

Analytical Description of Hebrew Biblical Texts

A methodological guideline

by

Prof. em. Dr. Helmut Utzschneider

The following guide outlines criteria and methods for the description of Hebrew biblical texts. It is based on theories of syntax of biblical Hebrew and text-linguistic as presented and explained in detail in Helmut Utzschneider / Stefan A. Nitsche, *Arbeitsbuch Literaturwissenschaftliche Bibelauslegung. Eine Methodenlehre des Alten Testaments*, 4th edition Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2014, pp. 62–115 (§ 4 Textanalyse).

A thorough description of a given text is the basis for all further exegetical analyses and inquiries, like form criticism, reconstruction of literary history (“Literarkritik”, redaction history), inquiry of its theological meaning in a given historical or a transcultural context. The method, presented here, presupposes a “close reading” and thorough observation of the Masoretic text according to the “Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia”.

Texts can be described in four different respects, resp. on four different levels

1. In respect of their **phonetics**, or more simply: How does a given text sound when orally performed? Are there phonetic patterns like alliterations, rhymes etc.?
2. In respect of their **lexemes**, or more simply: Which kinds of words occur in a given text? Are there clusters of words of special lexical or semantic fields, do they form patterns etc.?
3. In respect of the **syntax**, or more simply: Are there types of clauses (“formations” see below) prevailing in a given text? If so, what does this mean in relation to the meaning and translation of Hebrew tenses in a given text and its genre (e.g. narratives; prophetic promises)
4. In respect of the **text**, or more simply: Which evidence is provided by a given text in relation to its formal or semantic structure, especially its beginning and its end? Is the given text coherent or are there major formal or thematic fractions in it?

These four basic questions can be further refined and in this way provide more precise information. The description can be focused on the formal resp. the thematic shape of the text (“surface structure” resp. “deep structure”), which is not intended by this paper.

For practical reasons the description starts with the analysis of the **syntax** (above: 3) in connection with a (preliminary) translation, it proceeds to the description of the textual features (above 4: **text**). The analysis of **phonetics** (above 1) and **lexemes** (above: 2) follow up.

Ad 3: Analysis of Syntax

From a formal (morphological) point of view the Hebrew language basically knows three types of clauses: the nominal clause, the verbal clause, the participial clause.

From a functional point of view there are much more types, e.g. clause of affirmation, conditional, temporal, circumstantial, interrogative clauses etc.

The nominal clause is simply defined by the absence of a finite Verb form, as in:

(Gen 25:23)

Two nations are/were in your womb.

שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם (גוֹיִם) בְּבֶטְנִי

The participial clause is defined by the presence of a participle which functions as a predicate as in:

(Gen 25:28)

Rebekah loved/loves Jacob.

וַרְבֵּקָה אֲהַבָּת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב

The tenses in the translations of nominal or participial clauses depend on the given literary context.

More complicated are the verbal clauses. In principle they are defined by the presence of a finite verb form as predicate. In addition to this principle there are multiple possibilities of verbal clauses depending on the tense of the verb and its position in the clause.

The traditional terms for the tenses like “perfect”, “perfect consecutivum”, “imperfect”, “imperfect consecutivum” etc. do not correctly indicate the temporal function of the verbal forms with which they are related. Therefore they are replaced by a strictly descriptive nomenclature¹ which uses the pattern of the verbal forms derived from a non existing Hebrew verbal root *קַתַּל / q-t-l (to avoid קַתַּל “to kill”). These patterns are amplified in order to determine not only the tense as such but also the position of the verb in a given clause. The latter determines the temporal meaning of the verb and not seldom the syntactic function of the verbal clause. The verbal patterns occur in the the following combinations, also called “(verbal) formations”. In the notation of a formation the sign “x” designates arbitrary non-verbal elements of the clause, e.g. an negation, an pronoun. The Hebrew particle ו is represented by “w^e” or “wa”.

This results in the following equivalences:

Perfect without preceding elements

qatal

¹ That nomenclature is also used in the major scholarly Grammar of Biblical Hebrew by Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka (Paul Joüon, Takamitsu Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, Subsidia Biblica 27, Roma: Editrice Pontificia Istituto Biblico, 2nd ed. 2008, pp.330–325–409, and in many other scholarly works of biblical Exegesis. Advanced students should be familiar with it).

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Perfect with preceding non verbal elements | x-qatal |
| Perfect with preceding waw and non-verbal elements | we-x-qatal |
| Perfect consecutivum | w ^e qatal |
| Imperfect without preceding elements | yiqtol |
| Imperfect with preceding we | w ^e yiqtol |
| Imperfect with preceding waw and non-verbal elements | w ^e -x-yiqtol |
| Imperfect consecutivum | wayyiqtol |
| Participle | qotel |
| Imperative | q ^e tol |

Examples:

we-x-qatal:

A verb in “Perfect”, arbitrary non verbal elements (including sometimes the waw particle) precedes, as in:

Gen 25,26

Afterward his brother came out

וַאֲחֵרֵי־כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו

In most cases the qatal-formations are to be rendered in a past tense (remote past or pluperfect); not seldom the x-qatal- formation functions as circumstantial clause in narratives, connected with an waw it can also have an adversative meaning.

qatal(-x):

A Verb in “Perfect” followed by arbitrary element(s) of the clause, as in

Ps 104,5

He set the earth on its foundations

יָסַד אֶרֶץ עַל־מְכוּנֶיהָ

As in many cases “qatal” denotes here a single, past action.

Sometimes simple qatal also is to be rendered by present tense, especially if it states an action which is performed by stating it (“performative”), as in English: “Herewith I baptize you in the name ...” or in Hebrew.

Deut. 8,19

I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish

הֵעֵרְתִי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֶבְרַח הָאֲבָדוֹן

(we) x- yiqtol

A verb in “Imperfect” preceded by an arbitrary elements; yiqtol in most cases denotes a future action or status, as in:

Gen 25,23

and two peoples from within you shall be divided

וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמְעֵיךָ יִפְרְדוּ

In certain cases, *yiqtol* clauses can denote repeated (iterative) or durative actions and are to be rendered in present tense, as in

Gen 32,33:

Therefore the Israelites do not eat the sciatic nerve עַל-כֵּן לֹא-יֹאכְלוּ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-גֵּיד הַנֶּשֶׁה

The **consecutive formations $w^e qatal$ resp. $wayyiqtol$** denote actions as following to an other preceding action. In contrast to the time-sphere of the non-consecutive forms $w^e qatal$ formations denote consecutive actions in the future or in a consecutive state of a series of actions whereas *wayyiqtol*-formations denote consecutive actions in the past. In many cases consecutive formations occur in sequences denoting a sequence of action. Especially *wayyiqtol*-sequences denote sequences of past actions and therefore are typical for narratives in the Hebrew Bible.

$w^e qatal$

Is 2:4

*...and he will judge between the nations
and will arbitrate for many people,
and they will beat their swords into plowshares...*

וְשָׁפַט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם רַבִּים
וְהוֹכִיחַ לְעַמִּים
וְכָתְתוּ חַרְבֹתָם לְאֵתִים

Not seldom a $w^e qatal$ -formation resumes an imperative ($q^e tol$), as in

Exod 8:1:

*Go to the Pharaoh
and speak to him*

בֹּא אֶל-פַּרְעֹה
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו

wayyiqtol

Gen 25:25

*(then) the frist came out, red,
(all his body like a hairy mantle
and they called him Esau*

וַיֵּצֵא הָרֵאשִׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי
(כִּלְוֵ פַאֲרַת שֵׁעַר)
וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו:

The nominal clause (NC) in between the two *wayyiqtol*-clauses has the function of a circumstantial clause. It interrupts the narrative consecution from *wayyitol* וַיֵּצֵא to *wayyiqtol* וַיִּקְרְאוּ

Besides its (most frequent) occurrences in Hebrew narratives, *wayyiqtol* also can be found in subordinated clauses as in

1Sam 15,23b

*Because you have rejected (x-qatal) the word of the LORD,
he has rejected you from being king*

וְעַן מֵאַסֶּה אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה
וַיִּמְאַסֶּה מִמֶּלֶךְ

The waw in וַיִּמְאַסֶּה is a so called “waw apodosis”; it links the Protasis (the syntactically and logically) preceding clause, with the following clause.

In class a syntactical analysis should contain the following elements:

- The hebrew text, structured in its clauses
- determination of formations including mode (co-/adhortative) and nominal clauses (NC)
- determination of clause-functions (affirmation, narrative, question; subordinated: e.g. circumstantial, causal)
- Translation according to analysis

The analysis of the syntax of a longer piece of text not only gives insight into the formation and into the function of each single clause, but also makes visible the syntactical structure of the text (Text-Syntax; see below) as a whole.

Ad 4: Analysis of Text-Structures

Each description of text which exceeds the borders of phonemes, single words or groups of words and clauses is an analysis on the text-level. Texts have their own rules, conditions and means of formation, structuring and constitution of meaning. These rules (“grammar of text”) are less strict than grammatical rules for the formation of words (morphology) or clauses (syntax), notwithstanding that grammatical rules of Hebrew Grammar changed even in biblical times (cf. classical biblical Hebrew vs. late biblical Hebrew). The “grammar of text” lets a wider scope for particularities of literatures of different types of text (description, narrative, speech) and genres (e.g. legal texts, psalms), milieus and epochs, even of single authors and their modes of speaking or writing. So the analytical description on the level of text is also a description of style(s).

At first we demonstrate the most important and general means and rules of text-structuring and of generating their meaning (a.– d.). Then we introduce an exemplary analysis of an narrative text (e.).

a. Sorts of Texts

Basic types of texts are discourse (speeches), narrative and description. Biblical narrative texts switch between sections of narrative, description and speeches. Greater textual unities can be structured by changing the type or genre of texts. So the songs of Moses and Miriam closes the Exodus-narrative (Exod 1–14). The Isaiah narratives (Is 37–39) form a transition between the two sections of the book of Isaiah (1–36 / 40–66), which mostly consist of performative speeches.

b. Text-Syntax

The “Text-syntax” deals with the sequence of clauses resp. formations and its grammatical or logical coherence resp. incoherence. In biblical Hebrew texts parataxis, i.e. series of clauses of the same formation, prevails. The syntactical analysis uncovers those structures. We will demonstrate in detail the analysis of a text-syntax in a narrative text (Gen 25,10–26) below.

c. Markers of beginning and ending of given texts and other markers of text-structuring

Beginnings of texts can explicitly be stated by superscriptions as in

Prov 10:1

The Proverbs of Salomon

משלי שלמה

Structuring markers are וַיְהִי, וְהָיָה, especially in sequences of weqatal or wayyiqtol formations.

וַיְהִי opens sequences with future actions (w^eqatal) as in

Mic 5:10s

In that day,
utterance of the Lord,
I will cut off your horses from among you
and I will destroy your chariots
and I will cut off the cities of your land
and I will throw down all your strongholds ...

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם-הַהוּא
נְאֻם-יְהוָה
וְהִכֹּתִי סוּסֶיךָ מִקִּרְבְּךָ
וְהִאַבְדֹתִי מִרְכָבֹתֶיךָ:
וְהִכֹּתִי עָרֵי אֲרָצְךָ
וְהִרַסְתִּי כָּל-מִבְצָרֶיךָ:

N.B. the time-formula „In that day“

וַיְהִי opens sequences of wayyiqtol – formations, especially in narrative texts (see below) .

As a structuring marker is also used the deictic particle כִּי. The particle has different meanings and syntactical functions, e.g. it can be a conjunction which

- opens causal clauses (rendered mostly „because“ or “for”);
- follows verba dicendi (e.g. דַּבֵּר) and opens an object-clause (I tell you that...)

In its proper deictic function, it can also indicate a major cut in a given text, as in

Psa 33:3–4:

Sing to him a new song!
Play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts!
Truly –
The word of the Lord is upright
And all his work is done in faithfulness....

3 שִׁירוּ-לוֹ שִׁיר חָדָשׁ
הִטִּיבוּ גִּיטֵי בְתוּרֵי-עֶה:
4 כִּי-
יֵשֶׁר דְּבַר-יְהוָה
וְכָל-מַעֲשָׂהוּ בְאֱמוּנָה:

Here כִּי indicates the transition from the introductory call to sing a song to the song itself, probably this also includes a change of speaking / singing persons.

Aside from its normal temporal meaning („now“), the conjunction וְ(עַתָּה) can be a very strong indicator of structural „cuts“. It is used in performative speeches as in a longer poem in

Micah 4:9–5:5

(4:9) (עַתָּה) Now why do you cry aloud?
Is there no king in you?

(11) (וְעַתָּה) And now many nations are assembled against you,....

(5:1) (וְעַתָּה) And now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;...

(Translation ESV)

Structuring Formulas in prophetic texts are נאם יהוה, כה אמר יהוה .

d. Actors, references and scenes

In coherent texts, actors are introduced by names or appellative lexemes. In the progress of the text they are represented by pronouns and/or verbal particles. In incoherent texts this sequence of pronominal references can be disturbed as in

Mic 2:4

ביום ההוא ישא עליכם מושל
ונקה נתי נקה
אמר שדוד
נשדנו
תלק עמו ימיר
איד יניש לו
לשובב שדנו יחלק:

In that day they shall take up a taunt song against you.
and moan bitterly, and say,
“We are utterly ruined;
he changes the portion of my people;
how he removes it from me!
an apostate he allots our fields.”

(Translation ESV)

The references of the pronouns “We”/“our”, “he” and “my” in the “taunt song” are unclear. This incoherence may be caused by the fact, that the taunt song is a citation and well known to the original hearers / readers. They had been able to identify the actors to which the pronouns refer.

Even the definite article references to previous actors. Nouns without article or with indefinite article denote newly appearing actors.

Exod 2:1–2:

ויגדף איש מבית לוי ויקח את־בת־לוי:
ותמר האשה ותלד בן ותרא אתו כי־טוב הוא ותצפנהו של־שה ירחים:

In narrative and performative texts jointly appearing and interacting actors make **scenes** which also structure the respective text (N.B. the network of references in the following text):

Ex 2:1–5:

Scene 1: The marriage of the Levite and the daughter of Levi

(1) Now a man from the house of Levi went and married the daughter of Levi.

Scene 2: The woman, her son and the basket (the man is no more mentioned)

Ex. 2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

Ex. 2:3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

Scene 3: The sister of the son, standing aside

Ex. 2:4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

Scene 4: The daughter of Pharaoh, her attendants and the basket

Ex. 2:5 ¶ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.

e. An analytical description of narratives – Gen 25:20–26 as example

Narratives express a progress of past actions from the viewpoint of an (mostly remote) narrator. In (classical) Biblical Hebrew is expressed by a series of wayyqitol-formations; further means of profiling the narratives are:

The beginning or resuming of a narrative can be expressed by

- וַיְהִי (literally: “and it happened”) as “introductory formula of a narration” (IFN – as in Gen 25,20)
- an x-qatal- formation as in

Job 1:1

There was once a man in the land of Uz. (x-qatal)

אִישׁ הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ-עֻזַּיִן

His name was Job. (NC)

אִיּוֹב שְׁמִנוֹ

How it is obvious in the example below (Gen 25,20–26), beginnings of Hebrew narratives comprise information about the circumstances or about the persons which the hearers or readers should know, before the progress of actions starts.

Clauses, which interrupt the progress of actions, e.g. background information on attendant circumstances or flashbacks, are expressed by (we)-x-qatal – Formations or Nominal causes. This has to be expressed in translations also, e.g. by pluperfect, by adding a conjunction or a particle (like “once” in Job 1,1)

Narratives of the Hebrew Bible typically include (mostly short) speeches of the acting persons. They are part of the narrative progress and at the same time interrupt it. In this double structural function they are marked by formulas like לאמר /ויאמר (“introductory formulas of speeches” IFS).

| The text-syntax of Gen 25:20-26 (Text divided in clauses) | (Formation) | (Translation) |
|--|---|--|
| <p>20 ויהי יצחק בן-ארבעים שנה בקהלתו את־רבקה בת־בתואל הארמי מפרן ארם אחות לבן הארמי לו לאשה:</p> | IFN | And as Isaac was forty years old, he took Rebekah, the daughter Betuels, the Aramean of Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laben, the Aramean, as wife for him, ² |
| <p>21 ויעתר יצחק ליהוה לנכח אשתו כי עקרה הוא ויעתר לו יהוה ותהר רבקה אשתו:</p> | 21 wayyiqtol-x NC (causal) wayyiqtol-x wayyiqtol-x | (then) he prayed tot he Lord for his wife, because she was barren, and the Lord granted his Prayer, and Rebekah, his wife, concieved. |
| <p>22 ויתרצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר</p> | 22 wayyiqtol-x wayyiqtol-x (ISS) | And the sons kicked one another in Rebekah, (then) she said: |
| <p>אם־כן למה זה אנכי</p> | NC (cond.) NC (interrog) | „If it is thus, why is this happening to me? |
| <p>ותלך לדרש את־יהוה: 23 ויאמר יהוה לה</p> | wayyiqtol-x 23 wayyiqtol -x (ISS) | (Then) she went to inquire the Lord. The Lord said to her: |
| <p>שני גוים בבטןך ושני לאמים ממעיך יפרדו ולאם מלאם ואמין</p> | NC w-x-yiqtol (future) w-x-yiqtol | „Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you shall be divided |
| <p>ורב יעבד צעיר: (Speech ends)</p> | w-x-yiqtol-x | and the the older shall serve the younger. |
| <p>24 וימלאו ימיה ללדת והנה תומם בבטנה:</p> | 24 wayyiqtol-x NC (interjection) | And the days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. |
| <p>25 ויצא הראשו אדמוני</p> | 25 wayyiqtol-x | And the first came out, red, |

² In Hebrew V. 20 is one single clause, which is too long to be translated as such into English. So it is divided into one main clause and a subordinated

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| בָּלֹוּ כְּאַדְרָתִי שֵׁעָר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו: | NC wayyiqtol-x (Progress stops) | all his body (was) like a hairy mantle. So they called him Esau. |
| וַאֲחֵרֶי-כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו וַיְדֹ אֶחָזֶת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו | 26 w-x-qatal w-x - qotel-x (circumstantial) | Afterward his brother came out his hand holding Esau's heel. |
| וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב | wayyiqtol-x | So he was called Jacob. |
| וַיִּצְחָק בְּשֵׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֶדֶת אֹתָם: | NC (circumst.) | Isaac was sixty years old, when she born them. |

Actors, references and scenes in Gen 20,20–26

Scene 1: Isaac and his wife Rebekah (Introduction)

20 And as Isaac was forty years old, he took Rebekah, the daughter Betuels, the Aramean of Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laban, the Aramean, as wife for him,

Scene 2: Isaac prays to the Lord for Rebekah

(then) he prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren,

Scene 3: Lord grants the prayer, Rebekah conceives.

and the Lord granted his Prayer.
and Rebekah, his wife, conceived.

Scene 4: The pregnant Rebekah inquires the Lord

22 And the sons kicked one another in Rebekah, (then) she said:

„If it is thus,
why is this happening to me?”

She went to inquire the Lord.

23 The Lord said to her:

„Two nations are in your womb,
and two people from within you shall be divided
and one people shall be stronger than the other
and the the older shall serve the younger.”

Comment: Strictly speaking, the article in “the sons” (הבנים) is incoherent. It presupposes the hearers / readers knowledge about the children of Isaa and Rebekah)

Scene 5: The birth of the twins

24 And the days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.

25 And the first came out, red, all his body (was) like a hairy mantle. So they called him Esau.

26 Afterward his brother came out, his hand holding Esau's heel. He was called Jacob.

Closing comment of the narrator:

Isaac was sixty years old, when she born them.

Ad 1&2: Analysis on the level of Phonetics and Lexems (selected issues)

The “sound” of the text is a major feature of Old Testament poetry, especially of psalms. Important phonetic figures of style are meter, rhyme and **alliterations** as can be heard and seen in Ps 122:6s

Ps 122:6f

scha'alu sch^elom y^eruschalayim yischlayu 'oh^abaik

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

May they be secure, who love you,

y^ehi schalom bechelek salwa b^e'arm^enotaik

Peace be within your walls,

security in your towers!

These short lines comprise three forms of alliterations: alliteration in the initial sound („schal/schel), in the middle of the word and in the final sound (-aik). The latter sounds as rhyme.

Alliterations or rhymes are occasionally found in „prose“- writings as well.

Ex 3:7.9

(7) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה

רֵאֵה רְאִיתִי אֶת-עַנְי עַמִּי ...

(9) וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צָעַקְתָּ בְנִי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶחָ אֶלַי

וְגַם-רְאִיתִי אֶת-חֲלָחֶץ

אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לְחַצְצִים אֲתָם:

A deliberate play between the phonetic form and the semantic meanings of words are found in so called **paronomasias**:

Gen 20:26 (see above)

26 וַאֲחֵרֵי-כֵן יֵצֵא אַחִיו

וַיְדוּ אַחֲזֵת בְּעֶקֶב עֵשָׂו

וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב

The phonetic consonance of the hebrew for „heel“ (עֶקֶב) and the name of „Jacob“ produce an etiology for Jacobs name and for his character. He is like a man who grips his brothers heel, which is a rather unflattering characterisation.

Further paronomastic plays with the name of Jacob / Israel and other Hebrew lexemes characterizing his deeds and his character are found throughout the Jacob / Esau – story (Gen 25–33). In Gen 27,36 the name of the patriarch is paralleled with the verb עָקַב “to cheat“. In the story of Jacobs struggle with the angel (Gen 32:23–33), the name Jacob is related to the name of the river Jabbok and the the verb אָבַק , to struggle (32:25). Jacobs new name יִשְׂרָאֵל is related to שָׂרָה , “to strive” (Gen 32:28). In this way the name(s) of Jacob

and its changing relations become **guiding words (“Leitworte”)** of the story as a whole which mirror the character of the protagonist and its metamorphoses. Guiding words in a given text indicate its coherence.

A **semantic and/or lexical field** is a set of words which are related in meaning and cover a certain conceptual domain (cf. Adrienne Lehrer, 1985). Common “Conceptual domains” in ancient Israel are law and lawsuit, prophecy, cult, kingship, warfare, agriculture, etc. In biblical texts those conceptual domains are reflected in a typical, traditional vocabulary. The occurrence of such vocabularies in a given text indicates thematic coherence.

Mic 3:5–8

deals with false and true prophecy; it is sated with lexemes and word-groups indicating the conceptual domain of prophecy and divination:

5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets,

who lead my people astray,

who cry “Peace”

when they have something to eat;

but declare war against those

who put nothing into their mouths.

6 Therefore

it shall be night to you, without vision,

and darkness to you, without revelation.

The sun shall go down upon the prophets

7 the seers shall be disgraced,

and the diviners put to shame;

they shall all cover their lips,

or there is no answer from God.

8 But as for me, I am filled with power,

with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might,

to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.

5 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים

הַמְתֵּיעִים אֶת־עַמִּי

הַנֹּשְׁכִים בְּשִׁיחָם

וְקִרְאוּ שְׁלוֹם

וְאָשְׁרָ לֹא־יִתֵּן עַל־פִּיהֶם

וְקִדְּשׁוּ עָלָיו מִלְחָמָה:

6 לְכֵן

לַיְלָה לְכֶם מַחְזוֹ

וְחֹשֶׁכָה לְכֶם מִקְּסָם

וּבָאָה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים

7 וּבִשׁוּ הַחֲזִים

וְחָפְרוּ הַקְּסָמִים

וְעָטוּ עַל־שִׁפְפֵם כָּלֶם

כִּי אֵין מַעֲנֶה אֱלֹהִים:

8 וְאוּלָם אֲנֹכִי מִלְּאֲתֵי כֹחַ

אֶת־רוּחַ יְהוָה וּמִשְׁפָּט וּגְבוּרָה

לְהַגִּיד לְיַעֲקֹב בְּשִׁעוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל חַטָּאתוֹ:

The **parallelismus membrorum** is traditionally understood as the feature of biblical poetry and as such found in prophetic texts, and sayings of wisdom. In this common understanding the “parallelism” occurs in two clauses, which follow one another and which express one issue in a similar but not identical way, as in

Num 23:7:

‘Come, curse Jacob for me;

Come, denounce Israel!’

The structure of the wording is nearly exactly parallel. The modifications “curse” (ארר) / “denounce” (זעם) have slightly different connotations: „Cursing“ is an magic act; denouncing adds to this act emotions like wrath. This similarity causes also ambiguity, a parallelism does not decide between the two (or more) similarities which it expresses.

Parallelism is not confined to the two-clauses similarity. There examples with three or more members, or with antithetic members as in

Ps 93:4

(More majestic) than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!

מקלות אֲמִים רָבִים
אֲדִירִים מִשִּׁבְרֵי יָם
אֲדִיר בְּמָרוֹם יְהוָה:

(The sequence of the three members can express a relation of increasing majesty; but the parallelism can express the uniqueness of Gods majesty as well.)

or in

Prov 10:1

A wise child makes a glad father,
but a foolish child is a mother’s grief.

בֶּן חָכָם יִשְׂמַח אָב
וּבֶן כְּסִיל תּוֹגַת אִמּוֹ:

Parallelism is a figure of **repetition**, which can be found in multiple forms and appearances in OT literature, even in larger literary contexts. E.G. the twofold proclamation of the coming of day of the Lord in Joel 1,14–15 and 2,1–2.10–11 can be understood as parallelism. From a poetical point of view this is also true for the three patriarchal narratives with the “wife-sister-motif” (Gen 12:10–20: Abram and Saraj; 20: 1–18: Abraham and Sarah; 26:6–11: Isaac and Rebekah), even the repetitions have origins in the literary history of the patriarchal narratives.