How This Poetry Masters the Flow of Speech. The Structure of Psalm 4 in the Hebrew Original as Found by Investigating Two Layouts and Supported by an Observation on Mendelssohn’s and Meschonnic’s Translations

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

I thank Dr. Stephan Packard for correcting proofs my English text.

Exposition of the Problem: The Lack of Authorized Layouts in Biblical Hebrew Poetry

By analyzing psalm 4 (יתֶּשָּׁהוּ ‘ןִּיתַיָּהוּ) as an example, this essay intends to show the specific problem of biblical Hebrew poetry: the lack of a final layout authorized by “the poet” which could indicate the “original” verse structure. What we have is a variety of Hebrew “textual witnesses”, the fragments from the Judean Desert being the earliest ones (ca. 250 v. – 100 n. Chr.). The main part of manuscripts however, stem from the early and late Middle Ages. Four sources show signs of a concept of writing systems for poetry that tries to indicate the rhythmical structure and division of these poems:
Signs of a “Semiotik der Textgestalt” as Raible puts it. First, there are the special layouts in medieval manuscripts for the kernel poems of the Hebrew Bible, including Mose’s Song at the sea (Ex 15), Mose’s leave-taking song (Dtn 32), Debora’s victory song (Ri 5) and Samuel’s thanksgiving song (2 Sam 22) which is identical with psalm 18. Second, the explicit rules for writing these songs are fixed in the “Writers' Treatise”. Third, there is the peculiarity of the Masoretic accents, a system of diacritic signs, indicating divisions and combinations of speech units. Fourth, exceptional translations have to be taken seriously as practical observations of the original Hebrew verse structure and equivalents for them. The current PhD project, from which this essay is an extract, focuses on the German and French translations of Moses Mendelssohn, 1783 and Henri Meschonnic, 2001 for two reasons. First, they explicitly look at and reflect on the biblical Hebrew psalms as poetry and try to give optic equivalents for their structure. Second, both focus on the Masoretic accents as a guide to the rhythmic arrangement and movement of the poems. Within the scope of this essay, these translations are not analyzed, but only the first part of the actually twofold project is presented. Nevertheless, their translations are shown here as an important support for the thesis that the Hebrew psalms call for a structuring layout.

The main thesis of the investigation is that caesuras or rather incisions of different degrees do play a central role in biblical Hebrew poetry and are closely connected to the weaving of key words and paronomasies, forming a tricky work of parallelism on phonetic, grammatical and semantic layers. The outline of an analysis of psalm 4 is based on some methodological preparations. A summary of basics of biblical Hebrew language will provide the important terms; an exhibition of “Textbilder” visually demonstrates the problem of layouting biblical Hebrew Poetry; and a colometric analysis, transliteration and interlinear translation should finally allow readers with no knowledge of biblical Hebrew to understand the short psalm and to follow me diving into it.

Summary of Basics and Terms for Biblical Hebrew Language and Poetry

The peculiarity of the Hebrew language is its “triliterality”. Most words are derived from a root of 3 consonants. 7 verb patterns change the lexical meaning of the word (e.g. passive, causative, factitive, reflexive). The “status constructus” designates a noun proclitically connected with the following one, whose relationship to it is that of a genitive to its governing noun; the stress lies on the second word. The distinction between “imperfect” (“yiqtol”) and “perfect” (“qatal”) gives the aspect under which an action is told (durative vs. completed); second, it works as a relative tense system (priority vs. successivity; “yiqtol” mainly for present/future, “qatal” for the past). By the composed or inverted verb forms “wayyiqtol” (progress in the past) and “wĕqatal” (progress in the future) a system of time phases is approached. Verbal sentences have a finite verb as predicate, nominal sentences have other predicates. The inverted tenses can only be followed by or include their subjects. The NS has either the word order S-P or P-S; the VS dominantly has P-S.

The scholarly standard edition of the Hebrew Bible is the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) whose basic text is the codex Leningradensis / Petropolitanus (1008 C.E.). Originally, the biblical Hebrew text wrote consonants only. The term “Masoretes”
(Aramaic mēsar means “to transmit”) refers to several generations of scholars whose efforts were directed towards the exact transmission of the biblical text. Between the 7th and 11th century C.E. they added a system of vocalization as well as accent signs to the text. Two systems of diacritical accents for the twenty-one prose and the three so-called poetic books structure the text with a set of dividing and combining accents (tē'amím, sg. tá’am = “taste; sense”). Their function is threefold: phonetic (stress syllable), syntactical and musical (musical motifs). The main dividers in poetry are sīlluq (sof pasuq) for the end of a “verse”, atnach, the main divider within a “verse” and ‘ole wēyoréd, a third divider that occurs in verses without atnach or precedes it in longer “verses”. The Masoretic period – mainly syntactical – marked off by sof pasuq is not always identical with the rhythmical units of the poem. The numbering of these MV-“verses” comes not until 15th century and stems from the Vulgata. Since then, “verse” has designated the prose-MV as well as of the poetry-MV. Here, I will distinguish between MV (Masoretic verse) and PV (poetic verse).

“Colon, comma and caesura as basic terms of ancient colometry provide the basic concepts of the present study. The flow of speech calls for a division into syntactical units of different size by incisions (caesuras) of different strength, challenged by the system of Masoretic accents. The colon (capital letter (A) for main caesura) as a syntactical independent word group often coincides with atnach, the comma (small letter (a) for minor caesura) syntactically depends on the colon⁵. “Strophe”, literally “turn” in ancient Greek, shows the beginning of a new section within a poetic composition. As in modern poetry, strophes in biblical Hebrew poetry do not have to be groups of verses of the same rhythmical structure, but can be marked off optic-graphically only¹⁷.
Exhibition of “Text Pictures” as a Call For a Semiotics of Textual Shape

BHS §1997

Mendelssohn, 1783
Analysis and Edition of the Hebrew Original Psalm 4

Suggestions for Two Editions

The following editions present two possible versions of a poetic layout for psalm 4. Both visualize specific aspects of the rhythmical and thematic design and should therefore be considered as complementary results of an intimate look at the original text. Consequently, they are discussed side by side. The first indicates only the main caesuras by spaces (cola) and without supposing a division into strophic units. Additionally, key words, echoing significantly through the “text”, are underlined in this edition. The second differentiates between main and minor caesuras (cola and commata) by two sizes of spaces and elucidating the text further by a proposition for a strophic structure. For both the arrangement into two columns reflects traditional Jewish conventions for writing biblical poetry. The central position of the title already appears in texts from the Judean Desert. The “pure” Hebrew letters heighten the optic force of rhythmical groupings and paronomastic links.

edition psalm4a

למנῦה בָּנַיָּהַת מְמוֹר לְדוֹד
Observations on the Hebrew Poem

The PV in these editions of psalm 4 are at the same time identical with writing’s technical unit, the line, and the borders of the Masoretic sof pasuqs. It is only because the heading...
is separated from and centered above the text that the counting of sof pasuqs diverges from that of the PV. Fokkelman sees psalm 4 as “a very regular composition”22.

9 PV.1, the opening verse of the psalm, is the only tricolon in editions 4a and 4b. Accepting the accentual theory23 that for a rule, each word in Hebrew takes an expiratory accent, PV.1 has the pattern 3/3/3. PV.1 stands out from the rest of the text by this tricolon structure as well as by its expressive minor caesuras that are visible in 4b. There is much invested into the rhythmical and phonetic composition of this first verse line. The appellative imperative with vocative addressed to God is the dominant speech attitude of the psalmist. Beginning with a nominalized infinitive in the function of a temporal subordinate clause, PV.1 has a sequence of three imperatives (“anéni” [answer me] (PV.1Ab), “channéni” [have mercy upon me] (1Ca), “ushéma” [and hear] (1Cb)) that is interrupted by a clause of statement in the middle colon (“batstsár hirchávta lí” [in the narrowness you have widened for me] (1Bab)). The three cola are held together by the forceful i-sound that rings seven times through this line and continues less intensively in the following one24. Commata Aa and Ba alliterate on “b” (“bégori” [on my shouting] -“batstsár”), and the two imperatives in Ab und Ca (“anéni”-“channéni”) as well as “bégori”-“tsidqí” [my justice] -“lí”-“tëfilláti” [my prayer] rhyme with each other. The central statement in the B-colon reflects the typical feature of the Hebrew tenses not to mark firm time steps. Consequently, the qatal “hirchávta” in 2B can be interpreted as a narrative (completed in the past: “you have [already] widened”), a performative (instantaneous: “you widen [in the moment of my speaking]”), a prophetic (imagined as present: “you [will] widen) or a precative, ie. optative (wish: “widen [!]”). The statement thus hints at the general tension between fulfillment and expectation that characterizes the whole poem25.

10 PV.2 no longer addresses God but the “bène-ísh” [sons of men], “ísh” designating men of a higher status26. Because of this remarkable “turn” of address,27 and with regard to the special rhythmical structure of PV.1, which is the verse most rich in caesuras, it constitutes its own strophe in e4b. Moreover, it corresponds to the last verse PV.8, which is also a strophe of its own. PV.1 echoes the sounds of PV.8 (cf. the alliteration “bégori”-“beshálómi [in peace]” (8A), and “toshívéní” [you make me sit]” (8Bb) rhyming with “anéni” and “channéni”) and thematically answers to the cry for divine attention in PV.1 with a complete confidence in God. This confidence is the result of several perlocutive efforts to move God, people and oneself into a reciprocal relationship stretched out for the “good” (“tôv” (6Ab)). The whole psalm therefore is one single performative act28 driving at a confidence in God which itself is just the condition for the desired experience of divine presence. The psalm calls for a circle reading, constituting this confidence again and again through the act of reading itself.

11 PV.2-5, taken as one strophe, concentrate on the difficult interdependence between the collective and the individual aspect of the worship of God. The individual cry “bégori” to God now corresponds to the alliterative appeal to the “bène-ísh” in form of a rhetorical question. The two cola of the verse line (4+4) both have minor caesuras: the PV.2a after the vocative, the PV.2Bab between the parallel predicates “te’ehavún” [you will love] and “tëvaqšhú” [you will search] that depend on the interrogative words “ad-mé” [till when] in 2Ab. In PV.3-5, we find an accumulation of seven imperatives (PV.4Ab is a vetitive)29 towards these “bène-ísh” of whom was said in PV.2 that they hurt the “kavód” [honour] of the psalmist and do not care for God. The sequence of appeals begins with the call for realization (“udédi” [and realize]), immediately explained by the conjunctive
clause with “ki” [that], that is externally parallel to the second ki-clause in PV.8Ba, which there gives the climactic reason for the individual’s absolute trust in God. The ki-clause in 3Abc prepares that in 8B [because]. Similar to the latter, it is rhythmically exceptional because of the unusual distance of “ló” from the predicate, which leads to a deictic caesura in the argument “ki hiflá ’adonáy chasíd ló” [that the Lord has sort out a/the pious for him(self)]. Furthermore remarkable for this bicolon is its number of accented words, which are chiasmically mirrored in PV.8 (5+4 vs. 4+5). The B-colon presents either the psalmist’s claim or his strong wish that God hears or will hear his prayer. Looking at and hearing this colon reveals its direct connection with 1A and thereby a characteristic feature of the whole composition: the net of key words (“bĕqorí”, “shĕmá” [hear], “tsédeq” [rightness/justice], “lév” [heart], “shacháv” [to lie down], “batách” [to trust’], underlined in e4a) that are rhythmically and phonetically tied together.

12 This net of lexical references is the main guide to van der Lugt’s division of the “rhetorical structure” into cantos and strophes. This network of repetitions constitutes several external parallelisms with the result – according to van der Lugt’s division – of one linear parallelism for the structure of the poem as a whole (a.b. | a’.b’).

13 Back to the thematic and structural unit of PV.2-5: The sequence of imperatives is intensified in PV.4 and 5. The dynamic force of these two lines is the consequence of the continuous head position of the imperatives. Their appellative function effects several minor caesuras that constitute the two significant own-word-kommata ויבא "rigzú"...
[shake] und וָדָמו [be silent] that frame the line at its beginning and end. The A-colon is outstandingly short (2+4), preparing PV.5, the climax of the appeal to the people (2+2). This last verse line of the unit culminates in the main point of the psalmist’s argument and is completely concentrated on the grammatical mode of imperative. Offers of justice (“tsédeq”) and confidence (“uvitchú”) in God are the central demands for the people. In PV.6 we have, similarly to PV.2, another change of speech attitude that marks a kind of cut in the poem. The direct vocative to the “bène ísh” with a sequence of imperatives shifts to a direct quotation of an indefinite quantity of people (“rabbim” (many)). This quotation is a question that is in an external linear parallelism to the psalmist’s rhetorical question in PV.2 (נָה תֻע “‘ad-mé” [till when] vs. מִי “who’). The gesture of this last question is controversial in exegesis and translations and depends on interpretation. The crucial point is whether the question of the many “mí yar’énú tóv” (PV.6Ab) [‘Who let us see the good?’] is understood as an honest and deep desire or as an ironic mockery. If it is interpreted positively, as in this analysis, the psalm gets more complex. The “rabbim” then could be seen as a part of the “bène-ísh” (PV.2) in whom the psalmist’s rhetorical efforts to persuade have already shown results. In this perspective, especially in PV.6 as well as in the poem as a whole, individual and collective desire and search for God confront, combine and overlap one another. So the psalmist can identify himself with this group in the key preposition עלינו “‘alénu” in PV.6B.

Regarding the sequence of words with accents, PV.6 (4+3) slightly diverges from PV.2 (4+4). The distribution of minor caesuras is also different. It further differs between the two cola of PV.6 itself, although the number of words around the minor caesuras is identical. Observing the massoretic maqqefs (a line combining two words) namely, makes of “mi-yar’énu” and “nèsa-'alénu” one tone unit with a stress on the second word only and in the constructus connection “‘ôr panécha” [‘light of your face’] the stress also is on the second word (as in “bène ísh”).

The abrupt change of mood in PV.7 is characteristic for the tension of the poem. In 7A, the psalmist withdraws again into an individual relationship to God. The separation from the people is mirrored firstly through the key word “bèlibbi” that echoes both וָיֵלְבְּכֶם” (PV.4Ba) and “alénu” (PV.6Ba), and secondly through the declarative sentence with the qatal “natattá” [‘you have given’] that echoes the qatal “hirchávta” in PV.1B. The declarative status of PV.7 is brought out by the chiastic syntax of the two qatal-forms “natattá”-x / x-“rabbú”. If the suffixes in “dèganâm wètirosám” [their grain and their must] are referred to the “rabbim” in PV.6A, and harvest is taken as an expression of material or better physical goods, this only reveals how absolute and consequently demanding the decision for God is. It is therefore a substantially individual decision that everyone must come to for himself before meeting others that can either support or endanger one’s confidence. The division by one main caesura consolidates the declarative effect of the verse line. PV.7 prepares PV.8, which completely returns to the individual communication with God with which the poem had begun in PV.1. In edition 4b this movement in a “full circle” is visible immediately, since PV.1 and PV.8 correspond to each other as the only “one-verse-strophes”.

PV.8 as the last verse line is – similarly to the opening verse line PV.1 – especially richly composed in its rhythm and phonetic allusions. Firstly, there is the alliteration between “bèqorí”, “batstsár” (PV.1Aa,8a) and “bèshalóm” (PV.8Aa) which three stand at the head of a colon respectively. The root יָנָע “shlm” – if its etymology is kept in mind – is the vanishing point of all arguments of the poem. Its basic meaning is "to be finished,
completed”, then “to stay intact, unhurt”40. Completeness, thus the seemingly paradox experience of the psalmist, is not gained within human community, but in solitude with God. To confirm this basic conviction – that God himself is the best and only fulfilling partner: for everyone – the poem is performed.

PV.2A and PV.6B are then to be read as persuasions that everyone for himself is demanded to get “shlm” with God. It is only by this individual frame that the universal demand can be revealed. The fulfillment however would be a world without this colourful psalm. This basic tension of the whole poem between solitude and community is expressed most directly in the neighbourhood of the roots “shlam” and “ychd”. The root יָחָד “ychd” means not only “at the same time”, but above all “together”41. In PV.8, the poet has solved the tension for himself: He declares to be complete by being alone with God. To be thus alone is unambiguously positively connotated in PV.842. As for the accented words, PV.8 – as was already mentioned - chiastically echoes PV.3 (5+4 / 4+5). These two verses are moreover connected by a similar syntactic and rhythmic structure. Both cola contain an explaining ki-clause that directly addresses ʻadonáy (tetragramm twice) and that is interrupted by a minor caesura. The Masoretes marked this minor caesuras by the dividing accents dĕchi and atnach. This structural interdependence is motivated by a striking semantic parallelism. While in PV.3A it is argued that God chose the psalmist as his special “pious”43, God is now addressed directly in the second person (“ʼattá”[,] you), and the argument is repeated more exclusively and personally: It is you, God, who alone makes me be alone and safe.

Here we meet the crucial point of rhythmical arrangement and semantic interpretation of the poem that is diversely discussed. The problem is the reference of “lĕvadád” [,alone] as well as the dichotomy or trichotomy of the verse. “Lĕvadád” can either refer to the subject ʻadonáy (you, God, alone), or together with “lavétach” to the predicate that also contains the object “me” in its suffix (you, God, let me sit alone)44. Probably with regard to its length, the Masoretes gave MV.9 (PV.8) two main dividers, ʻolew ĕyoréd and atnach (as MV.2 (PV.1))45. In contrast to PV.1 with its four independent clauses, in PV.8 the atnach falls in between the syntactic unit of the ki-clause. It is therefore more probable to see PV.8B as one colon consisting of two commata (atnach indicating a minor caesura) instead of assuming two cola (main caesuras) here. In psalm 4Bab “lĕvadád” und “lavétach” are divided by the major divider “atnach”. Logically, 4Bab complement each other, that is, the “missing links” are repeated in each comma respectively46. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to assume a trichotomic structure for PV.9 as Fokkelman proposes47. PV. 8 taken as a bicolon, as van der Lugt does, reveals the atnach here to be a minor caesura within the B-colon that is obviously parallel to the minor caesura in the A-colon.

Just a brief look back again at Mendelssohn’s and Meschonnics arrangements of psalm 4 may for now suffice to show how their translations support the importance of the semiotics of textual shape. Only with such layouts does the originally sung poetry receive a visual equivalent, revealing its effective web to us late readers.
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NOTES

8. Cf. e.g. Moses Mendelssohn’s “Be’ur” (Hebrew for “explanation”) on the song at the sea (Ex 15), Hebräische Schriften II.2. Der Pentateuch, bearbeitet von Werner Weinberg, Stuttgart u. Bad Canstatt, Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog) (= Gesammelte Schriften, JubA, 24 Bde., begonnen von I. Elbogen, J. Guttmann u. E. Mittwoch, fortgesetzt von A. Altmann u. E. J. Engel in Gemeinschaft mit F. Bamberger u.a., Bd. 16), 1990c, p.125-134. I am greatly indebted to Prof. Daniel Krochmalnik and Dr. Rainer Wenzel (College of Jewish Studies, Heidelberg) for giving me access to Dr. Wenzels German translation, that is expected to be published in the JubA, which helped me in understanding the rabbinical Hebrew.


18. The transliteration is not a scholarly transcription, but its aim is just to connect to the Hebrew sounds in the general school pronunciation. The so-called shwa mobile, designating the reduced or “murmer” vowel at the beginning of a syllable, however, is transliterated as "ĕ" instead of a simple “e”. Cf. *Das Hohelied Salomos*, übersetzt, transkribiert u. kommentiert von Klaus Reichert, München, Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 2003, p.88f. The vertical lines separate Hebrew word units.


33. Ibid., p.113 sees only „uvitchú-lavétach“ as an inclusion.
34. In van der Lugt’s typographic interpretation the two words belong to different strophes; that they are nevertheless phonetically tied, corresponds to his definition of “concatenation”, Ibid., p.113, 572.
35. Cf. Ibid., p.114.
36. Against the arrangement of BHS in MV.5 I do not suppose the main, but only a minor caesura to be between the parallel phrases “ʻimrú vilvavchém” and “ʻal mishcavchém”. The structure of this B-colon parallels that of 3B (“te’ehavún riq / tē’vaqshú chazáv”).
38. Cf. Hupfeld, Ibid., who takes MV.7B as the continuation of the many’s speech, which is taken for improbable by the later reworking by Riehm, p.131.
41. Cf. Ibid., 387f.
46. Cf. Mendelssohn’s expression “ממשולבו’ [as intertwined’], 1990c, Ibid., p.130.

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**ABSTRACTS**

By analyzing Psalm 4 (Bēqor‘i ‘anēni ‘elohe tsidqī) as an example, the essay “How This Poetry Masters the Flow of Speech” demonstrates the specific problem of Biblical Hebrew poetry: the lack of a form authorized by “the poet” that could indicate the “original” verse structure. The arrangements of two editions of Psalm 4 are supported by Mendelssohn’s 1783 and Meschonnic’s 2001 translations. These editions make clear that the force of Biblical Hebrew verse relies on the effective art of breaking speech into corresponding rhythmical elements, and that this art calls for a visual equivalent.

En prenant pour exemple le psaume 4 (Bēqor‘i ‘anēni ‘elohe tsidqī), l’essai *How This Poetry Masters the Flow of Speech* montre le problème spécifique de la poésie biblique hébraïque: l’absence d’une mise en page dernière et autorisée par le “poète” qui pourrait indiquer la structure versifiée “originale”. Les suggestions de deux éditions du psaume 4 sont confortées par les arrangements des traductions de Mendelssohn, en 1783, et Meschonnic, en 2001. On commence à comprendre que la force du vers biblique hébreux repose sur un art efficace de briser le discours en membres rythmiques correspondants et que ce mouvement appelle à un équivalent visuel.
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