

# Psalm 116,5-6: 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 third strophe. The others will follow in due course.

## Strophe 5-6

The third strophe consists of two bicola:

		חַנּוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק	5
		וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵרַחֵם	
5	YHWH is merciful and righteous,	דְּלוּתִי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ	
6	YHWH protects the simple –	שָׁמַר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה	6
		I had no vigor at all, but he would help me.	

### Prosodic structure

The division of these verses in two cola each is confirmed by the Masorettes, and is found in all editions. The consulted codices had to put colon 5a in the left column, due to the tripartite structure of verse 3:

חַנּוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק  
 וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵרַחֵם :  
 שָׁמַר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה  
 דְּלוּתִי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ

The unintentional effect of this layout is the visual parallel of the participial clauses/cola 5b and 6a (also in Snaith). The writer of the Leningrad codex had a bad hair day, and messed up colon 6b by putting *דְּלוּתִי* behind colon 6a and *וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ* on the following line.

The cola consist of 3, 2, 3, and 3 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.<sup>1</sup> Cola 5b and 6a have one clause, cola 5a and 6b two clauses, connected by the conjunction *waw*.<sup>2</sup>

The four cola form two bicola, in accordance with the prosodic rule. The first bicolon has no line parallelism, but the cola are bound by a play of the predicates *חַנּוּן* and *מֵרַחֵם* on the expected *חַנּוּן מֵרַחֵם*.<sup>3</sup> The conjunction *waw* at the start of colon 5b is probably a *prosodic waw*, marking the transition from the A-colon to the B-colon.<sup>4</sup> The second bicolon has a weak/partial, chiasmic line

parallelism:<sup>5</sup>

שָׁמַר	פְּתָאִים	יְהוָה		דְּלוּתִי	וְלִי	יְהוֹשִׁיעַ
VERB	COMPLEMENT	Ø		Ø	COMPLEMENT	VERB
Ø	Ø			Ø	Ø	Ø
help	Ø			Ø	Ø	protect

The strophe has two verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule. An intricate balance pattern structures the strophe in a chiasmic way:

A	5a	nominal clause	2 words	חַנּוּן יְהוָה
B	5a	nominal clause	1 word	וְצַדִּיק
C	5b	participial clause	subject	וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ
D	5b		predicate	מֵרַחֵם
D	6a		predicate	שָׁמַר פְּתָאִים
C	6a	participial clause	subject	יְהוָה
B	6b	verbal clause	1 word	דְּלוּתִי
A	6b	verbal clause	2 words	וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ

This balance pattern is first of all about the number of clauses: the first and the last colon both have two clauses, the middle cola one clause. Secondly, it is about the distribution of clause types: the first colon has two nominal clauses,<sup>6</sup> the last colon two verbal clauses and the middle cola together two participial clauses. Thirdly, the participial clauses are syntactically chiasmic: subject – predicate // predicate – subject,<sup>7</sup> a chiasm that forms the heart of the balance pattern as a whole. Lastly, the two nominal and the two verbal clauses are chiasmic in number of words or metrical units: 2 – 1 // 1 – 2.

<sup>1</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>2</sup> See below: *Text-syntactic structure*.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the liturgical formula – cf. Ex 34,6; Joel 2,13; Jonah 4,2; Pss 86,15; 103,8; 145,8 – like in Ps 111,4; Neh 9,31. The combination with *צַדִּיק* is found elsewhere too: Ps 112,4.

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

<sup>5</sup> The predicates, *שָׁמַר qal* and *יֵשׁ hifil*, belong to the same semantic field. Collocations e.g. Pss 86,2 and 145,19-20.

<sup>6</sup> One could read one nominal clause with an interrupted nominal predicate, but the composition shows us the way.

<sup>7</sup> For the record, the predicates, *רָחַם piel* and *שָׁמַר qal*, are nowhere else collocated in the Psalms.

Syntactically, the verse lines are linked by the two participial clauses. There is no syntactic connection with verse 7, with forms a syntactic unit with verse 8 (and, as will be clarified in the near future, with verse 9).

*Text-syntactic structure*

We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause.

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חנן יהוה	5.1
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A [NOMPR-SUBJECT]clause.

חנן יהוה	5.1
וצדיק	5.2

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A [waw-NOMPR-ELLIPSIS]clause. The subject is assumed to be known from the previous clause. The clauses are noted as parallel.

חנן יהוה	5.1
וצדיק	5.2
וַאֲלֵהֵינוּ מִרְחָם	5.3

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A [waw-SUBJECT-PARTICIPLE]clause. The clause is noted on a new level because of a change of clause type.

חנן יהוה	5.1
וצדיק	5.2
וַאֲלֵהֵינוּ מִרְחָם	5.3
שֹׁמֵר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה	6.1

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A [PARTICIPLE-COMPLEMENT-SUBJECT]clause. The clause is noted as a (chiastic) parallel of the previous clause.

חנן יהוה	5.1
וצדיק	5.2
וַאֲלֵהֵינוּ מִרְחָם	5.3
שֹׁמֵר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה	6.1
דְּלוֹתַי*	6.2

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A [QATAL]clause. The clause is noted on a new level with an asterisk added, because of a change of clause type and subject. There is no conceivable link to the previous clauses. Clause 4.2 was the last one with participant-subject ME.

חנן יהוה	5.1
וצדיק	5.2
וַאֲלֵהֵינוּ מִרְחָם	5.3
שֹׁמֵר פְּתָאִים יְהוָה	6.1
דְּלוֹתַי*	6.2
וְגִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ	6.3

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A [waw-COMPLEMENT-YIQTOL]clause. With this clause and its participant-subject YHWH we are back on track. This clause comments on God like the other clauses. The interruptive clause 6.2 describes the situation of participant ME, whereas this clause states

the reaction of participant YHWH.<sup>8</sup>

The combination of nominal, participial and verbal clauses may be interpreted as follows: the two nominal clauses describe YHWH's character, the two participial clauses state his habitual actions,<sup>9</sup> and the two verbal clauses are about his actual help to the protagonist.

This composition implies that the paragraph starts with a neutral time perspective, but will get specific in the verbal clauses. The time perspective of these clauses needs some discussion. The verb *qal* is stative so that the QATAL *דלותי* can be oriented to the present as well as to the past: *I have no vigor at all, but he will help me*, or *I had no vigor at all, but he would help me*. The YIQTOL does not help, because it is used as a present-time iterative in clauses 1.2 and 2.1 and a past-time iterative in clauses 3.3 and 4.1. The combination of the [QATAL] and the [X-YIQTOL]clause does help, because it is already found in verses 3-4. There, it is past oriented, and we interpret clauses 6.2-3 in the same way.

The paragraph belongs to the same communicative domain as the previous ones. YHWH is subject, with a slight deviation in clause 6.2, where ME takes that role. Maybe the new personage mentioned in clause 5.3, US, paves the way for character ME.

What is the mother clause of this paragraph? According to *Shebanq* it is clause 1.1, but the paragraph has nothing in common with that clause. In fact, the only syntactic element that connects clause 5.1 to the previous strophes is the shared character YHWH. The type of clause (nominal) is new. Its subject is YHWH and it will most probably continue another clause with subject YHWH. The only available clause is 1.2, clause 2.1 being lower in the syntactic hierarchy.

According to *Shebanq* the paragraph is not done in clause 6.3, and continues until clause 19.3 in a certain sense. Clauses 7.1 and 8.1 are linked to clause 6.2, and clause 9 to clause 5.1. We will comment on these links at the appropriate places.

*Interpretation and interstrophic repetitions*

The strophe contains a portrait of YHWH and a story fragment. The portrait of YHWH prepares for the story that he has helped the protagonist, but its general nature spells out that this intervention is not a one-time event, neither in the past nor in the future. In fact, this portrait gives a deeper understanding of the expectation uttered in the first strophe. Note how

<sup>8</sup> The [QATAL]clause is not a circumstantial clause – there is no preposed subject – but it is close by. Buber translates: ‘bin ich erschwacht, er befreit mich.’

<sup>9</sup> This composition is the reason for the substitution of the usual *מרחם*, an adjective, by the participle *מרחם*.

חַנּוּן, *merciful*, refers back to רַחֲמֵי, *my pleas for mercy*.

Story-colon 6b brings the story of the preceding strophe to a close. It elucidates what the protagonist said in the first strophe: 'he has turned his ear *to me* (לִּי)'. Note the repetition of לִּי in the story-colon.<sup>10</sup>

The protagonist does not only picture YHWH, but takes the opportunity to fill in his own identity too. He uses an inclusive *our* in *our God*, and typifies this group as *the simple*. WE THE SIMPLE are the object of God's compassion and protection, and the protagonist is a member of this group.<sup>11</sup>

The names of God alternate and are deepened in a fourfold sequence (A.B<sup>our</sup> // A.C<sup>me</sup>):  
YHWH + our God // YHWH + *he would help me*.

#### *Meta-analysis*

This is an easygoing strophe, but analyzing its syntax we were struggling with the problem how to integrate the verbal clauses. We added an asterisk because we could not find a link with the foregoing

clauses. Reading the strophe in a simple way, we do not have any trouble with colon 6b. Why is that?

Versification. Colon 6b does not bother the reader because the colon is a B-colon and therefore fully integrated in the verse line. Would it have been a A-colon, the reader would have asked whether it introduced a new strophe. Now the verse line has already started, and the reader will accept the following colon, with not much thought about its deviations.

With the integration in the verse line the integration in the strophe is given. Moreover, an intricate balance pattern covers the whole strophe and makes any questions about the place of colon 6b obsolete.

We may conclude that versification accounts for the integration of the syntactically unbound clauses 6.2-3. A further-reaching conclusion would be that the B-colon gives the poet the opportunity to experiment without losing his reader.

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<sup>10</sup> The use of the preposition לִּי to introduce the direct object in colon 6b is deliberate, as in colon 16d, and no automatism or just late usage. Nothing can be proved (Van der Ploeg, 281: 'Met zekerheid valt echter niets te zeggen.'). but meaningful balances and repetitions point to intentional selection.

<sup>11</sup> Hossfeld translates דליתי into 'ich war niedrig' with a

spiritual meaning (Hossfeld, 292 and 297), but in the Psalms the verb is used in situations of violence (cf. verse 3 and Pss 79,8; 142,7). On the other hand, the term פְּתוּחִים, *the simple*, will have a spiritual meaning. In the Psalms, it is used parallel to the soul that is receptive to learning (Pss 19,8; 119,129-130). The positive use of a negative term could point to the theology of the poor.