states of mind: love and trust. That is the core of the psalm. Both times there is a follow-up. In the preceding stanza, the challenge is to go on with life after a deep crisis and God's intervention, now it is to thank God for his generosity.

The first lines of both follow-ups are linked by a lexical repetition cluster and a deep-structure parallel (vv. 12 > 7)<sup>7</sup>. The repetition of the verb שׁוּב underlines the sequence of the stanzas: from returning to one's life (שׁוּב) to thanking God for it (אֲשִׁיב).

The repetition of the word כָּל on the same position in the line (the first position of cola 11b and 12b) spells out the hidden contrast of the preceding strophe: God with 'all his generousities' against the lies of 'everybody', but the second repetition, in colon 14b, mitigates this denunciation of humankind in a connection with Gods people: 'facing, indeed, all his people'.

The question of line 12 generates a series of answers in lines 13-14 and later on 17-19. The first answer takes up the last word of the first sub-stanza to connect the thanksgiving ritual with God's help: 'the cup of helps' > 'he would help me' (vv. 13a > 6b). The strange plural *helps* could mean nothing,

but, together with the plural *generosities*,<sup>8</sup> it may confirm our interpretation that this psalm is not about one intervention of God but about a recurring experience (compare our use of *would* in vv. 3c-4.6b).

The second answer is an exact repetition of colon 4a, underlining the transformative sequence of the psalm. There, 'calling the name of YHWH' meant praying, complaining and making a plea, here it means praising and thanking.

The third answer is special. It is the most interpretive of the three answers by pointing to vows. The other two provide details of the thanksgiving ritual. It has the same length as the question, a line, whereas the other two each have half that length, a colon. It is parallel to the question in an external chiasmic line-parallelism.<sup>9</sup>

Part of this line parallelism are the two specifiers, the first and the last phrases of the strophe. So, the strophe leads us from מָה to נִגְדָה נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ, where a new character shows up, HIS PEOPLE, maybe the embodiment of US in colon 5b, and certainly opposite the not so helpful liars, EVERYBODY, in the preceding strophe.

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<sup>7</sup> See above: *Text-syntactic structure*.

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<sup>8</sup> Note the morphologic and phonemic balance: כֹּל־תַּגְּמוּלוֹהִי // בִּי־שׁוּעוֹת, N<sup>sg</sup>cN<sup>pl</sup>, ko...-oe-o. The Aramaic suffix of תַּגְּמוּלוֹהִי is discussed in *Psalm 116,7-9 Syntax and Versification*, section *Plural nouns and Aramaic suffixes*.

<sup>9</sup> See above: *Prosodic structure*.