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**“INTO YOUR HAND, I COMMIT MY SPIRIT. YOU HAVE REDEEMED ME, YHWH, O FAITHFUL GOD” (PS 31:6): THE PURPOSE OF PSALM 31 AS A PART OF THE CLUSTER OF PSALMS 25-34 TO EXHORT THE IN-GROUP TO FAITHFUL TRUST IN YHWH**

*ABSTRACT*

*Psalm 31 is characterised by a mixture of earnest supplications for help and thanksgiving for having been helped by YHWH. It also contains two of the most memorable declarations of trust in YHWH, with the psalmist entrusting his spirit and his time into the hand of YHWH. This article interprets the psalm as a composition on its own but also within the context of the cluster of Pss 25-34. It argues that the psalm is well-integrated into the cluster, functioning as an acknowledgement to YHWH for having rescued the psalmist from his distress and serving as proof that YHWH is faithful so that the psalmist could use his experience to exhort the in-group to replicate his trust in seeking refuge in YHWH. Although the cluster contains echoes of David’s military struggle with Saul, the primary conflict in the cluster relates to the ethical-moral battle between the humble, poor, righteous worshippers of YHWH and the arrogant, wicked people who tried to shame them in post-exilic Judah.*

*1. INTRODUCTION*

Psalm 31 contains an intriguing mixture of supplications to be saved and protected, declarations of trust, and pronouncements of thanksgiving and praise for having been saved. The alternation of supplication and thanksgiving makes it challenging to assign the psalm to one particular Gattung.<sup>1</sup> However, the mix of styles and the interconnections with the rest

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1 The divergence of opinions on how the psalm should be segmented into strophes and stanzas (or “cantos”) indicates how difficult it is to reconcile the mix of styles. Cf. Van der Lugt (2006:314-315) for the lack of consensus. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:191) refer to it leaving the impression of being compiled from heterogeneous parts with similarities with the confessions of Jeremiah, Pss 69 and 71, and Jon 2. Its diffuse style also connects it to other psalms of the cluster (e.g., Pss 25 and 27) with similar mixed genres. See Botha and Weber (2019:46-47). Some interpreters resolve the contrast between distinct parts by suggesting that it is a compilation of different original psalms, or else that imagery from a

of the cluster possibly provide the key to its interpretation rather than obstacles in understanding it. In the final stanza of the psalm, the psalmist abandons the dialogue with God and addresses his in-group. He exhorts them to love YHWH and be courageous in waiting for him to act on their behalf. When compared to the similar self-exhortation in Ps 27:14, Ps 31:25 reveals the psalm's probable purpose as an encouragement of fellow believers to resilient trust in YHWH.

Weber (2001:155) understands the psalm as a song of thanksgiving. He sees the supplicatory and lamenting sections (with intertwined confessions of trust) as serving a retrospective role, referring to the crisis before the situation was resolved. In a later publication (Weber 2021:256), he states that supplication and thanksgiving alternate in Pss 27, 28, 30, and 31 but that the composition of Pss 25-34 is characterised by a general movement from supplication to thanksgiving, from distress to rescue, retraced several times and accented differently. This is indeed the case, but there is also a movement from supplication to exhortation in the cluster<sup>2</sup> and from a focus on the personal distress of the psalmist to a focus on the needs of the in-group. These features suggest that the purpose of the cluster, with Ps 31 contributing to that, was to exhort fellow believers to be resilient<sup>3</sup> in their

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variety of contexts points to convention rather than the reality of one person having experienced all the pressures mentioned (cf. Goldingay 2006:437).

2 In Ps 25, vv. 8-10 and 12-15 constitute teaching to the community. In Ps 30, vv. 5-6 contains a call to the faithful to praise YHWH. Psalm 31:24-25 contain exhortations to love YHWH and be resolute. In Ps 32, v. 10 contains teaching and v. 11 is a call to the righteous and upright to praise YHWH. Ps 33 can be described as the contents of that praise, with a number of wisdom aphorisms supporting it. Only Ps 33:22 contains a prayer to YHWH. Psalm 34:4 calls the in-group to praise YHWH with the psalmist, but praise changes to teaching in the greater part of the psalm, vv. 8-23.

3 The use of the term “resilience” and the verb “to be resilient” in the study of the Hebrew Bible has become somewhat controversial. Dietrich (2022:70) points out that “resilience” cannot be used as an antonym of trauma, since trauma implies being wounded in such a way that a person can barely recover from it using his or her own resources. Vulnerability is a better suited antonym for resilience. With Dietrich (2022:72) I would like to define resilience as, “der Umgang mit Widrigkeiten, Krisen und Katastrophen auf der Basis von grundsätzlicher menschlicher Vulnerabilität, und zwar so, dass der Mensch auf Krisen und Katastrophen mit seinem intrinsischen Gesundungskräften antwortet,

dedication to and trust in YHWH, as it is encapsulated in Ps 31:24-25. The psalmist experienced all kinds of distress but resolutely persisted in his trust in YHWH and was saved. From his experience, he can eventually encourage the in-group to do the same by remaining faithful and seeking refuge in YHWH.

The theme of faithfulness is reflected strongly in Ps 31 in the description of the members of the in-group as YHWH’s “faithful people (חסידים)”, “those who remain loyal (אמונים)”, and “all who wait (יחל piel) for YHWH” (Ps 31:24, 25). They are motivated to “be strong” (חזק) and “display strength of heart (לב אמץ לב) *hiphil*” (Ps 31:25), thus, to be faithful under challenging circumstances. This article investigates the theme of faithful trust in YHWH in Ps 31 by asking what its form and literary context can tell the reader about the implied author, the intended audience, the problems they faced, and how resilient trust could help them to overcome those problems. The form and contents of Ps 31 will first be analysed in a text-immanent and semantic analysis. Afterwards, it will be contextualised text-externally in the cluster in which it was purposefully placed. A possible late post-exilic context will be proposed as the actual background for interpreting the psalm and the cluster.

## 2. THE TEXT, TRANSLATION, AND SEGMENTATION OF PS 31<sup>4</sup>

	1	לְמַנְצֵחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:	1	To the Conductor. A Psalm. Of David.
I	A	2 בָּךְ יְהוָה חֲסִיתִי אֶל-אֲבוֹשָׁה לְעוֹלָם בְּצַדִּיקְתֶּךָ פִּלְטֵנִי:	2a	In you, <i>YHWH</i> , I sought refuge; let me never be put to shame; b in your righteousness, save me!
		3 הִטָּה אֱלֹהִים אֲזַנְךָ מִהֲרָה הַצִּילֵנִי הִיָּה לִּי לְצוּר-מְעוֹז לְבַיִת מְצוּדוֹת לְהוֹשִׁיעֵנִי:	3a	Incline your ear towards me, rescue me speedily! b Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me!
	B	4 כִּי-סִלְעִי וּמְצוּדֹתַי אַתָּה וּלְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ תִּגְּחֵנִי וְתִנְהַלֵּנִי:	4a	For you are my rock and my fortress; b and for the sake of your name, you will lead me and guide me.

die Krise überwindet und kein Trauma entsteht”. Resilience is therefore the ability to avoid trauma, not the response to trauma.

4 The translation is based on the ESV, with adaptations where it was considered necessary. The verse numbers are those of the Hebrew text, which differ from the English translations.

		5	תוציאני מרשת זו טמנו לך כִּי־אַתָּה מְעוּזִי:	5a	You will take me out of the net which is hidden for me,
				b	for you are my refuge.
II	C	6	בְּיָדְךָ אֶפְקִיד רוּחִי פְּדִיתָה אוֹתִי יְהוָה אֵל אֱמֶת:	6a	Into your hand I commit my spirit;
				b	you have redeemed me, <i>YHWH</i> , O faithful God.
		7	שָׂנֵאתִי הַשֹּׁמְרִים הַבְּלִי־שׁוֹא וְאֲנִי אֶל־יְהוָה בְּטַחְתִּי:	7a	I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols;
				b	but I, in <i>YHWH</i> , I trust.
	D	8	אֶגִּילָה וְאֶשְׂמְחָה בְּחֶסֶדְךָ אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתָ אֶת־עֲנִי וְדַעְתָּ בְּצָרוֹת נַפְשִׁי:	8a	I want to shout with joy and be glad in your constant love,
				b	because you have seen my affliction;
				c	you have taken notice of my soul's distress.
		9	וְלֹא הִסְגַּרְתָּנִי בְיַד־אוֹיֵב הַעֲמַדְתָּ בְּמָרְחָב רַגְלִי:	9a	Yes, you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
				b	you have set my foot in a broad place.
III	E	10	חַנּוּנֵי יְהוָה כִּי צָר־לִי עָשָׂשָׁה בְּכַעַס עֵינַי נַפְשִׁי וּבִטְנִי:	10a	Have mercy on me, <i>YHWH</i> , for I am in distress;
				b	my eye is wasted from grief,
				c	my life and inner self.
		11	כִּי כָלוּ בִּיגֹז חַיִּי וּשְׁנוֹתַי בְּאֲנָחָה כָּשַׁל בְּעוֹנֵי כַחִּי וַעֲצָמֵי עָשָׂשׁוּ:	11a	Yes, my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing,
				b	my strength fails through my transgression
				c	and my bones waste away.
	F	12	מִכָּל־צָרָי הֵייתִי חֶרְפָּה וְלִשְׂכַנָּי מֵאֵד וּפְחָד לְמִי־עֵי רָאִי בְּחוּץ נִדְדוּ מִמֶּנִּי:	12a	Because of all my adversaries, I have become a disgrace, especially to my neighbours, something dreadful for those who know me;
				b	those who see me outside
				c	flee from me.
		13	נִשְׁכַּחְתִּי כְּמֵת מִלֵּב הָיִיתִי כְּכֵלִי אֶבֶד:	13a	I am forgotten from the heart like one who is dead,
				b	I have become like a broken vessel.
	G	14	כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי דְבַר רַבִּים מְגוֹר מִסָּבִיב בְּהוֹסְדִם יַחַד עָלַי לְקַחַת נַפְשִׁי זָמְמוּ:	14a	For I heard the gossip of many, 'terror all around!'
				b	When they take counsel together against me,
				c	they plot to take my life.
IV	H	15	וְאֲנִי עָלִיד בְּטַחְתִּי יְהוָה אֶמְרָתִי אֱלֹהֵי אֶתָּה:	15a	But I have put my trust in you, <i>YHWH</i> ,
				b	I have said: "You are my God!"
		16	בְּיָדְךָ עֵתִי הַצִּילֵנִי מִיַּד־אוֹיְבֵי וּמִרְדְּפֵי:	16a	My times are in your hand;
				b	deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors!
		17	הָאִירָה פָּנֶיךָ עַל־עַבְדְּךָ הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי בְּחֶסֶדְךָ:	17a	Let your face shine on your servant,
				b	save me in your constant love!

I	18	יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹשָׁה כִּי קָרָאתִיךָ יִבְשׁוּ רְשָׁעִים יְדָמוּ לְשֹׂאֵל:  תְּאַלְמְנָה שִׁפְתֵי שֶׁקֶר הַדְּבָרוֹת עַל־צִדִּיק עָתֵק בְּגִאוֹה וּבְזוּ:	18a	YHWH, let me not be put to shame when I call to you, b let the wicked be put to shame; silence them to Sheol!	
	19		19a	Let the lying lips be dumb, b which speak arrogantly about the righteous, c with pride and contempt.	
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V	J	20	מָה רַב־טוֹבוֹךָ אֲשֶׁר־צִפְּנָתָ לִירְאִיךָ פְּעֹלֹת לַחֲסִים בְּךָ נִגַּד בְּנֵי אָדָם:	20a	O, how abundant is your goodness which you treasure up for those who fear you; b And work for those who take refuge in you c before all humanity!
		21	תַּסְתִּירֵם בְּסִתְרֵי פָנֶיךָ מִרְכָּסֵי אִישׁ תַּצְפֵּנֵם בְּסִפָּה מִרִיב לְשׁוֹנוֹת:	21a	You hide them in the cover of your presence from the plots of men; b you store them in your shelter c from the strife of tongues.
	K	22	בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה כִּי הִפְלִיא חַסְדּוֹ לִי בְּעִיר מְצוּר:	22a	Blessed be YHWH, b for he has wondrously shown his constant love to me in a fortified city.
		23	וַאֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי בְּחַפְזִי נִגְרַזְתִּי מִנְּגַד לְעֵינֶיךָ אֲכֹן שָׁמַעְתָּ קוֹל תַּחֲנוּנֵי בְּשִׁוּעֵי אֲלֵיךָ:	23a	Yes, I have said to myself in my alarm: b “I am cut off from your eyes!” c Yet you heard the sound of my pleas for mercy d when I cried to you for help.
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VI	L	24	אֲהַבּוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כָּל־חַסִּידָיו אֲמוּנִים נֹצֵר יְהוָה וּמְשַׁלֵּם עַל־יָתֵר עֲשֵׂה גֹאֲוָה:	24a	Love <i>YHWH</i> , all his faithful! b <i>YHWH</i> preserves the faithful, c but he recompenses the one who acts haughtily abundantly.
		25	חֲזִקוּ וַיֵּאֱמַן לְבַבְכֶם כָּל־הַמְּיַחֲלִים לַיהוָה:	25a	Be strong and let your heart be strong, b all you who wait for <i>YHWH</i> !

I	A	2-3	Declaration of trust and pleas for help.	Trust and call for help.
	B	4-5	Declaration of trust in <i>YHWH</i> 's guidance and protection.	
II	C	6-7	Declaration of trust in <i>YHWH</i> , who has saved the psalmist.	Declarations of trust and joy for having been helped.
	D	8-9	Exclamation of joy for having been set free.	
III	E	10-11	Plea for mercy since the psalmist is wasting away.	Plea for mercy because of physical and social distress.
	F	12-13	Lament about isolation caused by the enemy.	
	G	14	Plea for help against people who plot to take his life.	

IV	H	15-17	Plea for help because the psalmist has trusted YHWH.	Plea for help because of trust and for the wicked to be shamed.
	I	18-19	Plea for the wicked to be shamed and not the psalmist.	
V	J	20-21	Praise to YHWH for his protection of those who fear him.	Praise to YHWH for the protection of those who fear him.
	K	22-23	Praise to YHWH for help despite despair.	
VI	L	24-25	Call to the in-group to love YHWH and be strong since he preserves the faithful.	

Table 1: A synopsis of the proposed segmentation

Stanzas I-IV and VI (thus not Stanza V) are all demarcated with the help of the divine name YHWH as a transition marker in the first verse line of the stanza. In the case of Stanza VI, the name YHWH is repeated three times, once each in the first and last stichs, signifying a change in the dialogical situation: The fellow believers are now addressed for the first time. It also signifies that the psalm's conclusion is at hand. Contra-indications for using the name YHWH as a marker of segmentation are that Stanza V does not have the name YHWH in the opening verse (he is addressed directly), but it does occur in the first line of the second strophe of the stanza (Strophe K). Strophe I, which does *not* begin a new stanza, also has the name YHWH as the first word in its first verse line.

What strikes the reader is the switch between supplication for help and thanksgiving for having been helped. In Stanza I, Strophe A contains urgent pleas to YHWH to prevent shame for the psalmist and to serve as a place of refuge for him. It is formulated with a prohibition and four imperatives. Strophe B expresses confidence that YHWH *is* the psalmist's refuge and *will* lead, guide, and save him from the net set up to capture him.

In Stanza II, Strophe C again expresses trust in YHWH (as in Strophe B), but the psalmist then says that YHWH *has* redeemed him (v. 6b). The same happens in Strophe D: YHWH *has* seen his affliction and taken notice of his distress. YHWH *has* set his foot in a broad place. In Stanza II, the psalmist thus gives thanks for having been delivered (this theme forms an inclusion between vv. 6 and 9). The suffix-conjugation forms could be understood as present tense, but there are no imperatives as in Stanza I and III.

In Stanza III, Strophe E switches back with an urgent plea for mercy because the psalmist is physically and emotionally distressed. Strophes E, F, and G all describe the psalmist's distress. He is ill, full of sorrow and sighing, partly because of his guilt (Strophe E). He is subjected to disgrace and isolation (Strophe F) and knows of a plot to kill him (Strophe G).

Stanza IV begins with a declaration of trust, but it is used as a motivation for grace and to be saved (Strophe H). Again, the psalmist (as in v. 2a) asks YHWH not to be put to shame but rather for him to shame the wicked and silence their arrogant talk about the righteous (Strophe I).

Stanza V consists of praise for YHWH. He is praised for showing abundant goodness to those who take refuge in him and keeping them safe (Strophe J). Strophe K praises him for being gracious towards the psalmist. YHWH listened to his supplication when he thought he had been cut off from YHWH’s eyes.

Stanza VI, containing only Strophe L, turns the psalmist’s experience into teaching for his in-group. In it, he encourages the faithful and devout to love YHWH and wait for him since he preserves the faithful but recompenses the one who acts haughtily (cf. the similar conclusion in Ps 34:20-23).

From the synopsis above, it seems that the psalmist was in distress (Stanza III). He put his trust in YHWH to save him and serve as a place of refuge for him (Stanzas I and IV). He was not disappointed by YHWH and can thus give praise and thanks to him (Stanzas II and V). From his experience, he advises his fellow believers to wait patiently for YHWH to intervene on their behalf (Stanza VI).

Plea for mercy, distress	Trust, call for help	Praise and thanks	Advice to wait for YHWH
	Stanza I (31:2-5)		
		Stanza II (31:6-9)	
Stanza III (31:10-14)			
	Stanza IV (31:15-19)		
		Stanza V (31:20-23)	
			Stanza VI (31:24-25)

Table 2: A correlation between the literary themes and the stanzas of Psalm 31

### 3. *SIGNIFICANT SEMANTIC WORD FIELDS IN PS 31 AND HOW THEY ARE RELATED*

The most important semantic fields or lexical domains encountered in the psalm are listed below. They were identified in an attempt to classify the data available in the psalm. The semantic fields are based on the relationship between the dramatis personae, namely the psalmist, the in-group, YHWH, and the out-group. What is said about each actor or group of actors and what they do to one another formed the starting point. Within a certain semantic field, the different words are classified into types (verbs,

nouns, adjectives, or adverbs). Syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between the members of a particular domain were used to identify similarities.<sup>5</sup> Words constituting a word pair usually belong to the same semantic field since there is a paradigmatic relationship between them (e.g., synonymy or antonymy). Some members of a semantic field are used syntagmatically, using similar verb modes (indicatives, imperatives, jussives) between the same subjects and objects. Examples of paradigmatic relations are: “*save me*”, “*rescue me*”, and “*redeem me*”, for verbs belonging to the semantic field of *rescue*, and “*be a rock of refuge for me*”, “*you are my rock and my fortress*”, for nouns belonging to the semantic field of *refuge* and *protection*. Examples of words that have a syntagmatic relationship are: “*you have seen my affliction*” and “*you have taken notice of my distress*”, which form part of the semantic field of YHWH’s *awareness* of the psalmist’s distress. Sometimes a word can form part of more than one semantic domain.

Semantic domain	Hebrew stems or expressions
<i>Honour and shame</i>	<p><i>Verbs</i>: אל־אבושה, “let (me) not be <i>put to shame</i>” (31:2, 18); יבשו, “let (the wicked) be <i>put to shame</i>!” (31:18); ידמו לשאול, “<i>silence to Sheol!</i>” (i.e., silence their mockery)” (31:18); תאלמנה, “let (lying lips) be <i>mute</i>” (31:19); הדברות על צדיק, “those who <i>speak against</i> the righteous” (31:19); משלם עשה גאווה, “he <i>recompenses</i> the one who acts in pride” (31:24).</p> <p><i>Nouns</i>: עני, “humility, oppressed situation” (but see also at “distress”) (31:8); הייתי חרפה, “I have become a <i>disgrace</i>” (31:12); שמעתי דבת רבים, “I heard the <i>rumour</i> of many” (31:14); שפתי שקר, “lying lips” (31:19); בגאווה, “with <i>pride</i>” (31:19); בוז, “<i>contempt</i>” (31:19); ריב לשנות, “the <i>strife</i> (of tongues)” (31:21).</p> <p><i>Adverbs</i>: עתק, “(speak) unrestrained, impudently” (31:19).</p> <p><i>Preposition</i>: נגד בני אדם, “<i>before</i> humanity” (31:20).</p>
<i>Rescue, save, protect</i>	<p><i>Verbs</i>: בצדקתך פלטני, “in your righteousness, <i>save me!</i>” (31:2); מהרה הצילני, “<i>rescue me speedily!</i>” (31:3); הצילני, “<i>rescue me!</i>” (31:16); להושיעני, “to <i>save me</i>” (31:3); הושיעני, “<i>save me!</i>” (31:17); תוציאני מן, “you will <i>bring me out of</i> (the net)” (31:5); פדיתה אותי, “you have <i>redeemed me</i>” (31:6); לא הסגרתני, “you have <i>not delivered me</i>” (31:9); העמדת במרחב רגלי, “you have <i>set my feet in a broad place</i>” (31:9); אמונים נצר יהוה, “YHWH <i>preserves</i> the faithful” (31:24).</p>

5 The list of semantic domains listed below is based only on Psalm 31. For an example of a comprehensive analysis of one semantic field in Ancient Hebrew, see Zanella (2008:189-212).



<p>YHWH's awareness of the psalmist's distress</p>	<p><i>Verbs:</i> הטטה אלי אזנך, “<i>incline your ear to me!</i>” (31:3); ראיית את-עניי, “you have <i>seen</i> (my affliction)” (31:8); ידעת בצרות נפשי, “you have <i>taken notice</i> (of my soul's distress)” (31:8); בי קראתיך, “when I <i>call</i> to you” (31:18); נגרותי מנגד עיניך, “(I thought) I am <i>cut off</i> from your eyes” (31:23); אכן שמעת, “yet you have <i>heard</i> (the sound of my pleas for mercy)” (31:23); בשועי אליך, “when I <i>cried</i> to you (for help)” 31:23).</p>
<p><i>Distress</i></p>	<p><i>Nouns:</i> עניי, “my <i>affliction</i>, oppressed situation” (but see also at “honour and shame”) (31:8); צרות נפשי, “my soul's <i>distress</i>” (31:8); עששה בכעס עיני, “my eye is wasted from <i>grief</i>” (31:10); בלו ביגון חיי, “my life is spent with <i>sorrow</i>” (31:11); בלו שנותי באנחה, “my years (are spent) with <i>sighing</i>” (31:11); אמרתי בחפזי, “(I have said) in my <i>alarm</i>” (31:23). <i>Verbs:</i> צר-לי, “I <i>am in distress</i>” (31:10); עשש נפשי ובטני, “(my life and inner self) <i>waste away</i>” (31:10); בשל בעוני כחי, “my strength <i>fails</i> through my transgression” (31:11); בלו חיי ושנותי, “(my life and my years) <i>are spent</i>” (31:11); עצמי עששו, “my bones <i>waste away</i>” (31:11).</p>
<p>Seeking <i>refuge</i>, <i>trust</i> in YHWH, and his <i>protection</i></p>	<p><i>Verbs:</i> בדך חסיתי, “in you I <i>sought refuge</i>” (31:2); לחסים בדך, “for those who <i>take refuge</i> in you” (31:20); בידך אפקיד רוחי, “into your hand I <i>commit</i> my spirit” (31:6); ואני אליהוה בטחתי, “but I, in YHWH I <i>trust</i>” (31:7); ואני עליך בטחתי יהוה, “but I <i>have put</i> my trust in you, YHWH” (31:15); אמרתי אלהי אתה, “I have <i>said</i>: ‘You are my God!’” (31:15); בידך עתתי, “my times <i>are</i> in your hand” (31:16); ליראיך, “for those who <i>fear</i> you” (31:20); תסתירם בסתר פניך, “you <i>hide</i> them in the cover of your presence” (31:21); תצפנם בסכה, “you <i>store</i> them in your shelter” (31:21); בשועי אליך, “when I <i>cried</i> to you for help” (31:23). <i>Nouns:</i> יהיה לי לצור-מעו, “(be to me) a <i>rock of refuge</i>” (31:3); בית מצודות, “(be to me) a <i>strong fortress</i> to save me” (31:3); בייסלעי ומצודתי אתה, “for you are <i>my rock and my fortress</i>” (31:4); בייאתה מעווי, “for you are <i>my refuge</i>” (31:5); בסתר פניך, “in the <i>cover of your face</i>” (31:21); בסכה, “in your <i>shelter</i>” (31:21); בעיר מצור, “in a <i>fortified city</i>” (31:22).<sup>6</sup></p>
<p><i>Guidance</i></p>	<p><i>Verbs:</i> תנחני תנהלני, “you will <i>lead</i> me and <i>guide</i> me” (31:4).</p>

6 There is doubt whether this refers to the psalmist experiencing YHWH's protection “like a fortified city” or else YHWH's protection when the psalmist was besieged “in a fortified city.” David once was in such a position (in danger when in an unfriendly city), and it is possible the editors had this in mind. It is more probable, however, that the description refers to Jerusalem (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger 1993:193).

<i>Power</i>	<i>Noun</i> : בידך, “into your <i>hand</i> ” (31:6); בידך, “in your <i>hand</i> (are my times)” (31:16); ביד־אויב “into the <i>hand</i> of the enemy” (31:9); מיד־אויבי, “from the <i>hand</i> of my enemies” (31:16).
<i>Grace, mercy</i>	<i>Verbs</i> : חנני יהוה, “ <i>be merciful</i> to me, YHWH” (31:10); האירה פניך על־עבדך, “let your <i>face shine</i> on your servant” (31:17); קול תחנוני “(you listened to) my <i>plea for mercy</i> ” (31:23).
YHWH’s <i>goodness, blessings, and faithfulness</i>	<i>Nouns</i> : למען שמך, “for the sake of your <i>name</i> (you will lead me and guide me)” (31:4); יהוה אל אמת, “YHWH, God of <i>faithfulness</i> ” (31:6); אגילה ואשמחה בחסדך, “(I want to shout and be glad) in your <i>constant love</i> ” (31:8); הושיעני בחסדך, “(save me in) your <i>constant love</i> ” (31:17); מה רב טובך, “how abundant is your <i>goodness</i> ” (31:20); בי הפליא חסדו, “for he has wondrously shown his <i>constant love</i> to me” (31:22). <i>Verbs</i> : צפנת, “(constant love which you) <i>treasure up</i> ” (31:20); פעלת, “(constant love which you) <i>put into effect</i> ” (31:20).
<i>Enemies</i>	<i>Nouns and verbal nouns</i> : אויב, “enemy” (31:9); אויבי, “my enemies” (31:16); מכל־צררי, “because of all my <i>adversaries</i> ” (31:12); ומרדפי, “and of my <i>persecutors</i> ” (31:16); רשעים, “the <i>wicked people</i> ” (31:18).
<i>Isolation</i>	<i>Verbs</i> : ופחד מזודעי, “and something dreadful to <i>those who know me</i> ” (31:12); ראי בחוץ נדדו ממני, “(those who see me outside) <i>flee</i> from me” (31:12); נשכחתי כמת מלב, “I am <i>forgotten</i> from the heart like one who is dead” (31:13); הייתי ככלי אבד, “I have <i>become</i> like a broken vessel” (31:13). <i>Nouns</i> : חרפה לשכני מאד, “(a disgrace) especially to my <i>neighbours</i> ” (31:12).
<i>Danger</i>	<i>Nouns</i> : רשת זו טמנו לי, “the <i>net</i> which they have hidden for me” (31:5); מגור מסביב, “ <i>terror</i> (on every side)” (31:14); רכסי איש, “the <i>plots</i> of men” (31:21). <i>Verbs</i> : בהוסדם יחד עלי, “when they <i>take counsel</i> together against me” (31:14); לקחת נפשי וממו, “they <i>plot</i> to take my life” (31:14).
<i>Praise</i>	<i>Verbs</i> : אגילה ואשמחה בחסדך, “I want to <i>shout and be glad</i> in your constant love” (31:8); ברוך יהוה, “ <i>blessed</i> be YHWH” (31:22); בי הפליא חסדו, “for he has wondrously shown his constant love (to me)” (31:22).
<i>Faithful dedication</i>	<i>Verbs</i> : שנאתי השמרים הבלי־שוא, “I <i>hate</i> those who pay regard to worthless idols” (31:7); אהבו את־יהוה כל־חסידיו, “ <i>love</i> YHWH, all his faithful!” (31:24); חזקו ויאמץ לבבכם כל־המיחלים ליהוה, “ <i>be strong</i> and let your heart be strong, all you who <i>wait</i> for YHWH” (31:25). <i>Adjectives</i> : כל־חסידיו, “all his <i>faithful</i> ” (31:24); אמונים, “the <i>faithful</i> ” (31:24).

Table 3: Semantic domains in Psalm 31

### 3.1 *Distress and pleas for attention from YHWH and to receive mercy*

The psalmist had experienced distress and depended on the grace of YHWH for help. He describes his earlier distress (by way of thanksgiving, after YHWH had taken notice of his condition)<sup>7</sup> with the words “affliction” or “oppressed situation” (עני, 31:8) and “distress”, using both the noun צרה and the impersonal verb צרר (“to be in distress”) (31:8, 10). In verse 8, the expression is “distresses of the soul” (צרות נפש) in a parallel description with “affliction” (עני, already mentioned). In verses 10 and 11, his current state of being “in distress” (צר-לי) is described in physical terms: He says his eye is “wasted” (עשש) from “grief” (כעס),<sup>8</sup> and so is his “soul” (נפש) and “inner self” or “body” or “inner organs” (בטן). In the next verse, he carries on by describing his “life” (חי) as being “spent” or “consumed” or “vanishing” (כלה) with “sorrow” or “agony” (יגון), his years with “sighing” (אנחה),<sup>9</sup> and his “strength” (כח) as “failing” or “stumbling” (כשל) through his “transgression” (עון), while his “bones” (עצם) are also “wasting away” (עשש) (31:11).

What could have been the cause of the distress for the psalmist? In a few places, he mentions the threat of enemies. He says his life was endangered by people seeking to kill him. Such physical dangers are discussed below. However, the comprehensive descriptions of suffering in strophe E (vv. 10 and 11) almost fit the experience of someone suffering from a terminal disease whose life is fading away.<sup>10</sup> Because of physical and emotional suffering and a feeling of guilt, the psalmist had experienced stress or still experiences it. The description in strophe F adds to this by lamenting his social suffering. It paints a picture of someone being isolated – shamed,

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7 Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:198) note the similarity to Exod 3:7 and 4:31 where YHWH noted the affliction (also עני) of his people in Egypt. The thanksgiving in this verse corresponds to the supplication for help to YHWH in Ps 25:18, where עני is also used to describe his “affliction”.

8 The same expression is used in Ps 6:8, while in Ps 31:11, his “bones” are said to “waste away”.

9 “Sorrow” and “sighing” are also mentioned together twice in Isaiah, namely in Isa 35:10 and 51:11, but in both instances in a promise that gladness and joy will replace sorrow and sighing when the ransomed of YHWH return to Zion. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:198) say that the psalmist’s lamenting is reminiscent of that of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 20:18).

10 Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:191).

shunned by friends and strangers, and feeling discarded and forgotten.<sup>11</sup> This social aspect of suffering is described below as part of the semantic field of words relating to honour and shame. When someone was disgraced in the ancient Mediterranean world, strangers and even friends would avoid having a close relationship or association with that person.

As is customary in laments, the psalmist was also worried that YHWH could be unaware of his suffering, that YHWH could or would not hear his pleas or see his condition. This was an important aspect of his suffering. He therefore prayed that YHWH would “incline” (נטה) his “ear” (אזן) towards him and rescue him (31:3). At one point, he was afraid to have been “cut off” (גרז) from YHWH’s eyes (31:23).<sup>12</sup> It was a great relief, therefore, to be able to thank YHWH for having “seen” (ראה) his affliction and having “taken notice” (ידע) of his soul’s distress (31:8). YHWH had “heard” (שמע) the sound of his “pleas for mercy” (תחנון) when he cried to him for help (31:23). His requests that YHWH “have mercy” (חנן, 31:10) and “let his face shine” (האיר פנים) on his “servant” (עבד) (31:17) were thus answered (31:23).

### 3.2 *Trust in YHWH as a place of refuge and the protection sought from him*

As a motivation for the pleas for help, the psalmist refers to the fact that he had put his “trust” in YHWH and had “sought refuge” in him. To “seek refuge” in YHWH, expressed with the verb חסה, is used twice in the psalm (31:2, 20). The same applies to the verb בטח, to “trust” in YHWH. It is once used with the preposition אל (31:7) and once with the preposition על (31:15). The repeated use of these verbs indicates their importance for understanding the psalm. In verse 7, the psalmist distinguishes between those who pay regard to “worthless idols” and himself, who puts his trust in YHWH. “Trust” in a deity thus implies that a person has made a choice for a certain god (in this case, YHWH) as patron and expects him to provide help and protection.

In verse 15, the choice of YHWH as patron God is again involved since the psalmist expands the confession of trust in YHWH with the declaration, “I have said: ‘You are my God!’” To “trust” YHWH thus means to choose

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11 The comparison to a “broken vessel” in Ps 31:13 is reminiscent of Hos 8:8 and Jer 48:38, although the expression in those two verses is “like a vessel for whom no one cares”.

12 This is an experience typically associated with the suffering of the exile (Lam 3:54; Ezek 37:11; Isa 53:8; Ps 88:6) (Hossfeld and Zenger 1993:199).

him as the divine power from whom one seeks protection, entrusting one's life to him. The two most original and memorable expressions in Ps 31 also relate to this. In Ps 31:6, the psalmist says, “Into your hand, I commit my spirit (אפקיד רוּחִי)”. In Ps 31:16, he formulates it as follows: “In your hand are my times (בידך עתתי)”.<sup>13</sup> “Hand” refers to the power to protect in both instances. The noun יָד occurs another two times in the psalm, referring to the enemy's power. Putting one's “spirit” or “time” into the hands of YHWH implies that one trusts him for protection against those who have evil intentions. In Ps 31:9, the psalmist expresses thanks to YHWH for not having delivered him into the “hand” of the enemy, and in verse 16, after having stated that his times are in YHWH's “hand”, he asks YHWH to “rescue” him from the “hand” of his enemies and persecutors. The expectation is that YHWH will act in response to these declarations of complete trust, acting in accord with his “constant love”, his חסד, meaning that he will save the psalmist (31:8, 17, 22). Two of the three references to YHWH's חסד (31:8 and 22) occur in expressions of thanksgiving because YHWH had acted in accordance with his covenant love. The psalmist had expected YHWH to lead and guide the psalmist for his name's sake (31:4) and because he is a faithful God (31:6).

The psalm uses an impressive array of synonyms to describe the protection YHWH offers or should offer.<sup>14</sup> Many of these words are from a military context but with echoes of a reference to the temple in Zion. They are: “rock of refuge” (צור־מעוז, 31:3), “strong fortress” (בית מצודות, 31:3), “rock” (סלע, 31:4), “fortress” (מצודה, 31:4), the “cover” (סתר, 31:21) of his presence or face, his “shelter” or “hut” (סכה, 31:21), and “a fortified city” (עיר מצור, 31:22). There are associations with the temple in Jerusalem, built on a rock, with the mention of צור and סלע (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger 1993:192). The “shelter” or “hut” (סכה) also refers to the temple. The temple was a place of refuge, so when YHWH is described as a “rock of refuge”, it refers to a worshipper feeling safe in his protective presence.

Members of the in-group are described as those who “fear” YHWH, which also amounts to putting their trust in him (31:20). YHWH meets the expectations of the psalmist since he is described as a “faithful God (אל אמת)” (31:6). In response to the trust placed in him, he is said to “hide” (סתר) supplicants in the “cover” (סתר) of his presence from a mob of people (31:22) and “store” (צפן) them safely in his “hut” (סכה) (31:21). The

13 Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:198), referring to Isa 33:6, say it means to entrust one's fate or lot (“Schicksal”) to YHWH.

14 Weber (2001:155) speaks of a “Massierung von Schutz- und Trutzaussagen”.

psalmist acknowledges these actions by way of praise to him. However, these pronouncements also inform and motivate members of the in-group to put their trust in YHWH.

### 3.3 *The dangers that the psalmist faced and YHWH's saving acts*

In accordance with the military quality of the terms describing the safety the psalmist seeks, and also in line with the history of David to whom the heading refers, the threats the suppliant faced have a certain military quality. He was faced with “enemies” (אֹיִב, 31:9, 16), “adversaries” (צָרָר, 31:12), and “persecutors” (רָדַף, 31:16). They tried to hunt him down like prey since they (metaphorically) hid a “net” (רֶשֶׁת, 31:5) for him. As it was with the anointed in Ps 2, the enemies in this psalm “took counsel” together (יָסַד, 31:14)<sup>15</sup> and “plotted” (זָמַם, 31:14) to “take” the psalmist’s “life” (לָקַח נַפְשׁ, 31:14). Echoing the words in Jer 20:10, the psalmist experienced that there was “terror” (מַגּוֹר) all around (31:14).<sup>16</sup> The words from the semantic field of rescue and saving also point to a military conflict: “Save” (פָּלַט, 31:2; יִשַׁע, 31:3, 17; נִצַּל, 31:3, 16), “bring out of a net” (הוֹצִיא מִרֶשֶׁת, 31:5), “not hand over” (לֹא סָגַר בְּ, 31:9), and “set” one’s foot in “a broad place” (הִעֲמִיד רַגְלִי בַמְּרַחֵב, 31:9).<sup>17</sup> But there is another nuance to the dangers that beset the psalmist: The enemies are “wicked” people who want to bring shame upon him (see below). Furthermore, one of the “rescue words” refers to a different kind of distress: “redeem” (פָּדָה, 31:6) refers to the transgressions of the psalmist.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.4 *Honour and shame, arrogance, and humility*

A cause of distress which is even more important than the military threat is the social-ethical struggle with the enemy. The enemies consist of “wicked people” (רָשָׁעִים, 31:18), not soldiers. They spread a “rumour” (דְּבָה, 31:14)

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15 Through this word, the psalmist acquires a messianic image. See its use in Ps 2:2, where leaders of nations take counsel together against YHWH and his anointed.

16 According to Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:198), the suffering and persecution are experienced “in persona Jeremiae”.

17 Once again, there are messianic overtones. Cf. the use of the expression in Ps 18:20 and 37.

18 This word establishes connections to the frame around the cluster since it also occurs in Pss 25:22 and 34:23. Its occurrence in Ps 26:11 connects it specifically with the context of guilt and innocence. It will be discussed below as part of the literary context of Ps 31.

about the psalmist to intimidate him. They tell lies (שקר, 31:19) about members of the in-group. They speak “arrogantly” or “with impudence” (עתק) about the “righteous person” (צדיק) (31:19). Moreover, they display “pride” (גאווה, 31:19, 24) and “contempt” (בוז) (31:14, 19) in their dealings with the psalmist and members of the in-group. These are words from the semantic field of honour and shame. It is important for the psalmist and his in-group not to be publicly shamed. He twice asks YHWH to protect him from being “shamed” (בוש 31:2, 18). He asks YHWH to let the wicked be put to shame rather than himself (31:18). The word עני, used to describe his “affliction” in Ps 31:8, already indicates humility on the part of the psalmist. Because the LXX translates it with ταπεινωσις, it seems to describe a quality of unpretentious behaviour and lack of arrogance. One important contrast between the wicked and the righteous is the hubris of the wicked and the humility of the in-group.

The “lying” (שקר), “arrogant” (דבר עתק) rumour and “contemptuous speech” (בגאווה ובוז) of the wicked should be silenced (דמם in 31:18 and אלם *niphal* in 31:19) by YHWH. He also expects YHWH to repay (שלם, *piel*) the opponents who act “haughtily” (עשה גאווה) (31:24). This expectation is in line with the wisdom teaching that arrogance will meet with humiliation (Prov 16:18). Reverence for YHWH is strongly associated with an attitude of humility (Prov 15:33; 22:4). Such humility will be rewarded by YHWH (Prov 22:4).

Shame threatened when the social status of the psalmist was disparaged. It caused people to shun him, regarding him as a disgrace (חרפה, 31:12), as something “dreadful” (פחד), so that they would “flee” (גדד) from him (31:12). He thus suffered social isolation. When adversity struck someone in this society, it would demonstrate to the community that that person was not under the protection of his patron god, in this case, YHWH. A disaster caused shame since a claim to be protected by YHWH could not be substantiated. Such dishonour did befall the psalmist since he complains in verse 12 that he had become a “disgrace” (חרפה) to others, especially to his neighbours. That was through the doing of his many adversaries. His friends and the people who saw him in public would try to avoid him, leading to his isolation. Isolation is expressed as being disgraced to such an extent that people in the street would “flee” (גדד) from him (31:12). He felt “forgotten” (שכח, *niphal*) like someone who had “passed away” (מת) or like a “broken vessel” (ככלי אבד) (31:12). These are descriptions of someone who is not honoured rightfully. The psalmist later lauds YHWH’s abundant “goodness” (טוב) “stored up” (צפן) for those who fear him and

“brought into effect” (פעל) for those who take refuge in him “before humankind” (נגד בני אדם) (31:20). The reference to the awareness of “all humanity” serves as an indication that honour and shame as social values are at stake when one seeks protection in YHWH.<sup>19</sup> The choice of YHWH as a patron would be vindicated when believers would be showered with the “abundant goodness” (רב-טוב) of YHWH (31:20).

### 3.5 *YHWH's goodness, guidance, and blessing as privileges of the righteous*

The psalmist and members of the in-group experienced the grace of YHWH. Grace is expressed with the words of the Aaronite blessing, as YHWH “letting” his face “shine” (האיר פנים *hiphil*) on the psalmist. This is what he asks for in Ps 31:17. In response, YHWH is said to shower his “goodness” (טוב) on those who “fear” (ירא) him and who “take refuge in” (חסה ב) him (31:20). YHWH is said to “treasure up” or “save up” (צפן) his goodness and then to “bring it into action” or “make it effective” (פעל) for his worshippers (31:20). It was argued above that this happens before “all humanity”, demonstrating that his blessing serves as a confirmation of the privileged status of the believers, a way to honour them publicly. Such blessings were a public display of the belief that YHWH rewarded humility with honour (cf. Prov 22:4).

### 3.6 *Faithful dedication*

While YHWH is expected to act in accord with his “constant love” (חסד, 31:8, 17, 22) when the suppliant is in trouble, the worshipper and members of the in-group have the responsibility to be faithful in their dedication. Dedication to YHWH includes dissociation from those who put their trust in something else. That is why the psalmist says that he “abhors” or “hates” (שנא) those who pay regard to worthless idols (31:7). They form the out-group. The in-group is described as the “faithful” (חסידים) who must “love” (אהב) YHWH (31:24). Those who remain “faithful” (אמונים) are the ones whom YHWH will “preserve” (נצר) (31:24). They must therefore be resilient, “strong” (חזק) and “strengthen” their hearts (אמן לבב) while they “wait” (יחל) for YHWH (31:25). If one is willing to “wait” for YHWH, it means that that person trusts in him to act according to his covenant love. Therefore, the psalmist can express praise to YHWH with ברך for having “wondrously” (פלא, *hiphil*) demonstrated his constant love for him (31:22).

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19 At the same time, this phrase introduces a universal aspect. Barbiero (1999:489) relates it to the exemplary role of God’s people towards other peoples.

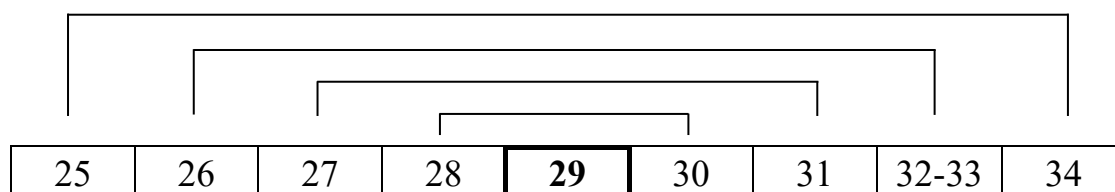


3.7 *Conclusion about the intratextual evidence about faithful dedication in Ps 31*

The psalmist pleads with YHWH to show mercy and rescue him speedily. He says he had sought refuge in YHWH as motivation for his plea. He repeatedly asks YHWH to act as a place of refuge and states his trust in YHWH to protect him. He was threatened by enemies who wanted to kill him, but his more significant concern was the danger of public dishonour. He twice asks YHWH not to be shamed. His emotional and physical distress was caused by disgrace and social isolation. His enemies spread rumours, told lies, and acted with arrogance, pride, and contempt toward the righteous. The psalmist wants YHWH to shame and silence them to Sheol and protect the humble worshipper. While the psalmist’s distress is described as ongoing, YHWH has already responded positively to his cry for help. He can thus also confess that YHWH had saved him. Thus, he confidently states that YHWH hides those who take refuge in him from people who plot against them. YHWH had wondrously shown his constant love to him when he had called for help. He, therefore, praises YHWH and advises the faithful to persevere in waiting for YHWH. YHWH will preserve those who remain faithful and wait for him, but he will abundantly repay the out-group of people who act haughtily.

4. *PS 31 WITHIN ITS LITERARY CONTEXT*

The editors of the Psalms (in the Masoretic tradition) arranged Pss 25-34 concentrically (thus chiasmically) around Ps 29:<sup>20</sup>



All the psalms of the cluster, but especially Pss 25 and 34, as the double acrostic frame, and Ps 27, as the concentric (chiastic) counterpart of Ps 31, form the immediate context.<sup>21</sup> While there is a progression from Ps 25 to

20 For a description of this composition, see Weber (2021:256).

21 The frame around a composition, in this case, Pss 25 and 34, is especially important as a literary context for interpreting the psalms it encloses (Liess 2021:215). Weber (2021:274) describes the relationship between Pss 27 and 31 as “dicht” (tight), developing from (Ps 25) and Ps 27 to Ps 31, but often also

Ps 34, Ps 27 also plays a key role in developing certain motifs. The series formed by Pss 31-34 is also considered particularly important. The repetition of keywords and motifs in the psalms of the cluster informs the interpretation of Ps 31, demonstrating that the psalm cannot be interpreted fully on its own. The following analysis focuses on some important semantic fields identified in Ps 31, also present in one or more of the significant other psalms.

#### *4.1 The distress of the psalmist within the cluster*

When Ps 31 is read within the context of its cluster, it becomes clear that the author wanted to demonstrate that YHWH took notice of his distress, as it was expressed at the beginning of the cluster, and that he had already responded to most of it. Three keywords used in Ps 31 to describe the psalmist's distress were already used in Ps 25, and two occur again in Ps 34. They are עני, צרה, and עון. In Ps 25:16, the psalmist complained that he was "lonely and afflicted (עני)". In verse 18, he asked YHWH to observe (ראה) his "affliction" (עני) and his "anxiety" or "trouble" (עמל). Psalm 31 responds directly to this. The request ראה עני ("see my affliction") in Ps 25:18 is dealt with in Ps 31:8 with ראית עני ("you saw my affliction"). This affirmation of YHWH's redeeming grace gives the authority to the psalmist to exhort members of his in-group to stay true to the trust they placed in YHWH.

In Ps 34:7, the psalmist uses עני once more, giving witness to the fact that he had cried to YHWH as someone who was afflicted (עני) but that YHWH had rescued him from all his troubles (צרה plural). This word (צרה) is the other word describing distress used in Pss 25, 31, and 34. It confirms the observation that the author used keywords to express the idea that YHWH does respond to the distress of the righteous. From the phrase "the troubles (צרות) of my heart are enlarged" in Ps 25:17, it proceeds to "you have known the troubles (צרות) of my soul" in Ps 31:8, before confirming in Ps 34:7 that YHWH had saved him (speaking in the third person about himself) "from all his troubles (צרות)".

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from Ps 31 back to Ps 27. Weber (2021:273-274) emphasises the themes of refuge, protection and guidance as the important ones while encouraging exhortations to be strong and wait for YHWH are found at the conclusion of both Pss 27 and 31. Botha and Weber (2019:36) provide a table with all the keyword connections between Pss 25, 27, and 31.

In Ps 31, however, the guilt about the psalmist’s sins is not yet resolved. In Ps 25:11, he asked YHWH to “forgive” his “guilt” (עוֹן).<sup>22</sup> In Ps 31, he says that his power “stumbles” because of his “guilt” (עוֹן, 31:11). The problem is, however, resolved in Ps 32.<sup>23</sup> Psalm 32 explains that sins one wants to hide cause physical and emotional harm, but confessing them leads to healing and joy. The psalmist does not have enough “power” (כֹּחַ) to carry his guilt (31:11). But YHWH is full of “power” (cf. כֹּחַ in 29:4). Psalm 34:20 thus also accounts for relief from stress caused by guilt when the psalmist says, “Many are the afflictions (רַעוּת) of the righteous, but YHWH delivers him out of them all”. The trouble in the “bones” of the psalmist (31:11; 32:3), caused by guilt, is also resolved in Ps 34:21, where it says that YHWH preserves all the “bones” of the righteous, that not one of them is broken. This is the case since YHWH “redeems” them, thus exempting them from condemnation (אֲשַׁם, 34:22-23; cf. also Liess 2020:188).

#### 4.2 *Trust in YHWH as a refuge and the protection he gives*

The verb בטח, “to trust” in YHWH, is used in Pss 25:22, 27:3, and 31:7 and 15. It is thus not repeated in Ps 34. In all these cases, it simply describes the resolute conviction of the psalmist to trust in YHWH. The verb חסה, “to seek refuge”, is, on the other hand, used also in Ps 34. It occurs five times in these three psalms, indicating its importance. Psalm 25:20 and Ps 31:2 have almost the exact phrase, connecting the verb חסה with the request not to be shamed. The sequence of the two verbs is merely rearranged to create chiasmus between the two verses: אל-אבוש כי-חסיתי בדך in Ps 25:20 becomes בדך יהוה חסיתי אל-אבושה in Ps 31:2.

The other three verses that use the verb, Ps 31:20 and Ps 34:9 and 23, are then used to describe the benefits of those who seek refuge in YHWH: YHWH is said to bring his blessings into effect for those who seek refuge in him (31:15), the man who seeks refuge in him is praised as being “blessed” (Ps 34:9), and in Ps 34:23, those who seek refuge in YHWH are said to be freed from being condemned. To seek protection from YHWH,

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22 The cluster differs from earlier clusters in Book I of the Psalms in moving stress about enemies into the background and focussing on stress caused by personal guilt (Liess 2020:188). The three words used to describe guilt in Ps 25 (פָּשַׁע, עוֹן, and חַטָּאָה) return in Ps 32. Cf. the discussion of Liess (2020:188).

23 Psalm 32 should also be read as the counterpart of Ps 26, where the absence of guilt forms the theme. Cf. Liess (2021:237). As Barbiero (1999:428) formulates it, it is not the man who has no sin (Ps 1:1) who is considered blessed in Ps 32:2, but the man whose sin is not counted against him because he has confessed it.

especially from being publicly humiliated, thus requires one to trust him. Such trust is rewarded not only with the protection of YHWH but also with his blessings. The one who seeks his protection will also be saved from being declared guilty.

The protection YHWH offers is described in Ps 31 with a series of keywords which have special connections with Ps 27 but not with Pss 25 or 34. These keywords are סתר (both as the verb “to hide” in the *hiphil* and the noun “hiding place”), צפן (“to hide”), סכה (“hut”), צור (“rock”), and מעוז (“stronghold”).<sup>24</sup> The function of these keywords is to “democratize” what is said about YHWH’s protection in Ps 27, extending it to the in-group. The phrase יסתירני בסתר אהלו (“he hides me in the hiding place of his tent”) in Ps 27:5 thus becomes תסתירם בסתר פניך (“you hide them in the hiding place of your face”) in Ps 31:21. In both cases, the hiding place is in the presence of YHWH. These two verses provide another connecting phrase between the two psalms: “He hides me in the hiding place of his tent” (27:5) and “you hide them in a tent”. The words צפן and אהל thus strengthen the connection. Again, the message is clear: The privilege of protection the psalmist enjoyed is also available to the in-group. In Ps 27, the verse containing the keywords constitutes a declaration of trust in YHWH’s protection, but in Ps 31, it is part of the praise of the psalmist, therefore formulated in the second person. The psalmist’s praise thus serves as an argument to convince the readers of the psalm that YHWH’s blessings are available to them as well.

### 4.3 *The motif of being rescued*

An impressive number of synonyms from the semantic field of rescue are used in Pss 25, 27, 31, and 34. They are פלט (“deliver”, 31:2), נצל (“rescue”, 25:20; 31:3, 16; 34:5, 20), ישע (“save”, 25:5; 27:1, 9; 31:3, 17; 34:7, 19), יצא *hiphil* (“bring out [of a net]”, 25:15, 17; 31:5), פדה (“redeem”, 25:22; 31:6; 34:23), לא סגר (“to not deliver”, 31:9), and חלץ *piel* (“pull out”, 34:8). Sometimes a military threat seems to be implied (as in 25:5, 15; 27:1; 31:3, 5, 9, 16; 34:8). Those situations fit into the narration about David’s persecution by Saul in 1 Samuel. However, the verbs of rescue can also be used metaphorically, and some equally apply to other causes of stress, such as shame (e.g., 25:20; 31:2), hardship (e.g., 34:20), and emotional stress

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24 Weber (2021:270) points out the key role Ps 29 plays in the centre of the cluster to emphasise YHWH’s might which he exerts from his heavenly palace and earthly temple mountain in a soteriological way for the protection of his anointed and his people.

(e.g., 25:17, 22; 34:7). In Ps 25, which is an important part of the context, the most crucial factor causing stress is the experience of guilt because of sin (Liess 2021:219).<sup>25</sup> This suggests that the cluster should be read on two levels: David’s history of unjust military persecution and life-threatening situations forms the suggested background, but the psalmist is also engaged in a moral-ethical battle. Liess (2021:222) says that the address to YHWH as “God of my rescue” (אלהי ישעי) in Ps 25:5 is related specifically to the theme of sin: “Es geht um ‘Rettung’ nicht nur angesichts der äußeren Feinde, sondern vor allem angesichts menschlicher Schuldverstrickung”. The enemies sometimes attack with rumours (31:14) and arrogant words (31:19), and in Ps 31, the psalmist is more worried about his guilt, shame and social isolation caused by the enemy, although his life is also at risk (31:14). In Ps 34:23, the rescue of the “servants” of YHWH is again connected specifically to the guilt of sins. This is done by using the keyword פדה for “rescue” or “redeem”: “YHWH redeems the soul (or life) of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned”. The verb פדה here in Ps 34, therefore, refers to Ps 25:22<sup>26</sup> and implies that the salvation mentioned in Ps 31:6 (also with פדה) similarly refers to YHWH’s forgiveness of sins.

Supplications for rescue thus evolve in the cluster into confessions of having been rescued. As has already been determined, in Ps 31, there is a mix of requests to be rescued (31:3 and 16 with נצל and 31:3 and 17 with ישע), statements of trust that it will happen (31:5 with יצא *hiphil*), and an acknowledgement of having been rescued (in 31:6 with פדה). The verb נצל is used in Ps 31:3 and 16 as in 25:20 to request urgent help, but in 34:5, it is used to state that YHWH had rescued the suppliant out of all his “fears” and in 34:20 to generalise this help to all worshippers: “The righteous has many causes of distress, but YHWH saves him from them all”. The four synonyms for rescue used in Ps 25 (נצל, ישע, יצא, and פדה) are all used in Ps 31. Three of the four reappear in Ps 34 (יצא *hiphil* is left out). However, a fifth synonym is added in Ps 34:8, namely the *piel* of חלץ (“pull out” or “tear out”). It also is contained in a general statement which concerns the in-group and not only the psalmist: “The angel of YHWH encamps around

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25 Cf. Ps 25:11, which forms the central verse of the psalm. “Misery” (עני) and “anxiety” (עמל) are used parallel to “sins” (חטאת) in 25:18.

26 This happens because both Pss 25:22 and 34:23 begin with the letter פ and fall outside the acrostic scheme. Cf. Liess (2021:239): The supplication for forgiveness in Ps 25 finds an explicit answer in the declaration of trust in the corresponding Ps 34.

those who fear him and delivers them”. There is thus this movement toward confession and thanksgiving and a pluralising of the objects of the verbs of rescue. The author of these psalms worked with a strategy to influence his readers to stay true to their mutual beliefs. One specific tenet of that belief was that YHWH would rescue and protect those who put their trust in him, specifically from the consequences of guilt caused by sin.

This belief can also be observed in the instances where נצר (“to keep watch over, to preserve”) is used in the cluster, also in the four important psalms discussed here. Psalm 25:10 teaches that YHWH acts with steadfast love and faithfulness towards those who “keep (נצר) his covenant and testimonies”. In Ps 25:21, he then prays that integrity and uprightness would preserve him, adding that he waits for YHWH. In Ps 31:24, he encourages the in-group to love YHWH since YHWH preserves the faithful but punishes those who act in pride. In Ps 34:14, he uses the verb נצר to encourage the in-group to “keep” their tongue from speaking evil and deceit. However, in Ps 32:7, which is not included in the investigation, the psalmist acknowledges that YHWH is a hiding place for him and “preserves” (נצר) him from trouble. The teaching coupled with this verb in the cluster is, therefore, that YHWH reciprocates the actions of the in-group: Those who preserve YHWH’s covenant and Torah will be preserved from trouble.

#### 4.4 *The social values of honour and shame*

Honour and shame are vital social values not only in Ps 31 but also in the cluster: Fear of being shamed (בוש, חפר) is mentioned explicitly in Pss 25:2, 3, 20; 31:2, 18; and 34:6. Being boastful was a way of claiming honour for oneself. If such a claim to honour were not acknowledged by being proven false, it would lead to shame. A denied claim to honour implied arrogance. When someone’s arrogant boasting was silenced, it implied being shamed. This is referred to with דמם in Ps 31:18 and אלה in Ps 31:19 (cf. also 30:13). Shame for the psalmist would happen when his enemies had an opportunity to rejoice over his fate (25:2; 31:12-14), so that he would have to keep silent (cf. 30:13). Such shame could be the consequence of a military defeat. However, shame also happens through daily social interaction with one’s opponents. Fortunately, YHWH helped the psalmist, and through his experience, the in-group was also saved from disgrace (34:6). For them, it was a reason for immense joy (נהר, “to be

radiant with joy”).<sup>27</sup> The cluster teaches that arrogant, treacherous people and evildoers will be shamed when YHWH intervenes (25:3; 31:18, 24; 34:5-6, 16-17).

While it was important for the psalmist and the in-group to be protected by YHWH against public disgrace, they also prided themselves in humility before YHWH. Humility is not the opposite of honour but a way of achieving honour by showing deference to YHWH and being rewarded by him. Such humbleness was manifest in their acknowledgement of guilt and the necessity to be open to YHWH’s guidance on the road of life (25:9).<sup>28</sup> Since the author and his readers were schooled in wisdom,<sup>29</sup> they were very much aware of the dangers of arrogance (Prov 3:34; 16:19). Dependence on YHWH was characterised by humility, described as being “broken-hearted” and “crushed in spirit” (34:19).<sup>30</sup> From Ps 25:8-9, it is clear that a confession of sin serves as an attestation of humility: YHWH teaches the Torah to sinners as he does to the humble (cf. Botha and Weber 2019:38).

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27 There is a possible similarity to Jer 31:12, with its description of joy over the bounty of YHWH, cf. also Ps 34:9. Liess (2020:190) emphasises the importance of “seeing” in the cluster. She relates this verse to the link between seeing YHWH’s face (27:4, 8-9, 13), light (27:1; 31:17) and salvation (31:17; 34:7, 16, and 19).

28 As explained by Barbiero (1999:370-371), the road of life is the road of the Torah in this cluster, simultaneously a reference to the journey to the temple, which serves as a metaphor for the presence of YHWH.

29 “Wisdom” refers to the connections the cluster has with the teaching found especially in Proverbs concerning, e.g., the deep respect for YHWH and the endeavour to follow his “way” by accepting his teaching. The acrostic form of the two psalms forming the frame around the cluster and the emphasis on following YHWH’s road in life in Ps 32 are good examples of this. The sharp contrast between the righteous and the wicked is another characteristic of wisdom teaching. Cf. Potgieter (2014) for wisdom in Ps 26 and Botha (2014) for wisdom in Ps 32.

30 For the idea of being “crushed in spirit”, cf. Prov 17:22, 18:14, and Isa 66:2. From the Isaiah text, it is clear that humility and reverence for YHWH were two sides of the same coin, exemplifying piety in post-exilic Judah. The opponents of these humble people were fellow Jews who wanted to shame them (cf. Isa 66:5).

#### 4.5 *Dependence on YHWH*

Dependence on YHWH is an important theme in the cluster (not only in Pss 25, 27, 31, and 34). It is visible in the *trust* (בטח) put in him, mentioned in Pss 25:2; 26:1; 27:3; 28:7; 31:7, 15; 32:10; and 33:21. It is also expressed by *waiting* (יחל, קוה) for YHWH (25:3, 5, 21; 27:14; 31:25). Being willing to “wait for” YHWH, expressed with קוה, reflects the advice given in Prov 20:22, “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’, wait (קוה, *piel*) for YHWH, and he will deliver you”.<sup>31</sup> Other verbs which describe submission to the will of YHWH and dependence on him are *calling* to him (קרא) (27:7; 28:1; 30:9; 31:18; 34:7) and *seeking refuge* (חסה) in him (25:20; 31:2, 20; 34:9, 23). The repetition of these keywords shows that the background of the cluster, including that of Ps 31, is not repetitive incidents when soldiers threatened the psalmist’s life with weapons but continuous psychological and spiritual harassment by wicked people. The reputation of the psalmist and the in-group was threatened. Their only defence was deference and humility, and subjection to the will of YHWH. Such signs of complete dependence on YHWH are used as a motivation for why the psalmist and his in-group should be protected against shame (25:2-3, 20-21; 31:2-3, 15, 18, 20, 25; 34:7). YHWH would be moved to defend the in-group because they depended on him completely.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4.6 *Piety*

Piety in the cluster is thus characterised by dependence on YHWH and humility. Included in this concept are being in a needy condition (עני, 25:16, 18; 31:8; 34:7; 31:25; cf. also 33:18, 22), humility (ענו, 25:9[x2]), a lack of arrogance (displayed by patiently waiting for YHWH to intervene, cf. 25:3, 5, 21; 27:14) and a willingness to acknowledge and confess one’s unworthiness and guilt (25:7, 11, 18; 31:11; cf. also 32:5). The reference to the psalmist’s “strength” as “stumbling” through his “transgression” (עון) in Ps 31:11 should be understood within the context of Ps 25. Psalm 27:2 also plays a role since, in that verse, the psalmist confidently announces that evildoers, adversaries and enemies who approach him to “eat up” his flesh will “stumble” (כשל) and fall. Now, however, it is his guilt which causes him to “stumble” (כשל). The cause of his stress has thus moved inwards to his fallibility (cf. Barbiero 1999:487).

31 See the explanation provided by Beyerlin (1980:41-46, especially p. 45) concerning its use in Ps 52:11.

32 According to Weber (2021:264), seeking refuge in YHWH is the appropriate attitude according to Pss 25-34, bringing salvation with it.



Awareness of one’s guilt is thus written into Ps 31 as part of humility. In Psalm 25, the psalmist described himself in contrast to the out-group, who were “treacherous without cause” (25:3), as dedicated to the covenant and precepts of YHWH (25:10, 14), someone who fears YHWH (25:12, 14), preserved by integrity and uprightness (25:21) (Liess 2021:220). Being willing to wait for YHWH is also contrasted with being “wantonly treacherous” (25:3). Acting “treacherously” (בגד) thus implies impatience with waiting for YHWH to deal justly with the righteous and rebelling against the in-group (cf. Ps 73:15). Being willing to wait for YHWH also means being willing to be *taught* and *guided* by him (25:4-5, 8, 12; 31:4; cf. also 32:8).<sup>33</sup> Psalm 32:8-9 explains a willingness to accept YHWH’s guidance is the opposite of obstinate recalcitrance. When the psalmist was unwilling to confess his sins, he acted like a horse or mule, which had to be controlled forcibly (cf. 32:3, 8-10).

Through his dogged patience, the psalmist eventually arrives at the position where he himself acts as a teacher for the in-group (31:24-25; 34:9-23).<sup>34</sup> The movement from accepting YHWH’s teaching in Ps 25 to acting as a teacher in Ps 34 is underscored by the admonition given to the in-group in Ps 31:24-25.

#### 4.7 YHWH’s blessings

Being blessed by YHWH is used to motivate the in-group to be faithful. Psalms 25, 27, 31, and 34 all use the noun and adjective represented with the stem טוב, “goodness” or “good”, to refer to YHWH’s blessings. This stem occurs in Pss 25:7, 8, 13; 27:13; 31:20; and 34:9, 11, and 13. It is repeated in Ps 34:15, but as an indication of how the conduct of the in-group should be: abandoning evil and doing “good”. When it refers to a characteristic of YHWH or the blessings he gives, YHWH is said to be

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33 Cf. also, Liess (2020:191), who discusses the theme of the road of life and God’s teaching as part of the wisdom motifs found throughout the cluster.

34 So, also, Weber (2021:259). Wisdom-like teaching forms an integral part of the composition. It begins with the (modified) acrostic arrangement of verses in Pss 25 and 34, the addition of an extra פ-verse at the end of both psalms (spelling the verb תלמד which signifies “teaching”), and the repeated use of the verb למד in 25:4, 5, 9 and 34:12. Weber (2021:259) says, “Belehrung als Bittgebet, Bezeugung und Vollzug umklammern diese Kleinkomposition und geben ihr eine didaktische Einfärbung, die in den weiteren Psalmen in unterschiedlichem Maß aufgenommen bzw. unterstrichen wird”. The cluster as a whole is characterised by alphabetising and teaching (Weber 2021:259).

“good and upright” (25:8), and members of the in-group are given the promise that their “souls” will “dwell” or “stay overnight” in goodness (25:13). In Ps 27:13-14, the psalmist says (by implication) that the hope to “see” the goodness of YHWH inspired him to wait for YHWH. Psalm 31:20 praises the great goodness of YHWH. Psalm 34:9 invites the faithful to “taste and see” that YHWH is good. Psalm 34:11 promises that those who seek YHWH will lack “no good thing”, and Ps 34:23 describes the faithful as those who love days to “see good”. The cluster, therefore, teaches that YHWH is good and does well to those who trust him and remain faithful.

Three other words which correspond to YHWH’s character as being good or his treatment of the faithful as being “good” are his “name” (שם), his “truth” (אמת), and his “constant love” (חסד). These three establish strong links between Pss 25 and 31,<sup>35</sup> but they do not occur in Pss 27 or 34. YHWH’s name is used in similar sentences in Ps 25:11 and 31:4: “Forgive my transgression for the sake of your name” in Ps 25:11, and “for the sake of your name, you will lead me and guide me” in Ps 31:6. YHWH is asked to “lead” the psalmist in his truth in Ps 25:5, and the psalmist says in Ps 25:10 that all YHWH’s roads are “constant love (חסד) and truth (אמת)”. In Ps 31:6, the psalmist asks YHWH to “redeem” him, addressing YHWH as the “God of truth (אמת)”. Two sentences in Ps 31 use YHWH’s חסד as a description of his faithfulness in having saved the psalmist (31:8 and 22), but the third is a plea for YHWH to save the psalmist according to his חסד. The cluster thus confirms that YHWH does act in accord with his name, his constant love, and his truth in saving faithful members of the in-group.

#### 4.8 *The development of faithful dedication from Ps 27 to Ps 31*

As the reader moves from Ps 27 to Ps 31, the focus shifts from the psalmist to the in-group and the exhortation to them to be faithful. The self-motivation to “be strong and let your heart be strengthened” (חזק ויאמץ לבך) in Ps 27:14 is copied in Ps 31:25, but it is now directed at the in-group as an exhortation to “be strong and let your heart be strengthened”

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35 Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:192) see in the presence of these terms an attempt by the editors, who expanded the image of God found in the “Grundpsalm” in vv. 10-19, to establish a connection with the formulation of the credo in Exod 34:6-7, changing the image of the personal protection God into that of the God of faithfulness and goodness. This credo already featured in Ps 25, however, and Ps 31 simply reaffirms the theology formulated there. See Liess’s discussion of the theme of God’s goodness, faithfulness, and grace in the cluster in Liess (2020:187-188).

(חזקו ויאמץ לבבכם) in Ps 31:25. This represents a tendency of collectivising (Barbiero 1999:486), moving toward teaching and shifting the focus to the congregation.

Faithful dedication is also extended to fellow believers, going from Ps 27:14 to Ps 31:25 by repeating that believers must “wait” for YHWH. Psalm 27 took up this theme from Ps 25:3, 5, and 25, where the psalmist twice said that he “waits” for YHWH. In Ps 27:14, the psalmist encourages himself to “wait” for YHWH, using the verb קוה in the *piel*, as in Ps 25. In Ps 31:25, waiting is expressed with the verb יחל in the *piel*, again used as a command but now directed at the in-group.

The expression יצפוני בסכה (“he will hide *me* in his shelter”) in 27:5 becomes תצפנם בסכה “you hide *them* in a shelter” in Ps 31:21. Again there is a pluralising at work, extending the favour of YHWH’s protection from the individual psalmist in Ps 27 to the group in Ps 31.

The description יסתרני אהלו in Ps 27:5 (“he will conceal *me* under *cover* of his tent”) also appears as a plural in Ps 31:21, תסתירם בסתר פניך (“you hide *them* in the *cover* of your presence”). It thus seems that Ps 31 as a whole is directed towards the plural exhortation at the end. Therefore, what YHWH did for the psalmist in Ps 27, he will also do for the in-group according to Ps 31.

However, from Ps 27 to Ps 31, the psalmist’s troubles seem to have increased.<sup>36</sup> This is suggested by the repetition of the verb “surround” and the preposition “around”. In Ps 27, he was certain about maintaining his honour. He says in Ps 27:6 that his head will be exalted above his enemies who “surround” (סביב) him. In Ps 31, this certainty is diminished. It is “terror” which now “surrounds” (סביב) him (Ps 31:14), and he has already become an object of “reproach” because of his adversaries (Ps 31:12). It should be added, however, that the problem of guilt is resolved in Ps 32. After having confessed his sins, the psalmist can assert that YHWH is a “hiding place” (סתר) for him, that he preserves him from “trouble” (צר), and “surrounds” (סבב *poel*) him with “shouts of deliverance” (32:7). The psalmist then teaches the in-group that the angel of YHWH encamps “around” (סביב) those who fear him and delivers them in Ps 34:8.

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36 Barbiero (1999:487) notes that laments, which characterised Pss 25-28, reappear in Ps 31. It is represented by the lexemes חנן, חנין, and צרר. The repetition of כשל from 27:2 in 31:11 shows, however, that the cause of distress is moved from the outside of the psalmist (enemies) to the inside of the suppliant, namely illness and sin. Sin and guilt were major causes of distress in Ps 25, however.

The psalmist's social isolation also increases from Ps 27 to Ps 31, but he is re-integrated into the group in Ps 34. In Ps 27:10, he says that, although even his father and mother have forsaken him, YHWH will "take him up". However, in Ps 31:12-13, his neighbours and acquaintances have also abandoned him and those who see him in the street flee from him. In Ps 34:4, he is eventually able to invite the in-group to praise YHWH with him, and he declares in verse 6 that the members of the in-group could look at him and rejoice because they were saved from humiliation. The resolution of all his troubles enables him to dedicate the greater part of Ps 34 to teaching the in-group to imitate his trust in YHWH.

##### 5. THE PROBABLE SOCIAL SITUATION BEHIND PS 31

Psalm 31 is well-integrated into the cluster Pss 25-31. From Ps 31 itself and the other members of the cluster, the in-group is profiled sharply: They consider themselves to be the righteous (צדיק) (31:19; 32:11; 33:1; 34:16, 20, 22) who are opposed by the wicked (רשע) (26:5; 28:3; 31:18; 32:10; 34:22). They are people who fear (ירא) YHWH (25:12, 14; 31:20; 33:18; 34:8, 10), who seek refuge (חסה) in him (25:20; 27:1, 4-5; 31:2, 20; 34:9, 23), who trust (בטח) him (25:2; 26:1; 27:3; 28:7; 31:7, 15; 32:10; 33:21). They wait (יחל, קוה) for him (25:3, 5, 21; 27:14; 31:25; 33:18, 22) to act on their behalf. They are humble and afflicted (25:16-18; 31:8; 34:7) but willing to confess their guilt (25:7, 11, 18; 31:11; 32:5; cf. 34:22-23) because they subject themselves to YHWH's guidance on the road of life (ידע *hiphil*, 25:4, 14; למד *piel*, 25:4, 5, 9; 34:12; דרך *hiphil*, 25:5; ירה *hiphil*, 25:8, 12; 27:11; 32:8; נחה 27:11; נהל *piel*, 31:4; יאץ 32:8). The implied author views himself as the servant (עבד, 29:9; 31:17; 34:23) of YHWH.<sup>37</sup> The in-group is also referred to as YHWH's servants (34:23). This is a privileged relationship since YHWH's servants will be redeemed from guilt (34:23). Yet, hunger and famine are real dangers for those who fear YHWH and seek him (רעב, 33:29; 34:11; ריש 34:11).

Their opponents are characterised by arrogant (עתק) (31:19) speech, lies (שקר) (27:12; 31:19), pride (גאווה) (31:19, 24) and contempt (בוז) for the righteous (31:19). Although they were probably also worshippers of YHWH, they are associated with idol worshippers (31:7). They want to cause shame (בוש) (25:2, 3, 20; 31:2, 18; 34:6) to the in-group. The presence of the "revolutionary motif" (in which YHWH saves the destitute

37 It is possible that he also refers to himself as YHWH's anointed (משוח, 28:8). The description is used in parallel to YHWH's people, so the reference to "his anointed" possibly refers to Israel as a whole.

by turning the tables on the wicked) points to the late Achaemenid period as the probable time of composition (Bremer 2017:197).<sup>38</sup> The presence of motifs which remind the reader of contexts in Proverbs, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Zephaniah also points to theological ideas from the post-exilic era.<sup>39</sup> There are also clear indications of the theology of the poor, pointing to the socio-economic situation in Judah in the Persian period. Van der Ploeg (1973:202) says that its language, style, and choice of words indicate its rather late composition.

To seek refuge in God (or a god) with *חסה* is a typical expression of the Psalms.<sup>40</sup> But, apart from the Psalms, it is rare. It is found in Deut 32:37, which can be dated to the post-exilic period. It is further found in Ruth 2:12 and 2 Sam 22:3 and 31 (which were carried over from Ps 18); in Prov 30:5; Isa 57:1; Nah 1:7, and Zeph 3:12. Its importance in the psalms seems to be related to the value that the editors of the Psalter, especially in Book I of the psalms, attached to it (cf. its prominence in Pss 2:12; 25:20; 34:9, 23).

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38 According to Bremer (2020:54-55), the end of the first book of Psalms gives evidence of the work of a circle of tradents who were critical of the cult, who associated themselves with the materially poor people and were conditioned by a sapiential understanding of poverty. He (Bremer 2020:58) finds it intriguing that the psalmist in Ps 25 identifies more strongly with the poor than in Ps 34 and that Ps 34 gives more evidence of the expectation of a “revolution” which would invert the societal structure (cf. also Bremer 2017:189). These differences make sense, however, when one reads the cluster as a unified composition aimed at using the experience of the psalmist to exhort the in-group to imitate him.

39 E.g., the willingness to “wait” for YHWH to punish evil in Prov 20:22; being “crushed in spirit” in Prov 17:22, 18:14, and Isa 66:2; the net spread out for the psalmist in Prov 1:17; to be “radiant” with joy in Jer 31:12, and “terror all around” in Jer 6:25, 20:10, 46:5 and 45:29. Jer 17:17-18 show remarkable parallels to Ps 31 (YHWH as a place of refuge, the fear of being shamed, the supplication that the persecutors be shamed instead). Zeph 3:11-13 is one of the important texts of the theology of the poor. YHWH would remove the arrogant leaders from Jerusalem so that only the humble and poor but righteous remnant would remain. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:193). According to Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:197), the description of the idols as “worthless” in Ps 31:7 can be traced to Jer 2:5, cf. also Jer 8:19, 10:8, 14:22. Being “cut off” from YHWH is an expression reminiscent of Isa 53:8, but there, cut off from “the land of the living” rather than from YHWH. But see the use of “the land of the living” in Ps 27:13, with which Ps 31 has strong connections.

40 Gerstenberger (1971:622) speaks of a strong concentration in the Psalter.

The possible connection between this term and the name Ἐσσηνοί (Essenes), which came into use in the Hellenistic period for a group of believers, is noteworthy (cf. Gerstenberger 1971:623).

The tradents who preserved and propagated the theology of humility and complete dependence on YHWH extolled in this cluster must have lived and worked in Jerusalem, at the temple, in the time after the exile. The importance of the temple in the cluster, notably in Pss 26, 27, 29, and 33, suggests that it was already rebuilt. Nevertheless, for the author of Pss 25 and 34, who also compiled the cluster as a whole, care for the poor was more important than the functioning of the cult or the bringing of sacrifices.<sup>41</sup> Psalm 33 seems to have been added after the cluster was assembled,<sup>42</sup> but it was also integrated into the group, bringing its own accent on YHWH as creator and king, thus confirming the theology of the centrepiece in Ps 29 (cf. Liess 2020:202-205).

Berges (2022:277) ascribe the similarity in “wordings, metaphors, and theological ideas” between Isaiah and Psalms to the possibility of the two compositions having been composed by neighbouring authors who had close contact at their workplace. He thus thinks of an “intellectual neighborhood” of “circles of tradents” (Berges 2022:279). There probably was only an extremely small number of skilled scribes who worked in close contact with one another at the temple in Jerusalem in the post-exilic period, although they represented divergent theologies (Berges 2022:279-280). Berges (2022:280) says that similarities in wording and theological ideas in Old Testament texts probably resulted from “skilled writers who created a network of cross references on purpose and with intellectual delight”. The criteria Berges uses to identify a literary relationship between Isaiah and Psalms, are consonance, rarity, and explainability (Berges 2022:281-282). One of those similarities, which also relates to the cluster Pss 25-34, is the usage of the term “servants” as a designation of the dedicated followers of YHWH in contrast to their enemies (Berges 2022:282).<sup>43</sup> Another is the

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41 This is Bremer’s view of the motivation which inspired the circle of tradents who identified with the poor during the Achaemenid period. Cf. Bremer (2017:199).

42 For an overview of the different views about how the cluster was assembled, see Weber (2021:255-256). The asymmetry of four psalms before the centre having to correspond to five psalms after the centre, the fact that Ps 33 does not have its own heading, and the deviating character of Ps 33 as a communal song of praise compared to the prominent role of the individual psalmist in the other psalms, require it to be connected with Ps 32.

43 Cf. Pss 27:9, 31:17, and 34:23.

promise contained in Isa 57:13b, that those who take refuge in YHWH shall possess the land and inherit the holy mountain (Berges 2022:287).<sup>44</sup> Berges limited his investigation to Isaiah 55-66, but there are also many similarities between Ps 31 and other books of the Hebrew Bible discussed above. These similarities strengthen his thesis.

The enmity the author of the cluster experienced came from foreigners (“idol worshippers”, cf. Ps 31:7) but also fellow Jews. In view of Berges’s theory, they could have been priests who considered themselves superior to other Jews and wanted to push the Levitical scribes out. These opponents caused them dishonour by acting arrogantly toward the in-group of the author. The in-group experienced such enmity and arrogance as wickedness and resolved to wait faithfully and patiently for YHWH to punish their arrogant opponents.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Psalm 31 should be read as part of the literary composition Psalms 25 to 34. The switch between laments about the psalmist’s physical and emotional suffering, pleas for help, and praise for YHWH’s intervention in Ps 31 should be read as part of the larger composition. The psalm is intricately linked to Ps 30 (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger 1993:193; Barbiero 1999:462-467; Weber 2001:156) and continues the thanksgiving for being rescued from death expressed in Ps 30:4. Yet some threats remain. The focus of the psalmist is to encourage fellow believers to stay faithful. The psalmist was plagued by guilt and persecution, especially disparaging and social isolation brought about by unscrupulous but more powerful opponents.

The psalmist stayed true to his resolution to trust YHWH for help, which brought relief in the form of protection from YHWH. As a result, his relationship with YHWH improved, and he realised that YHWH wanted to function as his guide on the road of life. YHWH also had goodness stored up for those who sought refuge in him. Consequently, he could encourage his fellow believers to stay true to YHWH, to wait for him to act, believing that he would protect them as he protected the psalmist and would shower them with his abundant goodness.

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44 Cf. Ps 25:13; 34:1. The cluster is characterised by the idea that the righteous are those who seek refuge in YHWH (25:20; 31:2, 20; 34:9, 23). The idea that those who “wait” for YHWH will not be put to shame (Isa 49:23) also has an echo in Ps 25:3.

In the circumstances during the Persian Period when the cluster was probably compiled, with psalms such as Pss 25, 33, and 34 being composed, while some older members (e.g., Ps 29) were edited, faithfulness implied the ability to stay faithful, acknowledge one's sins, do what is right, and put one's trust in YHWH to act according to his covenant love and righteousness. Faithfulness meant seeking refuge in YHWH, believing he would preserve the faithful from shame and eventually punish those who acted arrogantly because of their power, money, or political superiority. Faithful, resilient trust was the key that would unlock the door to YHWH's abundant goodness and happiness when the land was restored to the righteous.

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