Psalm 116,7-9: 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 fourth strophe. The others will follow in due course.

Strophe 7-9

The fourth strophe consists of two bicola and a tricolon:

	כי־יהוה גמל עליכי	שובי נפשי למנוחיכי	7
את־רגלי מדחי	את־עיני מן־דמעה	כי חלצת נפשי ממות	8
	בארצות החיים	אתהלך לפני יהוה	9

7	Return, my soul, to your resting places,	for Yнwн has treated you generously,
8	for you have rescued my soul from death,	my eye from tears, my foot from stumbling.
9	May I walk in the presence of Yнwн	in the lands of the living.

Prosodic structure

The subdivision of verses 7-9 in two bicola and a tricolon is confirmed by the Masoretes and found in all editions. The Aleppo and Leningrad codices show cola 8a-9b in their own column. Verse line 7 is mixed up, a little in the Leningrad codex:

שובי נפשי למנוחיכי כי־
יהוה גמל עליכי

and fully in the Aleppo codex:

	שובי נפשי
למנוחיכי כי־יהוה	גמל עליכי

The cola of verses 7 and 8 consist of one clause each, whereas with five metrical units verse 9 is too long to be a colon and has to be subdivided in two cola, a specifier (an adjunct of place) serving as the second colon. As a result, all cola have 2 or 3 metrical units, in accordance with the prosodic rule.[1]

The seven cola form two bicola and one tricolon. Bicolon 7 has no line parallelism, but the selection of Aramaic suffixes (*aychi* instead of *aich*)[2] makes the cola rhyme (combined with the repetition of *lamed* and *mem*). The remarkable plural *resting places* may have been selected in view of this rhyme – the singular would have a less pleasing suffix: *echi // aychi*, but there is more going on (see below).

Tricolon 8 has an elliptic and linear line parallelism (ABC // BC // BC), with a semantic balance of the first complement (*my soul // my eye // my foot*), and a repetition of the preposition מן marking the second complement. Bicolon 9 is one clause, as stated above.

The strophe has three verse lines, in accordance with the prosodic rule, but there is no consensus at all about the existence of this strophe. We could argue in this prosodic analysis that there is no syntactic continuation and no line parallelism or free balance between verses 6 and 7, and between verses 9 and 10, and that there are nice balances between verse 7 and 9 (see below), so that there should be no doubt about the boundaries and the inner coherence, in a word, the existence of this strophe, but syntax has to be discussed first, because there are two major problems, the changes of communicative domain and the function and place of verse 9.

The situation

Let's start with the situation… According to Buber, Van der Ploeg, and Allen verse line 7 does not belong to this paragraph, and verse line 9 belongs to the next paragraph according to Gerhardt/Van der Zeyde, Van der Lugt (*Structuren*), Fokkelman, the NBV, and the BGT. To show the other side, paragraph 7-9 is found in Gunkel, Petrus Canisius,

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[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] See Joüon/Muraoka § 94 i; GKC § 91 *l*.

Bible de Jérusalem, Van der Lugt (*Cantos*), Tromp, Booij, Janowski, Vesco, and Hossfeld.[3]

A short comment on Fokkelman and Van der Lugt may show why our analysis makes a difference. Fokkelman combines verse 9 with verse 10-11. His argument is fokkelmanian. He writes about interpretation, about balances between verses 9-11 and 15-16, and about syllable counts,[4] but nowhere does he evaluate the syntactic, semantic or whatever coherence of verses 9-11 as a strophe. Van der Lugt proposed a combination of verses 9 and 10 in *Structuren* (vv. 7-8.9-10.11-12.13-14), but had almost nothing to substantiate it.[5] Both authors pay a lot of attention to repetition patterns and balances, but do not focus on syntactic and prosodic coherence in a systematic way.

The analysis found in *Shebanq* may add to the confusion. According to this analysis the preceding paragraph did not end as yet – see the visualization below. Clause 9 is linked to clause 5.1 for no apparent reason. There is a change of clause type: [NOMINAL > ZERO-YIQTOL], and of subject: JHWH > I, and the subject-character is not present in the supposed mother clause. Clause 7.1 is linked to clause 6.2, presumably because of a certain resemblance in subject: I > MY SOUL, but 6.2 is a background [QATAL]clause, and 7.1 an [IMPERATIVE]clause in another communicative domain. Clause 8.1 is also linked to clause 6.2, presumably because both clauses have QATAL, but how could [כִּי-QATAL]clause 8.1 be a continuation of the background [QATAL]clause 6.2, and that with change of subject and of communicative domain?

Shebanq			6.2	6.2	5.1	
				|	|	|
			שׁובי		|	|	7.1
		נפשׁי			|	|	7.2
		למנוחיכי			|	|	7.3
	כי־יהוה גמל עליכי				|	7.4
	כי חלצת נפשׁי ממות				|	8.1
	את־עיני מן־דמעה					8.2
	את־רגלי מדחי					8.3
אתהלך לפני יהוה בארצות החיים						9

Communicative domains
A major problem of this strophe is communication. The speaker addresses his own soul in verse 7, but

YHWH in verse 8 and someone else or, maybe better, himself in verse 9. YHWH is second person in verse 8 and third in verses 7 and 9. Three verses, three communicative domains.

Let's keep the domain changes in perspective. Strophe 15-16 shows a domain change, strophe 17-19 even two, both times within a single verse, the second time within a single clause. Although the first domain change coincides with a strophic boundary (vv. 6/7), domain changes are not necessarily linked to strophic boundaries in this psalm.[6]

The domain changes between verses 6 and 7 and verses 7 and 8 have a strong deictic effect, because verses 7-8 have an addressee whereas verses 1-6 lacked one. The self-exhortation and the subsequent addressing of God make this strophe stand out and give it an emotional flavor.

Verses 8-9 are a rather literal quote from Psalm 56,14. By pointing to this fact, one could explain the third domain change – the protagonist addresses God in verse 8 and not in verse 9, as it is in Psalm 56 – but the quoting poet could have changed the address. In fact, we will argue below that the last domain (v. 9) returns to the first one (v. 7) in its own way, strengthening the coherence of the paragraph.

Syntactic hierarchy and clause 9
We will study the syntactic hierarchy clause by clause and discuss the meaning and hierarchic place of clause 9.

7.1	שׁובי נפשׁי למנוחיכי

A [IMPERATIVE, VOCATIVE]clause. The vocative, a clause atom (see *Shebanq* above), is placed on second position, between verb and modifier. This clause is interruptive. It implies a change of communicative domain, and, moreover, it offers a strong deictic utterance. The deictic [IMPERATIVE, VOCATIVE]clause is known to open new paragraphs/strophes.[7]

7.1	שׁובי נפשׁי למנוחיכי
7.2	⌐ | כי־יהוה גמל עליכי

A [כִּי-SUBJECT-QATAL]clause, subordinate to the preceding clause, giving reason, and past oriented

('he has treated'; we propose the time perspective of clause 2.1). The fronting of the subject may be motivated by the change of subject.

שובי נפשי למנוחיכי	7.1
⌐ כי־יהוה גמל עליכי	7.2
⌐ כי חלצת נפשי ממות	8.1

The [כי-QATAL]clause 8.1 is subordinate to the preceding clause, explaining it and changing to another communicative domain.

שובי נפשי למנוחיכי	7.1
⌐ כי־יהוה גמל עליכי	7.2
⌐ כי חלצת נפשי ממות	8.1
את־עיני מן־דמעה	8.2
את־רגלי מדחי	8.3

The [ELLIPSIS]clauses 8.2 and 8.3 are parallel to clause 8.1.[8]

שובי נפשי למנוחיכי	7.1
⌐ כי־יהוה גמל עליכי	7.2
⌐ כי חלצת נפשי ממות	8.1
את־עיני מן־דמעה	8.2
את־רגלי מדחי	8.3
אתהלך לפני יהוה בארצות החיים	9

The [ZERO-YIQTOL]clause 9 brings a new change of communicative domain. It does not continue the preceding clauses. It is, as a [YIQTOL]clause, of a modal nature, whereas clauses 7.2-8.3 are [כי-(SUBJECT-)QATAL]clauses, which belong to the indicative realm. That leaves us with clause 7.1, a volitive clause, as the mother-clause of clause 9.

Clause 9 could refer to the future and one could propose a non-volitive modal reading.[9] These interpretations have to be rejected, because the [ZERO-YIQTOL]clause is an exceptional one in this psalm, all other clauses with YIQTOL being [X-YIQTOL]clauses. The front position points to a volitive meaning.

If the first person YIQTOL אתהלך is an unmarked cohortative, the clause is an adequate follow-up of [IMPERATIVE]clause 7.1. Both clauses are self-exhortations.

The sequence [IMPERATIVE > *waw*-COHORTATIVE] is found very often.[10] The situation in Psalm 116 differs in three aspects. There is no *waw*, no cohortative and there is material in between: [IMPERATIVE > … > ZERO-YIQTOL].

To start with the latter aspect, there is material in between but it is parenthetic and subordinated within the syntactic hierarchy.[11] So the description should be changed: [IMPERATIVE (…) > ZERO-YIQTOL]. Secondly, the conjunction is the norm, but

'in a number of instances, most of them in poetry, one finds an asyndetic connection instead.'[12] Thirdly, 'instead of the expected cohortative one sometimes encounters regular first person YIQTOL forms after a volitive', without semantic difference.[13] Or, with no qualification, 'first person YIQTOL forms occurring at the head of their clauses following a volitive form should be considered cohortatives functionally.'[14]

One could argue about the meaning of the sequence. We will record the clauses as *parallel* self-exhortations, but sometimes this kind of sequence implies subordination voicing purpose or result.

We may conclude that the second domain change does not affect the integrity of the paragraph. In fact, the third domain strengthens the paragraph by returning to the first domain in its own way.

Prosodic structure: the strophe
Having discussed the threefold sequence of communicative domains and interpreted [ZERO-YIQTOL]clause 9 as a self-exhortation parallel to [IMPERATIVE]clause 7.1, we can continue our description of the prosodic structure.

Verse line 7 prepares the two following lines in a chiastic way. The self-exhortation in colon 7a is developed in line 9, and the statement of salvation in colon 7b is elaborated in line 8.

We stated above that verses 8-9 are a quote from Psalm 56,14. Colon 8b does not belong to the quote, and its addition was sloppy work: the preposition מן is assimilated in cola 8a and c but not in the addition.[15] Nevertheless, the colon gives the verse line an emotional quality that befits the strophe.[16]

Verse line 9 develops the self-exhortation of line 7. The lines are not parallel, but show an intricate fabric of balances. Both A-cola have a volitive form of a verb of movement and a modifier with preposition ־ל:

שובי ... ל־\\ **אתהלך ל**־	9a \\ 7a

By substitution, the parallel modifiers associate the *resting places* with *Yhwh*:

שובי ... למנוחיכי\\ **אתהלך ל**... יהוה	9a \\ 7a

8   See above: *Prosodic structure*.
9   E.g. 'I can walk' (Allen, 112, referring to D. Michel, *Tempora*, 69); 'ik mag verkeren' (Booij, 116).
10   Joosten, 144.
11   Compare Joosten, 145.

12   Joosten, 144. See the list on page 145.
13   See for more information Joosten, 146.
14   Joosten, 146.
15   Cf. Booij, *Psalmen IV*, 44: late classical Hebrew.
16   The suggestion that the *eye* and the *foot* form a merism (Hossfeld/Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150*, 297), does not convince because of the threefold combination with the *soul*.

The balance pattern is completed with a phonemic parallel on the second position: *npšy // pny*, so that *my soul* is associated with the *beholding of God*:

7a \\ 9a	שובי נפשי למנוחיכי \\ אתהלך לפני יהוה

The modifier of place למנוחיכי has a second parallel in the B-colon of line 9, the likewise unusual plural בארצות (החיים), as will be discussed below:

7			למנוחיכי
9	לפני יהוה	\	בארצות

On the first position of the B-colon of line 7, that is parallel to this בארצות, *YHWH* is found (again!):

7	למנוחיכי	\	כי־יהוה	A	B
9	לפני יהוה	\	בארצות	B	A

The thematic point of the described fabric of balances is the strong association of *my resting places* and *the lands of the living* with *the presence of YHWH* as its center. Its structural function is binding verses 7-9 together.

Plural nouns and Aramaic suffixes

We noted above that the two cola of verse line 7 rhyme, thanks to the selection of Aramaic suffixes and the remarkable plural *resting places*,[17] but there are more Aramaic suffixes and strange plurals. The plural nouns in question are found in cola 7a.9b.19a, the suffixes in cola 7a.7b.12b.19b. We will look into their function(s).

In this investigation, we will digress from our strophe per strophe approach and use some until now hidden knowledge of the overall structure of the psalm. For now, it is enough to know that the psalm consists of two stanzas and four sub-stanzas: vv. 1-6.7-9/10-11.12-19. This structure will be argued for later on, in accordance with the progression of our investigation. The balances we will describe here do not attest it but certainly confirm it.

Let us start with the two parallel modifiers of place we mentioned in the previous section, מנוחיכי in colon 7a and ארצות החיים in colon 9b. They are remarkable because one would expect a singular in both cases: *to your resting place* and *in the land of the living*.[18]

17   See above: *Prosodic structure*.
18   The word מנוח does not occur in the plural elsewhere. The feminine מנוחה is found in the plural in Jes 32,18 and Psalm 23,2. The phrase בארצות החיים is usually singular: בארץ החיים, Jes 38,11; Ps 142,6; cf. Ps 27,13; 52,7. Booij (40) calls the plurals '"poetische" meervouden' and tries to explain each of them individually, calling the one in colon 9b 'gekunsteld', which is obvious but not to the point.

7	למנוחיכי	\	
9		\	בארצות החיים

Both words of ארצות החיים parallel מנוחיכי: החיים is a unusual plural like מנוחיכי and ארצות is a phonemic play with מנוחיכי.

There is a third plural modifier of place, בחצרות, *in the courts (of the house of YHWH)*, which makes a strong parallel to בארצות, *in the lands (of the living)*, a lexical (preposition ב־), morphological (N^pl-fem) and phonemic parallel. This third plural is not remarkable in itself and, within the small series, it may function as the referent the other two are standing for. *The resting places* and *the lands of the living* could point to *the courts of the temple*, qualifying this referent.

7	למנוחיכי	\	
9		\	בארצות החיים
19		\	בחצרות בית יהוה

The positions of the second and the third plural are important. בארצות is found in the last line of the first half of the psalm, בחצרות in the last line of the second half. The prosodic positioning enhances the strength of the parallel.[19]

We may add the Aramaic suffixes now. The phrase בתוככי finishes off the plural-noun play. While בחצרות in colon 19a refers back to בארצות in 9b (B.B), the other modifier of place in line 19, בתוככי, *in your midst*, links up with the suffixed modifier of place in colon 7a, למנוחיכי, *to your resting places* (A.A), although the suffixes have a slightly different form in this case (*echi > aychi*!).

7	למנוחיכי	\		A
9		\	בארצות החיים	B
19	בחצרות בית יהוה	\	בתוככי	A B

The last Aramaic suffix, a third-person masculine one, is found in colon 12b: תגמולוהי, *his generosities*. This colon refers back to colon 7b – the root גמל and the preposition על are repeated. Going this way, we have returned to line 7 and our first observation, the two Aramaic suffixes that make the cola rhyme.

7	למנוחיכי	\	גמל עליכי	B A
9		\	בארצות החיים	C
12		\	תגמולוהי עלי	B
19	בחצרות בית יהוה	\	בתוככי	A C

Verse lines 7 and 9 are the first and last lines of strophe and sub-stanza 7-9, while verse lines 12 and

19   Read Samuel Levin, *Linguistic Structures in Poetry*, on the importance of prosodic positions. Cf. Van Grol, *Inleiding*, 44-45 and passim.

19 are the first and last line of sub-stanza 12-19. The poet appears to use the plural modifiers of place and the Aramaic suffixes to mark the boundaries of the related sub-stanzas 7-9 and 12-19, of course among other things (!).

In search of the mother clause
We could not confirm the links in *Shebanq*,[20] but the hierarchical position of the paragraph has still to be determined. There is a change of communicative domain between verses 1-6 and clause 7.1, so that the second person talk to MY SOUL is not found before. Therefore, we should look for something close. The mother clause should be a first person clause. There are five clauses that answer to this description: 1.1, 2.2, 3.3, 4.1, and 6.2. Moreover, the time perspective of a self-exhortation is the present/near future, so that clauses about the past can be excluded: 3.3, 4.1, and 6.2. Clauses 1.1 and 2.2 remain as potential mother clauses. The time frame of clause 2.2 is the future in a broad sense (בימי). This does not fit the time perspective of clause 7.1, so that clause 1.1 with its present time perspective will be the mother clause of clause 7.1. Last but not least, an [IMPERATIVE, VOCATIVE]clause has a strong deictic character, and will be, therefore, close to the upper level of a text, which is the case in Psalm 116.

Interstrophic repetitions
Colon 8a is a statement of salvation that we might expect after the second strophe, repeating the words *my soul* (c. 4b) and *death* (c. 3a). The verbs of salvation differ each time: √ מלט *piel* (c. 4b), √ ישע *hifil* (c. 6b), and √ חלץ *piel* (c. 8a). The preceding colon 7b characterizes the salvation as God's generous treatment, but line 8 does not elaborate this characterization – it will become important only in the last sub-stanza, verses 12-19.

Interpretation
Having told his story of death and deliverance and having clarified his expectation that God will listen, the protagonist exhorts himself to go on living. He envisages his near future as a movement. He uses motion verbs, mentions places to get at (in the outer verse lines), and states the situation he was moved away from (in the middle verse line). The movement departs *from* death, tears, and stumbling (3x the preposition מן/מ־) and is a *return* (√ שוב) to *the resting places* of the liberated soul (מנוחיכי). There, in *the lands of the living* (בארצות החיים),

he will live (√ הלך *hitpael*), in *the presence of Yhwh* (לפני יהוה), the one who has treated him generously.

The strophe is an emotional opening up. The self-exhortations, the addressing of God and the addition of the teary colon 8b take the psalm to the next-level.[21]

Meta-analysis
The analysis in *Shebanq* is a black box. The results are clearly indicated, but one has to guess the reasoning behind them. Does it, then, make sense to discuss the choices made in *Shebanq*?

The analysis in *Shebanq* is of a scholarly nature and we must take it seriously. We should state why we reject some choices and certain proposed links. It will enhance the value of our own analysis, and, maybe, it will lead to insight into the weaknesses of the analysis in *Shebanq*. More principally, the whole idea of our analysis is to clarify and discuss argumentation in matters of text structuring. Although the *Shebanq* analysis is a black box, it is a detailed analytical statement and as such rare. It should be discussed.

The analysis of the Psalms in *Shebanq* is done by Gino Kalkman, to prepare the text for his research on *Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: Poetic Freedom or Linguistic System?* The fundamental analyses are not published in his dissertation but on 'a companion website on which we present the results of the computational analyses performed by our Java program. The website consists of 150 web pages containing the analyses and translations of each of the 150 Psalms as they have been made by the computer program.'[22]

In fact, Kalkman used two programs. First of all, the ETCBC program *syn04types*, an interactive program to establish textual hierarchies.[23] 'For an adequate determination of the clause relations making up a text's syntactic hierarchy, several levels of information have to be taken into account. One should start with the parameters making up a clause's clause type, such as the presence of a coordinate conjunction, the type and position of the verbal form and the position of the explicit subject (…). After that, information about morphosyntactic and lexical patterns in specific clause sequences should be retrieved: do two possibly related clauses,

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20 See above: *The situation*.

21 For colon 8b see above: *Prosodic structure: the strophe*.
22 Kalkman, *Forms*, 4. The URL of this website is: http://nbviewer.ipython.org/github/ETCBC/Biblical_Hebrew_Analysis/blob/master/PhD/Introduction.ipynb.
23 See Kalkman, Forms, 118.

for example, agree in person, number and gender? Finally, one needs information about the participants referred to in a textual section and, more specifically, about the way in which they are referred to.'[24] 'For each clause, the program presents one or more mother clauses in which it could be anchored. A clause's possible mother clauses are ranked in order of probability. This ranking is based on multiple types of observations, including those of the grammatical and lexical correspondences between a clause and its possible mother clause, the number of earlier occurrences of a similar clause connection, and the distance (in clause atoms) between the two clauses. Eventually, it is the analyst who has to decide which of the proposed clause connections is the most adequate one. His or her decisions are tabulated in different levels of indentations reflecting parallel or dependent relations between connected clauses.'[25]

Then, he added a self-developed Java program to determine discourse level functions of all clauses.[26] At this stage, textual domains are delimited also. The program is partly interactive. Kalkman mentions 'calculations with respect to participant references and semantic correspondences between clauses.'[27] 'Additional parameters' are taken into account: 'the presence of subordinate conjunctions and relative pronouns, the presence of macro-syntactic signals, the presence of 'mainline-marking' elements, the presence of vocatives, the presence of transitions in the type of communication as marked by alternation of 2nd-person and 3rd-person references, and the type of participant references (explicit vs. implicit subject, etc.).'[28] The companion website is the output of this program.

The above description of both programs gives an indication of the parameters and the algorithms used in the black box, but the actual considerations that led to the proposed textual hierarchy, cannot be retrieved in any way.

We hope to continue with a discussion of Kalkman's more fundamental choices later on. Although the author claims that the analyses were performed by 'our Java program', we will hold himself responsible.

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[24]   Kalkman, *Forms*, 106-107.
[25]   Kalkman, *Forms*, 118 note 307.
[26]   See Kalkman, *Forms*, 3 and 118-119 for the description of this program.
[27]   Kalkman, *Forms*, 119 note 309.
[28]   Kalkman, *Forms*, 119 note 311.