

The textual strategy and ideology of Psalm 36¹

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 36 is a beautiful and masterfully crafted poem that once served to enhance the unity and conviction of a group of Yahweh-worshippers. The strategy of the author seems to have been an attempt to create dissociation from a group of people who are described as 'wicked' and to promote association with Yahweh as their patron deity. The psalm probably served at the same time as a request to Yahweh to protect the members of the in-group against the arrogant behaviour of the out-group who had no respect for him. It ends with a statement of confidence in the eventual downfall of the wicked people.

A INTRODUCTION

From the point of view of historical-critical exegesis, Psalm 36 might seem to consist of disparate elements. Elements characteristic of an individual lament and a hymn of praise,² with a marked influence of wisdom perspectives³ are visible in the psalm.⁴ It has therefore sometimes been described as a song consisting of mixed genres or the result of a conflation of separate songs or parts of songs.⁵

¹ I dedicate this article to professor Wouter C van Wyk who was my teacher in Syriac, supervisor in the writing of a dissertation, head of department and dean in the faculty of Human Sciences. He remains my mentor and friend. I have tremendous respect for his intellect, knowledge, and wisdom and therefore all the more for his friendship and humility.

² Gunkel identifies elements reminiscent of a lament in vv 1-5 and hymnic elements in vv 6-10 (Gunkel [1892] 1986:151). In vv 11-13, he discerns a 'Bitte', a 'Wunsch', and 'Gewißheit der Erhöhung' as typical literary types from the lament genre (Gunkel [1892] 1986:151). In his view, the different elements were 'nicht ganz organisch zusammengestellt worden' (Gunkel [1892] 1986:152). Le Mat (1957:94) describes it as a *Mischgedicht*.

³ Van Uchelen (1971:239) refers to a 'chokmatische inslag'. Eaton (2003:161) finds such influence especially in the depiction of the evildoer. Van der Ploeg (1973:230) notes that, with the exception of v 10, the influence of wisdom is rather more on the level of theme than on form.

⁴ Eaton (2003:160-161) says that such 'use of lament and statements of praise and confidence in support of a supplication is found elsewhere' as well. He refers to Pss 9-10 and 14 in this regard.

⁵ Van der Ploeg (1973:230) mentions Gunkel, Tournay, Duhm, Schmidt, and Podechard in this regard. Podechard (1949:163-166) goes so far as to discuss the two main sections as two separate psalms. He (Podechard 1949:166) bases his distinction primarily on the occurrence of the name Yahweh in vv 6-7, ignoring the fact that אלהים is once more used in v 8 also. Weiser (1975:305-306) thinks that the

Such attempts have mostly been abandoned in more recent expositions of the psalm (Schneider 1995:250).

In this paper, the psalm is studied with the help of social-scientific criticism as an ideological document. The difference between verses 2-5 on the one hand and verses 6-13 on the other is not interpreted as the result of a literary incorporation,⁶ but rather as a purposeful rhetorical contrasting of the character of members of a certain social group with the character of Yahweh, the patron deity of another group of people. This other group of people, the in-group, is represented by the first-person speaker in the psalm.

To be able to enter into discussion with those who have studied this psalm in the past, this investigation will begin with a stichometric and poetic analysis. After that, the psalm's textual strategy will be described and this will be related to its supposed ideological point of view.

B STICHOMETRIC AND POETIC ANALYSIS

Verses 2a and 3b contain difficult expressions. The translation given below is in accord with the majority of modern translations and the textual difficulties are discussed to a limited extent in footnotes.⁷

			לְמַנְצֵחַ לְעֶבֶד־יְהוָה לְדָוִד:	1	For the conductor. Of the servant of Yahweh, of David.
I	A	1	וְאִם־פָּשַׁע לְרָשָׁע	2a	An utterance concerning ⁸ the sinfulness of the wicked

contrast between the reflection on sin and that on divine love served a cultic purpose, and that there is thus no justification for splitting up the psalm into independent poems.

⁶ According to Seybold (1996:150), the psalm is understandable as a unity and should not be dissected. He sees this unity, however, in its being the prayer of an accused who defended himself (vv 2-5) and requested the verdict of Yahweh against his adversaries in vv 6-13. The text then became damaged and was restored in such a way that it was alienated from its original situation (Seybold 1996:150). Girard (1996:616) similarly sees no objection to regard it as a perfect unitary composition.

⁷ Le Mat (1957) has studied these problems in some detail, but his proposed translation seems implausible. He shows very little regard for the vocalised text, translating v 2ab with 'The rebel says: "I have resolved to do evil!"' (Le Mat 1957:4).

⁸ Gunkel (Gunkel [1892] 1986:152) rightly says that אִם is mostly used in the Hebrew Bible as a genitive, closely linked to the person who gives the inspiration. Sometimes it indicates the medium through whom the message was transmitted. Cf in this regard also Leupold (1977:293) who cites a few examples. In this case it is *sin* that gives the 'inspiration', and the problem of understanding the text would be

			בְּקֶרֶב לִבִּי	b	is within my heart: ⁹
		2	אֵין פֶּחַד אֱלֹהִים	c	There is no awe ¹⁰ of God
			לְנֶגַד עֵינָיו:	d	before his eyes.
		3	כִּי־הִחְלִיק אֱלֹוֹ בְּעֵינָיו	3a	For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much
			לְמַצָּא עוֹנוֹ לְשׂוֹא:	b	to notice or to hate his sin. ¹¹
	B	4	דְּבַר־פִּי אֲנִי וּמַרְמָה	4a	The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit,
			חָדַל לְהַשְׁפִּיל לְהַיְטִיב:	b	he has ceased to be wise, to do good.
		5	אֲנִי וַיַּחְשֹׁב עַל־מִשְׁכָּבוֹ	5a	He plots wickedness on his bed,
			וַיַּחְצֵב עַל־דֶּרֶךְ לֹא־טוֹב	b	he stations himself on a road that is not good,
			רָע לֹא יִמָּאֵס:	c	what is bad he does not reject.
II	C	6	יְהוָה בְּהַשְׁמַיִם חֶסֶדְךָ	6a	Yahweh, in the heaven is your faithful love,
			אֲמוֹנָתְךָ עַד־שָׁמַיִם:	b	your faithfulness (reaches) to the clouds.
		7	צְדָקָתְךָ כַּהַרְרֵי־אֵל	7a	Your righteousness is like the mountains of God,
			מִשְׁפָּטְךָ תְּהוֹם רַבָּה	b	your justice is a great deep.
			אָדָם וּבְהֵמָה תוֹשִׁיעַ יְהוָה:	c	Man and beast you save, o Yahweh!
	D	8	מַה־יָקָר חֶסֶדְךָ אֱלֹהִים	8a	How precious is your faithful love, o God!
			וּבְנֵי אָדָם בְּצֹל כַּנְּפִיךָ יִחְסִיִּין:	b	And humans seek refuge in the shade of your wings.

solved if a third person suffix instead of a first person suffix were attached to לב: 'The whispering of sin for the wicked is within *his* heart'. But, as Van der Ploeg (1973:231) notes, a novel expression is not necessarily erroneous and it is better to keep the Masoretic text than to accept one of the many proposed alterations.

⁹ The LXX reads φησὶν ὁ παράνομος τοῦ ἀμαρτάνειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν φόβος θεοῦ ἀπέναντι τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτοῦ ('The transgressor, in order to sin, says within himself there is no fear of God before his eyes'). This is very close to the Vulgate's 'dixit iniustus ut delinquat in semet ipso non est timor Dei ante oculos eius'. Many modern translations follow MT, although there are a number (e.g. ELB and LEI) that suppose a third person suffix attached to לב. This is how Gunkel also ([1892] 1986:150) understands the Hebrew text. He, however, takes vv 2cd-3 to refer to the thoughts of the wicked about God's lack of interest in the attitude of those who hate him: 'Es gibt keine Gottesfurcht vor seinen (i.e., God's) Augen; vielmehr "wendet" er (God) seine Augen "davon ab", "um die Schuld seines Hassers nicht zu finden"' (Gunkel [1892] 1986:150).

¹⁰ Van Uchelen (1971:239) notes that פֶּחַד is typical of the lack of any relationship with God, while יְרֵאָה describes a vital element of the relationship of Yahweh's followers with him.

¹¹ To translate 'For he flatters himself in his own thinking that his iniquity will not be found out or hated' as Leupold (1977:293) does, seems a bit forced. Van der Ploeg (1973:231) takes 'sin' as the subject of the verb in v 3a as well: 'It flatters him too much for him to be able to detect and hate his guilt' (my translation of the Dutch).

		9	יִרְוֹנוּ מִדֶּשֶׁן בֵּיתְךָ	9a	They satiate themselves from the fat of your house
			וְנַחַל עֲדֻנֶיךָ תִּשְׁקֶם:	b	and from the river of your delights you let them drink.
		10	כִּי־עִמָּךְ מְקוֹר חַיִּים	10a	For with you is the fountain of life;
			בְּאִוְרֶךְ נִרְאָה אֹר:	b	in your light we see light.
III	E	11	מִשֶּׁךְ חֶסֶדְךָ לְיַדְעִיד	11a	Draw your faithful love out for those who know you
			וְצִדְקַתְךָ לְיִשְׁרֵי־לֵב:	b	and your righteousness for the upright in heart.
		12	אַל־תִּבּוֹאֵנִי רֵגַל גְּאוֹנָה	12a	Let the foot of arrogance not come against me
			וְיַד־רָשָׁעִים אַל־תִּנְהַנֵּנִי:	b	and let not the hand of the wicked cause me to wander.
IV	F	13	שָׁם נָפְלוּ פְעֻלֵי אֵוֶן	13a	There the evildoers have fallen,
			דַּחֲוֵי וְלֹא־יִכָּלְדוּ קוֹם:	b	they are cast down and can rise no more.

The contents of the psalm can perhaps be represented best by the following scheme:

Stanza	Strophe	Verse lines	Verses	Themes of strophes	Themes of stanzas
I	A	1-3	2-3	The wicked has no awe of God; no knowledge of his own sin	Characterisation of the perception and actions of the wicked
	B	4-5	4-5	The wicked does what is bad, not good	
II	C	6-7	6-7	Yahweh is faithful and just	Characterisation of Yahweh and the blessings he provides
	D	8-10	8-10	Yahweh's faithful love satiates people	
III	E	11-12	11-12	Yahweh: Please protect the upright	Request for protection of the upright against the actions of the wicked
IV	F	13	13	The wicked will fall and rise no more	Statement of confidence

The strophes and stanzas are demarcated on the basis of the different themes treated in each, the repetition of key-words such as אֵוֶן, חֶסֶד, רָשָׁע, צַדִּיקָה, אֱלֹהִים and יְהוָה, and especially the occurrence of parallels (many of which are chiasmatically

arranged), prepositions, and negative particles.¹² The name Yahweh forms an inclusio that demarcates strophe C, for example. It is the very first and the very last word in this strophe and helps to emphasise the theme of Yahweh's encompassing love visually and/or audibly. Negative particles are concentrated in the first stanza to help with the characterisation of the wicked as someone who does *not* embrace what is good. The negative particles reappear in strophe F in the requests of the suppliant to be protected from the wicked. One last negative particle is used in stanza IV to express the (positive) event of the downfall of the wicked.

In strophe A, morphological parallels are formed between verse lines 2 and 3 ('before his eyes' – 'in his eyes'; 'his eyes' – 'his eyes' – 'his sin'; 'to notice' – 'to hate'). This helps to form a semantic parallel between the two verse lines as well: the wicked has no awe of God and consequently no perception of the fact that his actions are morally wrong.

Strophe B has a very clever pattern of parallels, which creates an even more impressive pattern of chiasmus: It begins with a positive statement about two negative characteristics¹³ of the wicked ('the words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit': +[-; -]). This is followed by a negative pronouncement on the lack of two positive characteristics ('he has ceased to be wise, to do good': -[+; +]), creating chiasmus with the preceding statement. In verse 5, a positive statement on a negative characteristic ('he plots wickedness on his bed': +[-]) is followed by another of the same type ('he stations himself on a road that is not good': +[-]). This parallel is then followed by a final statement which forms an antithetic parallel to the second-to-last statement ('what is bad, he does not reject': - [-(-)]). On top of this, the morphological elements of verse line 5 are arranged chiasmically (ABCD BCDEA AEB). The sequence of positives and negatives looks like this:

$$\begin{array}{l}
 +[-; -] \\
 -[+; +] \\
 +[-] \\
 +[-] \\
 -[-(-)]
 \end{array}
 \left. \begin{array}{l}
 \} \\
 \} \\
 \} \\
 \} \\
 \}
 \end{array} \right\} \begin{array}{l}
 x \\
 // \\
 // \\
 // \\
 //
 \end{array} //$$

Strophe A as a whole also forms a parallel to strophe B as a whole, since negatives are used in both to describe the character of the wicked. Verse line 2 introduces the description by stating 'there is no awe of God before his eyes' (-

¹² Terrien's (2002:312) suggestion that verses 5-7 should be grouped together as one strophe is completely mystifying if these criteria are applied. The 'structural symmetry' which he sees in the psalm and an attempt to avoid strophes of 'unequal lengths' (Terrien 2002:313) must have enticed him to propose such a segmentation.

¹³ The words 'wickedness and deceit' might be meant as hendiadys: 'wicked deceit'. Cf Anderson 1985:287).

[+]). Verse line 3 contains another negative, although it is not as evident: By saying that the wicked flatters himself too much to notice or hate his sin, the author says in effect that the wicked is not able to notice his own wickedness and deceit. This can be represented with the formula (-[- ; -]).

As was remarked above, strophe C is enclosed by an inclusio. Verse lines 6 and 7 both have parallels and that occurring in verse line 6 is arranged chiasmically. Verse line 7 also uses merisms to express the extent¹⁴ of Yahweh's divine qualities: *high* as the mountains of God¹⁵ and *deep* as Tehom;¹⁶ *man* and *beast* all benefit from it.¹⁷ The simile of verse 7a also progresses to a metaphor in verse 7b ('is like' becoming 'is'). Strophe D contains another three parallels, and verse line 9 has two compact metaphors ('the fat¹⁸ of your house' and 'the river of your delights'¹⁹). There is also a chiasmic parallel between the end of verse line 8 and the beginning of verse line 9, highlighted by the use of the paragogic nun with the two third person plural verbs.

Strophe E also has two parallels, one in each verse line. It uses the image that was begun in verse line 9 and expands on this: the '*river of delights*' (springing

¹⁴ Measured in the biggest and highest dimensions of the cosmos, these descriptions should be seen as superlatives (Seybold 1996:151; Girard 1996:615). Podechard (1949:165) agrees, but gives serious consideration to the possibility that the verse contains an allusion to the Babylonian conception of a mountain where the gods determine fate. Schneider (1995:252) probably gives the best explanation when he sees the implication of the expression as follows: 'Was Gott tut, is *unumstößlich*, aber auch *übermächtig* und *unzulänglich* für menschliches Denken.'

¹⁵ These would refer to the mountains on the edge of the earth that carry the heavenly vault. So also Seybold (1996:151). Van der Ploeg (1973:232) says that the divine element serves only to express the superlative, as in Ps 80:11 the 'cedars of God'. The high mountains and mighty cedars would also be regarded as special examples of the creative power of God, a thought encapsulated in the expression.

¹⁶ Although the *תהום רבה* is the mass of water surrounding the disc of earth and the dome of heaven (Van der Ploeg 1973:232), its lowest extremity is probably what the author has in mind when it is contrasted with the high mountains to form a merismus.

¹⁷ Hossfeld (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:227) notes that the merismus man-beast is meant to circumscribe the totality of living beings. He refers to Ps 104:14 and Ps 135:8.

¹⁸ What the author probably has in mind is partaking of the sacrificial meals, accompanied by priestly blessing, which included the fatty parts of the sacrificial meat (Schneider 1995:252). Hossfeld (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:228), in contrast, notes that the background of the sacrificial meals is often merely vaguely still present in such images in the psalms.

¹⁹ Worship as a spring of life ('Gottesdienst als Lebensquell'), according to Schneider (1995:252).

from the garden of Eden – עֲדֵנֶיךָ²⁰ leads one to the ‘fountain of life’ from which Yahweh ‘draws up’ his faithful love and righteousness. Verse line 12 also has a carefully constructed chiasmic parallel (ABCD CDAB). The wicked (partly with the help of metonymy) is mentioned for the first time since stanza I, and immediately the negative particles return. This time, however, they are used as polite prohibitives against the actions of the wicked (represented by his ‘foot’ and his ‘hand’).

Verse line 13, representing strophe G and stanza IV simultaneously, also has one last semantic parallel, and one last negative particle, forming a statement of confidence that Yahweh will finally incapacitate the wicked. The synonymous parallel is strengthened through the rhyme of the third person plural forms.

The words רשע and צדקה and the words און and חסד respectively form two instances of chiasmus in the psalm as a whole.²¹ The following table summarises the repetition of stems and words. It also surveys the use of prepositions and negative particles in the psalm as a whole, matters that will be discussed later on in this paper:

I					II					III		IV
A			B		C		D			E		F
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
2ab	2cd	3ab	4ab	5abc	6ab	7abc	8ab	9ab	10ab	11ab	12ab	13ab
ב ל	לנגד	ב אל ל(x2)	ל(x2)	על(x2)	ב עד	כ	ב	מן	ב עם	ל(x2)		
רשע											רשע	
לב											לב	
	אין		חדל	לא(x2)							לא(x2)	לא
	אלהים				יהוה	יהוה	אלהים					
	לנגד											
	עין	עין										
		כי							כי			
			און	און							און	
					חסד		חסד			חסד		
						צדקה				צדקה		
						אדם	אדם					

²⁰ Eaton (2003:161) speaks of a vision of Yahweh’s presence, ‘radiant with the light of life, and a world made perfect as the garden of Eden (*‘edanim*, “delights”), nourished and made fruitful by the fountain and river flowing from the holy presence.’ Van der Ploeg (1973:232) thinks that Gen 2:10; Ez 47:1-12, and Joel 3:18 were all present in the mind of the author.

²¹ Girard (1996:616-623) sees a chiasmic pattern in the psalm as a whole. In addition to the repetitions noted here, he notes (among many others) the correspondence of the ‘oracle’ at the very beginning and the ‘oracle d’anti-salut’ in the last line of the poem.

C THE TEXTUAL STRATEGY OF PSALM 36

From the poetic analysis, it seems that the implied author of Psalm 36 has availed himself of a wide variety of poetic stratagems to create a poem that is aesthetically pleasing, but also a text that would communicate effectively. What is it that the implied author wanted to communicate to the implied reader, and what techniques did he employ? What is the textual strategy of the psalm, and what ideology can be discerned to lie behind all this?

The psalm contains a description of the thoughts and actions of a group of people described as ‘the wicked’ (v 2a and v 12b), ‘evildoers’ (v 13a), and ‘arrogant’ (v 12a by implication of the metonymy). This description was not intended primarily for the cognisance of Yahweh, even though verses 6-12 are addressed directly to him.²² It probably was meant to help members of the in-group,²³ the group of people represented by the implied author, to formulate social boundaries.²⁴ By describing the deviant attitude and actions of the wicked, members of the in-group would get a better picture of what was unacceptable in their own ethos and who should be considered to be the opposition. Apart from this attempt at dissociation, the psalm also contains a contrasting description of Yahweh as a faithful patron of all creation and of believers in particular, and it formulates a call upon him to protect the in-group from the actions of the out-group. The serene tone of the psalm does not suggest immediate danger for the in-group (Clifford 2002:181). It ends with a statement of confidence about the eventual demise of the out-group.

One of the most important techniques used by the author is the concentration of negative particles (used to create negative statements) and words with a negative connotation in parts of the poem where the character and actions of the wicked are discussed. In this way, dissociation is created between the audience and a certain group of people whose members think and act on different impulses than those of the in-group or supposed audience. A strong contrast is formed, not (as one might expect) primarily between the character of the wicked and that of the righteous, but between the wicked and Yahweh. The wicked and the righteous are contrasted explicitly only in one important aspect: that of *perception*. It is said that the wicked has no ‘fear of God before his eyes’ and ‘flatters himself’ in his own eyes’, so that he has no perception of his own sin (vv

²² Eaton (2003:161) describes this as an ‘implicit’ entreaty.

²³ An ‘in-group’ is defined as a group of persons ‘whose members perceive themselves as sharing the same distinctive interests and values and as constituting a collective “we” over against non-members or “out-groups” designated as “they”, often with negative valuation.’ Elliott (1993:130).

²⁴ In this regard it shows parallels to wisdom texts, e.g. Prov 6:12-15. Cf also Clifford (2002:182) who notes parallels between Ps 36 and Prov 6:12-15 in the focus on organs of reflection and action and the social damage the type does.

2-3). In contrast, the worshippers of Yahweh find their perception in Yahweh, since they *see* the light in his light (v 10).

In the middle section then, it is primarily the character and beneficial actions of Yahweh that are described. An extended series of positive pronouncements on positive characteristics of Yahweh is built up. These pronouncements are used to create association between the in-group and Yahweh, the perfect patron, and to heighten the dissociation with the out-group. The in-group is defined in verse 11 as ‘those who know Yahweh’ and as the ‘upright in heart’. A schematic representation of the negatives and positives in the psalm looks as follows. In the following table, S represents a *statement* and R a *request*; these could be positive (+) or negative (-). The signs between square brackets refer to the negative or positive connotation of the words used to form the statement or request:

I	A	S+ [-; -]; S- [+]; S+ [-; -]
	B	S+ [-; -]; S- [+; +]; S+ [-]; S+ [-]; S- [-(-)]
II	C	S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+; +]
	D	S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]; S+ [+]
III	E	R+ [+]; R+ [+]; R- [-]; R- [-]
IV	F	S+[- -]; S+ [- -]; S- [+]

From this table it is evident that only stanza II contains no negatives. Stanza III also contains no negative *statements*; but two of the four *requests* in this stanza contain negative particles. Stanza IV reverts to statements, but these are positive pronouncements on the negative outcome of the life of the wicked.

Another conspicuous feature of the psalm, which forms part of its textual strategy, is the way in which the author uses prepositions to draw the attention of the reader to different localities. The role of space in the psalm can be defined by focusing on the use of prepositions. Every verse, except the last two, contains one or more prepositions. The space referred to thus creates a contrast between the wicked and Yahweh. The space associated with the wicked is *limited* in comparison to the *unlimited* domains of Yahweh’s character.

In the first strophe, the reader who pays attention to this movement, finds himself or herself in the heart (that is, the mind) of either the author or the wicked, depending on how the text is interpreted or adapted (‘*within* my/his heart’). In the second verse line, the locality is definitely within the mind of the wicked (‘*before* his eyes’ is an expression that refers to the perception and attitude of a person).²⁵ The reader is told that there is no awe of God before the eyes of the wicked. This is the space where the reader stays also in the third verse

²⁵ ‘Briefly, the “eyes-heart” area of human capability refers to emotion-fused thinking and its outcome, emotion-fused thought.’ Malina (1998a:68).

line ('*in his own eyes*') in order to become aware of the fact that the wicked is so full of himself that he is blind to his own sin.

In strophe B, the reader visits (so to speak) the inside of the mouth of the wicked with the mentioning of his words of wickedness and deceit. No preposition is used for this, but the lack of wisdom and good deeds is formulated with two infinitive construct forms preceded by two instances of the preposition לְ. Two occurrences of the preposition עַל then helps the reader to move to the *bed* of the wicked,²⁶ where wickedness is plotted, and to a *road* that is not good, where the wicked stations himself permanently (נָצַח in the hitpa'el suggests lack of movement). The movement in this stanza can therefore be described as a centrifugal movement from the mind and mouth of the wicked to his immediate surroundings (his bed) and from there to his sterile activities by day (described as being stuck to a road). Overall, members of the audience find themselves in this section in hemmed-in space with a negative connotation.²⁷

In the second stanza, prepositions help to take the reader to the extremities of space. Various domains of the cosmos are used to describe the beneficial characteristics of Yahweh. The reader visits Yahweh's faithful love *in heaven* and follows his faithfulness *to the clouds*. The *mountains of God* are ascended with the righteousness of God and the *waters beneath the surface of earth* are visited with his justice. These domains can be described as positive cosmic space.²⁸ In strophe D, the movement comes to rest in the presence of Yahweh where humans seek refuge *in the shade of Yahweh's wings*. It is there where people satiate themselves *from the fat* of Yahweh's house and drink *from the river* of his delights. It is there, *with Yahweh*, that the fountain of life is, and *in that light* people see the light. The movement in this stanza can therefore be described as *centripetal*. From the widest circles, it moves towards the presence of Yahweh in the temple as a kind of mini-cosmos and thus into the centre of positive space.²⁹

²⁶ The phrase 'on ones's bed' might indicate true intent, since it 'connotes private moments when one is alone and uninfluenced by others' (Clifford :2002:183). Cf Pss 4:5; 149:5; Hos 7:14 and Mic 2:1.

²⁷ Cf Brinkman (1995:171-172) who has also noted the contrast between the restrictions of the first part and the infinite spatial and temporal qualities of the second part.

²⁸ It is interesting that even תְּהוֹרָם is used here in a positive sense, associated with a positive characteristic of Yahweh. Westermann (1976:1029) rejects the 'vielfach vertretene Auffassung' that the basic meaning of the word in Hebrew refers to a hostile mythical power. Against this view, he refers to numerous texts where תְּהוֹרָם is understood as a source of blessings. Westermann is in doubt whether this particular text (Ps 36:7) should be seen as one of those or perhaps simply as one with a neutral use of the term.

²⁹ Girard (1996:622) calls the temple a 'représentation miniature' of the cosmos in Psalm 36.

A two-fold use of the preposition ל subsequently describes the effect of the faithful love of Yahweh and his righteousness which he *draws up* for those who know him and who are upright in heart. These two are the last instances of prepositions in the psalm. The movement is continued, however, in verse line 12 when the righteous asks God not to let the foot of arrogant people *come* against him and the hand of wicked people *cause him to wander*. Yahweh's presence therefore provides protection to the righteous and guarantees his presence with Yahweh. The last movement described in the psalm is the fall of the wicked in verse line 13. The adverb שם , 'there' – which is very non-specific in terms of place – is used to describe the future *downfall* of the evildoers, their permanent state of being *cast down*,³⁰ and their inability to *rise* again. There is thus an antithetic similarity between the righteous and the wicked: both find a resting place, but the resting place of the righteous is with Yahweh, in his presence, while that of the evildoers is in an unspecified, despairing locality.³¹

In terms of the psalm's textual strategy, it is also very interesting to note what body parts are mentioned to characterise the wicked. In the first part of the psalm, the eyes, mouth, and possibly the heart are used to describe the negative attitudes and actions of the wicked. In the last part of the psalm, the foot and the hand of the wicked are used to define the negative actions against upright people. This is probably a technique of enlivening the negative experience of the actions of the wicked.³² In contrast to these depictions, the 'shadow' of God's 'wings' is mentioned as a positive image of Yahweh's protective inclination.³³ For the

³⁰ Forming a strong contrast with v 5b where the wicked was described as having 'erected' (like a monument) himself on a road that is not good.

³¹ As Leupold (1977:297) notes, 'The adverb leaves the thought vague but all the more ominous.' Van der Ploeg (1973:233) has suggested that the psalmist echoes a lament such as that in 2 Sam 1:19, 27. The use of the form might then be ironic: Since the psalmist feels no sorrow for the wicked, the usual אֲרָא of the lament formula is replaced by שם . A different but plausible suggestion made by Clifford (2002:186) is that the adverb refers to Mount Zion. 'In poems about Zion, "there" occurs often, always in reference to the holy mountain, for example, Pss 48:6 (MT v 7); 76:3 (MT v 4) ("*There* he broke the flashing arrows"); 87:4, 6; 122:5; 132:17; Isa 33:21.'

³² Body parts are used to represent the 'body language' that forms part of all communication. Cf the very enlightening article by Gillmayr-Bucher (2004:301-326) on body images in the psalms.

³³ Gillmayr-Bucher (2004:304) notes the interesting fact that only body parts from head to chest are mentioned in describing God and his actions in the psalms. Van der Woude (1971:835) thinks that the origin of the metaphor is the protective wings of a mother-bird rather than conceptions of winged gods in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Hossfeld (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:227) says that the origin of the concept of the winged sun was indeed 'das Urbild der Vogelmutter/Henne',

believer, Yahweh's goodness offers blessings that can be tasted to satiation (v 9a), drunk (v 9b), and seen (v 10b).

D THE IDEOLOGY AND TEXTUAL FUNCTION OF PSALM 36

There is very clear evidence in Psalm 36 of tension that exists between two opposing groups of people. The first stanza is dedicated to the description of a certain group of bad people, although only a single person's perception and actions are described. It describes a typical (or caricatured) representative of that group of people and therefore refers to the whole group. By implication, this extended characterisation of members of the out-group, called 'the wicked', is simultaneously a description of the character of the 'upright in heart'. Everything that the wicked person is and does entails characteristics and actions that are not and should not be associated with the 'upright'.³⁴ The most important characteristic of the in-group would therefore probably be 'fear/respect for Yahweh' (v 2c),³⁵ something that is absent with the wicked and that leads to a lack of concern for ethical behaviour. It can also be deduced that the righteous is someone with a certain humility, who does not flatter himself or herself, and who therefore is aware of or able to discern his or her own sin (v 3b). A righteous and upright person is someone without arrogance (v 12a). From verse 5, it can be deduced that the righteous person is also someone who chooses a road that is good and who rejects what is bad.

Verse 11 provides evidence that the actions of the wicked, the members of the out-group, are detrimental to the life of members of the in-group. Yahweh is asked to act in accordance with his faithful love and his righteousness in favour of the upright in heart. In verse 12, the implied author or authorial speaker associates himself with this group in praying that the 'foot of arrogance' must not 'come against me'. The wicked can be characterised from this as people who arrogantly subdue members of the in-group.³⁶ The second half of the verse (12b) also speaks of the 'hand of the wicked' causing members of the in-group to 'wander'. It therefore seems that these people had power or authority over members of the in-group. They could have been Israelites themselves, or they could have been officials of a foreign power who exercised dominion over

but that in the milieu of the temple it also evoked the presence of the cherubs in the Holy of Holies.

³⁴ This could be compared with Ps 1:1 and 40:4

³⁵ A description that is often found in wisdom literature. Hossfeld (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:228) notes in addition that the descriptions of the righteous as 'those who know' Yahweh and who are 'upright in heart' links two typical but separately employed epithets from the wisdom literature.

³⁶ Hands and feet are correlative terms that refer to activity and power and can indicate subjection, control, and dishonouring of others. Cf Malina (1998c:100).

Israel.³⁷ The description of Yahweh's love, righteousness, and justice and of his presence in the temple, however, seems to favour the possibility that the out-group is constituted simply by criminally minded, powerful and arrogant Israelites or Judaeans.³⁸

A number of social values that were used to regulate society in biblical times are visible in the psalm. Without knowledge of these values, a lot of information provided in the psalm may be lost for the interpreter. The most important of these values seem to be concepts of honour and shame. A wicked person is defined as someone who has no regard for the honour of Yahweh (v 2c).³⁹ He is someone who consequently thinks too much of himself (v 3a) and therefore acts with arrogance in his encounters with people who do have reverence for Yahweh (v 12a).⁴⁰ As the wisdom books tell us, such arrogance will come to a fall and the wicked will be humiliated (v 13).⁴¹

Another important social value in the psalm is the patron-client relationship between Yahweh and members of the in-group. Yahweh's faithful love (v 6a, v 11a), his faithfulness (v 6b), and his righteousness (vv 7a, 11b) are characteristics of the good patron (cf Malina 1998b:93-94). As a good patron, Yahweh provides refuge (v 8b) and blessings (v 9) to his clients. The suppliant community asks him through this psalm to act in accordance with these characteristics (v 11) and to protect his clients (v 12).

One last area of importance in social relations should perhaps be mentioned. It is the distinction between holy and profane. There is a high regard for the holiness of Yahweh and the temple in this psalm. The temple is portrayed as a replica of the cosmos. There Yahweh's 'saving acts' (v 7c) from which all creation benefits, are concentrated for the benefit and blessing of his servants. Those who have access to his presence enjoy special protection and nourishment. But the actions of wicked people can cause the upright in heart to be driven from

³⁷ Gunkel speaks of 'hoffärtige Frevler, Heiden oder Heidengenossen' (Gunkel [1892] 1986:152). The influence of wisdom literature on the psalm is a strong indication of a post-exilic origin (Van der Ploeg 1973:230), although many investigators think that it could just as well be pre-exilic (e.g. Eaton 2003:161). But even if it could be proved that it had a post-exilic origin, there is still a possibility that the offending group was constituted by Jewish persons.

³⁸ With Podechard (1949:163) it should be emphasised that the wicked in this psalm is not so much an idolater than someone who simply thinks that there will be no moral retribution.

³⁹ The noun פִּחַד here refers to ethical behaviour on the basis of respect for Yahweh. Cf Stähli (1976:413). Its use forms a close parallel with יִרְאַה, as comparison with wisdom contexts such as Prov 1:7 and 8:13 shows (compare this last with Ps 36:3b and 5b).

⁴⁰ As Van der Ploeg (1973:233) notes, the biggest human sin is arrogance.

⁴¹ Cf. Proverbs 29:23.

Yahweh's presence into spiritual or real exile (v 12b).⁴² Through the extensive use of negative particles in stanza I, and their complete absence in stanza II, the feeling is created that the domain of the wicked is unholy, devoid of the presence of Yahweh. The cosmos, in contrast, is depicted as a universe full of centripetal symbols of God's goodness, mercy, and righteousness that centres in the temple in Jerusalem and Yahweh's presence there.

E CONCLUSION

Psalm 36 can be described as an aesthetically pleasing poem that beautifully portrays the negative social behaviour of wicked people and – in contrast to that – the benefits of Yahweh's characteristics for people who worship him. It contains a request to Yahweh to act in accordance with his character and responsibility as a patron God,⁴³ but it also (perhaps primarily) helps members of the in-group to strengthen the boundary lines between themselves and people who do not recognise Yahweh as God. It provides members of the in-group an opportunity (and the urge) to dissociate themselves from the wicked and to refine and reconfirm their belief in the character of Yahweh and the benefits of living in his presence. It encourages them to live in accordance with their ethos, since it clearly states the belief that Yahweh will act against those who do not recognise him and who maltreat his followers arrogantly. Yahweh's rule over the cosmos will eventually become visible to all, so the text tells us, even those who have no reverence for him. The psalm thus maintains group cohesion and commitment by providing members of the in-group access to a meaningful and honourable existence in relationship with God within a coherent symbolic universe.

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⁴² Cf the use of נָד in connection with אֲדָמָה in 2 Ki 21:8.

⁴³ As Tromp (2001:206) notes, the praise of vv 6-7 is a refined form of modest supplication. It is thus not only vv 11-12 that can be described as 'prayer'.

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