

Juxtaposition as literary feature in Psalm 116



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Identifying literary devices used in the (Hebrew) Old Testament serves as an aid to the understanding of a particular passage. In this contribution, juxtaposition as a literary device in Psalm 116 was investigated. A brief overview of the main problems in the research history of the Psalm is given, highlighting the date and composition, as well as the enigmatic verse 15. Drawing on other definitions of the term *juxtaposition*, the term was defined as a literary device used to imply comparison and especially contrast. In the rest of the article, juxtaposition as a literary device in this Psalm was investigated and eight different modes of juxtaposition were identified. It is argued that juxtaposition is the dominating and most prominent literary device that occurs in the Psalm. Finally, the contribution that the identification of juxtaposition as literary device makes to the understanding of this Psalm, was briefly discussed. Methodologically, the literary feature of juxtaposition was demonstrated through a careful reading of the text of Psalm 116. Once that was done, it became apparent that juxtaposition plays an important part in this psalm. The juxtaposition is of death versus life: it is an experience of the absence of YHWH in a Sheol-like situation in juxtaposition to the presence of YHWH in the temple; the temporal shift between present and past and the juxtaposition between the individual believer vis-à-vis the community of believers, all adds up to the conclusion that the Psalm displays a coherent unity, exactly because of the literary device of juxtaposition. Reading Scripture with a sensitivity to the literary devices that may be detected in passages of Scripture, is a rewarding exercise. It opens new possibilities to explore the meaning(s) these ancient texts have also for modern-day readers of the Bible.

Contribution: Although juxtaposition as literary device has been pointed out in previous research publications on Psalm 116, the specific contribution of this article is to demonstrate that juxtaposition is the dominating literary device in the psalm. Psalm 116 has been seen in the past as a disunity made up of incoherent parts. The frequent occurrence of juxtaposition throughout the psalm adds to the unity of the psalm. Recognising juxtaposition as the dominating literary device adds new light on the theological meaning of the psalm and this fits in well with the focus of *In die Skriflig* to come to a better understanding of the Bible.

Keywords: absence vs presence; composition; contrast; death vs life; juxtaposition; meaning; Psalm 116; Sheol; structure; unity.

Introduction, problem statement and methodological considerations

The book of the Psalms remains one of the most famous and beloved parts of the Bible. Johnston and Firth (2005) note that:

[T]he book of the Psalms is the best loved and most treasured book of the Hebrew Scriptures. It has been precious to countless thousands of faithful Jewish and Christian believers in hundreds of different languages and countries over several millennia, expressing their hopes and fears, inspiring their faith, and renewing their trust in God. (p. 17)

Brueggemann (2003) regards the Psalms as:

[T]he quintessential articulation of Israel's faith in the primal utterance of Israel in speech back to YHWH in affirmation and distress and is testimony to the world concerning the wonders of YHWH. (p. 277)

Psalms are found also in a secular environment. Funeral scenes in movies often include a reading of Psalm 23.

One aspect that has been alluded to in various publications on Psalm 116 and that will be the focus of this investigation, is the use of the literary device of juxtaposition that is found in this Psalm. Juxtaposition can be defined as the placement of two or more things side by side, often to bring out their differences (Anon n.d.b). Juxtaposition can also be described as 'the act or an

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instance of placing two or more things side by side, often to compare or contrast or to create an interesting effect' (Anon n.d.a). Juxtaposition is a literary device used to imply comparison and especially contrast. It is exactly by sensing the comparison or contrast that meaning is created. The main objective to this investigation is to highlight juxtaposition as literary device in this Psalm. Consequently, it is argued that juxtaposition is the dominating literary device that occurs in the Psalm. Finally, the contribution that juxtaposition makes to the understanding of Psalm 116, is discussed. Methodologically the literary feature of juxtaposition is demonstrated through a careful reading of the text of Psalm 116. Once this is done, it will become apparent that juxtaposition plays an important part in this Psalm. When that is established, the implications this investigation has in terms of the meaning of the text, is briefly pointed out.

It is a well-known fact that the book of the Psalms is divided into five parts or 'books' (Ps 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150), each part concluding with a praise to YHWH (Ps 41:14; 72:19; 89:53; 106:48; 150:6). Psalm 116 forms part of the last part or 'book' in the book of the Psalms. Psalm 116 is also part of a smaller collection within the last part of the Psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel, consisting of Psalms 113–118. These psalms are called the Egyptian Hallel because of the frequent references to the Exodus from Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness (deClaissé-Walford 2020:121). This group of psalms is also characterised by the occurrence of the hymnic call of hallelu (הללו) found in Psalms 113:1, 9; 116:19 and 117:2. If one takes the supposed exilic context of the fifth book of the Psalms into account, Ayars (2019:62) notes that this collection does not only commemorates the deliverance from Egypt, 'but also speaks to the future hope of a deliverance from exile and the fulfilment of God's promise to renew his covenant with Israel'. In this regard Zenger (in Hossfeld & Zenger 2011:3) is of the opinion that the Egyptian Hallel celebrates the second exodus, this time from the slavery of Babylon. It is also interesting to note that this group of psalms were and are used at major festivals within the Jewish tradition: the Passover, Feast of the Weeks as well as the festival of the Tabernacles.

A comprehensive overview of problems pertaining to the interpretation of Psalm 116 cannot be given here, but like all other psalms, this Psalm also presents the interpreter with a variety of problems when subjected to a careful and critical reading. Three of the main problems confronting the interpreter can be briefly highlighted: The dating of the Psalm has been a problem, and although some scholars (Dahood 1970:145) pose a pre-exilic date to the Psalm, many scholars (Allen 1983:114; James 2017:40; Kraus 1972:794; Potgieter 2019:410; Prinsloo 2006:757; Rogerson & McKay 1977:81) regard the Psalm as post-exilic or even late post-exilic. The composition of this Psalm is another major problem in the research. Ayars (2019:172) speaks of the 'elusive structure' that is characteristic of the Psalm. Scholarly opinions differ widely on the issue of how the composition of the Psalm is best explained (Snyman 2021:318–320). Some scholars (Emerton 1983:147; Kraus 1972:793) maintain that there is no

discernible form or structure to be detected in this Psalm, while others (James 2017:44) see the Psalm as a coherent whole made up of different strophes and stanzas. Thirdly, Psalm 116:15 remains a difficult verse to interpret, and it seems that a final answer to this problem still eludes the scholarly community (Emerton 1983:146–153; Pinker 2009:529–539).

The text of Psalm 116

אהבתי כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת־קוֹלִי תַחֲנוּןִי׃	1
כִּי־הִשָּׁא אָזְנוֹ לִי וּבִכְמִי אָקְרָא׃	2
אֶפְפוּנִי תַחֲלִי־מָוֶת וּמָצְרִי שָׁאוֹל מִצְאוּנִי צָרָה וְיָגוֹן אֶמְצָא׃	3
וּבְשֵׁם־יְהוָה אָקְרָא אָנָּה יְהוָה מִלְּטָה נַפְשִׁי׃	4
חַנּוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ מֵרַחֵם׃	5
שָׁמַר תְּתָאִים יְהוָה דְּלוּתִי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ׃	6
שׁוּבִי נַפְשִׁי לְמִנוּחֶיכִי כִּי־יְהוָה גָּמַל עָלַיִכִּי׃	7
כִּי חִלַּצְתָּ נַפְשִׁי מִמָּוֶת אֶת־עֵינַי מִדְּמָעָה אֶת־רַגְלִי מִדָּחִי׃	8
אֶתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּאַרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים׃	9
הֶאֱמַנְתִּי כִּי אֲדַבֵּר אֲנִי עֲנִיתִי מָאֹד׃	10
אֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי בְחַפְזִי כִּלְיָהֶם כִּנּוֹב׃	11
מָה־אֲשִׁיב לַיהוָה כִּלְיָתִגְמוּלוֹהִי עָלַי׃	12
כּוֹס־יִשׁוּעוֹת אֶשָּׂא וּבְשֵׁם יְהוָה אָקְרָא׃	13
נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נִגְדָה־נָּא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ׃	14
יָקָר כְּעֵינִי יְהוָה הַמּוֹתֶה לְחַסִּדָּיו׃	15
אָנָּה יְהוָה כִּי־אֲנִי עֲבָדְךָ אֲנִי־עֲבָדְךָ בְּיָדֶיךָ פִּתְחָתָה לְמוֹסְרִי׃	16
לִדְ־אֲנֹכַח וְכַח תּוֹדָה וּבְשֵׁם יְהוָה אָקְרָא׃	17
נִדְרֵי לַיהוָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נִגְדָה־נָּא לְכָל־עַמּוֹ׃	18
בְּתַצְרוֹת בֵּית יְהוָה בְּתוֹכִכִּי יְרוּשָׁלַם הִלְלוּ־יָהּ׃	19

New International Version: Psalm 116

1. I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
2. Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
3. The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
4. Then I called on the name of the Lord:
'O Lord, save me!'
5. The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
6. The Lord protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.
7. Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.
8. For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
9. that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
10. I believed; therefore I said,
'I am greatly afflicted'.
11. And in my dismay I said,
'All men are liars'.
12. How can I repay the Lord
for all his goodness to me?

13. I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
14. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
15. Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his saints.
16. O Lord, truly I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant;
you have freed me from my chains.
17. I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
18. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
19. in the courts of the house of the Lord—
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord.

There is no need to alter the text on grounds of text critical considerations, as most of the suggestions made in the critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* concern alternative readings from the Septuagint or Syriac versions (James 2017:40–41; Kraus 1972:793). It is interesting to note that the Septuagint views verse 10 as the start of a new psalm.

As has been noted in the introduction, that the composition of this Psalm is a controversial matter. Prinsloo (1993:71–82; 2000:244–255) provides an overview of standpoints scholars have on this matter, in which he demonstrates the differences of opinion on the composition of Psalm 116. Some scholars (Emerton 1983:147; Kraus 1972:793) maintain that no discernible composition can be found in the Psalm. Hossfeld (2011:214) for instance, is of the opinion that the Psalm consists of various subsections like lament, petition, expression of trust and thanksgiving that are all mixed in a disorderly fashion. For Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:499) ‘the Psalm’s structure is not easy to discern’. In more recent research, scholars are more inclined to find a meaningful structure in the Psalm, but opinions differ from splitting the Psalm in two parts, consisting of verses 1–9, 10–19 (Booij 1995:393; Lamparter 1978:248), or verses 1–11, 12–19 (Hossfeld 2011:219; Janowski 2003:278), to a five-fold division Anderson (1983:118–119) proposed (vs. 1–2, 3–4, 5–7, 8–9, 10–19), to a six-fold structure advocated by Prinsloo (2000:255), consisting of verses 1–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–14, 15, 16–19, to an eight-fold division consisting of verses 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–9, 10–11, 12–14, 15–16, 17–19 according to the analyses of Barré (1990:66) and Potgieter (2019:401–403), or verses 1–2, 3–4, 5–7, 8–9, 10–11, 12–15, 16, 17–19 Gerstengerger (2001:291) made of the Psalm. For the purpose of this contribution the analysis offered by Ayars (2019:207) is used. Ayars (2019:207–209) proposes a three-part division of the Psalm consisting of verses 1–9, 10–11 and 12–19. Ayars (2019:171) points out how the phrase, to ‘call on (the name of) YHWH’, occurs no less than four times (vs. 2, 3, 13, 17) in the Psalm and functions as a rhetorical-theological cohesion, binding the Psalm in a unity.

While there is little agreement on the structure and unity of the Psalm, scholars agree that it could be seen as

an individual hymn of thanksgiving (Allen 1983:113; Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:499; deClaissé-Walford 2020:138; Janowski 2003:275; Jacobson 2004:65; Kraus 1972:793; Lamparter 1978:248; Potgieter 2019:399; Rogerson & McKay 1977:81; Weiser 1975:719; and Westermann 1984:137) although the Psalm does contain elements of lament and praise as well. Individual hymns of thanksgiving normally contain an introduction in which the psalmist declares the intention of giving thanks and praise, followed by a narrative in which the psalmist recalls the event he was rescued from, and finally a conclusion in which God is praised for what He did in the life of the psalmist (deClaissé-Walford 2020:138). These typical characteristics of a hymn of thanksgiving is found in Psalm 116. The Psalm commences with an introduction in verses 1–2. Verses 3–11 can be seen as the narrative being told by the psalmist, while verses 12–19 constitute the conclusion of the Psalm in which YHWH is praised for the redemption the psalmist experienced. The historical setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Psalm can be in the temple in Jerusalem (vs. 18–19) after the Babylonian exile, presumably during a festival in which the community of believers gathered. Verse 5 in which YHWH is called a gracious, righteous and merciful God, reminds one of Exodus 34:6 located in the Sinai-tradition, where YHWH and his people entered into a covenant.

Juxtaposition in Psalm 116

When reading the Psalm through the lens of juxtaposition as an important literary feature, one is at once confronted with several perspectives. It is not always easy to distinguish the different perspectives from one another as they tend to overlap.

The juxtaposition of death vis-à-vis life

The most prominent juxtaposition in this Psalm, is the one of death vis-à-vis life. In verse 3 the poet states that snares or cords of death (מָוֶת) encompassed him to such a degree, that he experienced the pangs of Sheol (שְׁאוֹל). Sheol is nothing else but the realm of the dead, the underworld with the fullness of life diminished (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:500). The result of this experience was that he suffered distress and anguish. His life has been permeated by an aura of death (Allen 1983:115). In Old Testament thought, Sheol (שְׁאוֹל) is seen as the abode of the death, located in the depths of the earth (deClaissé-Walford 2020:139). Sheol not only means the end of life and the end of a relationship with YHWH (deClaissé-Walford 2020:139), but it is also understood to intrude on life even before physical death (Gerleman 1976:842). What is also important in the context of Psalm 116, is the conviction that those who find themselves in Sheol are excluded from YHWH’s cult and his historical acts (Gerleman 1976:840).

In response to this life-threatening crisis described in verse 3, the poet called upon YHWH to save his life (v. 4). The noun used for life (חַיָּה) occurs frequently in the book of the Psalms, according to Van Rooy (2021:131) – 52 times, 11 of which are found in book 5 of the Psalms. Westermann (1976:74–91)

found six usages of 'life' (נפש) in the Old Testament Hebrew Bible (breath or throat; longing or desire; soul; life; living being or person; corpse), but in most cases the term can be related to the idea of 'human life' (breath or throat; soul; life; living being or person). In the face of death, the poet cried to YHWH to rescue him to life. The life-threatening situation of the psalmist becomes clear only with the last word of verse 4, with a plea to YHWH to save his life (Barré 1990:68). The actual deliverance from the dangers that threatened the life of the poet, has not happened yet. In the face of the snares of death, he prayed to YHWH to save his life. The prayer uttered creates anticipation and tension in the reader of the Psalm: will the prayer be answered? In this way the scene is set for the juxtaposition of death vis-à-vis life.

The first part of the Psalm comes to an end in verse 9. In verse 8 the two key concepts setting the scene for the juxtaposition of death and life are picked up again and occur next to one another (נפש מות). The life (נפש) of the psalmist has been saved from death (מות) by YHWH. Van Rooy (2021:131) notes that the verb, to live, occurs mostly in laments, in which the life of the poet is in danger, and he asks for his life to be preserved. Verse 9 is a testimony to a turning point that happened: instead of being encompassed by the snares of death, finding himself in the realm of Sheol, he has now been restored to the land of the living (בְּאֶרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים). Death and the realm of Sheol stand in stark opposition in the land of the living. Barré (1990:67–68) also notes that death (מות) and life (נפש) are juxtaposed in verses 3 and 8 and then goes on to say that 'although the psalmist's life is literally encompassed by the bands of death, life triumphs'. According to Auffret (1984:37) verses 8–9 display a chiasmic pattern (death [A]; eye(s) [B]; foot/feet [C]; walk [C']; face [B']; life [A']) by which the contrast between life and death is emphasised even more. Janowski (2003:285) also notes the contrast between the life the psalmist may now experience, and death experienced earlier. There was a time when Sheol intruded on his life but that has changed, because YHWH has been good to him so that he may now experience inner rest (v. 7; Janowski 2003:286). Westermann (1976:87) notes that life that has been saved is often mentioned in contrast to life that has been threatened or lost in the Old Testament Hebrew Bible. The concept of life as נפש stands in contrast to death.

The juxtaposition of Sheol (v. 3) vis-à-vis the land of the living (v. 9) vis-à-vis the house of YHWH (v. 19)

The juxtaposition of death vis-à-vis life continues in the third part (vs. 12–19) of the Psalm. An even better prospect than to be in the land of the living, is to be in the house of YHWH. In verse 4 the psalmist called upon the name of YHWH (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ). In the last part of the Psalm, this call is repeated twice (v. 13 and v. 17), thereby creating a link between the two parts of the Psalm. To be saved by YHWH from death holds more than to be restored to the land of the living. To be saved by YHWH ultimately means to experience the presence of YHWH in the courts of the house of YHWH. According to Barré (1990:67) there is a close relationship

between 'in the land of the living' (בְּאֶרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים) and 'in the courts of the house of YHWH' (בְּחִצְרוֹת בֵּית יְהוָה). Barré (1990:67) interprets 'in the land of the living' as an epithet of the temple in Jerusalem. He notes that the plural form of land is used in verse 9, to create a paranomasia with 'in the courts' (בְּחִצְרוֹת) in verse 19.

To be restored from the snares of death amounts to be alive in the temple. Life is more than simply being alive; life means to be in the temple where the presence of YHWH is experienced. According to Janowski (2003:282–283) there is a movement from Sheol as the place where the believer is excluded from YHWH's cult (Gerleman 1976:840) in verse 3, to the land of the living in verse 9, to the courts of the house of YHWH in verse 19, in which YHWH is praised as the very last word of the Psalm indicates. According to Von Rad there is an important relationship between praise and death. In fact, Von Rad (1975:369–370) states that the 'praise is man's most characteristic mode of existence: praising and not praising stand over against one another like life and death'. Being in the realm of Sheol, the dead is incapable of praising God (Ps 115:17). This movement from Sheol to living in the land, to praising YHWH in the temple, can be described as a dramatic way from disaster to deliverance (*Unheil zum Heil*), thereby suggesting the juxtaposition of disaster (*Unheil*) to deliverance (*Heil*). The Psalm is all about a journey from Sheol via living again in the land, to the abode of YHWH where He is praised.

The juxtaposition of the past vis-à-vis the present time

According to Janowski (2003:285) verses 1–2 and 10–11 indicate the present time of the psalmist, while verses 3–9 tell the story of an event in the past. The psalmist looks back to a period in his life when he experienced a most difficult time. It was a time that he was close to death itself. In his anguish and desperation, he called out to YHWH to save him, and YHWH did just that. Verse 6 says that he found himself in an utterly helpless situation, but he was rescued from that because YHWH protected simple people like him. He was saved from a situation of being entangled by the ropes of death in the past, to his present situation in which he was in the temple – the house of YHWH – praising Him for the deliverance. He was in a position where it was impossible to praise YHWH but now in the present, he can pay his vows to God (v. 14) and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice (v. 17). The psalmist gives a perspective on the past when he experienced a situation that brought him face-to-face with death itself, but simultaneously the reader is also provided with a perspective from the present time when he has been saved from that ordeal and may enjoy being in the presence of YHWH (Janowski 2003:287).

The juxtaposition of the absence of YHWH in Sheol vis-a-vis the presence of YHWH in the temple

YHWH is not mentioned in verse 3 and it is quite fitting that He is not mentioned, as Sheol (שְׁאוֹל) is the place where believers are excluded from YHWH. Death and Sheol

indicate descriptions of a condition and place that is beyond any possible relation with God. In verse 9 the psalmist is restored to the presence of YHWH (לִפְנֵי יְהוָה) in the land of the living. Prinsloo (2006:749) notes how the Psalm commences in Sheol but ends in Jerusalem, that is the centre of the known universe, the place where YHWH is present in a very special way. Janowski (2003:287) notes that the Psalm provides the reader with a description of the way the psalmist travelled from Sheol to the temple. The absence of YHWH in Sheol stands in juxtaposition to being in the presence of YHWH in the temple. The temple is described as the house of God (בֵּית יְהוָה) which is a telling metaphor to denote the idea of the dwelling place of God where He is present.

The juxtaposition of praise and thanksgiving (vs. 8–9) vis-à-vis doubt (vs. 10–11)

With verses 8–9, the first part of the Psalm ends. It should be noted in passing, that verses 8 and 9 also display a contrast. Verse 8 recalls a time when the psalmist's foot was stumbling to avoid death. In verse 9 the poet walks in the presence of YHWH (Ayars 2019:189–190). Verses 10–11 function as a bridge between the first (vs. 1–9) and third (vs. 12–19) parts of the Psalm. Verses 8–9 and 10–11 display an unexpected juxtaposition. Verses 8–9 represent the climax of the first part of the Psalm, as the psalmist has been delivered from death and has been restored to the land of the living. Then it seems as if verses 10–11 retreat to the initial situation described in verses 3–4. Apparently, the suffering the psalmist had to endure, affected his faith. One gets the impression that the psalmist had some difficulty in keeping the faith amidst the affliction he had to suffer. Ayars (2019:191) notes that verses 9 and 10 is in juxtaposition because of the blessings in the land of the living mentioned in verse 9, opposite faith during affliction.

The juxtaposition in verses 10–11

Booij (1995:391) notices the contrast between verses 10–11, but exactly because of the contrast opts to translate 'I have kept faith', rather with 'I trusted', to smooth out the contrast. Consequently, he translates the two verses as follows: 'I trusted that I could speak: I am under great oppression. I said in my consternation: all men are liars'. Rather than to smooth out the contrast, it seems better to view the contrast created by these two verses as deliberate. In a recent study, Ayars (2019:193) maintains that verse 10 is all about faithfulness, but in verse 11 a contrast is created when the poet states that every human being is a liar, which is accentuated by the semantic parallelism that occurs between the second cola of verses 10 and 11. 'I kept my faith' (v. 10) even in times of affliction, stands in juxtaposition with verse 11 in which the poet says 'in consternation' that every human being is a liar. It seems that verse 10 is about the psalmist's relationship with God by keeping the faith, while verse 11 is about his relationship with people, while he regards every human being a liar. The juxtaposition is then between God that can be trusted, and human beings that are regarded as liars and therefore not to be trusted.

The juxtaposition of the individual vis-à-vis the community

This Psalm abounds with first personal singular forms. Towards the end of the Psalm, there is a shift to the believing community. The individual believer, rescued from a dire situation, will pay his vows to YHWH in the presence of the people of God (vs. 14, 18) in the house of YHWH. The individual believer is also part of all God's people (לְכָל-עַמּוֹ). While the first verb used in the Psalm is in the first-person singular form (אֶחְבֹּתֶיךָ), the last verb is in the plural imperative form (הִלְלוּ-יְהוָה). There is a juxtaposition created between the individual psalmist alone in his distress on the one hand, and the people of God on the other hand as the community of believers praising YHWH.

The juxtaposition between the two major parts of the Psalm

In the first part (vs. 1–9), the emphasis is on the action YHWH took in delivering the psalmist from a dire situation resulting almost in his death. The Psalm is a testimony to a saving act by YHWH in the life of the psalmist. True to his nature as the gracious, righteous, and merciful God (v. 5) who protects simple people (v. 6), YHWH restored the psalmist to the land of the living (v. 9), by saving him from a situation in which he faced death. In the third and last part (vs. 12–19), the emphasis is on the action of the human being in response to the deliverance experienced. He will lift the cup of salvation (v. 13), call on the name of YHWH (vs. 13, 17), pay his vows (vs. 14, 18), and as a devout servant (v. 16) he will offer a thanksgiving sacrifice (v. 17) in the house of YHWH in the community of fellow believers (vs. 14, 18). Significantly, 'T' (תָּ) is found twice (v. 16) in the third part of the Psalm, and not once in the first part (vs. 1–9). It should also be noted that 'T' (תָּ) is also found twice (vs. 10, 11) in the brief second part of the Psalm, signalling the shift to the response of the believer to the deliverance brought about in the first part of the Psalm.

Barré (1990:76) also notes the difference in the two parts of the Psalm. According to him, the first part of the Psalm deals with the threat of death and consequently YHWH's action, while the second part is more about the psalmist's response to YHWH's saving deeds. Barré (1990:76) also draws the attention to what he calls the dramatic movement of the actions of the psalmist throughout the Psalm. In verses 1–9 almost all the actions underscore the powerlessness and pitiful situation of the psalmist. In verses 12–19, the tone is quite different when the psalmist now acts decisively by lifting the cup of salvation (v. 13), pays his vows (vs. 14, 18) and offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving (v. 17). Ayars (2019:194) notices the semantic shift that took place between the trust during the distress mentioned in verses 10–11, and the spirit of worship in verse 12.

Some implications for the meaning of the Psalm

The frequent occurrence of juxtaposition throughout the Psalm adds to the unity in the Psalm. As has been pointed

out earlier, Psalm 116 has been seen in the past as a disunity made up of incoherent parts. The juxtaposition of death versus life; an experience of the absence of YHWH in Sheol to the presence of YHWH in the temple, the temporal shift between present and past, and the juxtaposition between the individual believer vis-à-vis the community of believers, all adds up to the conclusion that the Psalm displays a coherent unity, exactly because of the literary device of juxtaposition.

Life is lived between the extreme contrast of death and life, or as Leuenberger (2005:343) puts it: 'The relationship between "life" and "death" can be regarded as an anthropological constant, with a tense relationship between the two notions'. With hindsight, the psalmist may look back on a period in his life when he experienced the pangs of death even up to the point of an experience of Sheol itself, but he also experienced the joy of not only being alive but living in the close presence of YHWH in the temple. An important aspect of the Psalm is, that YHWH is the one who rescued him from a death-like situation to life in the presence of YHWH. In this regard, it is important to note the variety of words used for YHWH's saving activity (יָשַׁע; מִלָּצָה; פָּתָח; חָלַץ; יִשְׁעָה). YHWH who saved him, is the God who made himself known to his people as the gracious, righteous, and merciful God (Ex 34:6). The exact circumstances of this situation of a near death are not mentioned. Was it perhaps a severe illness? Was it adversaries who were looking to end his life? Was it perhaps the absence from the land during the Babylonian exile? This, perhaps deliberate, vagueness opens the possibility for readers to identify with the experience narrated by the psalmist. The snares of death and the pangs of Sheol are the common experience of both the psalmist and readers of the Psalm.

The juxtaposition between praise and thanksgiving (vs. 8–9) vis-à-vis doubt (vs. 10–11), shows that the path leading from the anguish of being trapped by the snares of death to praise and thanksgiving, is not always an easy way. Doubt may also be part of the journey from distress to deliverance.

To keep faith, believers must remember the past. The past tells the story of redemption from a situation of distress and anguish, so much so, that it resembles death. Because of what happened in the past, believers may now praise YHWH in the presence of fellow believers.

The Psalm portrays a believer that suffers in solitude. The individual believer is also part of a believing community. After the experience of being rescued by YHWH, the psalmist pays his vows as being part of the community of believers, the people of God. The interaction between the individual believer and the community of believers also works the other way around. James (2017:55) speaks of the potential corporate applicability, in which words of the worshipper may easily become the words of the worshipping community, irrespective of time, place, or circumstance. The testimony of the individual believer serves as an inspiration for the faith of

the community of believers. The juxtaposition of death vis-à-vis life, once experienced by the psalmist, is also the experience of the worshipping community.

Conclusion

One may concur with Ayars (2019) when he says that in Psalm 116:

[T]he psalmist artistically sets a variety of themes in parallel that together create a tapestry of paradox that highlights confession, thanksgiving, life, praise, distress, and faithfulness, all in the context of cultic ritual. (p. 172)

The initial hypothesis that was investigated can be maintained: juxtaposition is the most important literary device in this Psalm. Reading Scripture with a sensitivity to the literary devices that may be detected in the passages, is a rewarding exercise. It opens new possibilities to explore the meaning(s) these ancient texts have, also to modern-day readers of the Bible.

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