

The social setting and strategy of Psalm 34

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ABSTRACT

This paper endeavours to use the social setting of Psalm 34 as a key to its interpretation. The literary, social and ideological dimensions of the text are analysed in order to determine its textual strategy, intent and meaning. It is concluded that Psalm 34 was composed in post-exilic times with the intent of encouraging the community of the faithful to keep faith in the power and will of Yahweh to save them from humiliation and to cope with the adverse circumstances which they had to face.

A INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to determine what contribution can be made to the interpretation of Psalm 34 by a social-scientific analysis of its text. Almost without exception, the key to the interpretation of the Psalms is today still sought within the framework of a form-critical approach. The cultic settings which came to be associated with certain *Gattungen* are almost invariably taken as the interpretative keys to individual psalms.¹ This is also the case with Psalm 34, which is usually described as a didactic wisdom psalm with elements from the *Gattung* of a song of thanksgiving,² but sometimes even as a proper example of a song of thanksgiving of an individual (Gunkel 1933:265; Delekat 1967:79,119; Seidel 1980:24; Fohrer 1993:230).

In this paper it is proposed, contrary to this view, that a social-scientific analysis of Psalm 34 can provide a better key to understanding its textual strategy, its intended impact, and therefore its meaning. With Elliot (1993:70) the aim of social-scientific criticism is seen as

the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of the social as well as literary and ideological (theological) dimensions of a text, the correlation of these textual features, and the manner in which it was designed as a persuasive vehicle of communication and social interaction, and thus an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence.

It should be stated clearly that the literary (text-immanent) dimensions of the text are viewed in this investigation as the framework for the social-scientific analysis. In order to avoid circular reasoning, the literary and poetic features of the text are described before commencing with the social analysis which is partly based on those aspects. A social-critical analysis has to consult external sources also, and these should not be allowed to influence the data from within the text itself.

B THE POETIC FACE OF PSALM 34

The text of Psalm 34 is reproduced below in poetic form. The segmentation of verse lines (1, 2, etc, to the left of the Hebrew text) into strophes (A, B, etc) and stanzas (I and II) is based upon the literary analysis which will subsequently be discussed. The verse numbers appear between the Hebrew text and the translation.

		לְכָרֹד בְּשׂוֹחוֹ אֶחֱסָמוּ לִפְנֵי אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וַיִּנְבְּשֵׂהוּ וַיֵּלֶךְ:	1i	Of David. When he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.
I	A	אֲבַרְכֶּה אֶת־יְהוָה כְּכָל־עֵת : קוֹמִיר חֹהֵלְחוֹ כְּפִי b	2a b	I will bless Yahweh all the time; always his praise is in my mouth.
		כִּי־הוּא תִתְהַלֵּל נִפְשִׁי : יִשְׁמַעוּ עֲנֻיִים וַיִּשְׂחָחוּ: b	2 3a b	In Yahweh my soul will glory; the humble will hear it and be glad.
		וַיִּגְדַּל לִי־הוּא אִתִּי : וַיְנַרְמְסֵהוּ שְׁמוֹ וַיִּחְדְּדוּ: b	3 4a b	O magnify Yahweh with me, and let us exalt his name together!
	B	דָּרַשְׁתִּי אֶת־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי : וּמִכָּל־מַגְדָּרוֹתַי הִצִּילַנִי: b	4 5a b	I sought Yahweh, and he answered me, and from all my fears he delivered me.
		וַיִּבְטְאוּ אֵלָיו וַיִּנְהָרוּ : וּפְנֵיהֶם אֵל־יִתְחַפְּרוּ: b	5 6a b	They looked on him, and beamed; and their faces had no need to be ashamed.
		זֶה עָנִי עָקָב נִיחָהוּ שָׁמַע : וּמִכָּל־צָרוֹתָיו הוֹשִׁיעוֹ: b	6 7a b	This is a humble man; he cried and Yahweh listened, and from all his troubles he saved him.
		מַחְנֵה סַלְאֵר־יְהוָה : סָבִיב לִירְאָיו וַיִּנְטֹלְצֵם: b	7 8a b	The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear him, and saves them.
	C	טַעֲמוּ וּרְאוּ כִי־טוֹב יְהוָה	8a 9a	Taste and see that Yahweh is good!

		אֲשֶׁר יִתְחַבֵּא בְּיְהוָה:	b	Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!	
9		יִרְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה קְדָשָׁיו	10a	Fear Yahweh, all his holy ones,	
		כִּי־אֵין מַחְסוֹר לִירְאָיו:	b	for those who fear him have no want!	
10		בְּפִירִים רָשׁוּ וְרָעֵב	11a	Young lions suffer want and hunger;	
		וְרָשָׁע יְהוָה לֹא־יִחְסְרוּ	b	but those who seek Yahweh lack no	
		כֹּל־טוֹב:		good thing.	
II	D	11	לְכוּ־בָנִים שְׁמְעוּ־לִי	12a	Come, O sons, listen to me,
		יְרַאֵחַ יְהוָה אֶלְטַרְבָּתְכֶם:	b	the fear of Yahweh I will teach you.	
12		מִי־הָאִישׁ הַסּוֹפֵן טוֹיִם	13a	Who is the man who desires life,	
		אֲהַב יָמָיו לְרַאוֹת טוֹב:	b	who loves days to see what is good?	
13		כָּצַר לְשׁוֹנֶה מִרָע	14a	Keep your tongue from evil,	
		וּשְׂפָתֶיךָ מִדַּבֵּר מִרְמָה:	b	and your lips from speaking deceit!	
14		סוּר מִרָע וַעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב	15a	Flee from evil, and do good!	
		בַּקֵּשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרַחֲמֵהוּ:	b	Seek peace and pursue it!	
E		15	עֵינֵי יְהוָה אֶל־צְדִיקִים	16a	The eyes of Yahweh are toward the
				righteous,	
		וְאָזְנוֹ אֶל־שׁוֹעֲמָם:	b	and his ears toward their cry.	
16		פְּנֵי יְהוָה בַּעֲשֵׂי רָע	17a	The face of Yahweh is against the evildoers,	
		לְהַכְרִיחַ מֵאֶרֶץ זִכְרָם:	b	to cut off from the land their remembrance.	
17		צָעֲקוּ וַיִּהְיֶה שָׁמַע	18a	They call and Yahweh hears,	
		וּמִכָּל־צָרוֹתֵם הַצִּילֵם:	b	and from all their troubles he delivers	
				them.	
F		18	קְרוֹב יְהוָה לְנַשְׁכְּרֵי־לֵב	19a	Near is Yahweh to the broken-hearted,
		וְאֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ יוֹשִׁיעַ:	b	and the crushed in spirit he saves.	
19		רַבּוֹת כְּעוֹת צָרָה	20a	Many are the afflictions of the righteous;	
		וּמִכָּלֵם יִצִּילֵנּוּ יְהוָה:	b	but from them all Yahweh delivers him.	
20		שָׁמַר כָּל־עֲצָמוֹתָיו	21a	He keeps all his bones,	
		אֶחָד מֵהֶן לֹא נִשְׁבַּר:	b	not one of them is broken.	
G		21	חַמְסַת רָשָׁע תִּשְׁחָד	22a	Wickedness will kill the evil man
		וְשֹׂנְאֵי צְדִיק יִאָּשְׁמוּ:	b	and those who hate the righteous will be	
				condemned.	
22		פּוֹרָה יְהוָה נַפְשׁ עַבְדָּיו	23a	Yahweh redeems the soul of his servants,	
		וְלֹא יִאָּשְׁמוּ כָּל־הַחַסִּים בּוֹ:	b	and none of those who take refuge in him	
				will be condemned.	

1 The segmentation of the psalm

Because of the acrostic form, the demarcation of verse lines is certain. Only the letters *waw* and *sin* are wanting, and the second of these omissions is no surprise because of the similarity in form of *shin* and *sin*. Psalm 25 also omits these two letters. Verse 1 is a heading which was added later, and it seems that verse 23 is an ending which was also added to the psalm at some stage. It begins with *pe* and therefore disturbs the acrostic form.⁴ Its addition may have resulted from an urge to end the poem on a more positive note (cf Gunkel [1929] 1986:143; Podechard 1949:157), while the original version strove to let the end of the wicked coincide with that of the alphabet and consequently of the poem. This would have formed a contrast with the beginning of the poem where the urge is expressed to praise Yahweh 'always'. Its addition may also be the result of the redactional composition of the ensemble of Psalms 25-34 (cf Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:211). But since there is no text-critical reason to discard this verse, it is considered to be part of the poem. The same cannot be said of the heading which was obviously a note *on* the psalm (cf Seybold 1986:37) and which was written in prose. The effect of both additions on the communicative impact of the 'original' poem will also be discussed in due course.

The two stanzas are demarcated on the grounds of the dominant stylistic features of each.⁵ The three strophes of stanza I have as their themes the praise of Yahweh (strophe A), an acknowledgement of Yahweh's power to save (strophe B) and an invitation to experience Yahweh's providential care (strophe C). There is a high incidence of first person imperfect, voluntative or cohortative forms connected with the semantic field of 'praise' in strophe A. The reason for this praising of Yahweh is explained in strophe B (redemption from distress). The dominant grammatical form of the verbs is changed from imperfect to perfect. In strophe C there is again a change, for imperatives and nominal sentences now form the matrix. It contains an invitation to experience that Yahweh's character (being good⁶) is beneficial to his followers (they lack in nothing good).

Stanza II, beginning with strophe D, continues with the imperative-like teaching of strophe C. Seven imperatives are used for instructing the 'sons' (v 12) that fear of Yahweh concerns the flight from evil and the clinging to what is good. This is followed by an antithetical pronouncement that Yahweh loves and saves the righteous but that he dislikes and punishes the wicked (strophe E). This theme is further

exploited in strophe F (Yahweh's nearness to and care for the righteous) and G (the condemnation of the wicked). As it now stands (with the addition of v 23), strophe G no longer only forms an antithesis to strophe F (the preserving of the life of the servant of Yahweh versus the death of evil men) but it also contains an antithesis in itself (condemnation versus acquittal).

Not only the acrostic form, but also the repetition of words and semantic fields (that of praise, deliverance, the poor, what is good, the fear of Yahweh, evil and righteous) confirm the origin of the poem as a single composition.⁷

2 The poetic stratagems and their function in Psalm 34

The most important and conspicuous poetic feature of Psalm 34 is that of its acrostic form. The function of this specific form seems to be that it emphasises the idea of a comprehensive treatment of its subject. In this regard, the sevenfold repetition of 'all' in the psalm is probably not without significance (cf Hossfeld & Zenger 1993: 211, also note 4 above). The acrostic arrangement (with loss of one letter but addition of an extra verse line) amounts to twenty-two distichic lines with a metre count of two, three, four or five stresses per stich. The end of each stanza is demarcated through the use of verse lines with a length well above average: 3+4 (v 11) and 4+4 (v 23).

There are numerous instances of *parallelism* in the poem. In the first stanza, verse 2 opens with an elaborate ABCD-DBCA-pattern (I-bless-Yahweh-always and always-praise-his-my-mouth) through which the total involvement of the author with the praise of Yahweh is emphasised. Verse 2 is connected to verse 3 by way of subject-matter and alliteration (2b and 3a). There is also rhyming of two words in verse 3b (יִשְׁמְחוּ and יִשְׁמְעוּ), described as 'Wortspiel' by Gunkel [1929] 1986:143) which constitutes an associative link between the 'hearing' and the 'being glad' of the humble. The two halves of verse 4 are precisely parallel, strengthening the power of the call to praise Yahweh. Verse 5 also contains a parallelism (I-sought-answered and my-fears-delivered). The rhyme of וְצִלְמִי and וְצִלְמִי in verse 5 emphasises the personal nature of the confession. Verse 6 also has a parallelism ('they looked' is parallel to 'their faces' and 'beamed' is the semantic equivalent of 'not be ashamed'). In verse 7 'cried' and 'listened' are parallel to 'troubles' and 'saved'. In each case, the parallelism serves the function of emphasis.

Strophe C is characterised by assonance (of the imperatives), by rhyme (of

לִירְאוֹ and יִרְאוּ; כָּשׁוּ and כָּעֲבוּ and the stich-endings of v 10, קִרְשׁוּ and לִירְאוֹ) and by repetition (of the stems יִרְא, סוּב and חָסַר). All these characteristics serve to unite the elements of the strophe and thus to emphasise the truth of its maxims. The enjambment of verse 8 has the effect of suggesting the encampment of the angel of Yahweh around those who fear the Lord. As has been suggested above, the character of God (being good) and the benefits of calling upon him (lacking in nothing good) are also brought to the fore.

In stanza II, strophe D forms the most coherent part of the whole poem, driving its message home through admonition (12a), pedagogical questions (13a and 13b), repetition (of 'evil' and 'good'), antithesis (also of 'good' and 'evil') and chiasmus (good-evil-evil-good and the elements of v 15). The repetition of imperatives suggests a sense of urgency. The plural imperatives are linked through assonance, while the singular imperatives create a personalised atmosphere. The words for 'who desires life' and 'who loves days' in verse 13 are parallel, as are 'your tongue from evil' and 'your lips from . . . deceit' in verse 14. In verse 15, 'flee' is an antonym of 'seek', constituting antithesis and chiasmus with the help of the parallel phrases 'do good' and 'seek peace'. In this way, the moral choice one has to make is more clearly defined.

In strophe E, the two stichs of verse 16 form a beautiful parallel and the whole of verse 16 forms an antithesis to verse 17. This draws attention to the opposite fate of the righteous to that of the wicked. The benefit of the faithful is again emphasised through a parallelism in verse 18.

The same is true of the parallelisms of verses 19, 20 and 21 (strophe F). On top of this, verses 19 and 21 (each on its own) have a chiasmic arrangement of elements which draws attention to the reversal of the fortune of the righteous. Auffret (1988:15) draws attention to a further chiasmic arrangement of elements in verses 20 and 21 (many : not one; from them all : he keeps all).

In strophe G, the chiasmus in verse 22 emphasises the fate of the wicked, since the first and last words of the line are parallel and publicise the end of the wicked ('will kill' and 'will be condemned'). Two cases of alliteration strengthen this association (רָעָה and רָשָׁע; שָׁנְאֵי and שָׁנְאוֹ). Verses 22 and 23 form one last antithesis between the wicked and the righteous (through repetition of אָשָׁם).⁸

Waaajman (1981:46-48) draws attention to the similarities of the two stanzas that also highlight the differences between them: The *past* that dominates in the first

stanza ('delivered', 'listened' and 'saved') versus the *future* of the second ('he delivers', 'Yahweh hears'); the *receptive tone* of the first stanza ('taste and see that Yahweh is good') that becomes the *active tone* in the second (to 'see what is good' one needs to 'do good'); and the focus on *man* in the first stanza (they call, look on Yahweh and their faces need not be ashamed) as opposed to the focus on *Yahweh* in the second (he looks to the righteous, turns his face against the evildoers and is near to the broken-hearted).

One other conspicuous poetic feature of Psalm 34 is the repetition of words and stems. Among these are the repetition of אָשׁם (vv 22b and 23b, emphasising the contrast between the righteous and the evil people); דָּרַשׁ (vv 5a and 11b, establishing a connection between the experience of the author and the expectation of the audience); חָסָה (vv 9b and 23b, emphasising the benefits of taking refuge in Yahweh); the fourfold repetition of טָרַח (establishing a connection between moral good and prosperity); the sixteen occurrences of יָהוּרָה (characterising the subject-matter of the poem); the repetition of יָרָא in strophe C (three times, encouraging reverence for Yahweh); the eightfold repetition of כָּל (already touched upon); and the nine times that מָן is used (to describe rescue from troubles, abstention from evil and the annihilation of the wicked). The word נָפֵשׁ is used twice: at the beginning of the poem (v 3a) to describe praise; at the end (v 23a) to describe redemption. נִצַּל is used three times to describe the redemption of the righteous. The wicked and the righteous are contrasted through the use of עָשָׂה (with 'good' in v 15a and 'evil' in v 17a). To the same purpose, 'righteous' occurs three times and 'evil' also three times. רָעָה is used twice, once in the meaning of 'afflictions' (v 20a) and once as 'wickedness' (v 22a). This also serves to highlight the difference between the righteous and the evil people. The repetition of שָׁכַח (with 'heart' in v 19a and with 'bones' in v 21b) underscores the plight of the righteous. Finally, the fourfold repetition of שָׁמַע emphasises the willingness of Yahweh to answer to the needs of his faithful, but also to the responsibility of the righteous to listen to his Torah (v 12a).

C A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF PSALM 34

1 The role players in Psalm 34

There are three role players or groups of role players in Psalm 34, namely Yahweh,

the community of believers and the evildoers. Yahweh is mentioned thirty times in this psalm, sixteen times by name and fourteen times by way of a suffix or as the subject of a verb without his name being mentioned explicitly. It seems clear, therefore, that Yahweh is a major role player. It should nevertheless be observed that Yahweh is nowhere addressed, that this is a psalm *about* Yahweh and not a prayer directed to him.

The righteous themselves form two distinct entities in the psalm: The author, a first person singular (referred to fourteen times, four of those actually in the third person singular, v 7!) and the community of believers, spoken of twenty-three times in a third person plural form (they), six times in a third person singular form (he), seven times in a second person plural form (you) and six times in a second person singular form (you). The appellatives used for the believers are the following:

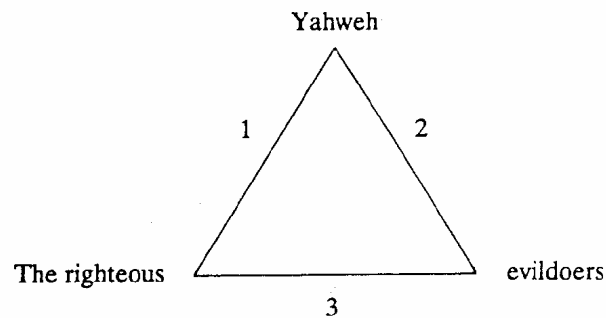
The humble (עֲנֻיִם) (vv 3b, 7a);
 those who fear him (Yahweh) (vv 8b, 10b);
 (the man) / those who take(s) refuge in him (vv 9b, 23b);
 his holy ones (v 10a);
 those who seek Yahweh (v 11b);
 sons (v 12a);
 the righteous (vv 16a, 20a, 22b);
 the broken-hearted (v 19a);
 the crushed in spirit (v 19b); and
 his servants (v 23a).

Some of these terms refer to a *state of mind* ('humble', 'fear Yahweh', 'take refuge in him', 'seek Yahweh', 'broken-hearted',⁹ 'crushed in spirit',¹⁰ 'his servants') while others refer to an *ethical state* ('his holy ones',¹¹ 'the righteous'). According to Martin-Achard (1976:345-346), the occurrence of עָנִי in verse 7 refers to a *spiritual* stance, while the same meaning can also be attached to the plural of עֲנֻיִם in verse 3 (cf also Van der Ploeg 1973:218). These people are the opposite of the haughty, the conceited and the wicked (cf Pr 16:19; Pr 3:34; and Ps 147:6). Especially the use of 'broken-hearted' and 'crushed in spirit' in this psalm seems to confirm the idea of people who acknowledge a complete lack of self-sufficiency.¹² They are people who experience (or have experienced) fear (v 5b), troubles (vv 7b, 18b), afflictions (v 20a) and the possibility of shame (v 6b) and of being condemned (v 23b). They

can be described as a group of modest people (vv 3b, 7a) with strong cohesive feelings¹³ (vv 3b, 4b), motivated in their behaviour by reverence for Yahweh (vv 10a, 12b), by a desire for prosperity and a long life (vv 10b, 11b, 13) and by hope of divine reward for themselves (vv 16a, 23b) and of retribution for the evildoers (vv 17b, 22b). Their social script is determined by their relationship with Yahweh (vv 12-15) and by the wisdom-tradition, of which the psalm gives ample evidence.

The third group of role players in this psalm is the group of people referred to as 'evildoers' (v 17a), 'the evil man' (v 22a) and 'those who hate the righteous' (v 22b). Evil itself is mentioned in this psalm as something that is spoken (v 14a), used in parallel with 'speaking deceit' (v 14b). It is also the opposite of doing 'good' and of pursuing 'peace' (v 15).

2 The interaction of the *dramatis personae*



The interaction between the characters of this psalm is almost completely on a vertical plane: between Yahweh and the pious community and between Yahweh and the evildoers. The interaction between the righteous and the evildoers (3 in the figure above) has to be surmised. The evildoers are called 'those who hate the righteous' (v 22b). But this signifies a disposition rather than an action. Similarly, it can be inferred that all the 'afflictions' (v 20a), 'fears' (v 5b) and 'troubles' (vv 7b, 18b) of the righteous, their being עַנְוִים (v 3b), broken-hearted (v 19a), crushed in spirit (v 19b) and generally in need of deliverance, protection, and commodities are the result of the doings of the wicked. But this is not explicitly stated. Some of these terms also refer, as has been argued, to the disposition of the believers rather than to their social position.

And yet, as Martin-Achard (1976:343) has argued, the material and sociological meaning of 'humble' (עַנְוִים) never disappeared when the religious-ethical connotation grew in importance. These people did not have a lavish style of living since the majority of them was poor (cf Podechard 1949:155). The text thus does give some information on the social position of the righteous. Yahweh's intervention is said to have saved 'their faces' from being 'ashamed' (v 6b). According to Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:213) the shame would result from their predicament or fear. But shame is a social phenomenon, thus it would make better sense to connect their red faces with a loss of social status or dignity.

The need for Yahweh to intervene is not only because their life is threatened (cf the holy war image of the angel of Yahweh (with an army of angels) encamping around the believers¹⁴ in v 8, the danger of having one's bones broken¹⁵ in v 21 and the redeeming of the 'soul' of the servants in v 23a), but also that of losing face (v 6b), suffering want and hunger (v 11a) and being publicly condemned (v 23b). In general, the righteous are also in need of the 'good things', basic commodities, (cf vv 11b and 13b) in life.

Because of their social and material position, the interaction between the righteous and Yahweh (2 in the diagram) consists of their seeking Yahweh (רָשָׁה vv 5a, 11b), crying to him (קָרָא v 7a, שָׁרְעָה 16b, צָעַק 18a), taking refuge in him (חָסָה vv 9b, 23b); and of his answering them (עָנָה v 5a), delivering them (נָצַל vv 5b, 18b, 20b), listening to them (שָׁמַע vv 7a, 18a, with his 'ears toward them' v 16b), saving them (יָשַׁע vv 7b and 19b, חָלַץ v 8b) turning his eyes toward them (v 16a), being near them (v 19a), keeping their bones from being broken (שָׁבַר v 21a), redeeming them (פָּדָה v 23a) and preventing them from becoming ashamed (v 6a), from suffering want or hunger (v 11) or from being condemned (אָשַׁם v 23b). They, in turn, feel the desire to bless Yahweh (בָּרַךְ v 2a), to praise him (תְּהַלֵּה v 2b, תְּחַלְּלֵה v 3a), to magnify him (גָּדַל v 4a), and to exalt his name (רָוַם v 4b).

It is also possible to catch glimpses of the interpersonal relationship within the believing community. From verse 3a the reader learns that praise of Yahweh by one member of the community has a positive effect on the other members of the group: They are glad when they hear it. They are also encouraged to partake of the praise of the author (v 4). What has happened to one member of the community is no private affair, but concerns all its members (Ringgren 1971:40). From verse 6 it is evident that the deliverance of one member, the author, by Yahweh, has saved the

other members of the community from becoming ashamed.

Lastly, there is also interaction between Yahweh and the evildoers in the psalm (2 in the diagram). Verse 17 states that the face of Yahweh is against them and that he will cut off their remembrance from the land. The reflexive and passive pronouncements of verse 22 should probably also be understood as the action of Yahweh: Wickedness killing the evil man is the retribution ordained by Yahweh. It is Yahweh himself who will condemn those who hate the righteous. It should be noted that this retribution is relegated to the future ('to cut off' with infinitive construct in v 17b; 'will kill' and 'will be condemned' with imperfect forms in v 22). These terms do not describe past actions of Yahweh, although his present disposition towards them is one of enmity (v 17a, a nominal sentence).

3 The goal and strategy of this psalm

The *genre* of Psalm 34 does make an important contribution towards its strategy. It is a wisdom text, as is evident from its acrostic composition, the antithesis between the righteous and the evildoer (vv 16-17), the wisdom-like sayings, the address (by the implied author) of the audience as 'sons' (v 12a) and the use of phrases such as 'the fear of Yahweh' (cf vv 8b, 10a, 10b, 12a) and 'blessed is' (v 9b) (cf also Burger 1985: 63-66 for these and other features of wisdom literature in the psalm). This constitutes a didactic setting with a teacher and an audience. The fact that Yahweh is nowhere addressed¹⁶ but continually spoken of in the third person, underscores this perception. Although the first stanza is modelled on the lines of a song of thanksgiving of an individual, it is solidly connected to and integrated into the second, didactic stanza through repetition of key-words and the first person singular style (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:210).

The dominant *terms and semantic fields* of the poem are that of *praise* (cf the use of 'bless', 'praise', 'glory', 'magnify' and 'exalt' in the translation); *appeal* to Yahweh (cf 'sought Yahweh', 'looked on him', 'cried', 'take refuge', 'seek Yahweh', 'their cry', 'they call'); and the *intervention* of Yahweh (cf 'answered', 'delivered', 'listened', 'saved', 'saves', his eyes being 'toward the righteous' and 'his ears toward their cry', 'Yahweh hears', 'he delivers them', 'near is Yahweh', 'he saves', 'Yahweh delivers him', 'he keeps all his bones' and 'Yahweh redeems the soul of his servants'). Secondary themes are *the good life* (cf 'no want', 'lack no good thing', 'who desires

life', 'days to see what is good') and *bad actions* ('evil' (x2), 'speaking deceit', 'wickedness', 'hate').

The *goal* of the psalm is to encourage people to keep on following Yahweh. Its *strategy* is to propagate the advantages and joy of being a member of the God-fearing community. The dangers of becoming apostate are also spelled out as a means of discouraging any such ideas. In strophe A, the author works up enthusiasm for the praise of Yahweh. The voluntative opening phrase, the repetition of the idea of duration in the praise and the mentioning of the effect of his praise on the community prepares the audience for the invitation to join in (v 4a) and for the cohortative encouragement to take part (v 4b). In this way, internal cohesion and a distinctive collective identity is established.

In strophe B, the reason for the praise of strophe A is given as the experience of deliverance from difficulties. It also constitutes a personal testimony to the truth of the maxims of strophes B and C that Yahweh provides for his faithful. The reference to the effect his testimony had on his co-religionists is also meant to instill a feeling of solidarity¹⁷ and to strengthen the belief in the maxim that the angel of Yahweh, as a metaphor for the action of Yahweh himself, will provide protection for the believers (v 8). In doing so, the psalm promotes the belief that Yahweh will protect his worshippers from disgrace and it also encourages in-group cohesion.

Three argumentative techniques are employed in strophe C. Three imperatives are used in close succession to drive the message home that Yahweh-worship is rewarding: Taste! See! Fear! The second technique is that of using three maxims to describe the benefits of Yahweh-worship: It makes one blessed¹⁸ (v 9b), those who fear him have no want (v 10b) and they lack no good thing¹⁹ (v 11b). The third technique is that of fixing a link between the character of God ('Yahweh is good') and the results of following him (his followers 'lack no good thing'). The idea is thus propagated that the followers of Yahweh, not the arrogant young lions (v 11a) of society, will eventually experience fulfilment of their needs.

The didactic character of the poem is perhaps most evident in strophe D. The audience is addressed directly and instructed through the help of seven imperatives, two of those in the plural by way of invitation to an audience to listen and the rest in the singular to evoke the atmosphere of personal instruction. The candidate for this personal instruction is carefully selected on the grounds of his desire for the good things in life and a long life at that (v 13). In this way, the benefits of fearing

Yahweh are advertised. The parallelism and antithesis of verse 15 and verse 16 are used to emphasise the choice one has to make. Similar to what has happened in strophe C, an associative link is established between a good life ('who loves days to see what is good') and the moral good ('flee from evil and do good'). The frame of reference is that of social and political ethics, especially the juridical process and social coexistence (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:214). Subordination to the accepted norms and traditions of the believing community is thus advanced, while at the same time a line is drawn between the in-group and the out-group.

In strophe E a full frontal attack is launched against the out-group, the evildoers. In the same way that the believers benefit from the (personal - cf the metaphorical mentioning of eyes and ears) intervention of Yahweh, the evildoers will suffer from his retribution (his 'face' is against them). In contrast to the prospect of a long and prosperous life for the faithful, the evildoers will suffer an early death. Their death is, however, not even mentioned. It has to be inferred from the statement that 'their remembrance' will be 'cut off from the land' (v 17b). This phrase is strongly reminiscent of the book of Deuteronomy and calls to mind the threat of destruction from the land should apostasy occur. The benevolence of Yahweh is contrasted in such a way to his wrath that the decision to remain with the community of the righteous is very compelling.

Strophe F drives home the point that the righteous are far better off, despite their experiencing troubles and afflictions.²⁰ In the end, it argues, God will save the righteous person from *all* his problems (cf the use of 'all' in vv 5b, 7b, 11b, 18b, 20b!) and reward him by keeping *all* his bones so that *not one* (the opposite of 'all', constituting antithesis, v 21ab) will be broken. The repetition of 'broken' in verse 19a and verse 21b is also significant in that it draws attention to the antithesis between spiritual oppression ('broken-hearted') and the utter physical destruction of the believer (not one of his bones being 'broken'). This promise also serves as a reminder of the covenant, since the bones of the paschal lamb had to be treated in the same way (cf Ex 12:46).

The fate of the evil man is contrasted with that of the righteous by way of summary in strophe G. Once again *all* (in the negative **לֹא כָל־**, v 23b) is used to emphasise the all-encompassing saving power of Yahweh which is placed at the disposal of his servants. The distinction between those who do evil and those who do good is that the wicked will be killed (v 22) by evil. The righteous are indeed

afflicted by evil (cf v 20), but not utterly destroyed (v 21) (Ridderbos 1972:247).

The group interests that motivated the production of this document are that of promoting Yahweh-worship (cf v 12), inner-group cohesion (exemplified by the mentioning of interaction and empathy within the audience, cf vv 3 and 6) and the maintaining of the ideological commitment to the wisdom tradition of retribution (vv 16-17, 22-23) although this tradition is no longer as rigorous as it once was.²¹

4 The social setting of Psalm 34

What then is the social context within which this psalm originally had its function? Who are the faithful, who are the wicked and what was their relationship? In order to answer these questions, the date of composition of the psalm and its *Sitz im Leben* have to be determined. It seems to be a late pre-exilic, exilic or early post-exilic wisdom psalm with a close affinity with other wisdom Psalms (especially Ps 25),²² with Proverbs and with the book of Deuteronomy. With regard to Deuteronomy, the phrase 'lack no good thing' (v 11b) is strongly reminiscent of texts like Deuteronomy 2:7, 8:9, and 26:11; while the phrase 'to cut off from the land their remembrance' (v 17b) reminds one of Deuteronomy 11:17 and 32:26. Van der Ploeg (1973:220) draws attention to the similarity of **רְעוּת רְבוּת** in Deuteronomy 31:17 and 21 and Psalm 34:20a. But there is also a close affinity with Psalm 94, for instance in the use of the verb **רָכַח** in Psalm 94:5 (cf the noun from the same stem in Ps 34:19), the mentioning of Yahweh's having ears and eyes (Ps 94:9), and the antithesis between righteous and evil people. If these similarities are taken as an indication of proximity in time of the origin of the respective texts, a date after 622 BCE (the date of the 'rediscovery' of parts of Deuteronomy) may be postulated. Psalm 94:5 may contain a clue to the identity of the 'crushed in spirit' of Psalm 34:19b. Psalm 94:5 translates: 'Your people, Yahweh, they crush (**וַיִּכְאֹבֵם**), your inheritance they oppress (**וַיִּצְנוּ**)'. This seems to be a portrayal of the exilic or post-exilic situation of oppression by foreigners. To 'beam' and not to be 'ashamed' (v 6) will be the privilege of Zion in the new dispensation (cf Is 60:5 and 54:4, Deissler 1964:140). Waaijman (1981:44) interprets verse 6 as an allusion to the liberation from exile. If this is considered in conjunction with the affinity with Deuteronomy and other wisdom psalms and also the acrostic form,²³ the corroborating evidence suggests a post-exilic²⁴ date²⁵ of composition.

5 The meaning of Psalm 34

The above social-critical analysis, in conjunction with the arguments for a post-exilic date, strongly suggests that Psalm 34 was neither meant as a thanksgiving song of the individual as it is almost invariably described (Gunkel 1933:265; Ridderbos 1955:287; Ridderbos 1972:245; Dahood 1979:205; Weiser 1979:296; Brueggemann 1984:133; Anderson 1985:267-268; Kroll 1987:99; Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:319; Fohrer 1993:231²⁶), nor as a 'Lebenszeugnis eines Geretteten für die Armen' (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:210; cf also Kraus 1988:381). It was rather intended as a didactic, literary²⁷ text with the purpose of encouraging the post-exilic community of the faithful in their struggle to come to terms with their oppression by gentile peoples, to keep faith in the power and will of Yahweh in saving them from humiliation and to try to cope with the adverse circumstances which they had to face in general. There is no need to demarcate an ancient, hymnic part (strophe I) embedded within a later didactic poem (strophe II) (cf Craigie 1983:278). There is already a strong influence of wisdom-thinking to be detected in the first stanza and a homogeneous use of terminology and of the alphabet throughout the psalm.

Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:211) see the key to the interpretation of Psalm 34 in its acrostic form:

Diese Kunstform gibt einen wichtigen Deuteschlüssel: Der Psalm bietet sich angesichts der leidvollen Erfahrung gestörten und durchkreuzten Lebens als eine umfassende (der Psalm verwendet achtmal die Totalitätsangabe 'ganz, all') Lebenslehre ('von A bis Z') und als einen die auseinanderstrebenden Lebenssituationen ordnende (alphabetische Abfolge) Lebenshilfe an.

The form of the psalm is thus taken as an important indication of its strategy and meaning. This is a step in the right direction, but their approach does not take the social context of the psalm into consideration and it therefore remains incomplete and one-sided to a certain extent. The key to the psalm's interpretation should rather be seen as being provided by the total impact of its literary composition, social setting and ideological thrust. According to such an approach, its strategy is identified as directed at encouraging a whole community of believers to persevere in their faith under adverse conditions.

6 A note on the history of interpretation of Psalm 34

The heading of the psalm is a later addition which strove to provide a historic *Sitz* for it, not dissimilar to the attempts by modern commentators in providing a cultic *Sitz*.²⁸ The choice for the specific incident (1 Sm 21:11-16, involving Achish instead of Abimelech) seems to have been made on the grounds of similar *Stichwörter* occurring in the psalm and in the history of David's flight before Saul (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:213). What was the motivation for providing such a setting? It might have been intended to stimulate a desire for emulating someone considered to be a model of faith.

The author of 1 Peter (in 3:10-12) made good use of Psalm 34:13-17 by quoting these verses in a different but not altogether dissimilar context of encouraging a faithful community to persevere (cf Elliot 1993:77-78). The same holds true for the allusion to verse 21 in John's account of the crucifixion (Jn 19:36). But the use of verse 9 ('Taste and see that the Lord is good') by the early church in an eucharistic context (Craigie 1983:282) seems to suppose a rather superficial connection between this psalm and a particular context.

E CONCLUSION

What is the value of a social-scientific analysis in the exegesis of Psalm 34? This approach has helped to focus on the social setting of the psalm, rather than on its *Gattung(en)* or cultic *Sitz im Leben* as a key to its interpretation. The present study has endeavoured to correlate the literary, social and ideological dimensions of the text in a comprehensive way. With the help of insight drawn from this analysis, but also from those researchers whose approach may have been criticised, this study has succeeded to a greater extent (it is hoped) in defining the textual strategy, social context, intended impact, and thus the meaning of Psalm 34.

NOTES

- 1 Those commentaries that do not follow this approach are described as 'unconventional'. Cf Becker (1975:13).
- 2 According to Deissler (1964:140), it is 'ein Lehrgedicht das die Gattung des individuellen Dankliedes als "Gefäss" seiner Bemühung benützt, zum Leben in wahrer Weisheit anzuleiten'.

- 3 In the light of the third person plural in v 3b, no change to a second person imperative is necessary as Gunkel ([1929] 1986:144) and a host of others following in his footsteps have suggested (cf Deissler 1964:139; Craigie 1983:277; Burger 1985:59; Kraus 1988:382).
- 4 Again there is similarity to Psalm 25, which also ends with a 'superfluous' *pe*-line. See the remarks by Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:211) in this regard. Gaebelein (1990:136) cites the interesting observation of Skehan (1971:74 n 13) that the addition of a *pe*-line makes *lamed* the exact middle of the series of lines and sums up the whole alphabet in the name of its first letter (*alef* first letter, *lamed* middle letter and *pe* last letter spells $\aleph \lambda \pi$).
- 5 Auffret's (Auffret 1988:6) demarcation of strophes agrees to a certain extent with the present segmentation: he distinguishes 2-4, 5-8, 9-15 and 16-23 (or 17-23). His attempt to identify a chiasmic structure in vv 9-15 (Auffret 1988:9) is based on the repetition of 'see', 'good', 'fear' and 'lack' in these verses, but fails to recognise the many differences between 9-11 and 12-15. Among these are the address to 'sons' and the difference in syntax, for instance the questions used. Cf further Gunkel ([1929] 1986:143). Gaebelein (1990:127-143) has argued for a qualitative difference between vv 2-8 and the rest of the psalm, which seems to be in evidence also in the way Codex Aleppo has arranged the text.
- 6 'Good' is to be understood as a comprehensive adjective according to Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:213).
- 7 Cf the repetition of 'see', 'good', 'the man', and 'fear' in vv 9-15. Auffret (1988:9) even demarcates this section as one strophe. According to Watson (1986:193) the recurring pattern in vv 5, 7, 18 and 20 and keywords such as 'Yahweh' and 'all' give the psalm its unity.
- 8 Kselman (1982:224-225) is mistaken in citing these two verses (22-23) as an instance of the ABCB pattern ('the second word in a sequence of four is repeated as the fourth'), since the verb כָּלַף is ignored in this reckoning.
- 9 According to Kraus (1988:386) they 'are people who are seized by a deep despair about themselves. Their natural trust in life is broken and ruined. Such a breakdown always points to the final depths of the relationship to God.'
- 10 Van der Ploeg (1973:220) explains both expressions of v 19 as an image of worry and sorrow ('De uitdrukking wil een beeld zijn van kommer en verdriet; hart en geest zijn niet als onderscheiden bedoelt.').
- 11 The only passage in the Psalms where the word refers to human beings (Van der Ploeg 1973:219). According to Van der Ploeg (1973:219), they are those people who serve Yahweh and refrain from everything profane, unclean, bad.
- 12 The comparison with the 'young lions' in v 11 also suggests the dependence on God. As Craigie (1983:280) has observed, young lions symbolise the essence of self-sufficiency in the provision of their basic needs. In contrast, those who fear Yahweh depend on him for the provision of what they need. The psalmist thus demonstrates that it is the self-sufficient predators of this world who will eventually suffer want and hunger.
- 13 Through their corporate praise, the members of this community 'organically grow together and become the *corpus pionum*' (Weiser 1979:297).
- 14 Kraus (1988:384) calls this an 'age-old tradition', already evident in Gn 32:1, Ex 14:19, Jos 5:14, etc. This last context demonstrates the military character of the image, which is used here in a metaphorical way. Cf Craigie (1983:279) and Van der Ploeg (1973:219).

- 15 'Bones' are to be seen as representative, *pars pro toto*, of the person himself and thus of his life. Cf Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:214). Weiser (1979:299) is right in explaining this as protection from 'the complete destruction of his existence'. Van der Ploeg (1973:220) notes the significance of Is 38:13 where Yahweh is represented as a lion, breaking the bones of the suppliant. It has nothing to do with stoning to death as Delekat (1967:120-121) proposes.
- 16 It is for this reason difficult to understand why this psalm, or the first stanza on its own, is often described as a song of thanksgiving, since this particular *Gattung* 'ist charakterisiert durch die Anrede Gottes und die Anrede der Gemeinde' (Seidel 1980:25).
- 17 According to Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:213), 'der Psalm drückt den Prozess der Solidarisierung sprachlich aus: ich - die Armen - ihr - wir'.
- 18 The 'blessed is . . .' formula is used as a kind of advertisement in this instance. Cf Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:213).
- 19 An allusion to the maintenance of Israel in the desert after the exodus and to the gift of the 'land of milk and honey'. Cf Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:214).
- 20 In this regard, the psalm demonstrates a more refined form of wisdom theology than that of the friends of Job (Craigie 1983:281). 'The true happiness of a godly life consists in the nearness of God and in the living experience of his help and not in being spared suffering and affliction. On the contrary, suffering is an essential part of the life of the righteous, and only he who is broken-hearted and crushed in spirit will experience what the nearness of God and his help can really come to mean.' (Weiser 1979:299.)
- 21 The afflictions suffered by the righteous are no longer negated completely as in certain earlier versions of wisdom teaching. Cf v 20, Craigie (1983:281).
- 22 Four verse lines begin with the same words or stems (cf Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:211). But it is especially the similarity of ideas that draws attention: The question in Ps 25:12 reminds one of that in Ps 34:13; the reference to the עַלְמַי in Ps 25:9 and Ps 34:3; the promise of the descendants taking possession of the land in Ps 25:13 in contrast with the cutting off of remembrance from the land in Ps 34:17, etc.
- 23 According to Kraus (1988:383), the acrostic form appeared in exilic and post-exilic times.
- 24 Compare v 3a with Zch 9:8, v 10a with Is 4:3, v 19 with Is 57:15 and 61:1. Cf further also Deissler (1964:141-142).
- 25 According to Deissler (1964:140), 'frühestens in die mittlere nachexilische Zeit'. Sabourin (1974:24) lists this psalm as one from the post-exilic group.
- 26 Fohrer (1993:230), however, does suggest that it is more probable that the psalm was intended for use in the synagogue service rather than in a sacrificial cultic setting.
- 27 As it was an acrostic, it was intended to appeal to the eye rather than to the ear (Watson 1986:191).
- 28 Cf for instance Weiser (1979:298) who thinks of the 'sons' of v 12 being present at a 'cultic feast'.

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