

To honour Yahweh in the face of adversity: A socio-critical analysis of Psalm 131

P J Botha
(UP)

ABSTRACT

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Psalm 131 is analysed in respect of its poetic features and a probable social background. The social model which regards honour and shame as pivotal values in Mediterranean societies is used to try to determine what impact it was most probably supposed to have on the community of believers which included it into the Psalter and, consequently, its meaning for us today.

1 INTRODUCTION

Even though it seems by now commonplace to say so, this psalm must certainly be one of the most beautiful poems ever written. The parallelism of its lines, the repetition of certain words and ideas in it and its imagery combine to give it a poignant beauty only rarely encountered in the Book of Psalms. But even more important than these features is the way in which its simplicity, its brevity¹ and the conciseness of its lines reflect its meaning. This meaning, its message, is about honouring Yahweh in the face of adversity and suffering. As such it seems a good choice of subject also to honour the memory of a respected teacher, colleague and friend such as Willem Prinsloo was.

W S Prinsloo himself has published a very fine article on the poetic structure of this psalm². The intention with this contribution is not to criticise his analysis,³ but to investigate the social and cultural background of the psalm in order to further the research on how it was intended to communicate and what its meaning is for a present-day community of believers. In order to do that, a poetic analysis needs to be made to determine the parameters of such an interpretation⁴.

2 STICHOMETRIC ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION

			שִׁיר הַפְּעֻלֹת לְדָוִד	1	a	A pilgrim song. Of David.
I	A	1	יְהוָה לֹא יִגְבַּהּ לִבִּי	1	b	Yahweh, my heart is not haughty,
		2	וְלֹא יִרְמֵ עֵינַי		c	and my eyes are not arrogant;
		2	וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לִּי בְּגִדֹת		d	and I don't concern myself with
						lofty matters
		2	וּבְנִפְלְאוֹת מַפְעָי:		e	or with things too marvelous for me.
	B	3	אִם לֹא שָׁרִיתִי	2	a	Indeed, I have calmed
		2	וְדוּמַמְתִּי נִפְשִׁי		b	and quieted my soul.
		4	כְּגִמְלַת עַלֵּי אִמִּי		c	Like a weaned child with his mother,
		3	כְּגִמְלַת עַלֵּי נַפְשִׁי:		d	like the weaned child is my soul
						with me.
II	C	5	יְחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה	3	a	Wait, O Israel, for Yahweh,
		2	מִעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:		b	from now on and for evermore.

3 THE POETICAL DIMENSIONS OF PSALM 131

As can be seen from the stichometric representation above, Psalm 131 was probably composed with five distichic lines, organised into three strophes and two stanzas. The metre, comprising feet of two or three stresses each, is reminiscent of the *qinah*⁵ in the first and last lines⁶. But the syntax and ideas expressed in the psalm suggest that it should probably be described as “a personal declaration of trust with a paranetic application”.

The theme of the first stanza concerns a personal attitude of true humility in relation to Yahweh, while the second stanza implores the people of Yahweh to assume the same attitude⁷. Within the first stanza, the first strophe is built up around repeated use of the negative particle לֹא and words forming a semantic field that can be defined with “haughtiness”. The second strophe comprises a number of positive statements linked to the introductory oath-formula אִם־לֹא which here has the meaning of “on the contrary”⁸. The dominant semantic field in the second strophe is that of quieting and stilling.

There is a remarkable concentration of first person singular verb forms and pronominal suffixes in the first stanza: two in the first line; two in the second line; three in the third line; and one in the fourth verse line. The first line contains a fourfold parallelism constituted by the negative particle, a verb, a bodily part signifying attitude, and a first person singular suffix. This description of humility within the mind of the author is expanded in the second verse line with regard to conduct. Consequently, there is an external synthetic parallelism between the first two lines. The second line itself is constructed as a parallelism (the preposition וְ and the semantic idea of “greatness” forming the parallel), while there is also chiasmus of the first person singular pronominal suffix. This chiasm has

the consequence of placing great emphasis on the semantic and acoustic word-pair **גְּדֻלּוֹת וּנְלֵאוֹת** which stands in the middle, between the first person forms⁹.

The second strophe, which is characterised by verbs opposite in meaning to those used in the first strophe, also contains two parallelisms. The parallelism in verse 2 (line 3) is constituted by the semantic parallel between the verbs and its first person perfect ending. Once again there is a parallel between the two verse lines of the strophe, since both end with the form **נִפְשִׁי**¹⁰ and a further semantic parallel is formed by the idea of quieting that occurs in both lines. The fourth line of the poem has two hemistichs which are parallel in almost every way: The preposition **עַל**, the word **גָּמַל**, the preposition **עַל**, and a noun with a pronominal suffix all together form a fourfold parallelism. By using the plural form of the preposition, **עַלֵּי**, a closer (acoustic) parallel is established between it and its form with the first person singular personal suffix in the second hemistich.

The imagery is very special. The stereotyped metaphors of “heart” and “eyes” as representative of the level of respect in the first verse line are augmented by that using the verb “to walk” as a general metaphor for conduct in the second line. The word **נַפְשׁ** is then used in line 3 in accord with its general meaning of “self”, but unexpectedly it becomes an object in itself, distinct from the person of the author, when it is compared in line 4 with a weaned child and the person of the author with its mother. In addition to these images, Baethgen¹¹ recognises in verse 2 the image of a restless sea (comparable to the imagery in Isaiah 57:20 and Jeremiah 49:23) that eventually becomes mirror-like in its calmness.

4 THE ROLE PLAYED BY HONOUR AND SHAME IN THIS PSALM

Honour, as a reference to the proper attitudes and behaviour of a person towards those who control his or her existence¹², plays a very important role in this poem. The author is saying (and repeating in a variety of ways) that his attitude is that of proper respect for Yahweh¹³. He is not haughty or vain, but modest and full of respect. He states this in the first strophe in a negative way. Words such as **גְּבוּהָ**, **רוֹם**, **גְּדֻלּוֹת**, and **נְפִלְאוֹת** have a common semantic element in that they refer to height, size or elevatedness. The heart and eyes are often mentioned in expressions that portray conceitedness, such as is the case in connection with the verbs “be haughty”¹⁴ and “be lofty”¹⁵ in verse line one. One did not try to look one’s

superiors in the eye, but rather to cast the eyes down. The psalmist expresses the realisation that he is not on an even footing with Yahweh¹⁶.

The verb הִלַּךְ in the Pi'el, as used in the second verse line, can be translated with "go about", "walk", "deal with", or "concern oneself with"¹⁷. The last meaning mentioned is probably the best translation, since there is a degree of comparison mentioned: "with things too wonderful for me". While "big things" in the first hemistich of the line is more neutral in meaning¹⁸, the "wonderful things" of the second hemistich usually has a positive connotation¹⁹. It is namely often used in connection with the (wonderful) deeds of God²⁰. Here we have the first hint of what is at stake: the author is not claiming humility in relation to people, but he is claiming an attitude of respect with regard to Yahweh and his deeds²¹. In this context, the word נִפְלְאוֹת gets a new meaning. It concerns things which the author does not understand and which, so we may assume, some other members of his people find fault with or are outright critical about²². But not he himself. He does not dwell on questions that relate to the deeds of Yahweh. He is not concerned with sanctioning or questioning the actions of Yahweh, since that would mean to be disrespectful or irreverent.

On the contrary, he has calmed and quieted his soul, his inner being. The Pi'el of שָׁוה can be translated with "to make smooth", "to level (ground)", "to smoothen", or "to compose", "to appease", "to pacify". The Po'el of נָמַךְ forms a close parallel to this with possible translations like "to silence", "to quieten", "to appease", "to pacify". An important mutual element of these semantic fields is the notion that there was an unevenness, a disturbance, an annoyance or disorder beforehand. In the present context, it probably means that the author has subdued the perplexing questions he had about God's control over his world. In doing so, he has reaffirmed his belief in Yahweh's power, and thus he has acknowledged that he still believes that Yahweh is in control of his personal history and that of his people.

These ideas of the third strophe are then expanded and illustrated by way of a comparison in the fourth. His inner self, his soul, is satisfied, pacified or quieted within him like a weaned child who is in the reassuring presence of his mother. All he needs, is provided for. It is important to note that it is not the poet who is like a child and Yahweh who is like a mother, but his soul which is like a child within himself as the mother²³. His inner self has thus become one of the *dramatis personae*, a person quite apart from himself, but nevertheless a person over which he has control. His own honour is illustrated by his control over his feelings. He is the master of his inner self, he chose for an attitude of humility and

respectful acceptance of whatever Yahweh chooses to bring over him. The image of the weaned child on his mother should thus not be understood in the first place as signifying “being properly cared for”. A weaned child is one that begins to understand, a child that can be quieted. But, more importantly perhaps, a child that has learned respect and which will understand that it is sometimes necessary for it to be subdued²⁴.

Finally, this attitude is recommended as the appropriate one for Israel. The verb **חל** has a semantic element in common with the verbs used in the third strophe. To “wait for” Yahweh means to be patient, to appease the feelings of impatience that seeks to overpower someone in distress. It is the reaction of someone who believes that God is almighty, that he can and will change his fortune. It is a reaction of trust, but also of respect. The juxtapositioning of verse 3 with verse 2 thus adds a new dimension to the image of a child with its mother. It now resembles the relationship of Israel with Yahweh. Israel should be content in a relationship of submission to, trust in and reliance on Yahweh.

5 THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF PSALM 131

This psalm was written at or for a time of personal and or national crisis. It is for that reason that it was necessary to “quieten” and to “calm” the inner self of the author²⁵. In its present form, it is intended as an appeal to “Israel” to “wait” for Yahweh (v 3). With a view to the close links the psalm shows with wisdom material such as that found in Proverbs and Job²⁶, the difficulty in which Israel is here admonished to persevere should most probably be identified as the dishonour and shame that befell them in the exile or that still continued in the post-exilic time²⁷.

The immediate literary context of Psalm 131 within the Psalter confirms this surmise, since there are connections with the exilic or post-exilic Psalm 130²⁸ (the author similarly speaks of his soul and Israel having to “wait” - **קוה** and **חל** - on Yahweh)²⁹; while there is also a parallel with David’s humility in the exilic or post-exilic Psalm 132:1³⁰. But the time of origin of the psalm is not only characterised by difficulty. It also polemicalises against an attitude of discontent, of criticism against Yahweh³¹. The correct attitude for Israel, it implies, is not that of haughtiness, discontent or criticism against Yahweh. The correct attitude is that of true humility, of trust in Yahweh and of patiently and respectfully waiting for him to restore their honour.

Psalm 131 offers an alternative to the traditional, pre-exilic lament³². In stead of the explicitly verbalised criticism of Yahweh’s absence and of

his silence that we find time and again in the individual laments, this psalm chooses another approach to a similar crisis. It chooses the way of humility, of becoming like a child, a child that has learned respect for its parent. It has chosen the way which acknowledges that respect for Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom and happiness.

6 CONCLUSION: THE TEXTUAL STRATEGY AND MEANING OF PSALM 131

The strategy of this poem is exemplified by its simplicity and the expressed intention not to be critical about the actions of Yahweh. Such critical contemplation, it is implied, will be tantamount to a lack of respect or even to contempt for Yahweh. Humility and acceptance, an attitude of respectfully "waiting" for Yahweh, is propagated instead. To this effect the parallelism of lines, the semantic fields of words relating to haughtiness and quieting, and a beautiful comparison concerning a mother and her weaned child are all used.

The poem is directed to Yahweh, but in its present form it also addresses Israel. Therefore it can be described as a declaration of humility, and thus of trust in and honour for Yahweh, which is recommended as the proper attitude in times of distress³³.

When confronted by a tragedy such as the one that struck Israel with the destruction of the temple, or some or other personal tragedy in the life of one of God's children, this psalm certainly gives direction to one's life. It tells us that faith is about patience, acceptance and trust. It tells us that, when we are humiliated by other people (as Israel was), the proper attitude should not be that of seeking revenge or satisfaction, but of seeking to honour God through self-humiliation. The kingdom of God belongs to those who become like children. To rebel against God because of our circumstances, would mean to dishonour him. It implies, by using the term נפלאות to describe a situation of adversity, that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28). This psalm tells us that a proper attitude of respect for God is the only way of restoring self-respect.

NOTES:

- 1 It seems there are some who regard it to be defective and for that reason to be a fragment of a psalm. Cf L D Crow, *The songs of ascents (Psalms 120-134). Their place in Israelite history and religion* (SBL Dissertation Series 148), Atlanta, 1996, 94, 97.
- 2 W S Prinsloo, Psalm 131: "Nie my wil nie, o Here...", *Skrif en Kerk* 7(1) 1986, 74-82.

- 3 I have also very little to add to the excellent poetic analysis made by Hennie Viviers in his dissertation under guidance of Willem Prinsloo, “’n Teksimmannente ondersoek na die samehang van die Ma’alot-Psalms (Pss. 120-134)”, Pretoria 1990, 137-145.
- 4 The aim of a social-scientific analysis is the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of the social as well as literary and ideological 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. Cf. J H Elliott, *What is social-scientific criticism?* Minneapolis 1993, 70.
- 5 Cf also J P M van der Ploeg, *Psalmen*, Deel II, Roermond 1973, 385.
- 6 Quell’s suggestion (G Quell, Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131, in: Hrsg F Maass, *Das Ferne und nahe Wort. Festschrift für L. Rost*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 105, Berlin 1967, 173-185, 173.) that יהוה forms an anacrusis, standing on its own in the first line, seems very tempting. It would also constitute a beautiful example of anaphora, with three successive lines beginning with אָל. The parallelism between the first three hemistichs would also become more explicit. But if verse 3 is seen as an intrinsic part of the poem, and not an added “liturgische Anrede”, this seems less probable. It is also not supported by the Masoretic punctuation.
- 7 Note the vocative “Yahweh” with which the first stanza begins, and the vocative “Israel” at the beginning of the second stanza in contrast with this.
- 8 In fact, this phrase establishes an antithesis between strophes A and B. Cf P A H de Boer, Psalm CXXXI 2. VT XVI (1966) 287-292, 289.
- 9 H Viviers, *op cit*, 138.
- 10 According to Prinsloo, *op cit*, 76 this constitutes an instance of epiphora. Cf also W Beyerlin, *Wider der Hybris des Geistes. Studien zum 131. Psalm*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 108, Stuttgart 1983, 53.
- 11 F Baethgen, *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt*. Dritte Auflage, Göttingen 1904, 390.
- 12 Cf B J Malina, *The New Testament world. Insights from cultural anthropology*, Atlanta 1981, 27.
- 13 According to Prinsloo, *op cit*, 75 the name Yahweh is given prominence in the syntax of the first line, thereby indicating that, in accord with the rest of the psalm, the honour of Yahweh is the most important issue.
- 14 Proverbs 6:17 mentions “haughty eyes” as one of the things which Yahweh hates. Cf also Psalms 18:27; 101:15; Proverbs 6:17.
- 15 Proverbs 21:4 speaks disapprovingly of “haughtiness of eyes and arrogance יַחַבּ of heart”. Cf also the “haughtiness of eyes” in Proverbs 30:13. גְבוּהָ and לֵב are also used in conjunction in Proverbs 18:12; 2 Chronicles 26:16; 32:25; Ezekiah 28:2; 5; and 17.
- 16 P A H de Boer, *op cit*, 288.
- 17 According to Baethgen, *op cit*, 389, the Pi’el should be understood as having frequentative meaning. It occurs mainly in late poetic texts. See De Boer, *op cit*, 288.
- 18 Baethgen, *op cit*, 389, compares it with the similar expression in Jeremiah 45:5, interpreting it as “audacious plans” (“kühne Pläne”).
- 19 Cf for example Proverbs 30:18. Sometimes, however, there is an element of “too difficult” associated with it (cf Deut 17:8; 30:11).

- 20 Cf for instance Exodus 3:20; Jeremiah 21:2; Psalms 86:10; 105:2; 119:27; 136:4; etc. Only God does “big and wonderful things”, things which man cannot understand. To try to do so, would amount to arrogance. Cf Van der Ploeg, *op cit*, 386.
- 21 Cf the parallel use of נפלאות and ממני in Job 42:3 and of נפלאות and גדלות in Job 5:9; 9:10 and 37:5. Cf also W Brueggemann, *The message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis 1984, 48.
- 22 According to D D Sylva, , *Psalms and the transformation of stress: poetic-communal interpretation and the family*, Louvain, s a, 47, “Psalm 131 deals with the perspective we should have in relation to events that are either too difficult for us to handle or too difficult for us to understand. These are what cause fear, fatigue or pain”.
- 23 I find it hard to understand how God can be seen by some exegetes as the “divine mother” in this comparison. Cf for instance Sylva, *op cit*, 56. Neither is it evident that this prayer was written by a woman (so for example Beyerlin, *op cit*, 495). Verse 2d needs not be translated as if the author is speaking of a child on her hip; this would in any case obscure the meaning of the reference to a mother in the previous hemistich. Quell’s, *op cit*, arguments that this poem was written by a woman are based more on psychology than on grammar and it seems strange that he found such a following.
- 24 According to Harm van Grol, “Psalm 131, een labyrint van verlangens” in: P Beentjes, J Maas & T Wever (eds), “*Gelukkig de mens*”, *opstellen over Psalmen, exegese en semiotiek aangeboden aan Nico Tromp*, Kampen s a, 62-73, 64-65, cf. also 67), the term *gamul* indicated a child that had reached a certain independence from its mother, a child who became a person in his own right ready for education and able to inherit.
- 25 Cf R Kittel, *Die Psalmen*, Leipzig/Erlangen 1922, 403.
- 26 Especially the younger wisdom material, according to W Beyerlin, *op cit*, 73-74, 98.
- 27 “Israel, das sich v. 3 selbst anredet, hatte vielfach hochfliegende Erwartungen und Pläne auf weltliche Herrschaft gehegt; aber im Exil hatte es erfahren, dass dies nicht Gottes Absichten mit ihm waren”, Baethgen, *op cit*, 389.
- 28 Verses 7-8 show close affinity with Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40:2 and 50:2). Cf K Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, HAT I/15, Tübingen 1996, 494. Cf also A F Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge 1903, 761.
- 29 Cf also the investigation of H van Grol, *op cit*, 68-71 in this regard.
- 30 According to Seybold, *op cit*, 497, its “enge Beziehung zu Ps 89 deutet auf exilische Herkunft”.
- 31 It is not necessary to suppose a prior form of presumptuous arrogance on the part of the psalmist himself, as W O E Oesterley, *The Psalms*, London 1939, 529 does. His attitude is described not in contrast to his earlier disposition, but in contrast to the attitude of others. Note in this regard the continuous use of perfect forms of verbs.
- 32 Cf the similar conclusion of Van Grol, *op cit*, 69 in this regard. According to H-J Kraus, *Psalmen, 2. Teilband*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: 1978, 874, Gunkel has suggested that it was once a special motif in the laments “Gott vorzuhalten, wie gering die Wünsche des Betenden seien, um ihn so um so sicherer zu ihrer

Erfüllung zu bestimmen". But Kraus rightly remarks that this does not really clear up the relations.

- 33 According to P A H de Boer, *op cit*, 19, it contains "neither request nor complaint, nonetheless what the poet says about himself is intended to make the deity or person addressed favourable to him". Such a hidden agenda would seem to me to refute the declaration made in the poem.