

## Jakab Farkas of Alistál's first greeting poem for György Csipkés of Komárom (Utrecht, 1652)

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### I Introduction

In my paper, I will focus on – within the greater subject area of 17th century greeting poems (*carmina gratulatoria*) written by Hungarian peregrines in Hebrew – a *carmen* published in Utrecht in 1652<sup>1</sup> written by Jakab Farkas of Alistál [Jakab Farkas Alistáli] and addressed to György Csipkés of Komárom [György Komáromi Csipkés], his fellow student on the occasion of his disputation *Disputatio Scholastico-Theologica. De Speculo Trinitatis* [*Scholastic-Theological Disputation. About the mirror of Trinity*].<sup>2</sup>

Greeting poems were composed to mark the occasions of doctoral theses' defenses, or disputations, accordingly, the Sitz im Leben of *carmina gratulatoria* were university events. The authors of the *carmens* were the doctoral candidates' or respondents' fellow students, and these occasions also provided opportunities for them to showcase their Hebrew language skills or poetic abilities. The *carmina gratulatoria* shared certain characteristics of genre. This genre flourished in the 17th century and was typically practiced by Protestant peregrines. The poems were published with the dissertations and disputations, consequently – at least theoretically – they were preserved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The National Széchényi Library's call number of this poem is RMK III. 1813. Site: Reformed College of Sárospatak – NSZL B1 (cop).

<sup>2</sup> György Csipkés of Komárom (Komárom, 1628 – Debrecen, 1678) was one of the greatest Hungarian theologians, linguists, grammar-writers and Bible-translators of his time. He composed a grammar of Hebrew (*Schola hebraica*, Utrecht, 1654), Hungarian (*Hungaria Illustrata*, Utrecht, 1655) and English (*Anglicum Spicilegium*, Debrecen, 1644) – all in Latin. Locations of his peregrinations were: Utrecht, London, Oxford, Utrecht. He himself created two Hebrew greeting poems, and he was the addressee of five. For more information on his biography and work see Zoványi, "Komáromi"; Márkus, *Komáromi*; Zsengellér, "The Hebrew Language"; Zsengellér, "György Komáromi".

<sup>3</sup> About the written material of such university events in relation to the University of Franeker see Postma and van Sluis, *Auditorium Academiae Franekerensis*. About the dissertations of the University of Wittenberg see the catalog: Hegyi, *Hungarica in der Dissertationssammlung*.

I chose this poem as the topic of my paper because I find it quite special even within the corpus of *carmina gratulatoria* genre: its range of ideas and stylistic structures do not fit into the prevailing literary tendency of the age, the Baroque, or the dominant trend, the “Baroque-esque” style. And I would ascribe this characteristic not primarily to “poetic” freedom or the particular choices made by the author, but to the linguistic constraints of his Hebrew knowledge. Together with Alistáli’s other poem, as well as with two further Utrecht-poems,<sup>4</sup> these greeting poems – with their strict or less strict metrical rules, awkward, cumbersome Hebrew grammatical-syntactic structures – can be seen as forerunners of modernity.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 About the author

The author was born in Alistál, around 1630. He lost his parents early, first studied in Komárom, graduated from the gymnasium there, and later continued his studies in Sárospatak. From 1647 on, he held a teaching position in Tokaj.

He began his peregrination at the University of Utrecht in 1651. From there, he went to Franeker the same year, then in 1652 and 1654, he re-enrolled at the University of Utrecht. Our next date about his place of work or residence is 1656 when he was appointed teacher in Gönc. Thereafter, he served as a pastor in Szőny and became a pro-senior of the diocese of Komárom. We have no information about the time and place of his death.

He wrote two greeting poems in Hebrew for György Csipkés of Komárom, we know of no other *carmens* written by him. In this paper, I will present the first one.<sup>6</sup>

## 3 The greeting poem in question

Figure 1 shows the scanned version of the *carmen* as it is printed (the quality, unfortunately, is not ideal). This poem is relatively long and typographically arranged in two columns. In Figure 2, I present the text as I adapted it to the standard written, that is vocalized Hebrew, including the Latin frame. The supposed English translation is presented in Figure 3. I indicate the suggested grammatical-syntactical corrections in square brackets in the Hebrew text. The square brackets in the English text contain some additions, necessitated by the contrastive differences between the two languages. Both the vocalized, standardized transcription and the close translation are nothing more than suggestions for interpretation. Particular points in the text certainly allow for different interpretations.

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<sup>4</sup> The four greeting poems in chronological order are as follows: the first was composed by István Ötvös of Szathmár for György Csipkés of Komárom (Utrecht, 1651; RMK III. 1780), the second is the answer-poem from Komáromi to Szathmári (Utrecht, 1651; RMK III. 1790), and the two last greeting poems were created by Alistáli for Komáromi (Utrecht, 1652; RMK III. 1813 – the subject of the present study; and Utrecht, 1654; RMK III. 1904).

<sup>5</sup> See on this subject: Koltai, “Pre-expresszionista héber üdvözlőversek”.

<sup>6</sup> For more information see Szinnyei, *Magyar írók*.

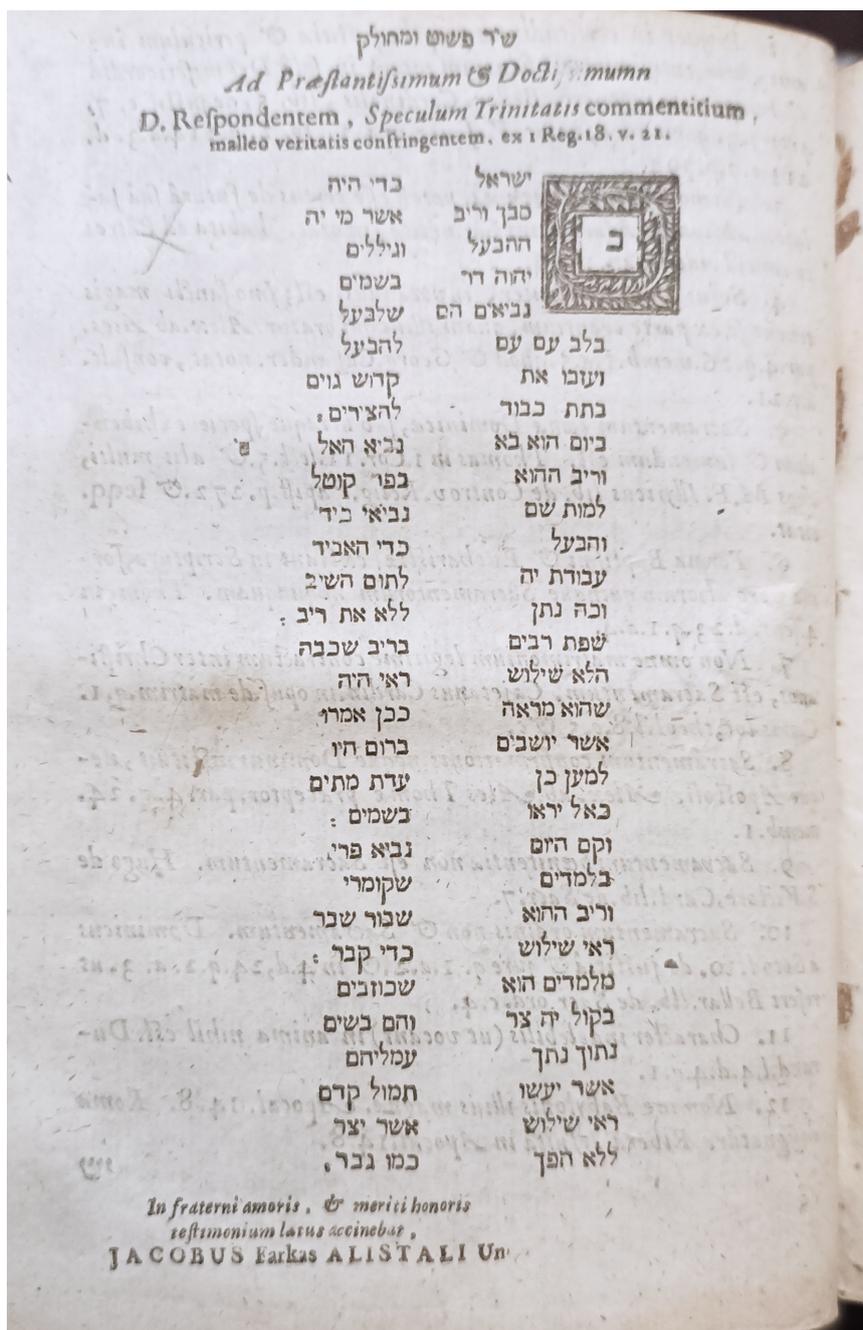


FIGURE 1: Location: Sárospatak Reformed College Scientific Collections Library (SRKTGY Library), classification number: SS 236/e1, the poem is found on the verso of letter D2

שִׁיר פְּשׁוּט וּמְחֻלָּק

*Ad Praestantissimum et Doctissimum*

D. Respondentem, *Speculum Trinitatis* commentitium  
malleo veritatis consrigentem, ex I Reg. 18. v. 21.

כְּדֵי הִיָּה	בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲשֶׁר מִי יְהוָה	סָבָד וְרִיב
וְגִלְלִים	הַהֲבֵעַל
בְּשָׁמַיִם	יְהוָה דָּר
שְׁלֹבֵעַל	נְבִיאִים הֵם
לְהַבְעַל	בְּלֵב עִם עִם
קְדוֹשׁ גּוֹיִם	וְעִזְבוּ אֶת
לְהַצִּירִים:	בְּתַת כְּבוֹד
נְבִיא הָאֵל	בָּא [בְּיוֹם הַהוּא] בְּיוֹם הוּא
בְּפָר / בְּפָר קוֹטֵל	וְרִיב הַהוּא
נְבִיאֵי בֵיד [בְּדִים]	לְמוֹת שָׁם
כְּדֵי הָאֲבִיד	וְהַבְעַל
לְתוֹם הַשִּׁיב	עֲבוֹדַת יְהוָה
לְלֹא אֶת רִיב:	וְכֹה נָתַן
בְּרִיב שְׁכָבָה	שְׁפַת רַבִּים
רְאֵי הִיָּה	הֲלֹא שִׁלּוּשׁ
כְּכֹן אֲמָרוּ	מִרְאָה שֶׁהוּא
בְּרוֹם הָיוּ	אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבִים
עֲדַת מַתִּים	לְמַעַן כֵּן
בְּשָׁמַיִם:	כְּאֵל יִרְאוּ
נְבִיא פְּרִי	וְקִם הַיּוֹם
שְׁקוֹמְרֵי [שְׁקוֹל מְרִי?] <sup>7</sup>	בְּלִמּוּדִים
שְׁבוֹר שְׁבֵר	וְרִיב הַהוּא
כְּדֵי קִבְר:	רְאֵי שִׁלּוּשׁ
שְׁכּוֹזְבִים	מִלְמָדִים הוּא
וְהֵם בְּשִׁים	בְּקוֹל יְהוָה צָר
עֲמֻלֵיהֶם	נִתְוָדָה נִתְוָדָה
תְּמוֹל קִדָּם	אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ
אֲשֶׁר יִצָּר	רְאֵי שִׁלּוּשׁ
כְּמוֹ גְּבֵר.	לְלֹא הַפָּדָה

*In fraterni amoris et meriti honoris  
testimonium laetus accinebat,  
JACOBUS Farkas ALISTALI Ung.*

FIGURE 2: Vocalized and standardized transcription

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of שְׁקוֹמְרֵי is not clear, but the phonetic form of the word is reminiscent of Komáromi's name.

The Hebrew title is identical with that of another poem by István Ötvös of Szathmár published a year earlier in Utrecht.<sup>8</sup> The influence of this aforementioned poem is also revealed by the peculiar feature (or perhaps this is a popular custom linked to the *carmina gratulatoria* genre that we are simply not aware of) that the Latin subtitle contains a biblical quote to which the author refers. At the same time, unlike the common practice in Utrecht, Alistáli also publishes a coherent, polite Latin sentence commemorating their relationship as a closing note, similar to the Latin subtitle in extent and wording, in which he inserts both his name and his nationality.

Simple and split / divided song<sup>9</sup>

In Israel	when
Chaos and strife [broke out]	about who the Lord was,
Whether it was Baal	and the idols,
[Or] YHWH who resides	in the Heavens;
The prophets who [sided]	with Baal,
[And gained] the hearts of many people	for Baal,
And abandoned	the saint of the nations
Paying respect	to the messengers.
On that day,	the prophet of God arrived, <sup>10</sup>
And his arguing [was]	like a murderous buffalo, / as if he destroyed [the] murderer, <sup>11</sup>
So that the false prophets	would die there; <sup>12</sup>
And that Baal,	because he destroyed
The respect for God,	would finish giving answers;
This way he put	an end to strife.

FIGURE 3:A Translation

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If the author wanted to recreate the addressee's name in Hebrew from the Latin form (NB: Komáromi himself signed his poems in Latin letters as Comarinus), we must state that he uses a shorter form. In any case, I also include a correction between square brackets: [שְׁקוֹל מְרִי], in which I suggest another solution as an alternative reading ('which is the sound of rebellion'). In my translation, I take account of both possibilities (see below). Although the word's sound is very similar to an other Hebrew word's sound: כּוֹמֵר / כּוֹמֵר ('attendant, priest' – always used of idolaters), such a letter-mistake (כ-ק) does not occur elsewhere in the poem; so we have no reason to assume that an orthographic error occurred here.

<sup>8</sup> This is the poem mentioned before, its National Széchényi Library's call number is RMK III. 1780. See on this subject: Koltai, "Az utrechti".

So that the mouths of the	[would not be engaged]
majority	in bickering that is over;
Wasn't [this] look	the [Holy] Trinity's?
Whose appearance	they talked about like
	this,
The ones who lived	above;
This is why the	congregation of the dead
Looks similar to God	in the Heavens.
And the day will come,	prophetic [and] fruitful,
For the disciples	who is Komáromi /
	whose voice is rebellion
	(?),
And his arguing	wreaked havoc;
The mirror of [Holy]	after it buried.
Trinity,	
Those disciples,	who lied,
[Laid] siege in the voice	and they were
of the Lord	denigrated,
Indeed, he upset	their labour
Which they performed	beforehand;
The mirror of [Holy]	the shape of which
Trinity,	
Does not change,	unlike that of humanity.

FIGURE 3:B Translation

The English translation of the title is the following:

Simple and split / divided song (hb.)

To the most excellent and educated mister respondent, who with the Speculum Trinitatis, as with the hammer of truth, shatters the fabrications (citation) from 1Kings 18.21 (It.)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The literal English translation, based on my literal Hungarian translation, is mainly the work of Andrea Götz, who holds a Ph.D. in translation studies, and who is the person responsible for English translations in the research group.

<sup>10</sup> Because of the different syntactical structure of English, we had to change the word order, that is we had to replace the original Hebrew word from the end of the first half-verse line to the end of the second one in the English translation.

<sup>11</sup> The explanation of the two variants see later.

<sup>12</sup> Because of the different syntactical structures of the source- and the target language-texts, we had to exchange the two half verse-lines in the translation.

<sup>13</sup> Biblical quote:

וַיִּגַשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הוּא אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם, וַיֹּאמֶר עַד-מָתַי אֲתֶם פֹּסְחִים עַל-שְׂתֵי הַסַּעֲפִים אִם-יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים לָכֵן אֲחַרְיוּ, וְאִם-הַבַּעַל לָכֵן אֲחַרְיוּ  
[...]

And although the Hebrew title, as I mentioned, follows Szathmári's or is inspired by a shared tradition, in light of the biblical quote, we are able to interpret the word "divided" in the Hebrew title in a way that it refers not only to the layout of the text but also to the idea that people go limping because of their ambiguous thoughts.

The translation of the closing Latin line is as follows:

In the glory of brotherly love and merit, he sang joyously the testimony together with others

#### 4 Linguistic analysis of the text – regarding the erroneous or extraordinary forms

In this section, I would like to highlight some elements from the 30-line long poem – which is remarkably long even within the corpus – in order to examine in more detail its linguistic and stylistic characteristics and to present those particular thoughts and emotions, that display a modern tone and vision (see Table 1).

Simple transcription shows the text without punctuation, the normative transcription includes reconstructed vowels, which is, of course, a matter of interpretation – as mentioned previously.

TABLE 1: Selected linguistic and stylistic characteristics

Literal translation	Normative transcription	Simple transcription	Line
Chaos and strife [broke out]    <b>about</b> <b>who</b> the Lord was,	סָבַד וְרִיב    אֲשֶׁר מִי יְהוָה	סבד וריב    אשר מי יה	2
[Or] <b>YHWH</b> who resides    <b>in the Heavens</b> ;	יְהוָה דָּר    בְּשָׁמַיִם	יהוה דר    בשמים	4
[And gained] the hearts of <b>many</b> peoples    for Baal,	בָּלַב עַם עַם    לְהַבְעֵל	בלב עם עם    להבעל	6
And his <b>arguing</b> [was]    <b>like</b> a <b>murderous buffalo</b> , / <b>as if he destroyed</b> [the] <b>murderer</b> ,	וְרִיב הוּא    בְּפָר/בְּפָר קוּטֵל-קוּטֵל	ורלב הוא    בפר קוטל	10
So that the <b>false</b> prophets    would die there;	לְמוֹת שָׁם    נְבִיאֵי בֵיד/בְּדִים	למות שם    נביאי ביד	11
<b>Whose appearance</b>    they talked about like this,	מְרֵאָה שְׁהוּא    כִּכְן אָמְרוּ	מראה שהוא    ככן אמרו	17
<b>the ones who lived</b>    above;	אֲשֶׁר יוֹשְׁבִים    בְּרוֹם הָיִו	אשר יושבים    ברום היו	18
And <b>his arguing</b>    crushed;	וְרִיב הוּא    שְׁבוּר שֶׁבַר	ורלב הוא    שבור שבר	25
<b>Those disciples</b> ,    who lied,	מְלַמְּדִים הוּא    שְׁכוּזְבִים	מלמדים הוא    שכוזבים	27

*And Eli'jah came near to all the people, and said, „How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Ba'al, then follow him (...)” (Revised Standard Version / RSV).*

In the following, I provide a systematic explanation of the features highlighted in red in the selected lines.

2. *line*: The unusual composition of **אֲשֶׁר מִי** raises the possibility that **אֲשֶׁר** should not be interpreted as a relative pronoun (its usual function in the Hebrew Bible), but as ‘that’ or ‘about’, which function is presumably due to the analogous influence of the Aramaic **דִּי** already present in the post-exilic texts of the Hebrew Bible.

4. *line*: The author uses the biblical propaganda vocabulary expertly, the adverbial “in the Heavens” declares the superiority of JHWH over Baal. In the text of the target language, I intentionally left the tetragrammaton untranslated because a special emphasis is given to the Divine Name in the biblical narrative.

6. *line*: The duplicated form can express both ‘many’ and ‘each one’, thus performing a function equivalent to the quantifier.

10. *line*: **רִיב** means ‘debate’, ‘fight’; according to post-biblical usage: ‘quarrel’. Contextually, however, it is more appropriate to associate it with some kind of argumentation expounded over the course of debate by Elijah. That is, the author creates an analogy between Komáromi who is being challenged during the disputation, and Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal.

It is not clear whether **פָּר** is a noun (‘bull, buffalo’) or a verb, namely the verb **פָּרַר** in *hiph’l infinitive constructus*, with **ה** being dropped after the preposition (‘destroy’, ‘delete’). The metaphor of the „murderous buffalo” with which the author depicts Elijah, that is to say, Komáromi, who stands up against his opponents, may have the same *raison d’être* as the image of „destroys the murderer”, an image that softens, alleviates the prophetic action, and at the same time, it presents his opponents as killers. Both meanings fit the narrative of the poem.

11. *line*: Perhaps because of the rhyme, Alistáli deploys a word here which does not exist: **בִּיד**, which I normalize as **בְּדִים** (‘false’). The corrected version, which refers to the institution of false prophecy, can be traced back to the following biblical passages<sup>14</sup>:

מִפֶּר אֶתֹת **בְּדִים**, וְקִסְמִים יְהוּלֵל; מְשִׁיב חַכְמִים אֶחָזֵר, וְדַעְתָּם יִסְכַּל. (Isa. 44:25)

who frustrates the omens of **liars**, and makes fools of diviners; who turns wise men back, and makes their knowledge foolish.

חַרֵּב אֶל־הַבְּדִים וְנֶאֱלַו חַרֵּב אֶל־גְּבוּרֶיהָ וְחָתָו: (Jer. 50:36)

A sword upon **the diviners**, that they may become fools! A sword upon her warriors, that they may be destroyed!

17. *line*: The erroneous form of the possessive noun declension is **מְרֵאָה שְׁהוּא**. In the present realization as an analytical, periphrastic structure, it serves as an attribute and adverbial in the sentence unit. As an incorrect, faulty form it either “replaces” the plain possessive suffix form: **מְרֵאָהוּ** (as it should be in Biblical Hebrew regularly) or another periphrastic structure: **מְרֵאָה שְׁלוֹ** (as it should be regularly in post-biblical Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> Both translations from the Revised Standard Version / RSV.

18. *line*: The substantive verb forms a unit with an active participle **הָיָה + יוֹשְׁבִים**. The so-called composed tense is presumably a form borrowed from the Aramaic morphosyntax, it occurs characteristically in the late, post-exilic books of the Hebrew Bible, and even later, in post-biblical literature.

25. *line*: The erroneous form of the possessive noun declension is again **הָיָה הָיָה**. Presumably, the personal pronoun should be disregarded, and the noun should be supplemented with a possessive suffix (**הָיָהוּ**).

27. *line*: In the case of the **הָיָה מְלָמְדִים**, I assume that this is another case of Alistáli's individual "possessive designation", i.e. the role of the possessive suffix is again performed by the personal pronoun. Understanding the personal pronoun according to its original function would produce a zero meaning of the structure.

## 5 Analysis – regarding the content-stylistic and poetic features

Alistáli builds the text from a few words, and there are no complicated linguistic structures. But the result is not "simple". The concentration of words at the same time as the breaking of the grammatical-syntactic norms (either at the level of mixing different registers or at the level of individual innovations) does not make the meaning evident at all. For him, sovereign creative activity proves to be more important than the rules of grammar.

In all likelihood, this is not a result of a conscious decision on behalf of the young author, but rather a consequence of his limited knowledge of Hebrew: he simply was not capable of composing a greeting poem with correct and consistent grammar.

The broader context or speech situation and subject of the *carmen* is illuminated in its caption, where the author immediately predicts its content. The celebrated respondent strikes at ideological opponents like Elijah on Mount Carmel the prophets of Baal in the course of the divine ordeal. In essence, Komáromi is equated with the great prophet Elijah. The respondent's disputation (referred to as the "mirror of [Holy] Trinity") destroys folk beliefs, "superstitious rites" and "fabrications [/forgeries]", which he describes, and against which he raises arguments. On the other hand, he equates the prophets of Baal with those who are of a different opinion regarding the question of the Trinity – they are the "lying disciples".

From one aspect, the *carmen* is relatively "simple": concerning rhymes. Alistáli uses couplet rhymes or monorhymes, two-beat bisected verses of 8 and 9 syllables, interrupted by a break, based on different levels of stress. One possible interpretation for the number of lines is that 30 is three multiplied by ten, which symbolizes wholeness and, at the same time, the Trinity.

If the subscription or information on the disputation were not available to us, the style, expressive power, and mood of the poem would still have an impact. However, reconstructing the content of the poem would be immensely difficult.

TABLE 2: Poetic and content-stylistic features of the carmen

Poetic features	30 lines, couplet rhymes or monorhymes, two-beat bisected lines of 8–9 syllables, interrupted by a break, based on different levels of stress
Content features	Elijah = Komáromi; Baal-prophets = dissenters in the question of the Trinity; Komáromi, therefore, as a prophet of God, strikes with the “mirror of [Holy] Trinity”
Stylistic features	breaking of the norms, ambiguity, language innovations, mixing of language versions, different registers; fragmentation, peculiar atmosphere; subjectivity, expressive power, emotional charge; loose cohesion: title is the point of reference; the forerunner of the modern, expressionist poem → pre-expressionist poem

## 6 Conclusion

The prevailing literary trends of the 17th century dictated a predilection for expansiveness and decoration, but this 17th century Hebrew language *carmen* is very far from the trends of its time with its minimalist and fragmented form. Perhaps we are not mistaken if we attribute a serious role in producing this style to the young author’s poor language skills, as well as his youthful self-confidence and passion which were not bound by his insufficient knowledge of the Hebrew language, for which he felt no shame. Whatever may have motivated or driven the author, he diverged from the ruling literary tastes of his time and created his own alternative, characteristic style.

This *carmen* is an embarrassingly strange salute to an eminent student from a less experienced student of Hebrew who is certainly ambitious. However, if we measure this 17th-century poem (along with the three other Utrecht-poems) not by the standards of the dominant style of the era, but see it as a forerunner of modern, expressionist poems, its oddities come across as charming, rather than confusing.

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