

Psalm 116,17-19: 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 eight and last strophe. Some thematic reflections will follow in due course.

Strophe 17-19

The eight strophe consists of three bicola:

ובשם יהוה אקרא	לך-זבח זבח תודה	17
נגדה-נא לכל-עמו	נדרי ליהוה אשלם	18
בתוככי ירושלם	בחצרות בית יהוה	19

17 I will sacrifice to you a thank offering,	I will call the name of YHWH,
18 I will pay my vows to YHWH,	facing, indeed, all his people,
19 in the courts of the house of YHWH,	in your midst, Jerusalem.

Prosodic structure

The division of verses 17 and 18 in two cola each is confirmed by the Masorettes, and is found in all editions. Verse 19 consists of adjuncts of place, belonging to the clause in verse 18, while the last part, the formula הלל-יהוה, frames the psalm, and does not belong to its corpus – in our analysis (!). One could suggest that the Masorettes have read the verse as a clause with הלל as a verb, but they did not treat it as a normal verse, using two *r^evias* instead of an *ole w^eyored* and an *atnach*, and thereby confirming our reading. The Aleppo codex spaces the verses as we do, and places the formula on a separate line. The Leningrad codex has poor spacing as usual, but everything is done – that is neglecting the first pause in verse 19 – to place the framing formula on a separate line. The edition of Snaith ends up with the formula הלל-יהוה in the second column, starting with colon 18a in the same column. The BHK2, BH3, and BHS space the verses as we do, and place the formula on a separate line.

The cola consist of respectively 3, 3, 3, 3, 2, 2 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.¹ The cola of verse 17 have one clause each. Verses 18 and 19 are one clause of 10 metrical units, obviously too long to be hold in one colon. In

our spacing, the first colon contains the predicate, the other three cola adjuncts of place.

The six cola form three bicola, in accordance with the prosodic rule. Bicolon 17 has no line parallelism or free balance. The conjunction *waw* in colon 13b is a B-colon marker.² Bicola 18 and 19 show a repetition of the prepositions ל- and ב-, respectively.

The strophe has three verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. All three clauses, that is cola 17a and 17b, and verse lines 18-19 are parallel as [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL^{1SG}]clauses, but the nature and the order of the complements differ. More important as a structuring motive are the nature and the order of the cola themselves. Three clausal cola are followed by three adjuncts-of-place cola.

The strophe has two paradigmatic plays. The relational (!) prepositions ל- and ב- are repeated in all cola and form a branching structure:

A.B // A.A // B.B	ב- \ ל-	17
	ל- \ ל-	18
	ב- \ ב-	19

The phrase שם יהוה is transformed until climaxing in the name Jerusalem:

שם יהוה	\	17
	\	יהוה.שלם 18
שלם...	\	יהוה 19

¹ 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 For the prosodic *waw* or B-colon marker see Van Grol, *Syntagma*, 61-103.

The strophe is a syntactic unit, in which all clauses are [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clauses. The three adjuncts-of-place cola are an adequate closure of the psalm.³

Text-syntactic structure

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

לְךָ־זֹבַח זֹבַח תּוֹדָה	17a
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A [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause.

לְךָ־זֹבַח זֹבַח תּוֹדָה	17a
וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא	17b

A [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause, parallel to the previous one. The conjunction *waw* is a B-colon marker.⁴ There is a change of communicative domain – God is third person again. Domain change is not interruptive in this psalm (see clauses 7.2/8.1 and 15/16.1).

לְךָ־זֹבַח זֹבַח תּוֹדָה	17a
וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא	17b
נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁלֶם נִגְדַה־נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ +	18-19
+ בְּחִצְרוֹת בֵּית יְהוָה בְּתוֹכֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם	

A [COMPLEMENT-COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause, parallel to the previous one. The adjunct of place is enlarged with two appositions,⁵ the second one belonging to a new communicative domain in which Jerusalem is addressed. JERUSALEM is a new and final character in the psalm.

The three parallel [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clauses continue the three similar clauses 13.1, 13.2 & 14. *Shebanq* prefers the domain (change!) above the composition and links clauses 16.5 and 17.1. Later on, it links the identical clauses 14 and 18, so that clause 17.2 is stuck in the middle.

The time-frame is the same as that of 13.1-14, the present/near future.

Interstrophic repetitions

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

the sequence **וּבִשְׁם יְהוָה אֶקְרָא** in cola 2b, 4a, 13b and 17b;

the clause **נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁלֶם נִגְדַה־נָא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ** in verse lines 14 and 18;

the word **כָּל** in cola 11b, 12b, 14b and 18b.

³ For an investigation in the closing power of verbless cola see Van Grol, *Syntagma*, 105-136.

⁴ For the prosodic *waw* or B-colon marker see Van Grol, *Syntagma*, 61-103.

⁵ Cf. the notes of Booij 46-48 on the unique form of **נִגְדַה־נָא לְ**.

Interpretation

The protagonist comes back to his theme how to thank God, by partially repeating strophe 12-14 and continuing it. The thank offering is new and parallels the cup of helps in colon 13a. The last line is new too, and draws attention to the place of thanking, the temple in Jerusalem. But, more to the point, the new elements concern the two relations that were unveiled in the preceding strophe.

In its new form, the strophe counts three communicative domains. The protagonist addresses YHWH in colon 17a, and Jerusalem in colon 19b.⁶ In this way he emotionalizes his relations with YHWH and with the community, embodied in Jerusalem.

The two characters are alpha and omega. The first word of the strophe is the indirect object **לְךָ**, referring to YHWH, the last word is the vocative Jerusalem. The attention shifts from YHWH to Jerusalem. The first three cola, [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clauses, mention ritual actions of thanksgiving to God, the last three cola, adjuncts of place, focus on the people, the temple courts, and Jerusalem. We may bring to mind the paradigmatic play in which the phrase **שֵׁם יְהוָה** is transformed until climaxing in the name Jerusalem.

The end is quite harmonious: the three characters – the PROTAGONIST, YHWH and the COMMUNITY – find each other in the courts of the temple.

Interstrophic repetitions in the second stanza

Arrived at the end of the psalm, we may look back at the interstrophic repetitions in the second half of the psalm. We will start making an inventory (see the next page) and introducing it.

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 of major structural importance, connecting the second sub-stanza of

⁶ For the suffix in **בְּתוֹכֵי** see *Psalm 116,7-9: Syntax and Versification* § Plural nouns and Aramaic suffixes.

the first half with the second sub-stanza of the second half (vv. 7-9 > 12-19). It is discussed in

Psalm 116,12-14: Syntax and Versification § Text-syntactic structure.

no	lexeme \ strophe	19-17	16-15	14-12	11-10	9-7
1	√ ^{ref IK} + יהוה + √ ^{ref IK} גמל + על			X		X
2	כל-האדם [A] – כל-ת' [B] – לכל-עמו [C]			B	A	
3	אני		XX		XX	
4	ובשם-יהוה אקרא	X		X		
5	נדרי ליהוה אשלם נגדה-נא לכל-עמו	X		X		
2	כל-האדם [A] – כל-ת' [B] – לכל-עמו [C]	C		C		

The word כל is linking the first two paragraphs/strophes. The double repetition no 3 is connecting the first and the third strophe. The other repetitions are connecting the second and the fourth strophe.

If we would plot the repetitions on the four strophes of the second half of the psalm, we could observe that repetitions 3-5 give the four strophes a linearly parallel pattern (A.B//A.B; Van der Lugt, *Cantos*). There are two problems. Repetition cluster no 2 does not fit in this linear parallel (the A-B part), and the second half of the psalm does not consist of four strophes but of one plus three, if we follow the text-syntactic structure – and we should.

Should we? Previously, I wrote that both parts of the psalm have the same structure and repetitive pattern, in reverse order (*Psalm 116,10-11: Syntax and Versification* § Interstrophic repetitions in the first stanza). This is not according to the facts. Indeed, the structure is the same in reverse order, but the repetitive patterns are linearly parallel. If this is correct, structure and repetitive pattern are relatively independent. The stanza's have 3+1 and 1+3 patterns, but the repetitions within each stanza have a Ac.Bc//A.B pattern, that is a linearly parallel pattern with a special connection between the first two elements, supposing a 2+2 grouping of the four strophes.

19-17	16-15	14-12	11-10
		c	c
	A		A
B		B	
B		B	
B		B	

9-7	6-5	4-3	2-1
		c	c
	A		A
	A		A
B		B	
B		B	

The diagram affords a plain view of the parallel repetitive patterns. We skipped the lexemes and repetition clusters – they may be retrieved via the inventories, above and in *Psalm 116,10-11*.

Although the structuring power of these repetitions is relatively weak and the interstanzaic repetitions are not analyzed so far, the fact that these repetitions deviate from the unbalanced text-syntactic and prosodic structure and create a more balanced 'shadow structure', is interesting.