An “exeget's nightmare” revisited.

The masoretic text of Isaiah 38:16 put to the test.

Jón Ásgeir Sigurvinsson, Reykjavík

Abstract: For more than a century of Old Testament scholarship the masoretic text of Isaiah 38:16 has been regarded as utterly unintelligible. This view has been largely undisputed and is clearly represented in H. Wildberger's comment, that the text is "seit jeher ein Alptraum der Exegeten. Man ist sich immerhin darüber einig, daß man M nicht übersetzen kann".[1] As a consequence scholars have made brave attempts to "restore" the original text, but lacking a firm ground to stand on they have not been convincing. Others have taken the standpoint, that attempting to restore the text further complicates the matter, and choose to interpret it as it stands. But also that hasn't produced satisfying results, not least because of the fact that reading the first half of v. 16 as two independent sentences leaves the reader without a clue as to what reality the enclitic personal pronouns הן and הם refer. In this paper a new reading of the syntactic relations in Isaiah 38:16 is put forth, interpreting the first half of the verse as two *causal clauses*, each comprising a prepositional phrase and a relative clause, followed by the apodosis in the form of two volitional clauses. Such a reading makes good sense and eliminates the referential problem of the pronouns.

Introduction to the problem: The heritage of scholarly opinions

It goes without saying, that there would be limited progress of scholarship, if each and every scholar would always try to invent the wheel anew in his or her investigations. Unavoidably and thankfully we all prosper from earlier investigations, draw upon them and choose to make some of their conclusions our own, given that we find the arguments convincing. The nature of the later investigation plays a role here; if you’re writing a commentary, you will hardly try and explain every problematic detail of the text on your own accord, but in many instances rather take up the best solution hitherto proposed. A PhD student studying a certain Old Testament text presumably sees it as a challenge to resolve old problems, not least those, which have obtained the respectful label ‘crux interpretum’, ‘the commentators’ torment’. Isaiah 38:16 is one of those verses. H. Wildberger comments in his Isaiah commentary, that the text is “seit jeher ein Alptraum der Exegeten. Man ist sich immerhin darüber einig, daß man M nicht übersetzen kann”. Both he and J. Begrich alike cite Houbigant, who already in the 18th century wrote: “Felix, qui potest haec verba, ut sunt, interpretari”, “happy is the one, who can interpret these words as they stand”.[2] Bernhard Duhm writes in his Isaiah commentary, first published in 1892, that v. “16 ist im hebr. Text gar nicht und bei keiner Auslegung des Gesamtzusammenhangs zu übersetzen“. Peter Höffken puts forth the opinion, that v. 16 can’t be translated, [3] and Joseph Blenkinsopp is in no doubt as to the corrupt nature of the vers, [4] to mention but a few of the scholars that have commented in this way.[5]

Obviously then, we have a tradition of negative evaluation regarding the transmission and state of the masoretic text of Isaiah 38:16, which goes at least as far back as the 18th century if not further.

---

[1] Höffken, P., Das Buch Jesaja. 1. Kapitel 1-39. Stuttgart 1993, 255: „V. 16 ist unübersetzbar…“

[2] Cf. Begrich, J. Der Psalm des Hiskia: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis. Göttingen 1926, 43; Wildberger, H., Jesaja 28-39. Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 1444. The primary source of the citation is Scheidius, E., Everardi Scheidii Dissertatio philologico-exegetica ad canticum Hiskiae Ies. XXXVIII, 9-20 : accesserunt specimen observationum ad quaedam loca Veteris Testamenti et tres orationes academicae. Leiden 1769, 118.

[3] Cf. Höffken (1993) 255: „V. 16 ist unübersetzbar…“

[4] Blenkinsopp , J. Isaiah 1-39. A New Translation and Commentary. NY/London 2000, 481: „the line seriously corrupt“.

[5] Cf. Clements, R.E., *Isaiah 1-39*. Grand Rapids 1980, 292: “The Heb. is unintelligible and *RSV* is an attempt at a literal translation.”

Translating and interpreting the masoretic text

Hezekiah's psalm (Is 38:10-20) is introduced in its context as a "writing of King Hezekiah after he had been ill and was recovered from his illness". In the context of Hezekiah's illness it must be read as a psalm of thanksgiving. Stylistically and semantically it can be divided in more than one way, but its primary division comprises a cited lament (v. 10-17a; 10a: "I once said:…"), a description of YWHW's deliverance with an inclusive thank (v.17b-19; 17b: "But you have held back my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back"; 19a: "The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day"), and finally a promise to praise YHWH with music in the Temple (*Lobgelübde*) (v. 20: "The LORD will save me, and we will sing to stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD").

V. 16 + 17a stands at the end of the cited lament, immediately before the apparent turning point of Hezekiah's psalm in v. 17b, where God's gracious restoration of the psalmist's health is described. Exactly in the middle of the psalm, v. 15 brings to words the psalmist's abyssal despair ("What can I say, since he has spoken of me, and he himself has done it? I will wander about all my years, in the bitterness of my soul"), framed by two prayers in v. 14e-f and v. 16-17a respectively. In BH[t] v. 14d-17a are divided into sentences in the following way[6]:

My eyes look soulfully to heaven:[7]	דַּלּוּ[8] עֵינַי לַמָּרוֹם	14d
O Lord,	אֲדֹנָי	14eV
I am oppressed;	עָשְׁקָה־לִּי	14e
be my security!	עָרְבֵנִי:	14f
What can I say,	מָה־אֹמַר	15a
since he has spoken of me,	וְאָמַר־לִי	15b
and *he himself* has done this!	וְהוּא עָשָׂה	15c
In my life's bitterness I will wander about all my years.	אֲהַלְּכָה כָל־שְׁנוֹתַי עַל־מַר נַפְשִׁי:	15d
O Lord,	אֲדֹנָי	16aV
by these *things men* live, (KJV)	עֲלֵיהֶם יִחְיוּ	16a
and in all these *things is* the life of my spirit: (KJV)	וּלְכָל־בָּהֶן חַיֵּי רוּחִי	16b
Oh, restore me to health (NRS)	וְתַחֲלִימֵנִי	16c
and make me live! (NRS)	וְהַחֲיֵנִי:	16d
Surely it was for my welfare that I had great	הִנֵּה לְשָׁלוֹם מַר־לִי מָר[9]	17a

[6] As put forth in BH[t]: Richter, W., *Biblia Hebraica Transcripta: Jesaja.* ATSAT 33.7. St. Ottilien 1993.

[7] I agree with Barré, M.L., *The Lord Has Saved Me. A Study of the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20)*. CBQMS 39. Washington DC 2005, 129 in his opinion, that „In the present context *kālû ʿênay* functions virtually as a *verbum dicendi*…The next bicolon (v. 14d) gives the words that the psalmist tearfully utters " even though I do not agree with his interpretation and translation of the verb.

[8] *l* כלו; Cf. Ps 119:82.123. In Deut 28:32 'eyes' function as the subject of the participles רֹאוֹת and כָלוֹת with the Prep אל. The verb כלה obviously has the meaning 'to long for' in this context: וְעֵינֶיךָ רֹאוֹת וְכָלוֹת אֲלֵיהֶם כָּל־הַיּוֹם "and your eyes shall look, and long for them all day long". Cf. the translation of the Complete Jewish Bible (1998): "you will watch for them longingly all day…"

[9] In my opinion a *dittographie*.

bitterness (NRS).		

Now, while there can be little doubt as to the volitive nature of the second half of v. 16 followed by v. 17a, it's first and foremost the first half of v. 16 that has troubled commentators:

אֲדֹנָי עֲלֵיהֶם יִחְיוּ וּלְכָל־בָּהֶן חַיֵּי רוּחִי.

A direct translation could be: 'O Lord, on account of them they live, and in all of them is the life of my spirit'. The King James Version from 1611, which I follow in the translation of the first half of v. 16 in the table above, translates in a similar fashion, only translating יִחְיוּ עֲלֵיהֶם with 'by these *things men* live' and וּלְכָל־בָּהֶן חַיֵּי רוּחִי with 'and in all these *things is* the life of my spirit': 'O Lord, by these *things men* live, and in all these *things is* the life of my spirit: so wilt thou recover me, and make me to live.' NRS and ESV follow KJV in this interpretation.

Martin Luther's 1545 German translation is very similar, though even more literal: 'Herr, davon lebet man, und das Leben meines Geistes stehet gar in demselbigen; denn du ließest mich entschlafen und machtest mich leben.' And Franz Delitzsch follows this line of interpretation in his Isaiah commentary from 1879: "O Allherr, durch solches lebt man auf und allwärts ist darin meines Geistes Leben: So wirst du mich denn gesund machen und laß mich leben!"[10]

Now, one could ask what seems to be the problem. Isn't the text pretty obvious? Well, surely it's not problematic to understand why the Hebrew text has been translated in the way we have seen above; the translations given above are straightforward literal translations of the text, which as such contains neither syntactical nor lexical-semantical difficulties, i.e. if we consider the pure *conceptual meaning* of the words in the text.[11] It's rather a question of what the meaning of the text as a whole in it's context is, and the root of the problem lies in the question, to which reality the pronomen הם and הן (+ the indefinite pronoun כל) refer. KJV connects them with some undefined 'things' and Delitzsch translates 'solches', concluding, that the neutral עֲלֵיהֶם and בָּהֶן refer to the promise of healing, which Isaiah brings in vv. 5-6 of the same chapter.[12] In a recent commentary, Willem A. M. Beuken sees עֲלֵיהֶם, 'these things', as referring to v. 15d עַל־מַר נַפְשִׁי 'the bitterness of my soul': "With the confession: 'O Lord, by these things people live, and in these is all the life of my spirit' the petitioner recognises that his experiences, amply portrayed in the preceding verses, are for him in fact the way towards life …The king thus justifies God's actions in a doxology of judgement."[13]

Obviously then, it's not at all clear, to which reality the pronomina refer. One scholar connects them with the promise of healing, while the other connects them with the suffering of the petitioner.

Text critical emendations of Isaiah 38:16: A solution or a further complication of the matter?

Given the uncertain meaning of the masoretic Text it's actually not surprising, that scholars have tried to undertake some text critical emendations of it. Whether these have clarified the matter is another question. Let's look at some proposals.

[10] Delitzsch, F., *Jesaja*. Gießen [5]1984 (Nachdr. d. 3. Aufl. Leipzig 1879), 397.
[11] Therefore, one cannot agree with P. Höffken, that it's impossible to *translate* v. 16, cf. footnote 3 above.
[12] Delitzsch ([3]1879) 397: "Was dann v. 16 folgt, läßt sich in Anbetracht der Bitte 16[b] nur als Hizkia's Erwiderung auf die durch den Proph. ihm kundgewordene göttliche Verheißung fassen." Oswalt, J. N., *The Book of Isaiah. 1-39*. NICOT. Grand Rapids 1986, 686 translates: "My lord, on account of them they live and by all that is in them my spirit lives," but finds it difficult to explain. So he writes: "Perhaps "them" refers to the words and acts of God (so Young). But Cheyne relates it to life's experiences, depending on the final clause of the previous verse."
[13] Beuken, W.A.M., *Isaiah II/2: Isaiah 28-39* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament). Leuven 2000, 400.

Joachim Begrich presumes, that already in v. 16-17a the description of Gods saving act begins. Then he proposes the following emended text – although "mit allem Vorbehalt":[14]

Herr, den, der dein harrte, hast du erhört,	אֲדֹנָי עניתָ מוֹחִיל־לָךְ
hast meinen Geist getröstet.	הֲנִחֹתָ לִרוּחִי
(or: hast mich zur Weite geführt.	or: תַּנְחֵנִי לָרֶוַח)
Und du hast mich geheilt und belebt.	וַתְּחַלִּימֵנִי וַתְּחַיֵּינִי
Zum Heil ward mein Leid.	לְשָׁלוֹם מַר־לִי:

Begrich argues for his proposal on the basis of graphical similarities between letters and puts forth the view, that his text proposal is appropriate for the context, pointing to similar instances in other psalms. He also points in a few cases to Targum variants, e.g. in favor of his optional reading תַּנְחֵנִי לָרֶוַח 'du hast mich zur Weite geführt').[15] Nonetheless, there can be no denying it, that his emended text is a total fabrication.

Arvid Bruno[16] leaves the beginning of the verse as it is in the MT, but instead of וּלְכָל־בָּהֵן he reads לְךָ לִבְחֹן. That leaves us with the following text:

Herr, für diese werden sie ‚dir' gehören,	אֲדֹנָי עֲלֵיהֶם יִחְיוּ לְךָ
‚zu prüfen' den Gehalt meines Geistes.	לִבְחֹן חַיֵּי רוּחִי

Bruno thinks –If I read him correctly– that הם refers to the petitioners bitterness[17], and the inherent plural subject of the predicate יִחְיוּ to the remaining years of the psalmist's life.[18] Compared to Begrich's proposal, this one has the advance of staying relatively true to the masoretic text, changing it only in a minor way, but nevertheless without basing his emendation on a textual witness of any kind.[19]

Now, the most ambitious attempt at 'restoring' the text of Isaiah 38:16 is that of Michael L. Barré.[20] On the basis of the readings of 1QIsa[a], 1QIsa[b], the Targum of Isaiah, Aquila, and not least the presumed *Vorlage* of LXX,[21] he reconstructs a hypothetical intermediate stage of the text, coming finally to the *Urtext*:

O Lord Most High, you who give life to every heart,	אֲדֹנָי עֲלִי הַמַּחֲיֶה כָּל־לֵב
who give life to every spirit—	הַמַּחֲיֶה רוּחַ
Restore my strength, let me recover, [(17a)] grant me health/peace,	תַּחֲלִימֵנִי וְהַחֲיֵנִי הַנְחֵל שָׁלוֹם

[14] Begrich (1926) 44-45.
[15] Begrich (1926) 46-47.
[16] Bruno, A., *Jesaja: Eine rhythmische und textkritische Untersuchung*. Stockholm 1953.
[17] Bruno (1953) 317, notes, that מר should perhaps be in the plural in agreement with עֲלֵיהֶם.
[18] Bruno (1953) 318.
[19] Still, even though I'm not prepared to consent to his textcritical operations of the second half of v. 16and v. 17a, I fully agree with his seeing them as volitive clauses, : "Du sollst mich wieder stark machen und mich beleben – ‚gestatte, dass sich' in Ruhe ‚verwandle' der Schmerz meiner Seele!"
[20] Barré, M.L. "Restoring the "Lost" Prayer in the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:16-17b)", in: *JBL* 114/3 (1995) 385-399; Barré (2005) 153ff.
[21] κύριε περὶ αὐτῆς γὰρ ἀνηγγέλη σοι καὶ ἐξήγειράς μου τὴν πνοήν καὶ παρακληθεὶς ἔζησα "O Lord, it has been made known to you about it (my soul?), and you awakened my breath, and comforted do I live". Barré (2005) 156, postulates the *Vorlage*: *'dny 'lyh mḥwh lk wmḥyh/wthyh rwḥ(y?).*

(for) bitter indeed is my anguish! מַר־לִי מְאֹד

Barré's 'restoration' of the alleged 'lost' prayer of Hezekiah's psalm is made with much scholarly skill, knowledge and insight, yet I fear his work on this matter will prove to be much ado about nothing, since the MT can— in my view —be reasonably interpreted as it stands.

The last attempt at emending the text I will note is the one by H. S. Nyberg.[22] He only changes עֲלֵיהֶם into עֲלֵי־הֵמָּה and בָּהֵן into בְּהֵנָּה:

Herr, damit *jene* leben, und um aller derer willen die hier sind, belebe meinen Leibesgeist אֲדֹנָי עֲלֵי־הֵמָּה יִחְיוּ וּלְכָל־בְּהֵנָּה חַיֵּי רוּחִי

But in spite of only minor changes the impact on the interpretation is considerable, and I believe actually that Nyberg is on the right track in his interpretation. He sees the prep עַל as governing the whole sentence הֵמָּה יִחְיוּ 'so that they live'. וּלְכָל־בְּהֵנָּה he interprets as 'and for all, who are here'. He then interprets חַיֵּי as the imperative of the *piel* חיה, not as the plural noun in the constr. state. 'Jene'*, they,* are 'die Untertanen', the kings subjects.[23] Nyberg's interpretation is an interesting one, not least because it differs from the traditional one described above. Sure enough, it's based on an emendation of the text, but it's a minor one. Even though not identical, my own interpretation is more in agreement with Nyberg's interpretation than the traditional one.

All in all, trying to emend and 'restore' the text of Is 38:16 is a journey into the desert; you don't know where you're going, and it's unlikely, that you're going to make it. I'm sure it's better to try and interpret the masoretic text as it stands than undertaking major —or even minor— textcritical operations of the text, based on not so strong a foundation.

An attempt at a fresh interpretation of Isaiah 38:16 MT

The reading of Is 38:16 proposed here, is as follows:

O Lord,	אֲדֹנָי	16aV
because of the ones,	עֲלֵיהֶם	16a
who live,	יִחְיוּ	16aR
and for all of those,	וּלְכָל	16b
with whom my spirit's life lies (= to whom my life belongs / to whom my life is dedicated (?)),	בָּהֵן חַיֵּי רוּחִי	16bR
then, restore me to health (NRS)	וְתַחֲלִימֵנִי	16c
and make me live! (NRS)	וְהַחֲיֵנִי:	16d
Yes, may my Bitterness transform into welfare![24]	הִנֵּה לְשָׁלוֹם מַר־לִי מָר[25]	17a

In this interpretation יִחְיוּ and בָּהֵן חַיֵּי רוּחִי are regarded as relative clauses, qualifying the enclitic personal pronoun הם in עֲלֵיהֶם and the indefinite pronoun כָּל in לְכָל respectively. Both

[22] Nyberg, H.S., "Hiskias Danklied Jes. 38,9-20", in: Gerlemann, G., Kosmala, H. (red.) *Festschrift Hans Kosmala.* ASTI 9. Leiden 1974, 85-97.
[23] Nyberg (1974) 94.
[24] For examples of verbless precative (/ volitive) clauses, cf. Waltke-O'Connor: Waltke, B.K., O'Connor, M., *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake 1990, § 8.4.2.e. Consider for example a simple clause like Gen 9:25: אָרוּר כְּנָעַן "cursed be Canaan".
[25] In my opinion a *dittographie*.

phenomena, i.e. qualifying relative clauses in the form of an asyndetically connected verbless or a verbal clause, are frequent in Biblical Hebrew.[26] That leaves us with two prepositional phrases, the first governed by עַל, the second governed by לְ.[27] The first one is best perceived as having a causal function; the examples of such uses for עַל are numerous.[28] לְ sometimes functions as a dative of advantage, 'for', 'in favour of'.[29] This meaning could well fit in our context.

In terms of *speech acts* the two prepositional phrases have the function of motivation, of invoking God's sympathy, causing him to respond positively to the following directives.[30] Therefore they can be termed *causal*, even though לְ isn't in the strict sense causal within the prepositional phrase. Perhaps it would be best to translate both prepositions with 'for the sake of'.[31] In these phrases the psalmist appeals to God's sympathy towards the people left behind on his death, the living ones, to all of whom his heart belongs, with whom 'the life of his spirit', his joy and meaning of life is connected. Syntactically the prepositional phrases take on the role of the causal clause, connected by a "Waw of apodosis"[32] to the following directives, which function as the *apodosis* of a complex causal sentence.[33]

As the reader immediately observes, this interpretation doesn't drastically differ from Nyberg's, mentioned above, that is with regard to what reality the pronouns refer to. But rather than seeing those as the king's subjects, I would understand them as being the *significant others* of the psalmist, king or not.

Now, surely this interpretation can be immediately criticised by pointing out, that the prepositional phrases are neither sentences—despite the qualifying relative clauses—nor constituents of the directive clause וְתַחֲלִימֵנִי, since that is doubtless a new clause, separated syntactically from the preceding text by the initial ו.

---

[26] Cf. Gesenius-Kautzsch § 155ef.

[27] An interesting case of a double cause, first introduced through עַל then through מִן is to be found in Ezra 10:9: עַל־הַדָּבָר וּמֵהַגְּשָׁמִים.

[28] Cf. II עַל 2. in: HAL: Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. Leiden 2001. Cf. also Gesenius-Kautzsch § 158c; Joüon-Muraoka: Joüon, P., Muraoka, T., A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Rome 1991, § 170h. To note only a few instances: 2Ki 32:26; 1Chr 10:13; Ezr 3:11; 9:15; Est 9:26; Job 23:2; 34:36; Ps 7:1; 115:1; 119:62; 119:136 (introducing a verbal clause); 119;164; Eccl 8:2; Jer 2:35; 4:28; 10:19; 16:18; 19:8; 30:14,15; 31:15; 32:32; 47:4; 52:3; Lam 1:22; 2:11; 5:17; 5:17, 18; Ez 22:13. Examples of עַל with an enclitic pronoun in the meaning 'because of him/it', 'seinetwegen': Lev 19:17; Num 18:32; 1Sam 17:32; Neh 4:3; Is 52:15; 54:15; Jer 15:15;

[29] Cf. I לְ 8. in: Joüon-Muraoka HAL.

[30] וְתַחֲלִימֵנִי is a *non perfective of injunction*, as in Ps 51:9: תְּחַטְּאֵנִי בְאֵזוֹב וְאֶטְהָר תְּכַבְּסֵנִי וּמִשֶּׁלֶג אַלְבִּין 'Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow'; cf. Waltke-O'Connor § 31.5a-b: "In [the volitional] use [the non-perfective] approximates the imperative mood and is, in fact, frequently found in conjunction with an imperative form".

[31] It's actually very difficult to distinguish between a causal and a final sense here. To illustrate my point, let's take the sentence 'O Lord, save me because of my children' as an example. 'Because of my children' would normally be regarded a causal phrase, but if we say instead 'O Lord, save me, so that my children won't loose their father' we have a final clause. In both instances, the petitioner is doing the same thing in terms of *speech act*, i.e. motivating God to save him.

[32] Cf. Joüon-Muraoka § 171o, 176e: J-M §176 c: "The use of the Waw of apodosis is not subject to any strict rules. Generally suc a Waw is used when a need is felt to link what is about to be said to what has been said, after a slowing down or break in the flow of thought. Now this slowing down takes place especially in conditional clauses (§ 167), causal clauses (§ 170), temporal clauses (§ 166), and after the casus pendens (§ 156). Certain details have some bearing on the use oft he Waw of apodosis, notably the grammatical caetegory of the wort which begins the apodosis (verb, noun, particle), and the length of the protasis"; §176 *k*: "The Waw of apodosis is not put before the imperative: Dt 12.30 […] (after a very long temporal protasis); Gn 50.4; … But it is found before the jussive: Ex 12.3, and before the cohortative: Gn 13.9.""

[33] Even though we don't have a conditional sentence here, I take the liberty of using the term *apodosis*, following Joüon-Muraoka, who speak about the main clause as apodosis, when the "cause appears in the first position", cf. § 171o.

Against this critique I point to the fact, that Biblical Hebrew contains many types of incomplete sentences[34] and Gesenius-Kautzsch mention clauses made of the preposition עַל + with the infinitive as equivalents of complete causal clauses.[35]

The following examples will show, that prepositional phrases of this kind, followed by a main clause, should—or at least could—be defined as clauses or clause equivalents on their own, as is the case here.

Examples of clause equivalent prepositional phrases

In Ps 12:6 we have a case of two prepositional phrases with a causal sense followed by the apodosis in the form of a complete sentence:

Because of the oppression of the poor,	PP (P + CP (N/m.sg.cs./ + A/m.pl.abs./))	מִשֹּׁד עֲנִיִּים	(?)[36]
because of the groaning of the needy,	PP (P + CP (N/f.sg.cs/ + N/m.pl.abs./))	מֵאַנְקַת אֶבְיוֹנִים	(?)
therefore I will now rise up,	…	עַתָּה אָקוּם	(?)

The two prepositional phrases should in my view be treated syntactically as subordinate, but incomplete, clauses, giving the cause or grounds for the act that follows, עַתָּה having both a temporal and a logical function.[37]

To classify these prepositional phrases as clauses is at least convenient, even though not undisputable. Here is not the place to go into the problem of sentence definition,[38] but I would make a distinction between a *sentence* and a *clause* in line with Waltke-O'Connor,[39] seeing the text of Ps 12:6 above as a *complex* sentence comprised of two causal clauses and a main clause, the apodosis. This understanding can be argued for by pointing to the fact, that in Biblical Hebrew various forms of *incomplete* sentences exist, without the predicate, the subject, or even both. These must then be derived from the context.[40] As an equivalent of a complete causal clause Gesenius-Kautzsch mention clauses made of the preposition עַל + with the infinitive, [41] cf. for example Am 1:3:

(1:3) because of their threshing Gilead with threshing sledges of iron …	PP (P + inf.cs.+ ePP/3.m.pl./) …	עַל־דּוּשָׁם בְּחֲרוּצוֹת הַבַּרְזֶל אֶת־הַגִּלְעָד׃	c[42]

[34] Cf. fn. 40 below.
[35] Cf. fn. 41 below.
[36] The question mark indicates, that it's not clear, whether the phrase in question is to be defined as a clause, and consequently aquire its own small letter in dividing the text into clauses/sentences (e.g. Ps 12:6a, b, c etc.)
[37] Cf. Waltke-O'Connor § 39.3.1h: "The stative temporal deictics עתה and אז share with the English counterparts 'now' and 'then' a logical force … but the temporal and logical uses are best kept distinct." In the case of Ps 12:6, following two causal clauses, I find it logical to say, that עתה functions both as a temporal adverb and a locigal marker simultaneously, '*therefore* I will *now* rise'.
[38] Waltke-O'Connor § 4.8a cite F. I. Andersen, who writes: "It must be admitted, that, in spite of constant discussion, no foolproof definition of *sentence* has been achieved in theoretical linguistics."
[39] Cf. Waltke-O'Connor § 4.8f: "We define a sentence as a linguistic unit not as large as a discourse but larger than those grammatical elements that cannot exist independently but are syntactically dependent on one another within this larger linguistic unit; namely, the clause, the phrase, the word, the morpheme."
[40] Cf. Gesenius-Kautzsch: Gesenius, W., Kautzsch, E., Hebräische Grammatik. Leipzig [28]1909 (Hildesheim 1985), § 147.
[41] Gesenius-Kautzsch § 158c: "Als Äquivalent eines vollständ. Kausalsatzes steht häufig die Präpos. -עַל (= *auf Grund von, wegen*) mit dem Infin."
[42] The PPs עַל־שְׁלֹשָׁה ׀ פִּשְׁעֵי דַמֶּשֶׂק וְעַל־אַרְבָּעָה 'For Dammesek's three crimes, no, four', should probably be seen as occupying the preverbal field of the following לֹא אֲשִׁיבֶנּוּ 'I will not reverse it'.

(1:4) So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael …		אֶשׁ בְּבֵית חֲזָאֵל… וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי	a

Often such infinitive constructions are continued by a clause with a finite verb, cf. Jer 9:12-14:

Because they have forsaken my law…	PP (P + inf.cs.+ ePP/3.m.pl./) …	עַל־עָזְבָם אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי…	12b
and have not obeyed my voice	…	וְלֹא־שָׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי	c
Therefore …		לָכֵן…	14a

But the prepositional phrase need not be made up of a preposition and an infinitive, it may also comprise a preposition and a substantive or a nominal phrase, then continued by a clause with a finite verb, cf. Jer 30:15:

Because of the abundance of thy iniquity,	PP (P + CP (N/m.sg.cs./ + N/sg.cs./+ePP/2.f.sg./))	עַל ׀ רֹ֣ב עֲוֹנֵ֗ךְ	(?)
your sins are so numerous,	V/perf.3.pl./ + N/f.pl./ +ePP/2.f.sg./	עָצְמ֥וּ חַטֹּאתָֽיִךְ	(?)
I have done these things to you.		עָשִׂ֥יתִי אֵלֶּ֖ה לָֽךְ׃	(?)

Now, is it justifiable to assert, that such a causal prepositional phrase including a noun or a noun phrase, can claim to be a *clause* in just the same way as a causal prepositional phrase including a an infinitive? The verbal noun differs from the substantive noun in that it may either be considered a noun or a verb relying on the context. Has the clause a direct object as one of its constituents one would normally read the infinitve as a verb, as in Jer 9:12: 'Because they have forsaken (*inf.+ ePP = S*) my law (*O*)'. With reference to Jer 30:15 and the example of Ez 24:13 below, my answer is 'yes'.

As in Jer 9:12, עַל in Jer 30:15 also governs the second clause, although asyndetically connected to the former. It's impossible to regard עַל רֹ֣ב עֲוֹנֵ֗ךְ as occupying the preverbal position[43] of the clause עָשִׂ֥יתִי אֵלֶּ֖ה לָֽךְ given the fact, that in between comes the verbal clause עָצְמ֥וּ חַטֹּאתָֽיִךְ. Rather we should consider עַל רֹ֣ב עֲוֹנֵ֗ךְ as being clause equivalent, syntactically and semantically parallel to the following verbal clause.

Then, apparently, it doesn't seem to matter whether the noun (in the broadest sense) in the prepositional phrase is an inf. (= verbal noun) or a substantive. The syntactical and pragmatical function of the clause in the discourse is identical, and there is no reason not to consider them as syntactically identical, i.e. as equivalents of complete causal clauses.

As I compare the clauses in Ps 12:6 with the clauses in Jeremiah and Amos I am inclined to consider these also as clause equivalent. It's a different preposition, but the function is identical, i.e. to put forth the cause for the action described in the following sentence:

Ps 12:6	because of the groaning of the needy,	מֵאַנְקַ֣ת אֶבְיוֹנִ֑ים
Jer 9:12	Because they have forsaken my law…	עַל־עָזְבָם֙ אֶת־תּוֹרָתִ֔י

[43] On the phenomen of 'fronting', cf. van der Merwe, C.H.J. et al., A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar. Sheffield 2000, § 46-47; cf. p. 358: "If the PREVERBAL FIELD (i.e. the part of the CLAUSE that precedes the VERB) is occupied by a CONSTITUENT, this phenomenon is referred to as fronting of that constituent."

Jer 30:15	Because of the abundance of thy iniquity,	עַל־ רֹ֣ב עֲוֹנֵ֔ךְ

In Jer 9:12 'my torah' is the object of the action, which the inf. expresses, and the enclitic personal pronoun refers to the agent. Therefore the most natural thing to do is to translate the clause in English with a verbal clause: 'Because they have forsaken my law…'. The same applies to Ps 12:6; the noun in the construct state expresses something that the needy do (they groan = *genetivus subjectivus*) and therefore many English translations also translate with a verbal clause: 'Because the needy groan' (NRS). Moreover, the clause above in Jer 30:15 is in NRS translated as if it was a nominal clause: 'Because your guilt is great'. This tells us that these prepositional phrases are sensed by the translators as being clause equivalent and are translated accordingly. This is understandable, since by placing these phrases before the main verbal clause, the Hebrew emphasizes them, slowing down the flow of the text, resulting in an emphasizing pause before the main clause.[44] This applies especially if the main clause has at its beginning a discourse marker (*Satzweiser*) [45] like ו.

Sure enough, the temporal adverb עַתָּה, which we have in Ps 12:6, is not incontestably a discourse marker, it must not stand at the beginning of a clause. But if it was וְעַתָּה it would clearly be a discourse marker with a logical force. Without any difficulty with regard to the meaning or function of the clauses, we could substitute וְעַתָּה for עַתָּה in Ps 12:6. That would clearly seperate עַתָּה(ו)אָקוּם as a distinct clause from the preceding text, and as I noted above, I find it sensible to assume, that here עַתָּה has both an adverbial temporal function as well as a logical force ('now *therefore'*). Nevertheless, it must be admitted, that in Ps 12:6 we possibly have a case of *fronting*, i.e. where a constituent of a clause occupies the preverbal field of the clause, thus obtaining the focus of the utterance.[46] In that case, the text of Ps 12:6 discussed above would be defined only as sentence *12:6a* instead of *12:6a*, *b* and *c*.

The last example should nevertheless convince the reader, that presuming the existence of two causal clauses in Is 38:16, comprised only of prepositional phrases, is a plausible proposition.

In Ez 24:13 we have the cause, expressed by at least two, if not three, causal clauses, followed by the apodosis:

Because of your uncleanness by infamy,	PP (P + N /f.sg.cs./ + ePP /2.f.sg./) + N /f.sg.abs./	בְּטֻמְאָתֵךְ זִמָּה	a
because I cleaned you/tried to clean you,	Conj. + V /perf.1.sg./ + ePP /2.f.sg./	יַעַן טִהַרְתִּיךְ	b
but you were not clean from your uncleanness,	Conj. + Neg. + V /perf.2.f.sg./ + PP (P + N /f.sg.cs./ + ePP /2.f.sg./)	וְלֹא טָהַרְתְּ מִטֻּמְאָתֵךְ	c
(therefore) you will no more be cleansed …	…	לֹא תִטְהֲרִי־עוֹד אֶת־חֲמָתִי בָּךְ עַד־הֲנִיחִי	d

[44] Thus the frontal position of the prepositional phrases either emphasizes them or, as in judgment texts like the ones here considered, creates a feeling of anticipation in the recipient, as to what fearful judgment the Lord is going to pass, or both.

[45] Cf. Richter, W., Grundlagen einer althebräischen Grammatik III. ATSAT 13. St. Ottilien 1980, 7: "Das textgliedernde *w*ˉ= sei als den Satz einleitendes Zeichen interpretiert und probeweise "Satzweiser" genannt. Mit seiner Hilfe läßt sich eine Anzahl von Wortreihen aus dem Kontext isolieren, an denen geprüft werden kann, ob ein Satz vorliegt und welches seine Merkmale sind."

[46] Cf. van der Merwe, C.H.J. et al. § 47.2(i).

It's hard to imagine another meaning of בְּ in בְּטֻמְאָתֵךְ זִמָּה than 'because of' or 'on account of',[47] even though a temporal ('in the time of') or a specifying ('with regard to') sense is not out of the question.[48] The substantive זִמָּה is a nominal adjunct indicating in what manner Jerusalem has become unclean.[49] The text that follows is clearly a clause, separated from the preceding text by the causal particle יַעַן and a finite verb. יַעַן functions here as a conjunction, and governs the following clause as well, which is introduced by a contrasting ו and a negated verbal clause, expressing a fact ('you were not clean from your uncleanness') contrary to the preceding assertion ('I cleaned you/tried to clean you'). Since clauses b and c are governed by the same causal particle, and since they can be regarded as sharing the prepositional phrase מִטֻּמְאָתֵךְ, they may be thought of as being a compound sentence.[50]

The prepositional phrase and adjunct בְּטֻמְאָתֵךְ זִמָּה can hardly be regarded as the fronting of a constituent of the main verbal clause … לֹא תִטְהֲרִי־עוֹד, since two verbal clauses intervene. It must then be defined as clause equivalent and marked as v. *24:13a*, as I have done above.

Conclusion

A plausible interpretation of the masoretic text makes an emendation of the text superfluous. Such an interpretation should be given priority over interpretations based on emendations, whether major or minor.

The masoretic text of Is 38:16 can, and should therefore be interpreted as it stands. The comparison of texts has shown, that the proposed interpretation is a plausible one. The presumed syntactical constructions, i.e. clause equivalent prepositional phrases, expressing the cause, followed by the apodosis, beginning with a *waw of apodosis*, are known from other contexts. Also, the asyndetically connected relative clauses are a common feature of Biblical Hebrew.

By reading: 'O Lord, because of them, who live, and for the sake of all, to whom my life is dedicated' the referential problem of the enclitic personal pronouns is eliminated. In the first case the relative clause יִחְיוּ specifies, to whom the pronoun refers, i.e. to the living. In the second case, the relative clause בָּהֵן חַיֵּי רוּחִי determines to which reality the indefinite pronoun כל refers, the enclitic pronoun הן anaphorically referring to כל. In both instances what meant is, are the significant others of the psalmist, the ones, who share his life and give it meaning, his family and friends.[51]

[47] For a causal ב cf. Gen 18:28.
[48] Cf. Waltke-O'Connor § 11.2.5e.
[49] Cf. van der Merwe, C.H.J. et al., A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar. Sheffield 2000, § 33.3.
[50] Cf. Waltke-O'Connor § 4.8i.
[51] Nyberg's interpretation discussed above, that כל refers to the subjects of the king, is of course not out of the question, if the redactor, who inserted the psalm in it's context, also was the author of the psalm, and had the royal position of Hezekiah in mind.