

# Strophes in Peshitta Psalms? A Study of Selected Examples

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**Abstract:** As the Peshitta plays an essential role in literary and textual criticism, the literary features of the Peshitta must be examined not only from the perspective of translation technique but also from the perspective of other factors, such as poetical devices and form. Little attention has been paid to the translation technique in the Peshitta Psalms despite the substantial research conducted on the Peshitta. Most studies have focused on the relationship between the Peshitta Psalms, the Hebrew Masoretic text, and other ancient versions. Therefore, the Peshitta Psalms have yet to be examined from the perspective of classical Syriac poetry. This study investigates how well the Syriac translator employed poetical devices to produce strophic structures and poetic style in the psalms, with particular attention to potential approaches to strophic structure that have not previously been explored. The paper addresses the question of whether the Peshitta Psalms are strophic. The study indicates that Peshitta Psalms 29, 96, 136, and 148 use strophic markers such as word repetition, alliteration, repetition of syntactical structures, parallelism and a balanced number of syllables and words.

Keywords: Peshitta, Syriac psalm poetry, strophic structure, translation technique

## 1. Introduction

As part of the Syriac translation of the Bible in the second century AD, biblical psalms were translated into Syriac from the Hebrew text.<sup>1</sup> The Syriac Bible Peshitta (P) is presumed to be based on the pre-Masoretic Hebrew text – i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to, for example, Joosten (2013: 76), Dirksen (1993: 23–25), Weitzman (1999: 1–2), Carbajosa (2008: 2). The theory that the Syriac version was not translated directly from Hebrew but rather from a Jewish Aramaic translation was examined and eventually rejected by Weitzman (1999: 160–162).

unvocalized, partly unstable text.<sup>2</sup> It is important to examine the features of P and particularly of the Peshitta Psalms (P-Ps) not just from the perspective of translation technique, but also from the standpoint of poetical devices and form, since it helps to understand better the significant role P plays in textual and literary criticism.

The translation technique in the P-Ps has received little attention despite considerable research on the Peshitta. The first comparative study of the Peshitta translation was conducted by F. Baethgen (1878, 1882).<sup>3</sup> In some cases, Baethgen claims the Syriac translator deviated from the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT), either arbitrarily or depending on Greek texts. Then B. Oppenheim (1891) examined Psalms 107–150.<sup>4</sup> Vogel (1951) analysed the P-Ps more comprehensively, concluding that they are similar to the MT.<sup>5</sup> Eriksson (1989) compared only the Hebrew and Syriac texts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, some short works discuss translation of the P-Ps directly or indirectly.<sup>7</sup> A detailed analysis by Carbajosa (2008) of 61 psalms found that the Syriac translation is independent of the MT word order.<sup>8</sup> Based on the verbal systems of Biblical Hebrew and classic Syriac and on an analysis of Psalms 73–89, Moretsi (2019) concluded that the P-Ps were composed with a proto-Masoretic text as a *Vorlage*.

This study will analyse the P-Ps through a poetological lens, seeking to identify poetic figures, with specific attention to potential approaches to

<sup>2</sup> Haefeli 1927: 7; Gelston 1987: 192–193; Carbajosa 2008: 2

<sup>3</sup> Baethgen released two studies. One was an investigation of the Peshitta Psalms, the second of the value for the textual criticism of the Psalter. In his works, Baethgen considers how the Peshitta Psalms differ from the Masoretic text alone or from other ancient versions.

<sup>4</sup> This is a brief work showing the peculiarities of the P-Ps compared with MT and Septuagint and Targum verse by verse. The author simply provides suggestions for each verse without concluding the survey.

<sup>5</sup> There are two parts to this work. The first part examines the relationship between P and MT, the second between P and Septuagint.

<sup>6</sup> According to Eriksson, most of the discrepancies are caused by word order, use of the waw copula, elements that are irrelevant to accuracy, or changes in semantic content.

<sup>7</sup> According to Carbajosa (2008: 12), there are a few works that are primarily concerned with the influence of the Septuagint on the P-Ps (Berg 1895; Rowlands 1939; Lund 1988). Moreover, scholars such as Zimmerman, Barnes, Weitzman, Oliver, and David have studied the P-Ps' characteristics directly or indirectly.

<sup>8</sup> In the first part of his study, Carbajosa discusses the morphological and syntactical discrepancies between Hebrew and Syriac verses and continues the study comparing the P-Ps with the Septuagint and the Targum.

strophic structure, which has not been explored previously. Emphasis will be placed on stylistic elements of the P-Ps' poetry and how the Syriac translator employed poetic devices to achieve a poetic and strophic style. The ultimate goal is to ascertain whether the P-Ps are strophic in nature.

The present study, which analyses the Syriac text according to the Leiden edition, is based on classic Syriac poetic models.<sup>9</sup> In order to understand how the Syriac translator arranged strophes, this study firstly maps repetition, mainly word and sound repetition. Furthermore, syllable<sup>10</sup> and word numbers will be analysed statistically.<sup>11</sup> This study has the phenomenon of isosyllabism as its starting point, which has been recognized by theorists as an important feature of Syriac poetry.<sup>12</sup> In addition, word pairs, parallelism, syllabic balance and word meter will be considered. A selected strophe from each of four psalms (29, 96, 136, and 148) will be examined, along with a brief look at other strophes to confirm the results. The psalms were selected from the corpus of hymns because they are more likely to exhibit repetition, balance and poetic features.

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<sup>9</sup> Douayhi, Hage 1987.

<sup>10</sup> The author of this paper is fully aware of the fact that, etymologically, short vowels in unstressed open syllables have been reduced over time (Knudsen 2015: 37). According to Beyer (1990: 234–259), this phenomenon began during the first half of the third century, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of syllables compared with earlier language stages within the period of the Classical Syriac poetry in the fourth century and later. However, this study stands by the classical vocalization and counting of syllables, hoping to gain more diachronic insight in future studies.

<sup>11</sup> Due to the fact that the author of this paper has not found any hint at word meter patterns (counting words) in the previous scholarship on Syriac poetry, this study has adapted the word counting from scholars who advocated the method, such as Kosmala (1964) for Hebrew poetry and Margalit (1975) for Ugaritic prosody.

<sup>12</sup> Jeannin (2009: 58–65) provides a summary of the arguments made by advocates of this method, such as Bickell and Emerau.

## 2. Selected strophic examples from the P-Ps

In the following, I will provide a short description of the structure and poetic patterns in the first strophe of Psalm 29:<sup>13</sup>

Table 1. The strophe

1a	<u>Bring to the Lord</u> young rams; <sup>14</sup>	אֲנַחְדָּם לַיהוָה צִבְיֹתִים
b	<u>bring to the Lord</u> praise and <u>honour</u> .	אֲנַחְדָּם לַיהוָה שִׁבְחָא וְכִבוֹדָא
2a	<u>Bring to the Lord</u> the <u>honour</u> due to his name;	אֲנַחְדָּם לַיהוָה כִּבוֹדָא לְשֵׁם
b	worship <u>the Lord</u> in his holy court.	אֲנַחְדָּם לַיהוָה בְּחֵדְרֵי קֹדֶשׁ

Verses 1 and 2 form a strophic unit, primarily due to the repetition of אֲנַחְדָּם in cola 1a, b, and 2a, as well as לַיהוָה in the second position in all four cola. The third verse cannot be included in the first strophe for two reasons: firstly, it has a different syntactic structure, and secondly, it is thematically and semantically unrelated since it belongs to the next strophe discussing “the approach of the storm from the sea”.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the syntactical structure of the strophe is similar throughout because of the use of the imperative verbs in the initial position (אֲנַחְדָּם ‘bring’ in 1a, b, and 2a; אֲנַחְדָּם ‘worship’ in 2b) and the indirect object לַיהוָה along with the preposition *lameth* in the second position. In the third position, we find the direct object(s) (1a, b, 2a) or prepositional phrase (2b). In addition, the repetition of אֲנַחְדָּם in cola 1b and 2a emphasizes the strophe. Hence, both synonymous parallelism and syntactical parallelism shape the whole strophe.

The example strophe shows that the question of whether we deal here with a tetracolon or two bicola remains open. The following analysis will reveal that there are more reasons to evaluate the strophe as two closely connected bicola.

An important feature of the strophe is its balance of syllables and words in the verses. Following is a table showing the words and syllables:

<sup>13</sup> The English translations here and in the following are according to Taylor et al. (2020) but have been modified occasionally.

<sup>14</sup> See Taylor *et al.* (2020: 99): ‘young rams’, lit. ‘sons of rams’ for MT בני אֱלֹהִים ‘sons of gods’. Taylor’s contention is that the difference is the result of the similarity in the orthography between the two words in Hebrew. For the MT אֱלֹהִים ‘gods’, the Syriac translator interpreted אֱלֹהִים ‘rams’, but it might also be a pious emendation to avoid polytheistic connotations.

<sup>15</sup> Terrien 2003: 277.

Table 1.1. Word and syllable counts

Verses	Words	Words in verses	Syllables	Syllables in verses	Syllables of words	
1a	4	8	7	16	2+2+1+2	ܐܘܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ
b	4		9		2+2+2+3	ܐܘܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ
2a	4	8	9	16	2+2+3+2	ܐܘܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ
b	4		7		1+2+2+2	ܐܘܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ

Syriac translators have created an unsound quaternary strophe based on the Syriac model strophe.<sup>16</sup> This shows verses with different values.<sup>17</sup> Another way to express it is to say that cola represent a different number of syllables. The number of words is balanced (4:4, 4:4) and the number of syllables is symmetrical (7:9, 9:7). As for bicola, there is an excellent balance between words and syllables (8, 8 words, 16, 16 syllables).

Considering syllables per word, it seems that Syriac translators preferred words with two syllables: this is the case for 12 of 16 words. Noticeably, every colon in the strophe begins with the same consonant (ܐ), except for colon 2b, which seems to underline the phenomenon of the last unit varying in form.

In the comparison between the Hebrew original and its Syriac translation, it becomes evident that the Syriac text adheres to the same word order as the Hebrew text, albeit employing certain elements in a distinct manner. A notable example of this can be observed in the utilization of two different Syriac words, namely ܐܘܪܝܢ and ܐܘܪܝܢ, to convey the meaning of the Hebrew word כבוד in lines 1b and 2a, thereby exerting a direct influence on the patterns of repetition within the text. Consequently, owing to this adherence to the original word order, nearly all the features are faithfully reproduced in the Syriac strophe.

As shown in the first example strophe, the number of words is more regular and consistent than the number of syllables within the strophe. However, our

<sup>16</sup> Douayhi, Hage 1987: 81.

<sup>17</sup> The term refers to cola in different syllable counts.

analysis suggests that syllable and word numbers within the strophe can be considered balanced.<sup>18</sup>

Let us now turn to another example of a strophe from Psalm 148. The first strophe of the psalm is as follows:

Table 2. The strophe

1a	<u>Praise</u> the Lord from the <u>heavens</u> ; <sup>19</sup>	שְׁבַחֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם
b	<u>praise him</u> in the heights.	שְׁבַחֵהוּ בְּרָמְתָיו
2a	<u>Praise him</u> , <u>all</u> his angels;	שְׁבַחֵהוּ כָּל־מַלְאָכָיו
b	<u>praise him</u> , <u>all</u> his armies.	שְׁבַחֵהוּ כָּל־צְבָאוֹתָיו
3a	<u>Praise him</u> , sun and moon;	שְׁבַחֵהוּ שֶׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ
b	<u>praise him</u> , <u>all</u> the stars and light. <sup>20</sup>	שְׁבַחֵהוּ כָּל־חֲכָכֵי־מַטְוֵיָא
4a	<u>Praise him</u> , the <u>highest heavens</u> ,	שְׁבַחֵהוּ שָׁמַיִם וְעַד־שָׁמַיִם
b	the waters that are above the <u>heavens</u> .	יָמַי וְיַלְדֵי־הַשָּׁמַיִם

This strophe can primarily be considered as a separate strophe because each verse has a similar syntactical structure. This is due in particular to the repetition of imperative verbs שְׁבַח at the beginning of every colon except 4b. The imperatives are accompanied by a direct object in 1a, personal suffixes in 1b–4a, and vocatives in 2a–4b. Furthermore, not only is the word שָׁמַיִם ‘heavens’ repeated four times in cola 1a, 4a (twice) and 4b, but the phrase מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם creates an inclusion in cola 1a and 4b, thus making the strophe more prominent. The intensive word repetition highlights another aspect of this strophe: the impressive use of alliteration of ש repeated twelve times and מ repeated six times within the cola. The strophe clearly consists of parallel bicola, which are marked by word pairs שָׁמַיִם ‘heavens’ / בְּרָמְתָיו ‘heights’ (1), מַלְאָכָיו ‘his angels’ / צְבָאוֹתָיו ‘his armies’ (2), and שֶׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ ‘sun and moon’ / חֲכָכֵי־מַטְוֵיָא ‘stars and light’ (3). The repetition of כָּל in verse 2 and of שָׁמַיִם ‘heavens’ in verse 4 similarly underscores the strophe. The bicola are fully connected thematically and semantically and apply synonymous and syntactical

<sup>18</sup> Here, it should be clarified that the term ‘balanced’ still means slight variation (+- 2 syllables).

<sup>19</sup> The MT includes the phrase יהי הללויה ‘Hallelujah’ at the beginning and the end of the psalm; the Syriac psalm does not include the phrase.

<sup>20</sup> See Taylor *et al.* (2020: 611): for the MT’s כוכבי אור ‘stars of light’, the P-Ps interpret מַטְוֵיָא חֲכָכֵא ‘the stars and light’.

parallelism within the strophe. Within the Hebrew text, an analogous course of action unfolds, characterized by the emergence of identical processes and features, owing to the adherence of the Syriac translator to the prescribed word order of the Hebrew source.

The numbers of syllables and words are as follows:

Table 2.1. Word and syllable counts

Verses	Words	Words in verses	Syllables	Syllables in verses	Syllables of words	
1a	4	6	7	12	2+2+1+2	ܩܘܡܘ ܥܡ ܩܘܪܒܐ ܐܘܒܘܟܘܢ
b	2		5		2+3	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
2a	3	6	7	15	2+2+3	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
b	3		8		2+2+4	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
3a	3	7	6	13	2+2+2	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
b	4		7		2+1+2+2	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
4a	3	7	5	12	2+1+2	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ
b	4		7		2+2+1+2	ܩܘܡܘܢܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ ܥܡܘܫܐ

It is evident that the Syriac translator has created the strophe with the help of bicola. The number of words (4:2, 3:3, 3:4, 3:4) and the number of syllables (7:5, 7:8, 6:7, 5:7) says that the structure is balanced. The number of words and syllables in bicola is accordingly 6, 6, 7, 7 words and 12, 15, 13, 12 syllables, demonstrating a rather coherent and balanced structure altogether.

Looking at the number of syllables in the segments, the Syriac translation prefers words with two syllables, seen in 19 words out of 26. As can be seen, the result is similar to the first example from Psalm 29. As reported in the latter example, it should also be noticed that our current example strophe has the feature in which every colon in the strophe begins with the same consonant (ܩ) or word, except for the last colon 4b.

The syllable and word counts reveal that the number of words tends to be more consistent in strophes than syllable numbers, as shown earlier. Both the number of syllables and the number of words in the strophe are balanced. This strophe is therefore an example of the Syriac translator's use of bicola in

constructing strophes. The translator(s) have undertaken minimal departures from the original text in terms of form, verse, and parallelism, thus yielding an impression of continuity in the Syriac rendition due to the meticulous preservation of word order. Consequently, it can be surmised that the Syriac text upholds equivalent structural and poetic features.

A further example of a strophe can be found in Psalm 96. The first strophe of the psalm reads as follows:

Table 3. The strophe

1a	<u>Praise the Lord</u> (with) a new song;	ܐܘܒܫܢ ܐܘܒܫܢܢܐ ܕܢܘܒܢܐ ܥܒܘܕܐ
b	<u>praise the Lord</u> , <u>all</u> the earth.	ܐܘܒܫܢܢܐ ܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܬܐ
2a	<u>Praise the Lord</u> and bless his name;	ܥܒܘܕܐ ܘܥܒܘܕܐ ܕܫܡܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ
b	declare his salvation from day to day.	ܥܒܘܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ
3a	Relate his glory among <u>the peoples</u>	<sup>21</sup> ܥܒܘܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ
b	and his works among <u>all the peoples</u> .	ܘܥܒܘܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܥܘܒܕܐ

Considering the poetic unit as a strophe, it is strongly influenced by the syntactic structure. The primary characteristic of cola 1a, b, and 2a is the systematic and frequent use of the imperative verb ܥܒܘܕܐ ‘praise’, followed by two direct objects ܐܘܒܫܢܐ and 1) ܐܘܒܫܢܢܐ ܕܢܘܒܢܐ, b). In cola 2b and 3a, the verbs ܥܒܘܕܐ ‘declare’ and ܥܒܘܕܐ ‘relate’ are accompanied by the direct object and prepositional phrase (only in 3a). The repetition of ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ‘all’ in cola 1b, 3b and ܥܘܒܕܐ ‘peoples’ in cola 3a, 3b also accentuates the strophe. Moreover, the strophe features ܥ alliteration six times and repetition of the consonant ܥ eight times as the dominant sound. Verses 5 and 6 of the Hebrew text do not belong in the first strophe due to their syntax being different from the verses in the first strophe, and because these verses follow a different theme, which is “Foreign gods do not exist”.<sup>22</sup> This strophe demonstrates how the bicola benefit from a similar theme and semantic concept to the previous strophic examples. With slight variation, syntactic and synonymous parallelisms are adopted throughout, only the last bicolon is elliptic, with a verb only in 3a. Upon undertaking

<sup>21</sup> As manuscripts 10/6t1 8a19t3 10t1.2.4-6 11t1 12a1 12t4.8, (Leiden edition 1980: 113) and the syntax of previous cola use the imperative verb without waw copula, this study would prefer not to use waw copula. In addition, this type of reading confirms the closure of the strophe more clearly. In addition, it should be noted that the Antioch Bible does not use a waw copula here (Taylor et al. 2020: 394).

<sup>22</sup> Terrien 2003: 675.



a comparative analysis between the Syriac text and its Hebrew counterpart, a conspicuous revelation emerges, whereby all constituent elements are faithfully transposed from the Hebrew source to the Syriac rendition, owing to the scrupulous adherence of the Syriac text to the prescribed Hebrew word order. Similar to the previous strophic examples, Psalm 96 begins with a balanced number of syllables and words, emphasizing the tendency towards balance. Syllables and words are shown below.

Table 3.1. Word and syllable counts

Verses	Words	Words in Verses	Syllables	Syllables in verses	Syllables of words	
1a	4	8	9	17	2+2+3+2	ܪܫܝܘ ܪܫܘܥܝܬܝ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ
b	4		8		2+2+2+2	ܪܫܝܘ ܪܫܘܥܝܬܝ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ
2a	4	9	8	16	2+2+2+2	ܡܘܠ ܐܝܘܒ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ
b	5		8		2+1+1+1+3	ܡܘܠ ܐܝܘܒ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ
3a	3	6	8	15	3+2+3	ܡܘܠ ܐܝܘܒ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ
b	3		7		3+2+2	ܡܘܠ ܐܝܘܒ ܪܫܝܠ ܐܘܨܝ

As observed in the strophic examples so far, the number of cola and syllables suggests that the strophe is composed of bicola. Also in Psalm 96, the numbers of syllables (9:8, 8:8, 8:7) and words (4:4, 4:5, 3:3) can be considered balanced, even though the last bicolon tends to be shorter than usual. The same is true for the syllable count in bicola (17, 16, 15) and word count in bicola (8, 9, 6), where only the number of words in verse 3 is lower.

Based on the number of syllables in words, the results are similar to those of the previously studied strophes, 15 out of 23 words having two syllables per word. Although Psalm 96 also shows the poetic technique of initiating cola with the same consonant (1a, 1b, 2a) and using similar syntax finalized by a varying colon in 2b, the last bicolon 3 differs. However, since the bicolon is distinctively marked by a copula at the beginning of both cola, the translator seems to be aware of the poetic technique of a varying final colon and even underlining it with a different bicolon.

In contrast to our findings above, however, perfect evidence of the preference for more coherent and balanced word numbers than syllable numbers

was not detected. The initial strophe of Psalm 96 shows a tendency towards a more regular and consistent number of syllables compared to the word count. Similarly, as observed in the preceding examples, the analysis here indicates an appropriate balance in the number of syllables and words.

Let us examine the sixth strophe of Psalm 136 as a final example for our strophic analysis.

Table 4. The strophe

17	To the one struck down great <u>kings, for his mercies are forever.</u>	לְדוֹכָר לְחַלּוֹת גְּבוּרָתוֹ וְלַחַלּוֹת תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ
18	And killed powerful <u>kings, for his mercies are forever.</u>	וְהָמַלְאִךְ חַיִּתָּהּ וְלַחַלּוֹת תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ
19	Sihon <u>king</u> of the Amorites, <u>for his mercies are forever.</u>	לְמִסְבֵּה חַלּוֹת וְרַחֲמָיו וְלַחַלּוֹת תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ
20	And Og <u>king</u> of Bashan, <u>for his mercies are forever.</u>	וְהַלַּחַד וְחַלּוֹת וְרַחֲמָיו וְלַחַלּוֹת תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ

On the one hand, this sixth strophe is centred on the reiteration of the word חַלּוֹת ‘king(s)’ in verses 17–20; on the other hand, the focus is on the refrain וְלַחַלּוֹת תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ ‘for his mercies are forever’, which occurs at the end of each verse and characterizes the whole psalm. Secondly,  $\Delta$ -alliteration punctuates the strophe and serves as inclusion in verses 17 and 20. Furthermore, the strophe uses the nominal clause except for the first colon of 17 and 18, making them not only synonymously parallel but also syntactically similar. Through the meticulous undertaking of a comparative analysis between the Syriac text and its Hebrew counterpart, an unmistakable revelation unfolds, wherein each constituent element is transcribed from the Hebrew source to the Syriac rendition, as the Syriac text dutifully conforms to the ordained Hebrew word order. However, the sole differentiating factor lies in the versification employed, whereby the Syriac texts, unlike their Hebrew counterpart, derive advantage from the implementation of monocola. The question is whether the strophic example represents a tetracolon, two bicola, four bicola, or even four monocola. The refrain in every colon makes both a tetracolon and two bicola unlikely. Even though the solution of two bicola would be possible from the point of view of synonymous parallelism, and the copula at the beginning of 18 and 20 would even underline this, in the rest of the psalm, the initial copula is rare, and generally, the bicola would be extraordinarily long. Four bicola are supported by the Hebrew MT and the Antioch Bible, but the Leiden edition and the following quantitative analysis will suggest four monocola.

Throughout the strophe, there is an entirely perfect balance of words and a well-balanced number of syllables, giving significance to the strophic form. The number of words and syllables are shown below.

Table 4.1. Word and syllable counts

Verses	words	Words in verses	Syllables	Syllables in verses	Syllables in words	
17	5	5	11	11	2+2+2+3+2	ܐܘܨܬܐ ܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ
18	5	5	12	12	2+2+3+3+2	ܐܘܨܬܐ ܬܠܟܐ ܚܘܨܝܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ
19	5	5	13	13	2+2+4+3+2	ܐܘܨܬܐ ܬܠܟܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ
20	5	5	11	11	2+2+2+3+2	ܐܘܨܬܐ ܬܠܟܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ ܘܠܬܠܟܐ ܝܘܨܝܐ

The Syriac translator apparently used a strophe consisting of monocola to shape this strophe rather than a strophe with bicola used in the previous examples.<sup>23</sup> The model is called unsound quaternary strophe.<sup>24</sup> The verses demonstrate slight differences in syllable count, between 11 and 13, yet the number of words is entirely the same throughout the strophe – i.e., 5. This means that both the syllable and word numbers are balanced. A similar trend was observed in other examples for the counting of syllables, resulting in less coherent and consistent numbers than word counting. It should be noted, however, that both syllable and word numbers are balanced in this strophe.

According to the Syriac translator, 14 out of 20 words in the strophe have two syllables, which proves the translator's preference for two-syllable words. In conclusion, we have seen the same feature in all four strophic examples. Psalm 136 also continues to exhibit the remarkable characteristic that every colon in the strophe begins with the same consonant, except for 18. This was the clear tendency in previous strophic examples.

<sup>23</sup> Due to the high number of words (5) and syllables (11–13) in the strophe, the theory of bicolon form in the psalm is also plausible. It is not our intention to change the original versification, however.

<sup>24</sup> Douayhi, Hage 1987: 81.

All in all, strophic structures are influenced by a variety of factors, such as repeated words, word pairs, parallelism, balanced levels of syllables and words, and alliteration. It is also clear that there is a balanced ratio of syllables and words within strophes, as well as a relatively even number of cola.

## 2.1. Psalms 29, 96, 136 and 148: an overview

Now we should discuss whether the same strophic markers discussed above could also be applied to other strophes of the same psalms. The Syriac text of Psalm 29 as a whole can be divided into five strophes (1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–9, 10–11).<sup>25</sup> The reasons for delimiting the first strophe in 1–2 have already been described. The other strophes can be delimited similarly in accordance with major strophic characteristics, including word repetition, word pairs, similar syntax, alliteration, and word and syllable numbers. Word repetition emphasizes the strophes with phrases and words: *ܡܠܗ ܕܗܘܘܐ* ‘the voice of the Lord’ at the beginning of cola (3a, twice in 4); *ܗܘܐ* ‘Lord’ (3a, 3c, twice in 4); *ܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ* ‘the Lord is over the waters’ (3a, 3c); *ܡܡܘܠܗ* ‘glorious’ (3b, 4); *ܥܘܘܒܐܝܢ* ‘cedars’ (twice in 5); *ܠܒܢܢ* ‘Lebanon’ (5b, 6b); *ܡܠܗ ܕܗܘܘܐ* ‘the voice of the Lord’ (at the beginning of 7, 8a, 9a); *ܫܘܕܘܘܢܐ* ‘tremble’ (8a, 8b, 9a); *ܡܕܝܢܐ* ‘desert’ (8a, 8b); and *ܗܘܐ* ‘the Lord’ (10a, 10b, 11a, 11b). The balanced numbers of syllables and words – another strophic technique – is seen in the third and fifth strophes, where syllable numbers are 9:8 and 7:9 respectively; equally balanced word numbers are 4:4 and 4:5; and the ratio of syllables is 7:8, 8:9 and of words 3:4, 4:4. In addition, similar syntax and *ܗ*-alliteration are utilized in the fourth and fifth strophes. As the last aspect of strophic marking, the use of word pairs in the third strophe with a collection of words *ܫܢܝܪܐ* ‘Sanir’ / *ܠܒܢܢ* ‘Lebanon’, *ܥܘܠܘܬܐ* ‘calves’ / *ܥܘܠܘܬܐ* ‘young bulls’ enhance the focus of the strophe.

Psalm 29 contains eight bicola, a tricolon (verse 3), and two monocola (4 and 7). In general, the Syriac translator forms the poem as an unsound mixed poem, containing four unsound quaternary strophes in the first (vv. 1–2), second (vv. 3–4), third (vv. 5–6), and fifth strophes (vv. 10–11), as well as an unsound quinary in the fourth (vv. 7–9). All strophes except the fourth strophes in Psalm 29 has four cola, demonstrating the appropriate balance of strophes. The fourth strophe (vv.7-9) includes five cola and is nearly similar to the others. The Hebrew text displays a remarkable and concomitant compositional prowess by employing the first and fifth strophes, each comprising four

<sup>25</sup> For how scholars have divided the Hebrew psalm into strophes, see an overview by van der Lugt (2006: 294–300).

cola, alongside three strophes, each encompassing five cola. This structural configuration not only stands as an impressive feat but also serves to create a sense of inclusion within the text. A colon predominantly contains four words, making it highly balanced, although occasionally there are three words. As evidenced by the number of syllables in the strophes, the Syriac translator used 9 and 8 syllables in each colon. Accordingly, the first, second, third, and fourth strophes are balanced with a total of 32, 33, 33, and 32 syllables and 16, 17, 17, and 15 words. Strophes and psalms show that the Syriac translator prefers words with two syllables.

The next step is to examine Psalm 148 from an overview. There are four strophes in Psalm 148 (1–4, 5–7, 8–12, 13–14).<sup>26</sup> We now proceed to the remaining strophes of the Psalm using the strophic markers that have already been explained for the first strophe. In Psalm 148, as in Psalm 29, the primary strophic marker is word repetition, bringing more focus on strophes. The second strophe contains a tricolon and two bicola, and the fourth contains two tricola with repeated words: ܘܥܒܕ ‘to praise’, ܠܘܕܝܢ ‘Lord’ (5a, 7a), ܘܥܒܕ ‘to praise’ (13a, 13c, 14b), ܡܢ ‘name’ (13a, 13b), and ܡܢ ‘people’ (14a, 14c). A similar syntactical structure is emphasized in the third strophe. Aside from alliteration of ܥ and ܠ, the second strophe shares a common thematic and semantic aspect (invitation to praise). The third strophe features the same syntax and a series of word pairs ܠܥܝܢ ‘fire’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘hail’, (8a), ܠܥܝܢ ‘snow’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘frost’ (8a), ܠܥܝܢ ‘winds’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘hurricanes’ (8b), ܠܥܝܢ ‘mountains’ / ܠܥܝܢ ‘hills’ (9a), ܠܥܝܢ ‘fruit trees’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘cedars’ (9b), ܠܥܝܢ ‘animals’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘cattle’ (10a), ܠܥܝܢ ‘reptiles’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘birds’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘flying creatures’ (10b), ܠܥܝܢ ‘land’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘nations’ (11a), ܠܥܝܢ ‘nobles’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘judges’ (11b), ܠܥܝܢ ‘young men’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘young women’ (12a), and ܠܥܝܢ ‘old men’/ ܠܥܝܢ ‘youth’ (12b). In the fourth strophe, a balanced structure of syllable numbers (21, 23), and word numbers (11, 11), the root repetition of ܘܥܒܕ ‘praise, to praise’ in cola 13a, 14b, and reiteration of ܡܢ ‘his name’ in cola 13a, 13b, and ܡܢ ‘people’ in cola 14a, 14c act as strophic markers.<sup>27</sup> Psalm 148 consists of eleven bicola and three tricola (verses 5, 13, and 14).

Psalm 148 also benefits from unsound mixed poetry: it consists of two strophes with four bicola in the first (vv. 1–4) and five bicola in the third strophes (vv. 8–12), as well as an unsound mixed strophe in the second (vv. 5–7) and

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of how scholars have divided the Hebrew psalm into strophes, see again van der Lugt (2014: 561–546).

<sup>27</sup> No mention of other strophes means that this feature is not considered a strophic marker within the analysis of those strophes.



cola, indicating a certain balance. As the Syriac translator mainly uses four words per colon, and occasionally three, the predominant word ratio per colon is four. Furthermore, based upon the number of syllables in each strophe, it appears that the Syriac translator has primarily used eight syllables in each colon and occasionally seven. Consequently, the three first strophes, totalling 48, 49, and 47 syllables, and 23, 25, and 25 words, and the fourth and sixth strophes, totalling 22 and 25 syllables, and 12 and 10 words, are properly balanced. According to the Syriac translator's preference for two syllables per word, the majority of the segments contain two syllables.

The last psalm which will be generally examined is Psalm 136. This Psalm is made up of eight strophes (1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10–12, 13–16, 17–20, 21–22, 23–26).<sup>29</sup> As the sixth strophe of the psalm has already been discussed, the remaining strophes will be studied. It is noticeable that the psalm is composed of monocola.<sup>30</sup> The first, second, third, fifth and seventh strophes serve as good examples of word repetition, with ܘܢܘܪܘܢ 'give thanks' (at the beginning of 1, 2, 3), ܠܕܘܢܐ 'Lord' and ܠܡܠܟܘܬܐ 'God', ܥܒܘܢܐ 'make' (4, 5), ܠܠܘܠܐܘܠܐ 'for the governance' (8, 9), preposition ܕ (at the beginning of 13, 15, 16), ܥܘܫܘܢܐ 'reeds' (13, 15), and ܠܘܠܘܠܐ 'inheritance' (21, 22). The first, third, seventh and eighth strophes, with their syllable numbers (11, 12, 13; 12, 13, 14; 11, 13; 11, 11, 13, 13), and word numbers (6, 5, 6; 5, 5, 6; 5, 5; 4, 5, 6, 5), are good examples of balanced structure within the strophes. Word pairs as strophic markers can be particularly observed in the second strophe: ܠܫܘܩܘܬܐ 'Heavens' (5) / ܠܥܘܠܡܐ 'earth' / ܠܡܝܘܬܐ 'waters' (6); in the third strophe: ܠܡܝܘܬܐ 'lights' (7) / ܠܫܘܩܘܬܐ 'sun' / ܠܥܘܠܡܐ 'day' (8), ܠܡܝܘܬܐ 'moon' / ܠܥܘܠܡܐ 'stars' / ܠܡܝܘܬܐ 'night' (9); and in the fourth strophe: ܠܡܝܘܬܐ 'hands' / ܠܥܘܠܡܐ 'arm' (12). Alliteration, as another feature of strophic delimitation, can be seen in the strophes. For the purpose of illustration, there is alliteration of ܠ and ܥ in the first, of ܕ in the third, of ܥ in the fifth, and of ܠ and ܥ in the eighth strophe. A number of other markers can be discerned in the first, second, fourth, seventh and eighth strophes, including synonymous parallelism, similar semantic and thematic content, and similar syntax.

As a whole, Psalm 136 contains 26 monocola. The text also represents an unsound mixed poem comprising four unsound ternary strophes, including the first (vv. 1–3), second (vv. 4–6), third (vv. 7–9), fourth (vv. 10–12), and three unsound quaternary strophes in the fifth (vv. 13–16), sixth (vv. 17–20), eighth (vv. 23–26), and an unsound binary strophe in seventh (vv. 21–22), as in the above-mentioned psalm. In the first six strophes, as well as in the

<sup>29</sup> For different strophic divisions of the Hebrew text, see van der Lugt (2014: 455–456).

<sup>30</sup> According to the Antioch Bible, this psalm contains bicola, but see our arguments above.

eighth strophe, the psalm appears to have a balanced number of 3–4 cola. The seventh strophe with two cola is very close to them. Considering the number of syllables and words within the psalm, the predominant number is 11, followed by 12; the predominant number of words is 5, which is higher than the number in the previous psalms. Moreover, the first, second, third and fourth strophes contain relatively similar numbers of syllables (36, 39, 39, 37), but the sixth and eighth strophes contain 47 and 48 syllables, showing a balanced number of syllables. On the other hand, there is a balanced structure within the strophes, as evidenced by the total number of 16, 15, 16, 17 words in the first, second, third and fourth strophes, and the total number of 22, 20, and 20 words in the fifth, seventh, and eighth. Syriac translators prefer to formulate the poem with two syllables per word, as in the preceding psalms.

This study examined strophic markers that are similar to those in other strophes. The results are consistent with the sample strophic structures. They indicate a balanced number of words and syllables within strophes and psalms. Although the psalms usually have a balanced syllabic ratio, their word ratio is more regular and consistent.

As a note of clarification, the P-Ps show some poetical correspondences with Hebrew text, including parallelism, word repetition, and strophic markers. This illustrates that the translator of the P-Ps was conversant with Hebrew poetic devices, even though they were used differently.

### 3. Conclusion

A conclusion from this comparative analysis is that the four examples indicate strophic structures in the P-Ps and suggest the strong need to examine whether other Syriac psalms are also strophic. Further research is necessary on the P-Ps in order to gain a better understanding of their strophic structure. Syriac psalm strophes are marked by various poetic techniques, including word repetition, alliteration, repetition of syntactic structures, parallelism and balanced numbers of syllables and words. Word repetition, parallelism and word pairs are clearly most critical indicators / markers. A particularly striking feature is the use of strophic closure, which can be categorized as an additional strophic marker.<sup>31</sup> Since psalms are generally composed of strophes and cola with varying numbers of syllables and with different verse types, psalms form unsound mixed poetry. However, despite the absence of any strictly regular metrical

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<sup>31</sup> For more details on the closure, see the classic work by Watson (2009: 62–65).



pattern or steady syllabic arrangement within strophes, a tendency towards balance regarding the number of syllables and words and the number of cola in each strophe can be observed often enough. The earliest period of Syriac syllabic poetry could have been characterized by such strophic poems with heterosyllabic metrical patterns.<sup>32</sup> According to our findings, it is evident that Syriac translators frequently avail themselves of a diverse spectrum encompassing three to four lexemes, while simultaneously exhibiting an average syllabic count of seven to eight per individual colon. This study also confirms that Syriac poets primarily used two-syllable words in their poetry.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Turek 2010: 120.

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