

Psalm 116,15-16: 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 seventh strophe. The last strophe will follow in due course.

Strophe 15-16

The seventh strophe consists of three bicola:

	המותה לחסידיו	יקר בעיני יהוה	15
	כִּי־אני עבדך	אנה יהוה	16
	פתחת למוסרי	אני־עבדך בן־אמתך	

15	Costly in the eyes of YHWH	is the death of his faithful –
16	O, JHWH!	Me, I am indeed your servant,
	Me, I am your servant, the son of your handmaid!	You have undone my fetters.

Prosodic structure

The division of verse 15 in two cola is confirmed by the Masorettes, and is found in all editions. The Masoretic division of verse 16 is not entirely clear. It uses two important distinctivi, the *atnach* as usual, but also the *ole w'eyored*, on the first עבדך. The same combination is used one other time in Psalm 116, to mark a tripartition (verse 8). But the first part of verse 16 is again divided in two by a *zinnor* on יהוה, a medium strong distinctivus, so that one could argue for a Masoretic division in four parts. The Aleppo codex and the edition of Snaith have the tripartition. The Leningrad codex has divided the verse at random, like before, but it does certainly not support a division in four parts. The BHS shows that quadripartition.¹

The cola consist of respectively 3, 2, 2, 2, 3, 2 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.² The clause of verse 15 is too long to fit into one colon – a colon counts up to 4 metrical units max. The B-colon contains the subject of the clause. The tripartition of verse 16 would be rhythmically irregular with respectively 4, 3, and 2 metrical units, but it cannot be excluded. The syntax of the rhythmically regular quadripartition will be discussed in the next section. Here we may

note that the first colon of verse 16 has two clause atoms, an interjection and a vocative, and that the other cola have each one clause.

The six cola form three bicola, in accordance with the prosodic rule. The cola of bicolon 15 belong together as parts of one clause. There is no line parallelism in verse lines 16ab and cd.

The strophe has three verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. Three clauses are nominal (verse line 15 and cola 16b-c), two of them parallel and repetitive: [כִּי־אני עבדך] [בן־אמתך].

There are three arguments in favor of the quadripartition of verse 16. Rhythm (see above), syntax (see the next section), and an intricate balance pattern. Four cola, the three A-cola and the middle B-colon, are linked by verbal repetitions and phonemic balances (A), while the other two B-cola have their own connection (B).

	B	A	15
	A	A	16ab
	B	A	16cd

The fourfold play (A) involves four syntactically different combinations:

15a	בעיני יהוה	יהוה	בעיני
16a	אנה יהוה	יהוה	אנה
16b	אני עבדך	עבדך	אני
16c	אני־עבדך	עבדך	אני

We note the repetition of יהוה, אני, and עבדך, and the great phonemic sequence עיני > אנה > אני.

¹ Frants Buhl (BHK2) suggests that כִּי־אני עבדך is corrupt (BHK2) or has to be transferred to verse 4 (BH3).

² 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'.

The first and the third B-colon (B) have on the second position a repetition and a morphologic parallel: לחסידיו // למוסרי ל- + Npl^{suffix}. Both constructions with ל- are intentional. The unmarked version of colon 15b would have been: מות חסידיו,³ that of colon 16d: פתחת מוסרי.⁴ Moreover, the cola are semantically associated: ‘the death of his faithful’ // ‘my fetters’, the fetters being the fetters of death (note ‘the snares of Death’ // ‘the horrors of Sheol’ in line 3).

Text-syntactic structure

The paragraph has five clauses. We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause.

יקר בעיני יהוה המותה לחסידיו	15
A [PRED ^{NOM} -SUBJECT]clause.	
יקר בעיני יהוה המותה לחסידיו	15
אָנָה יְהוָה	16.1*

An [INTERJECTION-VOCATIVE]unit, an incomplete clause. This unit is combined with an IMPERATIVE in clause 4.2: אָנָה יְהוָה מַלְטָה נַפְשִׁי. Such a combination is unlikely in verse 16, because the conjunction כִּי interferes, even if one would interpret it in an emphatic way.

There is a change in communicative domain between clause 15 (God is third person) and clause 16.1 (God is second person), and there is nothing in the syntax that bridges this domain change. Of course, lexical, semantic and phonemic parallels do link verses 15 and 16, but these parallels are in no way linked to the syntax and fulfill functions in the prosodic structure.⁵ Clause 15 will be the mother clause of clause 16.1 – there is no alternative. An asterisk marks the syntactic gap.

יקר בעיני יהוה המותה לחסידיו	15
אָנָה יְהוָה	16.1*
כִּי־אֲנִי עֲבֹדְךָ	16.2

The [כִּי-SUBJECT-PRED^{NOM}]clause is linked to the introductive unit 16.1.

יקר בעיני יהוה המותה לחסידיו	15
אָנָה יְהוָה	16.1*
כִּי־אֲנִי עֲבֹדְךָ	16.2
אֲנִי־עֲבֹדְךָ בְּ־אֲמַתְךָ	16.3

³ Boij (*Psalmen IV*, 46) describes the ending of המותה as quasi-archaic (‘ter wille van het versritme’), and the genitive construction with article and preposition as late Biblical Hebrew. ‘De combinatie van de beide vormen is uitzonderlijk; ze kan zijn bedoeld om nadrukkelijkheid te bewerken.’ Cf. GKC § 90 f; Joüon/Muraoka § 93 i.

⁴ Boij (*Psalmen IV*, 47) describes the use of the preposition with a direct object as late Biblical Hebrew. Cf. GKC § 117 n; Joüon/Muraoka § 125 k.

⁵ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

The [SUBJECT-PRED^{NOM}]clause is parallel to clause 16.2.

יקר בעיני יהוה המותה לחסידיו	15
אָנָה יְהוָה	16.1*
כִּי־אֲנִי עֲבֹדְךָ	16.2
אֲנִי־עֲבֹדְךָ בְּ־אֲמַתְךָ	16.3
פִּתַּחַת לְמוֹסְרֵי	16.4

The [QATAL]clause is a daughter clause of unit 16.1. The subject 2sgm follows the vocative יְהוָה.

The nominal clauses have a neutral present-time perspective, [QATAL]clause 16.4 looks back.

Two new personages are mentioned: GOD’S FAITHFUL and GOD’S HANDMAID.

The last subject in this section is the position of the paragraph in the syntactic hierarchy. In *Shebanq* [NOMINAL]clause 15 is linked to [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause 14. This link is the only possible one, because the three [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clauses 13.1-2 & 14 are continued by the three similar clauses 17.1-2 & 18. These trios enclose paragraph 15-16. The link may be imperative, but it is not marked syntactically. The repetition of YHWH and the phrasal parallel לחסידיו // לכל-עמו show an affinity between clauses 14 and 15, but there is no easygoing syntactic sequence. We use an asterisk in the flow diagram.

Interstrophic repetitions

We will sum up the interstrophic repetitions here, to deal with their thematic importance in the next section:

- the word עֵין in cola 8b and 15a;
- the root מוּת in cola 3a, 8a and 15b;
- the sequence אָנָה יְהוָה in cola 4b and 16a;
- the word אָנִי in cola 10b, 11a, 16b and 16c.

Interpretation

Musing about the way to thank God, the protagonist changes over, abruptly, to a theme that was somewhat hidden but surfaces now: his identity. As strophe 5-6 with its nominal and participial clauses was a portrait of YHWH, so this nominal strophe is devoted to the identity of the protagonist. There are three perspectives from which one has to consider the theme: God, his people, and the protagonist himself.

The way the protagonist sees himself, is determined by the way God looks at him: *in the eyes of Yhwh*. Starting with this phrase the fourfold play described above shows the way.⁶ In the eyes of

⁶ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

YHWH (בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה), thanks God (אֲנִי יְהוָה), I am his servant (אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ).

The protagonist sees himself as one of us. He mentioned this community in strophe 5-6, typifying it as THE SIMPLE. In the preceding verse line (14) he added the phrase HIS (God's) PEOPLE, and, now, parallel to that phrase, HIS FAITHFUL. The characterization as YOUR SERVANT fits in this series, climaxing with *the son of your handmaid*, of course. The protagonist is a member of this community. Proof is his salvation from death, because it says: 'Costly in the eyes of YHWH / is the death of his faithful.' The association of the personal and the communal is marked by the play between cola 15b and 16a, described above.⁷ The 'death of his faithful' is appropriated in 'my fetters', the fetters of death.

The identity of the protagonist is a dynamic one. The new found identity as *your servant*, marked by twice אֲנִי, contrasts with his past depressions, also marked by twice אֲנִי, in strophe 10-11. Within the ritual of thanksgiving, the theme of the sub-stanza, the protagonist finds himself in a new identity, and as part of a community.

The change in communicative domain between verses 15 and 16 makes the strophe an emotional climax of the psalm. The reflexive, third-person statement in line 15 is followed by a sigh of relief with both characters dynamized as *me* and *you*.⁸

⁷ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

⁸ More about the semantic difference between אֲנִי יְהוָה in colon 4b and that in colon 16a in Fokkelman 230 note 40 and 232.