

Psalm 116,3-4: Syntax and Versification

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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 second strophe. The others will follow in due course.

Strophe 3-4

The second strophe consists of a bicolon and a tricolon:

		אֶפְפוּנֵי חַבְלֵי־מוֹת	וּמִצְרֵי שְׂאוֹל מִצְאוּנִי	3ab
		צָרָה וַיִּגְוֶן אִמְצָא :	וּבִשְׂם־יְהוָה אֶקְרָא	3c4
3ab	The snares of Death had surrounded me;	the horrors of Sheol had found me.		
3c4	I would find horror and agony;	I would call the name of YHWH:	‘O YHWH, set free my soul!’	

Time and translation

The combination of [QATAL] and [X-YIQTOL]clauses raises several questions. The first one is whether the two clause types point to two different time perspectives. The verbal repetitions between cola 3b and 3c and the line parallelism of cola 3c and 4a (see below) show that all clauses have the same time frame.¹

The second issue is to identify that time frame. The use of [QATAL] shows that the strophe is past oriented.² In fact, what is told here, is anterior to the previous passage. The statement of clause 2a: ‘he has turned his ear to me’ (QATAL) implies that the crisis of the second strophe has already come to an end. Does one translate clause 2a with a present perfect, the second strophe has to be translated with a past perfect.³

The third challenge is to determine the meaning of the [X-YIQTOL]clauses. They are past oriented, but are they *preterite-yiqtol* clauses?⁴ Reading [past-tense YIQTOL]clauses would make for easy interpretation and it cannot be excluded. An argument against this explanation is that this kind of

clauses are mostly combined with [WAYYIQTOL]clauses, which is not the case in Psalm 116.⁵ The alternative is a classical habitual-iterative reading.⁶ The YIQTOL does not refer to a single event in the past but to a series of events. The protagonist tells about ‘wiederholte Rettung, d.h. auf die rettende Begleitung JHWHs während seines bisherigen Lebens’.⁷ I have chosen the construction with *would* to express this [habitual-iterative past-tense YIQTOL].⁸ One may compare the [X-YIQTOL]clauses in the first strophe which have an iterative connotation too, but are oriented to the future (‘he will..., I will...’).

We may conclude that the strophe is past oriented, and that the [X-YIQTOL] clauses have an iterative connotation within that time frame. Anyway, this conclusion is relevant to the interpretation but not to the analysis of the prosodic and text-syntactic structures.

¹ The line parallelism of cola 3c and 4a makes it impossible to translate: ‘adversité et affliction j’avais trouvé. / Et le nom de YHWH, j’appelle’ (Vesco 1090).

² Hossfeld translates (292): ‘*Umfangen haben* mich Fesseln des Todes / ... / *Bedrängnis und Kummer treffe ich an*, / und *ich will anrufen* den Namen Jhwhs.’ All clauses in this translation refer to an actual event, which is in all probability wrong. In fact, this translation is not in keeping with Hossfeld’s analysis (see 296).

³ Van der Ploeg (278) pays attention to the sequence of events: ‘De koorden van de dood hadden mij omspannen’.

⁴ Allen (111) translates: ‘I encountered distress and anguish. / Then I invoked the name of Yahweh’, invoking Mitchell Dahood (145) for these preterites.

⁵ Cf. Joosten 429-432 on the use in poetry of YIQTOL referring ‘to single events located in the past’.

⁶ ‘The usages of YIQTOL in a past-tense context that are normal in prose occur in poetry as well ... prospective, past modal, and iterative YIQTOL’ (Joosten 430 n. 40). More about this usage of YIQTOL in Joosten 280-287. One may also compare Joüon/Muraoka § 113.e. Joüon argues that אִמְצָא in colon 3c has ‘no iterative or durative aspect’, because ‘the verb to find ... *per se* conveys a sense of instantaneity’ (§ 113.h).

⁷ Bernd Janowski cited by Hossfeld (295, see also 293). I do not agree with his two-part ‘Zeitschichtung’: (1) cola 3a-b the far past, and (2) cola 3c-4a: the near past.

⁸ An alternative could be: ‘I had been finding horror and agony; / I had been calling the name of YHWH.’

Prosodic structure

Each colon consists of three metrical units,⁹ except colon 4b, which has four stresses, all in accordance with the prosodic rule.¹⁰ Each colon consists of one clause, except colon 4b. That colon has two clause atoms, the interjection אנה and the vocative יהוה, and a clause, מלטה נפשי.¹¹ One may combine these elements into two cola: אנה יהוה \ מלטה נפשי.¹² That division would also comply with the prosodic rule, but there is no syntactic or other reason to keep them apart,¹³ and the resulting verse line would lack for parallelism in marked contrast to the other verse lines of this strophe (see below).

The Masoretes read verse 3 as a tricolon, verse 4 as a bicolon. BHK2, BHS, and Pieter van der Lugt follow this division, but BH3 and Jan Fokkelman take the third colon of verse 3 as the first colon of the next verse line. They are right. The codices do not help, because the Leningrad codex messes up these verses, and because the division of the Aleppo codex may be determined by the two-column coercion. Snaith also shows it, and it is nice:

אפפוני חבלי־מות ומצרי שאול מצאוני
צרה ויגון אמצא : ובשם־יהוה אקרא
אנה יהוה מלטה נפשי

Anyway, Fokkelman offers some relevant observations.¹⁴ It will suffice to note that clauses 3a and 3b show a chiasmic line-parallelism, and clauses 3c and 4a a linear one.

The chiasmic line parallelism of verse line 3a-b (A.B//B.A) is enriched by morphological and semantic equivalences. The verbs diverge on the semantic level, in preparation for colon 3c. The particle ׀ marks the beginning of the B-colon (a prosodic waw).¹⁵

אפפוני	חבלי־מות	׀	ומצרי שאול	מצאוני
QATAL	SUBJECT	׀	SUBJECT	QATAL
3p ^{suffix1sg}	N ^{pl} cN ^{sg}	׀	N ^{pl} cN ^{sg}	3p ^{suffix1sg}
∅	snare of death	׀	horrors of Sheol	∅

The linear line parallelism of verse line 3c-4b (A.B//A.B) has some morphological and phonemic equivalences, but a semantic coupling is absent. The particle ׀ is a B-colon marker.

אקרא	׀	ובשם־יהוה	׀	אמצא	צרה ויגון
YIQTOL	׀	COMPLEMENT	׀	YIQTOL	COMPLEMENT
1sg	׀	ב-NcN	׀	1sg	NwN
'èqra	׀	∅	׀	'èmtsa	∅

The strophe has two verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. The syntactic link between the verse lines is not obvious at first sight, but is strengthened by balances between cola 3b and 3c (see below). There is no syntactic connection with verse 5, which forms a syntactic unit with verse 6.

There is no external line parallelism, but there are some balances, binding the verse lines together and integrating the direct speech into the strophe. The roots צרה and מצא , *horror/gloom* and *to find* are used on the same prosodic positions in cola 3b and 3c:

3	2	1	position / colon
מצאוני	-	ומצרי	colon 3b
אמצא	-	צרה	colon 3c

Colon 4b is connected to the preceding colon by a repetition of the name YHWH on the same prosodic position: ... אנה יהוה \ ... ובשם־יהוה, and to the first colon by a hint of phonemic play:

פפנ + ל מת ׀ מלטה + נפ

linking situation and plea: *surrounded* by the snares of Death, the protagonist implores to be *set free*.

Text-syntactic structure

We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause.

אפפוני חבלי־מות 3.1

A [QATAL-SUBJECT]clause.

אפפוני חבלי־מות 3.1
ומצרי שאול מצאוני 3.2

The [waw-SUBJECT-QATAL]clause 3.2 is chiasmically parallel to [QATAL-SUBJECT]clause 3.1.¹⁶ The two clause types do not differ as for syntactic and pragmatic function. The particle ׀ is also motivated by prosody.

אפפוני חבלי־מות 3.1
ומצרי שאול מצאוני 3.2
׀ צרה ויגון אמצא 3.3

⁹ Following parallelism we are reading colon 3a with three metrical units (ooóo óo ó), but two metrical units is possible too (ooóo oo-ó). In the latter case, the short two could compensate the longer four of colon 4b.

¹⁰ 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'.

¹¹ In *Shebanq* each clause atom is registered separately, because it may function as an independent clause.

¹² BHS shows this division, apparently inspired by the *r'via'*, but it is not found in the other consulted text-editions and the Leningrad and Aleppo codices.

¹³ אנה יהוה functions as a separate colon in verse 16. There, the following clause starts with the conjunction ׀.

¹⁴ Fokkelman 227-228.

¹⁵ For the prosodic waw or B-colon marker see Van Grol, *Syntaxma*, 61-103.

¹⁶ In the flow diagram, parallel clauses have the same level and are, therefore, put right under each other.

With the [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause 3.3 tense and subject change. The clause has the parallel pair 3.1-2 as its mother clause. Semantically, one may characterize the relation as that of situation and personal experience.

אפפוני חבלי־מות	3.1
ומצרי שאול מצאוני	3.2
צרה ויגון אמצא	3.3
ובשם־יהוה אקרא	4.1

The [waw-COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause 4.1 is linearly parallel to [COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause 3.3. The particle ׀ is motivated by prosody. The poet has deliberately chosen [X-YIQTOL]clauses, here and elsewhere in the psalm, but the fronting of the complements could have a pragmatic function, contrasting צרה ויגון and שם־יהוה, DEATH and YHWH. Semantically, the relation of both clauses is that of experience and response.

אפפוני חבלי־מות	3.1
ומצרי שאול מצאוני	3.2
צרה ויגון אמצא	3.3
ובשם־יהוה אקרא	4.1
אנה יהוה מלמה נפשי	4.2

As said, colon 4b consists of two clause atoms and a clause: [INTERJECTION] [VOCATIVE] [IMPERATIVE-COMPLEMENT]. One should process them separately, as in *Shebanq*:

אנה	4.2
יהוה	4.3
מלמה נפשי	4.4

In our flow diagram, which is developed to visualize the *results* of the analysis, we combine the elements into clause 4.2. The clause is direct speech and as such subordinate to the preceding clause.

The paragraph belongs to the same communicative domain as the previous one – character ME speaking about YHWH to a not-mentioned addressee –, but there is a third personage, DEATH. Its appearance in the first two clauses marks the start of the paragraph. The last clause is direct speech and, as such, a new communicative domain but not larger than this one plea. In this domain character ME speaks to YHWH.

What is the syntactic link between this paragraph and the preceding one? What is the mother clause of this paragraph or, more precisely, of clause 3.1? In *Shebanq*, it is linked to clause 1.1. Both clauses are [QATAL]clauses, but they are different. The QATAL of clause 1.1 points to the moment of speaking, whereas the QATAL in 3.1 is about the past. Semantically, the statement ‘The snares of Death had surrounded me’ has no conceivable relation with the utterance ‘I

love’.

There is another [QATAL]clause, the [כִּי-QATAL]clause 2.1, and it is past oriented, but that clause is unreachable, being lower in the hierarchy. Moreover, time has many layers. The past of clause 3.1 has to be anterior to the past of clause 2.1. Logically, the time of crisis depicted in the second paragraph is anterior to the moment that YHWH has turned his ear to the protagonist. We may conclude that paragraph 3-4 is no easy continuation of clause 2.1, but that the reader will understand that it gives (a part of) the background-story of that clause.

The only potential mother clause left is clause 1.2, but there is no syntactic reason to link our paragraph with this clause, differing in clause type, subject and time orientation. Semantically, the statement ‘The snares of Death had surrounded me’ has no conceivable relation with the utterance ‘Yhwh will hear my plea for mercy’.

Even so, we propose a link with clause 1.2, just because we have to give the paragraph a place in the text-syntactic structure, and because that clause is the mother clause of that other [QATAL]clause 2.1. We indicate the link with an asterisk, pointing to its weak syntactic nature.

Interstrophic repetitions

Verbal repetitions that transcend the boundaries of the strophe, may have structural and thematic functions. In Psalm 116, the structural working of most repetitions is limited. We hope to elaborate on this after finishing the strophic analyses. Here we will comment on the thematic functions.

Colon 2b, ובימי אקרא, does not specify why the protagonist will call YHWH for the rest of his life. The paradigmatic link between the B-cola in the first strophe shows what it could be, *pleas for mercy*, תהנונים.¹⁷ Now we have such a plea for mercy in colon 4b, introduced by a partial repetition in colon 4a:

אקרא	ובימי	colon 2b
אקרא	ובשם־יהוה	colon 4a
אקרא	...ב-waw	equivalences

Future expectations parallel past experience.

Interpretation

In the first strophe the protagonist referred to the past, now he tells more about his experience, going further back in time. He describes a long-lasting situation of extreme distress and his reaction to it, calling YHWH to set him free.

¹⁷ See *Psalm 116,1-2: prosodic structure*.

Parallelism suits a lively description and equivalences show us what is foregrounded. Verse line 3a-b introduces a new character, DEATH, and the line parallelism focuses on its weapons: *the snares of Death // the horrors of Sheol*. Verse line 3c-4b shows the perception of the situation by the protagonist and his reaction, and they are combined by line parallelism: *'èmtsa // 'èqra, I would find // I would call*. The perception of the situation by the protagonist is realistic. Death and its horrors have already found him (note the repetition of the roots **צַרַר** and **מָצָא** on the same prosodic positions in cola 3b and 3c).¹⁸

The plea for mercy is the point of the strophe. The last colon stands out. It is longer than the other four: 3+3, 3+3+4 metrical units, it does not participate in line parallelism, and it is direct speech. Plea and situation are bound by a hint of phonemic play.¹⁹ Surrounded by the snares of Death, the protagonist implores to be set free. The name of God is mentioned twice, so that DEATH and SHEOL are countered by YHWH and YHWH (!).

Meta-analysis

The syntactically weak connection between this strophe and the preceding one is not just a one-off. Interstrophic syntax needs a lot of attention. We will initiate our reflection here.

With syntax offering no assistance and semantics being decisive, the text-syntactic hierarchy is in peril. The relation between paragraphs is not spelled out and is of an intuitive, associative nature. We may see in this kind of relation the influence of rhetorical logic, genre and poetry.

Let us state the obvious: every discourse which is longer than a sentence, will be governed by logic. Whereas a narrative is held together by the sequence of acts, the story line or plot, discursive or rhetorical

logic runs a discourse. A scholarly discourse will make this logic explicit, but that is quite exceptional in discourses. When we surmised that the reader will understand that strophe 3-4 gives (a part of) the background-story of clause 2.1, we assumed a certain (temporal) logic. Whether we were right or not, every reader has to make this kind of assumptions. Text syntactically, a critical question is whether this logic is really implicit or expressed in a syntactic way we do not understand yet.

In discourses that are of a stereotypical nature, because they are realizations of a certain genre, the logical turns may be implicit as in onetime discourses, but yet they are expected. In a lament, complaints, petitions for attention, petitions for help, and affirmations of confidence may be combined in different ways,²⁰ but when they occur, they are recognized and brought together in a meaningful way by the reader or supplicant. A psalm opening with new, positive experiences with God, and continuing with negative experiences situated in the past, will be recognized as a song of thanksgiving with (the first part of) a salvation narrative. Combinations and logical turns may stay implicit in discourses of a stereotypical nature, without causing misunderstandings.

Classical Hebrew poetry with its peculiar versification is characterized by prosodic turns every two or three verse lines. The so created strophes will vary in participant pattern, time orientation, clause combination, semantic field, or what may conceivably change. The educated reader of this kind of poetry will expect the more or less surprising transitions from one strophe to another.²¹ Genre expectations, rhetorical logic, and sometimes text syntax (!) will help him to have smooth transitions.²²

¹⁸ For the line parallelisms and the repetitions see above: *Prosodic structure*.

¹⁹ See above: *Prosodic structure*.

²⁰ The various *genre motives*, that is, the form elements of a genre, are more important than the genres themselves. They have a specific form and a specific function and, therefore, can be recognized in a lot of different combinations also outside the boundaries of the genre they originated from.

²¹ Hendrik Jan Bosman drew my attention to the importance of this prosodic expectation for coping with strophic transitions.

²² See the following essay on the strophic dynamics of classical Hebrew poetry: Van Grol, 'De strofische dynamiek van Psalm 26: Een visie op versbouw'. We will quote a central passage (in Dutch!): 'De strofe is niet zomaar een structurele eenheid, een cluster van wat versregels, die zelf weer met wat andere strofen geclusterd kan worden in een stanza. De strofe is een essentiële eenheid. De afwisseling van strofen is het hartritm van het

gedicht. De dichter denkt veelal in strofen. Niet in cola en versregels, niet in grotere structuren, maar in strofen. De strofe is vaak een wereld op zich. In het bereik van enkele versregels wordt een beeld geschetst en uitgewerkt. En met de overgang naar de volgende strofe wordt dat beeld weer verlaten of vanuit een ander perspectief gezien. In een profetisch gedicht kan de strofe een retorische eenheid zijn, een stap in de gedachtengang, een beweging in het retorische spel met de toehoorder. In een meer narratief getint gedicht is de strofe een scène in het verhaal, een paar actanten, één handeling of één handlingssequentie. En met de volgende strofe wordt gewisseld van actanten. Er is veel mogelijk, maar telkens is er die soms intrigerende samenhang binnen de strofe en die soms subtiële en verfrissende wisseling van strofe tot strofe. In dit alles ligt het belang van de strofe voor de lezer. Doordringen in de afwisseling van strofen is luisteren naar het hart van het gedicht.' (22-23)