

Psalm 118 and social values in Ancient Israel

Phil J Botha (UP)

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the dramatis personae mentioned in Psalm 118 is investigated to determine for whom the psalm was intended in its present form and what the author or final editor wanted to communicate with the composition. From this investigation is concluded that the psalm should probably be understood as a liturgy of thanksgiving of Israel. The setting that fits the psalm the best seems to be a celebration of Israel's restoration from international shame to a position of honour.

A INTRODUCTION

There are still a number of unresolved issues in the exegesis of Psalm 118. The most contentious issue that confronts the investigator seems to be the question about the identity of the individual who speaks in the greater part of the psalm (vv 5-21)¹ and who is probably to be identified with 'the stone which the builders rejected' that became the capstone (v 22). The stichometric demarcation, genre, date of origin and setting of the psalm and the translation and interpretation of a number of verses are consequently also involved. The verses that require special attention are verses 13, 24, and 27². According to Kraus (1966:803-804), the older exegesis tended towards interpreting the psalm as a national hymn of thanksgiving. The newer *Gattungsforschung*, he contends, has proved this improbable. The collective-political interpretation was thus gradually displaced by a more strict cultic approach. Kraus (1966:804) warns against interpreting the psalm within a cultic straitjacket, but also against jumping into an allegoric-eschatological mode of interpretation too quickly.

This paper presents an effort to analyse Psalm 118 as a medium of communication and social interaction. As such it will try to examine the social and theological dimensions of the psalm and to relate these to its literary structure. In doing so, it is hoped that a reasonable proposition can be made on

¹ Gunkel has made a major division between vv 4 and 5 and again between vv 21 and 22. The unifying principle in vv 5-21 is repetition of the idea 'I want to thank ...' according to him (Gunkel [1929] 1986:505). This kind of pronouncement is, however, also found in v 28, indicating that it is not the only principle at work.

² This last-mentioned verse is a *crux interpretum* according to Van der Ploeg (1974: 301).

socio-critical grounds about what and how the psalm was supposed to communicate³. The assumption used for this paper is that the text of Psalm 118 in its final form is a unity and that its different segments should be understood as a coherent whole⁴.

B TEXT AND TRANSLATION⁵

I	A	1	3	b/fAyKi hwyl' Wd/h	1	Praise Yahweh, for he is good;
			3	./DsJ' pI / [I] yKi		for ⁶ his kindness endures for ever!
		2	2	I arclj anArmlaye	2	Let Israel ⁷ say:
			3	./DsJ' pI / [I] yKi		'His kindness endures for ever.'
		3	2	:rnbA tybe anArmlaye	3	Let the house of Aaron say:
			3	./DsJ' pI / [I] yKi		'His kindness endures for ever.'
		4	3	hwyl' yarj anArmlaye	4	Let those who have respect for Yahweh say:
			3	./DsJ' pI / [I] yKi		'His kindness endures for ever.'
II	B	5	3	Hy: ytarq; rxMhA-mi	5	From distress I called on Yah;
			3	.Hy: bj rMB' ynh[:		Yah answered me, he set me free ⁸ .
		6	4	aryai al jyl i hwyl'	6	Yahweh is for me, I will not fear.
			3	.pda: yli hc, [YAhm'		What can humans do to me?
		7	3	yrz[B] yli hwyl'	7	Yahweh is for me to help me ⁹ ;
			3	.yanc[b] hara, ynlaj'		and I will look down on my haters.
	C	8	3	hwyl' B' t/sj]' b/f	8	It is better to take refuge in Yahweh
			2	.pdaB: j' f B] ni		than to rely on humans!

³ Cf the remarks by Elliott (1993:70) on the aim of social-scientific criticism.

⁴ Van der Ploeg (1974:292) is of the opinion that the unity of style in the psalm – namely that of a hymn – presents a convincing argument to regard the psalm as an original unity. Seybold (1996:459) would probably want to differ. He describes Ps 118 as 'ein liturgischer Text mit lockerem Gefüge' and refers to 11QPs^a that availed itself of this lack of interconnectedness to form an extract that it attached to Ps 136.

⁵ For the stichometric demarcation of the psalm into stanzas, strophes, and verse lines and a discussion of its poetic features, cf the accompanying paper by my colleague J H Potgieter.

⁶ Seybold (1996:459) assigns causative function to the first yk and emphatic function to the second. The parallel formed by 'he is good' and 'his kindness endures for ever' may be used to argue that both have the same function so that a parallelism is formed.

⁷ Kraus (1966:801, note a) changes this to 'the house of Israel' in accord with Pss 115:9 and 135:19 and the LXX. This seems to be too adventurous in view of the scanty textual evidence.

⁸ Literally 'he answered me in open space Yah', described by Kraus (1966:801 note b) as a 'Breviloquenz', a contracted utterance.

⁹ Literally 'among my helpers'. See Van der Ploeg (1974:297); Gesenius-Kautsch-Cowley (1910 § 119i).

		9	3	hwbyB' t/sj] ' b/f	9	It is better to take refuge in Yahweh
			2	.pybjdntBi j 'fB]mi		than to rely on nobles!
D		10	2	ynlWbbs] py/GAT K'	10	All nations surrounded me;
			4	.p l ymia) yKi hwby0 p vB]		in the name of Yahweh I warded ¹⁰ them off.
		11	2	ynlWbbs]Aµg'ynlWBS'	11	They completely surrounded me;
			4	.p l ymia) yKi hwby0 p vB]		in the name of Yahweh I warded them off.
		12	2	µyr'i/bdKi ynlWBS'	12	They surrounded me like bees;
			3	µyx/q vaK] Wk [Do		they were extinguished like a fire of thorns ¹¹ ,
			4	.p l ymia) yKi hwby0 p vB]		in the name of Yahweh I warded them off.
E		13	3	l Po0 i ynt]y] d] hj 0'	13	You pushed me hard ¹² so that I would fall,
			2	.ynlrz] hwhyw"		but Yahweh helped me.
		14	3	Hy: trmz0yZl:]	14	Yah is my power and my song ¹³ ;
			2	.h [Wkyl i yl Ayhj0"		yes he became my deliverance.
III	F	15	3	h [Wvym hlri l /q	15	There are triumphant shouts
			2	µyqjDix' yl h0B]		in the tents of the righteous:
			4	.l yj] ; hc:[o hwby0 =ymj0		'The right hand of Yahweh does mighty things.'
		16	3	hmmzr hwby0 =ymj0	16	The right hand of Yahweh is raised;
			4	.l yj] ; hc:[o hwby0 =ymj0		the right hand of Yahweh does mighty things ¹⁴ .
G		17	3	hyj; bAyKi tllma: al	17	I will not die, but I will live,
			3	.Hy: ycd [m' rPs'aj;		and I will proclaim the works of Yah.
		18	3	HY: yllr'Sj] rSp"	18	Yah has disciplined me severely,
			3	.ynhtn0al ; twWl w0		but he has not given me over to death.
H		19	2	qdxAyrd'v' yl AWj tPl	19	Open for me the gates of righteousness ¹⁵ ,

¹⁰ According to Brown, Driver & Briggs (*in loco*), a hi of the verb l Wm, 'to make circumcised'. However, Koehler & Baumgartner (*in loco*), posits a verb l Wm II in the hi, 'to ward off'.

¹¹ Various and ingenious proposals have been made to resolve the seeming textual problems in this verse. In these reconstructions and transpositions with the previous verse, too much weight has been given to the LXX ('surrounded me like bees the wax and they were extinguished'), which seemingly had difficulty in understanding the Masoretic text (cf Kraus 1966:801 note f). The reading of the text should be supported.

¹² The change to a ni perfect has no textual support. It is not necessary to understand Yahweh as the addressed (contra Kraus 1966:801 note g), since this would be in conflict with v 13b.

¹³ With ellipsis of the first singular pronominal suffix before Hy. Some think of another stem, having the meaning 'power', thus: 'Yahweh is my power and my strength'. But Van der Ploeg (1974:298) points out that all the ancient translations have taken this word as a synonym for 'song' and not for 'power'.

¹⁴ Watson (1986:182) mistakenly regards the similar feet in vv 15-16 as three cola of the same line.

			3	.Hy; hd/a ꞡbAaba;		so that I may enter through them and praise Yah.
		20	2	hwyl' r[VhAhz ²	20	This is the gate of Yahweh;
			3	./b Waby; ꞡycjDix'		the righteous may enter through it.
IV	I	21	3	ynftynl[]yKi öd/a	21	I praise you for you have answered me
			2	.h[Wvyl' iyl' Ayhil' j'		and you became my deliverance.
		22	3	ꞡyn/Bh' Wsah; :-ba,	22	The stone which the builders rejected
			3	.hWpI vard J htyh;		became the capstone.
	J	23	4	tazeh tyh; hwyl' taene	23	This came about through Yahweh;
			3	.Wyn[]B] tal phl ayhi		it is a wonder in our eyes.
		24	3	hwyl'hc[]; ꞡ/YhAhz ²	24	This is the day on which Yahweh did it;
			3	./b hj ꞡꞡꞡh' h' ygh;		let us shout with joy, let us rejoice in him ¹⁶ .
	K	25	4	all: h[yv/h hwyl' alla;	25	O Yahweh, please do save!
			4	.all: hj yl' ixh' hwyl' alla;		O Yahweh, please give success!
V	L	26	4	hwyl' ꞡv/B] aBh' JW rB;	26	Blessed is he who comes in the name of Yahweh!
			3	.hwyl' tyBani ꞡkllhkr' Be		We bless you from the house of Yahweh.
		27	4	Wnl ; raW' hwyl' ae	27	Yahweh is God; he let his light shine on us ¹⁷ .
			2	ꞡytbq' B' gj' AW r sai		Bind the feast with branches
			2	.j' BzW h' t' nrjq' Ad[]'		up to the horns of the altar! ¹⁸
	M	28	3	öd/aw' hTa' yl' ae	28	You are my God, I will praise you;
			2	.ömm/ra] yhl' a0		my God, I will exalt you.
		29	3	b/fAyKi hwyl' 'Wd/h	29	Praise Yahweh, for he is good,
			3	./Ds]j' ꞡl' / [] yKi		for his kindness endures for ever!

¹⁵ This may refer to gates within the temple precinct, but it can also be a reference to the city of Jerusalem (cf Is 1:26 qdXh' ry[i 'the city of righteousness') or simply a metaphorical expression for membership of the community of believers. Van der Ploeg (1974:299), however, sees in the expression in v 20 a definitive reference to the temple. Hamidović (2000:542 note 2) gives a list of 26 authors who feel sure that the doors of the temple are meant.

¹⁶ For an explanation of the translation given here, which clashes with the traditional interpretation, cf Becker (1998:44-51). Another possibility, the proposition of Berlin (1977:568) that it should be translated as 'This is what the Lord has done today; let us rejoice and exult in it' is proved to be improbable by Becker.

¹⁷ Literally 'he gave light to us', cf Nm 6:25, but there with the preposition la.

¹⁸ Anderson (1981:804) explains this expression as a reference to the *lulab*, a bundle of branches of myrtles, willows, and palms carried by worshippers in procession during the Festival of Tabernacles. He says that the altar was covered with the branches during the procession, referring to Mishnah Sukkah III:4 and IV:5f.

C THE SOCIAL FEATURES OF PSALM 118

1 The dramatis personae of Psalm 118 and their interaction

This psalm seems to be basically about the relationship of an individual believer with Yahweh¹⁹. However, the individual speaker understands himself to be also part of a group of Israelites that can be described as the in-group²⁰. It seems that the relationship between the individual and the group is determined by his relationship with Yahweh and vice versa. The psalmist also mentions another group of people that displays or displayed hostility towards the individual within the in-group. His relationship with Yahweh also has a bearing on the threat from this group of people, the out-group. It seems that the first person singular dominates in verbal forms, suffixes, and independent pronouns (36 instances). The in-group features in first, second, and third person plural forms as well as one third person singular form (14 instances). Yahweh is referred to in second and third person singular forms (21 instances). It is a spectacular feature of the psalm that the name Yahweh or Yah is used twenty-seven times in the psalm, and ‘God’ or ‘my God’ another three times. This must surely be one of the psalms with the highest density of divine references. A table of the verbal and suffixed forms is given below. There are also a number of miscellaneous elements, as can be seen from the table.

Person	Perfect	Imperfect	Jussive	Imperative	Suffix	Pronoun
First singular	v 5	vv 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 17, 17, 17, 19, 19, 21, 28, 28			vv 5, 6, 6, 7, 7, 7, 10, 11, 11, 12, 13, 13, 14, 14, 18, 18, 19, 21, 21, 28, 28	v 7
First plural	v 26	vv 24, 24			vv 23, 27	
Second singular	vv 13(?), 21 (Y)	v 21 (Y)		vv 25, 25 (Y)	vv 21, 28, 28 (Y)	v 28 (Y)

¹⁹ According to Kraus (1966:802), a choir piece that was to be sung by various voices (vv 1-4) was inserted before a song of thanksgiving of an individual (vv 5-21). Van der Ploeg (1974:292) is very sceptical about the use of choirs in the Ancient Near East. According to him, choirs sang only refrains.

²⁰ An in-group is defined as ‘any set 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).

Second plural				vv 1, 19, 27, 29 (in-group)	v 26 (in-group)	
Third singular	vv 5, 13 (Y), 16 (Hand of Y), 18, 18 (Y), 22 (stone), 23 ('this'), 24 (Y)	vv 6 (man), 14, 27 (Y)	v 2 (Israel)		vv 1, 2, 3, 4 (Y), 20 (gate), 24, 29 (Y)	v 23 (wonder)
Third plural	vv 10, 11, 11, 12, 12 (all nations), 22 (builders)	v 20 (righteous)	vv 3 (house of Aaron), 4 (Those who fear Yahweh)		vv 10, 11, 12 (all nations)	

This table does not yet give any indication of the interaction between the dramatis personae. Such interaction can perhaps be presented best diagrammatically. In the following figure, 'Y' stands for Yahweh and 'I' stands for the first person speaker or the 'Individual'. The 'In-group' represents all first, second, and third person references to the community; the 'out-group' all references to people from outside the community. Plus or minus signs are used to indicate a positive or negative state of affairs or result of action.

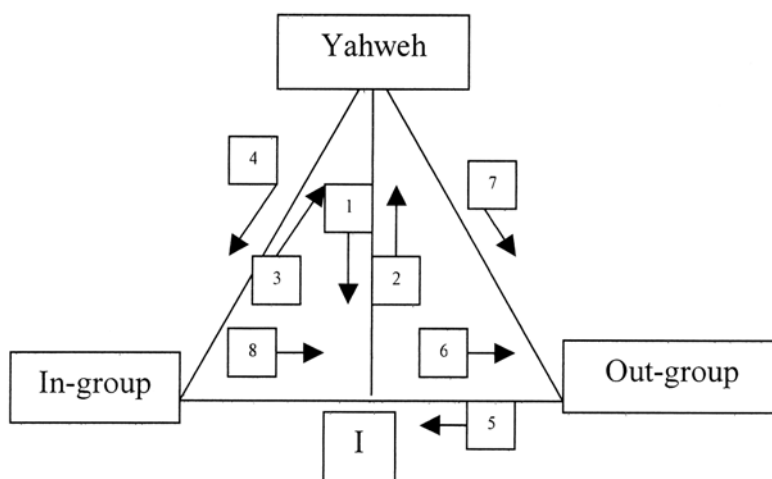


Figure 1: The relationship between the dramatis personae in Psalm 118

I	A	1	[You] must \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺ , for [Y] ⁺ , for [Y] ⁺
		2	[Israel] let \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺
		3	[House of Aaron] let \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺

		4	[Those who fear Y] let \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺
II	B	5	[I] ⁻ \rightarrow^2 [Y], [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺
		6	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ , not [I] ⁻ , [Humans] not \rightarrow^5 [I] ⁻
		7	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ to [I] ⁺ , [I] ⁺ \rightarrow^6 [Haters] ⁻
	C	8	[I] \rightarrow^2 [Y], then [I] ⁺ ; [I] not rely [Humans]
		9	[I] \rightarrow^2 [Y], then [I] ⁺ ; [I] not rely [Nobles]
	D	10	[All nations] \rightarrow^5 [I] ⁻ ; [I] \rightarrow^2 [Y] \rightarrow^7 [They] ⁻
		11	[They] \rightarrow^5 [I] ⁻ [I] ⁻ ; [I] \rightarrow^2 [Y] \rightarrow^7 [They] ⁻
		12	[They] \rightarrow^5 [I] ⁻ [I] ⁻ , [Y] \rightarrow^7 [They] ⁻ , [I] \rightarrow^2 [Y] \rightarrow^7 [They] ⁻
	E	13	[You] \rightarrow [I] ⁻ so that [I] ⁻ ; [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺
		14	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ , [I] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺
III	F	15	[Rigtheous] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺
		16	[Y] \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺
	G	17	not [I] ⁻ ; [I] ⁺ , [I] will \rightarrow^2 [Y] ⁺
		18	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁻ ; [Y] not \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁻
	H	19	[You] must \rightarrow^8 [I] so that [I] ⁺ \rightarrow^2 [Y] ⁺
		20	[Y] ⁺ ; [Y] \rightarrow [Righteous] ⁺
IV	I	21	[I] \rightarrow^2 [Y] ⁺ for [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺
		22	[Builders] \rightarrow [Stone] ⁻ ; [Stone] ⁺
	J	23	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [Stone] ⁺ , [Us] \rightarrow^4 [Y] ⁺
		24	[Y] \rightarrow^1 [Stone] ⁺ , [Us] ⁺ let \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺
	K	25	[Y] please \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺ , [Y] please \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺
V	L	26	[Y] \rightarrow [He who comes] ⁺ , [Us] \rightarrow [You] ⁺
		27	[Y] ⁺ , [Y] \rightarrow^4 [Us] ⁺ , [You] must \rightarrow^4 [Y] ⁺
	M	28	[Y] ⁺ \rightarrow^1 [I] ⁺ , [I] will \rightarrow^2 [Y] ⁺ , [I] will \rightarrow^2 [Y] ⁺
		29	[You] must \rightarrow^3 [Y] ⁺ , for [Y] ⁺ , for [Y] ⁺

Some statements in the psalm are ambiguous; it is not possible to plot all verbs in terms of relations at this stage. But it is clear that the psalm as a whole is mostly about what Yahweh has done for or to the believer (relation 1 – mentioned 14 times, 2 of these refer to the stone). Almost everything Yahweh did to the believer is experienced positively. Therefore, relation 2, interaction between the individual and Yahweh, features eleven times. The community is also involved in praising and thanking Yahweh, for relation 3 features six times. What Yahweh did to the community or does for them, is mentioned eight times (relation 4). Interaction between the individual and his enemies is mentioned four times with the individual as the object (number 5) and once with the enemies as the object (number 6). What Yahweh does or did to the enemies is mentioned four times (relation 7), and only once is the actions of the community with the individual as object mentioned, namely relation 8.

From this schematic representation, it can now be discerned that Yahweh's actions toward the first person speaker is indeed the main focus of the psalm. Yahweh interacts with the individual fourteen times. In twelve of these fourteen times the result is positive for the petitioner, once it is moderately negative (v 18:

‘Yah has disciplined me severely’); in the remaining instance the result is said to be ‘not negative’, it is therefore also positive. This is in verse 18b where this individual says ‘he has not given me over to death’. The other positive things that Yahweh is said to have done to or for the individual speaker include: to ‘answer’ him and ‘set’ him ‘free’ (v 5), to be in favour of him (‘for me’, vv 6 and 7), to be willing to help him (v 7), to be his ‘power and song’²¹ and to have become his help (v 14), to have ‘answered’ and have ‘become’ his ‘deliverance’ (v 21), and to be his ‘God’ (v 28). From this analysis, it seems reasonable to describe a major part of the poem as ‘a song of thanksgiving of an individual’²².

Relation number 2, the individual speaker’s actions that involve Yahweh, also features eleven times. This entails his ‘calling’ to Yahweh in distress (v 5); his acknowledgement that it is better to ‘take refuge in Yahweh’ than to rely on ‘humans’ or ‘nobles’ (vv 8 and 9), his consequent ‘warding off’ the enemy ‘in the name of Yahweh’ (v 10, v 11, and v 12); his ‘proclaiming’ the works of Yahweh (v 17); his desire to ‘praise Yahweh’ (v 19), his praising of Yahweh (v 19); and once again his intention of ‘praising’ and ‘exalting’ Yahweh (v 28 x 2). As has been noted above, the statement that Yahweh is his ‘song’ in verse 14 can also be taken as an expression of the desire to sing the praises of Yahweh.

A great deal of the psalm therefore is built up of sentences reminiscent of an individual’s song of thanksgiving. The elements that remind one of a lament of an individual²³ are essentially descriptions of past experiences that are employed as justification for praise and thanksgiving. Verse lines reminiscent of these two *Gattungen* also include the remarks about the threat of enemies (relation 5), the believer’s overcoming them in the name of Yahweh (relation 7); and a single instance of the individual’s remarking that he will ‘look down on’ his haters (v 7). This seems to place Psalm 118 clearly within Brueggemann’s (1980) third category of the functions of psalms, namely ‘psalms of reorientation or relocation, in which thanksgiving and praise affirm a reconstructed order that is no longer taken for granted because it has been won in pain and struggle and must be constantly rewon’²⁴.

By far the greater part of that which remains can be classified as having to do with the relationship between Yahweh and the community (relations 3 and 4) and between the individual spokesperson and the community (relation 8). The community of believers (similar to the individual) ‘praises’ Yahweh (v 1) and repeats the statement that ‘his kindness endures forever’ (vv 2, 3, and 4). They

²¹ This expression is a way of saying ‘Yahweh helped me through his power and thus I will sing to him’. Koehler & Baumgartner (1958:260), however, suppose the existence of a word *trmḥi* that is a synonym for ‘power’.

²² So also Kraus (1966:802).

²³ Gunkel ([1929] 1986:506) notes that the phrase ‘I will not fear ...’ is typical of an expression of trust in the lament of an individual.

²⁴ Cf also Gottwald (1987:537).

‘rejoice’ in him (v 24) and they ‘praise him’ once more because of his ‘kindness’ that ‘endures forever’ (v 29). Because of what Yahweh has done (to the individual, it seems), there are ‘triumphant shouts among²⁵ the righteous’ that ‘his right hand is raised’ and that it ‘does mighty things’ (v 15 and v 16)²⁶. In verse 23 Yahweh is thanked for the miracle that he caused to happen, namely that the ‘stone’ that was rejected eventually became the capstone or the cornerstone of the building. This is taken as statements about the individual for the time being. Finally, in verse 25 Yahweh is asked to ‘save’ and to ‘give success’.

The individual speaker is portrayed as someone who stands in isolation or has stood in isolation to a certain extent. He forms part of the in-group, but there are also possible signs of friction between himself and the community. While the ‘humans’ of verse 6 should definitely be taken as a reference to the antagonist out-group, the ‘humans’ and ‘nobles’ of verses 8 and 9 are possibly representatives of the in-group²⁷. In both instances ‘humans’ form an antithesis with Yahweh, but because of his relationship with Yahweh, ‘humans’ also stand in opposition to the faithful individual. Humans should not be feared on the one hand, but neither should they be relied upon on the other hand. Possibly members from the religious community have proved that they are not always worthy of trust and sometimes fail to guarantee an honourable existence²⁸. When the individual was surrounded by ‘all nations’, he stood and fought alone. There is a twitch of annoyance in verses 8 to 12: ‘no one helped me except Yahweh, I stood completely alone’.

When this isolation in the second stanza is noticed, it helps one to interpret the difficult verse 13: ‘You pushed me hard so that I would fall, but Yah helped me’. The verb is a second person masculine singular. Instead of changing this to a passive as many modern translations do²⁹, it should perhaps be understood as

²⁵ Literally ‘in the tents of the righteous’. ‘Tents’ are probably used as a metaphor for the religious community that is strongly reminiscent of the Exodus tradition.

²⁶ These expressions also remind the reader of the Exodus and Holy War scenes.

²⁷ According to Van der Ploeg (1974:297) the ‘nobles’ refers to important members of the own nation.

²⁸ Trust or hope is a means-value that serves to attain or maintain the core value of honour through the system of patronage. Cf Pilch (1998c:202).

²⁹ Even the translator of the Septuagint felt that it made no sense to have the first person speaker address an enemy or an adversary. The form yntyj d was consequently read as a nif'al first person perfect (‘I was pushed’). Despite the evidence of the LXX, this emendation is as hypothetical as any. In close proximity to a niph'al perfect, one would probably have expected a niph'al infinitive absolute rather than a qal, although this combination is not impossible. Only two verses containing a qal inf abs qualifying a niph'al perfect could be found in the Hebrew Bible, namely in Mi 2:4 and Nah 3:13. In contrast, there are about 64 instances of a qal inf abs qualifying a qal perfect and 7 instances of a niph'al inf abs qualifying a niph'al perfect.

an indication that all has not always been well in the individual's relationship with the in-group³⁰. The antagonism of verse 13 is also perhaps a reference to the 'discipline' of verse 18. The petitioner was pushed with the intention of letting him fall. While he ward off the attack of 'all nations' (vv 10-12), from within the community he experienced opposition that almost caused him to falter (v 13). This he interprets as a disciplining of Yahweh (v 18), or so it seems. Fortunately, Yahweh has not given him over to death. For that reason he is entitled to ask the community to restore him within their ranks. He asks that 'the gates of righteousness' be opened for him (v 19)³¹. Verse 20 may be the response of the community, admitting the individual and acknowledging his membership of the community of 'righteous'. It may also be part of the claim of the individual that he, as one of the 'righteous', may enter through the gates.

Stanza I is a call to the community to praise Yahweh. It seems that the whole community is involved and that different voices are heard with the same refrain of thanking Yahweh. In the second stanza, the individual gives thanks to Yahweh for having answered and helped him, thereby proving to be much more trustworthy than humans. Yahweh proved faithful as a place of refuge and he helped the petitioner to overcome his enemies. In Stanza III it is described how the victory of the individual speaker gives cause for shouts of victory among the community of righteous. On those grounds he asks to be restored as a member of the community. It seems that his request is answered, for Stanza IV begins with the personal praise of the individual speaker to Yahweh. He is not only restored to the community, but possibly also becomes their leader. This fact is stated metaphorically: the stone that was rejected at first is now given the place of honour. As such the individual is welcomed in the name of Yahweh (v 26), for the community recognises that his election and reinstatement is the doing of Yahweh (v 23). This gives rise to cries of joy and rejoicing (v 24), but also to petitions for national salvation and success (v 25)³².

As was already hinted at, verse 26 should then be understood as a welcoming address by the community to the individual speaker. The election of this individual is seen as a blessing from Yahweh. It is interpreted as Yahweh who let

³⁰ Although it must be conceded that the verb may reflect a metaphor of aggression from personal enemies (pushing someone's foot to cause stumbling) when compared to Pss 56:14; 116:8 and 140:5 (Seybold 1996:460).

³¹ Kraus (1966:802) refers to the parallel in Is 26:2: 'Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter'.

³² Mowinckel ([1923] 1966 V:34) describes this prayer – within his model of Ps 118 as a 'Prozessionsliturgie des Laubhüttenfestes' – as a prayer that Yahweh may bless the day so that the festival and everything associated with it, may contribute to the well-being of the congregation.

his face shine upon the community, giving cause for celebrations within the sanctuary (v 27)³³.

The community consists of different subgroups, according to the psalmist. 'Israel', 'the house of Aaron', and 'those who have respect for (or 'fear') Yahweh' are mentioned in verses 1-4. It is interesting to note that the designations 'house of Israel', 'house of Aaron', and 'those who fear Yahweh' are concentrated within the book of Psalms in the vicinity of Psalm 118. In Psalm 115:9-10 Israel, Aaron, and those who fear Yahweh are named and again in Psalm 115:12-13: 'he will bless the house of Israel, he will bless the house of Aaron, he will bless those who fear Yahweh'; in Psalm 135:19-20 there is another interesting parallel: 'Bless (thus: 'praise') Yahweh, O house of Israel; bless Yahweh, O house of Aaron; bless Yahweh, O house of Levi; you that fear Yahweh, bless Yahweh.'

It seems that, within the group of psalms from Psalm 115 to Psalm 135, certain terms were used to identify and address particular groups of people in the community of believers³⁴. In Psalm 135 there is an extra name to reckon with, namely the 'house of Levi'. Levi, the son of Jacob, was an ancestor of Aaron and, for that matter, of all the priests. In post-exilic books there is an explicit distinction made between priests and Levites. According to De Vaux (1974:364), the book of Ezekiel especially contrasts the Levites with the Levite priests. The Levites seem to have been inferior in rank to the Levite priests, although they are also accepted and acknowledged to be among the clergy (De Vaux 1974:364). The additional mentioning of the 'house of Levi' in Psalm 135 strongly suggests that the phrase 'house of Aaron' in Psalm 118 refers to a group of priests. It is possible that different groups of people took turns to speak (antiphonally?)³⁵

³³ Anderson (1981:804) refers to Am 5:18 and Es 8:16 and suggests that the meaning may be 'he has given us victory'.

³⁴ The idea that 'those who fear Yahweh' is an inclusive description of proselytes (found in many commentaries since Gunkel ([1929] 1986:506) should be discarded. It is a description used in various contexts in the Hebrew Bible to refer to all faithful Israelites, not 'die Randgemeinde der Nichtisraeliten' as Seybold (1996:459) still insists. There is no indication in the text that they form a different category or have limited access to the presence of Yahweh. The Israelites (v 2) should be seen as comprising the Aaronite priests (v 3) and those who fear Yahweh, a covenant term (v 4).

³⁵ Gottwald (1987:531) seems to think so. Mowinckel ([1924] 1966 VI:29) describes it as one of the group of 'Kultische Hymnen und vorwiegend hymnische "mehrstimmige Liturgien"'. Weiser (1955:499) describes vv 1-4 as 'ein Chor-Bekenntnislied, das mit verteilten Stimmen von der ganzen Festgemeinde gesungen wird'. Vv 5-21 is then the individual thanksgiving, sung by the king, according to him.

within a liturgy to which Psalm 118 is related in one way or another³⁶. In the first four verses as a group, one voice could have been heard, but it is also possible that three or four persons or groups of persons could have spoken the words.

2 Honour and shame as a social dynamic of Psalm 118

It seems that the relations between the different players in Psalm 118 are determined to a great extent by the social values of honour and shame. First of all, there is the honour of Yahweh. He is described throughout the psalm as deserving of honour. In his covenant relationship to his people, Israel, (and to the individual) he has proved himself to be ‘good’ (vv 1, 29). The word *dsj* is a covenant term³⁷ and it is used parallel to *bwf* ‘good’ in these two verses. Because Yahweh honoured his obligations to Israel, he should be ‘praised’. It is repeated five times in the psalm that Yahweh’s ‘kindness endures for ever’ (vv 1-4, 29). The reader also hears the ‘triumphant shouts in the tents of the righteous’ that ‘the right hand of Yahweh does mighty things’. Power, represented in this psalm through the words ‘my power’ (v 14), ‘right hand’ (vv 15-16), ‘mighty things’ (vv 15-16) and ‘raised’ (v 16) is a means-value to obtain the core value of honour (Pilch 1998b:158). Yahweh has intervened on their behalf. This is stressed through repetition (vv 15 and 16). Yahweh has complied with covenant obligations and he is therefore worthy of the praise of the community. This is also stressed through repetition. The voice of the community is also heard in the role of praising Yahweh in verses 23-24: ‘This (the election of the stone which the builders rejected) came about through Yahweh’ and ‘it is a wonder’ in the eyes of the community. They consequently want to shout with joy and rejoice in Yahweh (v 24). Similar statements are made in verse 27 where Yahweh’s grace and intervention are described as ‘Yahweh is God, he let his light shine on us’. Comparison of this phrase with Numbers 6:25 shows that it also indicates that Yahweh has acted in accord with the obligations of the covenant.

Despite the positive remarks about Yahweh and his acts of grace towards the community, however, it might seem that there is also uncertainty with regard to their future. In verse 25 there are parallel requests for Yahweh to ‘save’ and to ‘give success’. But since this verse comes at the end of a stanza full of praise for Yahweh for what he has done, it seems that the present situation of the

³⁶ According to Kraus (1966:802), this notion is strengthened through the later Jewish tradition as portrayed in the Targum and the Talmud, *Pesahim* 119a. Van der Ploeg (1974:293-294), however, shows that this is simply a spurious rabbinic tradition that held the idea that the psalm originated at the anointing of David. The different ‘voices’ are ascribed to David, his father Jesse, Samuel, and David’s brothers.

³⁷ The word *dsj* describes a debt of interpersonal obligation for unrepayable favours received. Beneficiaries owe such a debt of gratitude to their benefactors. But those, toward whom one has such a debt, in this case Yahweh, are equally obliged to maintain the relationship by further favours. See Malina (1998a:92). Olyan (1996:201) discusses the important role of honour and shame in covenant relations.

community cannot be too hard to deal with. This verse is followed by another stanza that also speaks of celebration and praise. As a consequence, it seems reasonable to interpret the expressions in verse 25 more generally as requests for the continued involvement of Yahweh in the community's affairs. This psalm definitely cannot be described as corresponding to a hermeneutics of convention (celebrating creation, wisdom, retribution, etc) or suspicion (laments of people whose world has fallen apart), but rather to that of re-presentation (in which thanksgiving and praise affirm a reconstructed order that is no longer taken for granted)³⁸.

Although the community itself is not described as having experienced shame, the individual petitioner in this psalm has indeed experienced some trying situations and shame. He has experienced 'distress' (v 5), he still has 'haters' to contend with (v 7), he was surrounded by people from other (heathen) nations ('all nations', v 10) whose intentions were unfriendly or even hostile like those of a swarm of bees, and he was 'pushed hard' by someone who had the intention of letting him fall (v 13). These statements form a claim to honour for the individual speaker. In verses 10-12 he avails himself of exaggeration or over-assertion (hyperbole – 'all nations surrounded me', 'they completely surrounded me', 'I was pushed hard'). This 'dramatic orientation' is a means of enhancing personal honour (Pilch 1998a:50)³⁹. The expectation to 'look down' on one's haters is similarly a claim to be honoured more than they (v 7).

It is probably the pushing that the individual speaker describes as Yahweh's disciplining him severely (v 18, another instance of dramatising). And it is quite possible that he is also referring to himself when he says that the 'stone which the builders rejected became the capstone'⁴⁰. The way in which the stanzas are demarcated in the stichometry implies that verse 21 should be connected to verse 22. This implies that the two verses refer to the same event ('I praise you for you have answered me and you became my deliverance'). Verse 23 also refers to this episode, but from the perspective of the community: 'This came about through Yahweh; it is (or was) a wonder in our eyes'. The capstone or cornerstone is a stone that serves an important function in the erection of a

³⁸ The terms were coined by Brueggemann (1980:3-32) and refer to modes of secure meaning (in psalms of orientation), radically doubted meaning (in psalms of disorientation or dislocation), and – as in this case – psalms of reorientation or relocation, reaching 'a new level and depth of meaning that does not forget the doubt' (Gottwald 1987:537).

³⁹ Kraus (1966:805) describes these statements as motifs or images from the royal psalms or possibly as referring to a situation in which the suppliant really had to contend with hostile heathens.

⁴⁰ It is impossible to be certain whether it is the individual who speaks or the group. V 21 is spoken in the first person singular; v 23 seemingly in the first person plural. V 20 could be linked to either of these.

building. Consequently it occupies a place of honour⁴¹. What is described through this proverb is the reversal of prominence, and prominence is related to honour⁴².

It therefore seems that the individual voice that is heard in this psalm is the voice of someone who has experienced shame: adversity, threats from an out-group, lack of support from the in-group (or a neutral out-group), discipline from Yahweh, even some attempts to dislodge him from a secure and honourable position (being rejected like a stone by builders), and a brush with death (v 17), but that he was nevertheless instated or reinstated in the position of honour through the intervention of Yahweh. From a position of shame and possibly a threat to his life, he has regained his standing. The threat from humans (v 6) and the lack of support from fellow humans (vv 8 and 9) were overcome by trust in and help from Yahweh. With his help the threat was warded off. For that reason the individual speaker is in accord with the community when it comes to praising Yahweh (cf vv 14⁴³, 17, 19, 21, and 28). Through Yahweh's intervention he can confidently state that his enemies have been vanquished (v 12, an expression indicating that they have been shamed)⁴⁴, and that he will look down on his haters (v 7). The community can therefore open the gates of righteousness for him (an expression indicating the conferment of honour)⁴⁵. Entering through the gates of righteousness indicates inclusion in the sphere of the righteous (Kraus 1966:807)⁴⁶. He regained his honour when Yahweh answered him (vv 5, 21), helped him (vv 13-14) and saved him (vv 14 and 21). By some act or consequence he was dislodged from his place in society. This could have been the

⁴¹ Cf the positive connotation given to *hnp̄i* in the semantic field of words in Zch 10:4. The association of 'head' with honour is well known and need not be argued.

⁴² Prominence is an evaluative label which is used in acclaiming a person or thing to be of social worth and thus worthy of priority. Priority reversal can be described as the reversal of roles, so that the first will be last, et cetera. Such a reversal is sometimes seen as 'an act of patronage on the part of Yahweh which disrupts established priorities and structures ...' (Seeman 1998:166-169).

⁴³ If *trmj* in v 14 is understood as 'song' (so Brown, Driver & Briggs (*s v*) and Gesenius in Tregelles 1954:248) and not a synonym for 'power' (so Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:260).

⁴⁴ 'Defeat means shame pure and simple' (Ford 1998:45).

⁴⁵ 'Honor is closely connected with justice, righteousness, and peace – key terms in the covenant vocabulary of the OT' according to Harrelson (1962:639-640).

⁴⁶ To deduce from this expression that the gates of the inner court of the temple are meant, since only Israelites were allowed to enter (Van der Ploeg 1974:293), seems to be stretching the evidence. Anderson (1981:797) states it as a fact that the psalm 'was performed at the Temple gates'. Since he thinks that the speaker is probably the king (1981:797), he naturally dates the psalm before the Exile (*ibid*). According to him (Anderson 1981:798), a representative of the community rather than the personified Israel or some ordinary worshipper should be considered as the speaker of vv 5ff if the psalm should prove to be post-Exilic after all.

result of sin or suspicion or an act of Yahweh. The ‘gates of righteousness’ in verse 19 refer to the ‘border post’ between purity and pollution. To re-enter the group of righteous people, some kind of ceremony or ritual was needed. This is possibly the setting of the psalm as a whole: a ceremony of restoration and return to the religious community or a celebration in commemoration of such an event.

Through the intervention of Yahweh, the individual petitioner is thus restored to his position of honour in the community, or so it seems. His election⁴⁷ is interpreted as an act of Yahweh (v 23) and nothing less than a miracle (v 23). It is a sign of mercy on the part of Yahweh, for he let his light shine on the community (v 27). The individual is consequently accepted and welcomed back into the community: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of Yahweh!’ (v 26). To understand this phrase, reference can once again be made to the blessing formula in Numbers 6 (v 24). The blessing used to send Israel away has some parallels with the greeting formula ‘we bless you in the name of Yahweh’ or ‘we bless you from the house of Yahweh’⁴⁸.

3 The identity of the individual and the group

It is not clear who the individual speaker is whose voice is heard in the psalm. All that can be said is that if he were indeed an individual person, he must have come from the top level of the social hierarchy. Even in this small section of society, he would seem to have been an important person: a priest, a scribe, a king, or another similar senior official. There is also the possibility that the individual is a representative of a group of people⁴⁹. Each member of the community to which the description would apply, would then think of himself or herself as speaking these words. Many modern religious songs similarly coin the experiences of a segment of society in personal, first person singular phrases. If this is the case, then the identity of the ‘individual’ should be sought in the existence of such a group of people who were pushed aside and temporarily became marginalized. The remarks in verses 8 and 9 that one should rather rely on Yahweh than on humans and nobles would perfectly fit such a situation. The social-critical description of such a relationship is ‘patronage’ and the problem defined here was a common one among social clients, namely that they did not

⁴⁷ Rather than his rescue from death as Kraus (1966:807) seems to understand. Being rejected as a stone for building purposes suggests that shame has come over the individual, not a life-threatening situation. This is also how Kraus (1966:808) describes it a little further on.

⁴⁸ Cf Dt 28:6, Ruth 2:4 and Ps 129:8.

⁴⁹ It should be remembered that the people of the Bible were dyadic, dependent on the group for their sense of identity. Cf Neyrey (1998:94). Mowinckel ([1922] 1966 III: 63 note 1) considers Ps 118 to be a cultic psalm ‘in denen die Gemeinde, dem altisraelitischen Denken gemäß, als eine Einheit und im Sgl. Redend auftritt’.

have an assurance of aid from the patron in difficult circumstances⁵⁰. That is why Yahweh is depicted as a better patron than humans.

It is important to note the convergence of the fate of the community and that of the individual (or ‘individual’ who represents a group) in the third and fourth stanzas. Immediately after the individual’s declaration that ‘Yah is my power and my song; yes he became my deliverance’ (at the end of Stanza II), the reader hears the triumphant shouts from the righteous that ‘the right hand of Yahweh does mighty things’⁵¹. Exactly the same word (h[wy]) is used for ‘deliverance’ and ‘triumphant’ in verses 14 and 15. This establishes a strong connection between the salvation of the individual and the praise of the community for that intervention. The same happens in verses 21 to 24. It also seems from verses 26 to 27 that the return of the individual to the community is interpreted as Yahweh’s letting his light shine on the congregation⁵². In fact, all the stanzas relating to the experiences of the individual are set within sentences of communal praise at the beginning and end of the psalm.

There are therefore many indications in the psalm that point in the direction of explaining the experiences of the individual in this psalm as that of a group of people⁵³. There are the links with a covenant setting (for instance, the mentioning of the covenant term *dsj* and Yahweh’s letting his light shine on the congregation⁵⁴), there is a mentioning of national enemies (the ‘nations’ who surround the ‘individual’ fit the context of a group of people much better)⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ Cf Malina (1998b:153).

⁵¹ There is another parallel here with Is 26, namely Is 26:11 where it says: ‘O Yahweh, your hand is lifted high *ōdly; hmr; hwhyt*. In that song, a song that will be sung in Judah when Jerusalem is restored (Is 26:1), it is prayed that the gates of Jerusalem be opened for the returning righteous nation.

⁵² This is another phrase from the priestly blessing in Nm 6 and signifies Yahweh’s honouring his obligations by being present in a beneficial way or by making an appearance in the temple.

⁵³ Kraus (1966:806) notes that the song of thanksgiving of the individual from v 14 onwards is situated within the praise of the community (‘er versetzt sein Danklied ganz hinein in den Lobpreis des Gottesvolkes’). Van der Ploeg (1974:292) thinks of someone who represents Israel who had been saved from enemies. Anderson (1981:797) says that the speaker in vv 5-21 seems to be the king or a representative of the nation, so that the whole psalm ‘concerns essentially the fortunes of the entire community’.

⁵⁴ The salvation that the individual has experienced personally is linked inseparably with the salvation of the community as a whole (Kraus 1966:806). Kraus (1966:808) also traces the expression ‘Yahweh is El’ (v 27) to the ancient festival of the Covenant Renewal.

⁵⁵ Unless the individual considers himself to be a member of the nation who had to contend with heathen nations many times in the past as Van der Ploeg (1974:297) suggests. Anderson (1981:800-801) considers three possibilities: Foreign enemies in a particular situation are referred to; the description is part of the ritual

apply to a group of people from the northern kingdom, Israel, who had been oppressed after the fall of Samaria and now returns to the community in Jerusalem. It would also serve as a description of the people of Judah after the fall of Jerusalem. Both Israel and Judah were continually surrounded by hostile nations; they were pushed by their neighbours and by the great powers to make them fall. They over and over again experienced how treacherous allies and nobles – even their own leaders – can be and that it is much better to trust Yahweh than humans. They seemed on many occasions to be a dying nation (vv 17-18), but Yahweh helped them. It seemed that they were rejected and forsaken in God's project of building a kingdom, but miraculously they were saved to become the cornerstone of God's kingdom⁶². That Yahweh saved the nation or a group of Israelites from oblivion is a wonder, a miracle. By having done this, he proved himself to be powerful (vv 15-16) and to honour his covenant by restoring their honour (vv 1-4). He mercifully let his light shine on his people (v 27). This would give occasion for shouts of joy and celebration (vv 15 and 27). And it may be that the psalm celebrates all such events in the history of Israel.

Psalm 118 should therefore probably be seen as a song or liturgy of thanksgiving of Israel itself⁶³. If this were the case, some references to the in-group could apply to Israel's neighbours and allies (for instance vv 8-9). As a nation, Israel experienced animosity from the out-group, described as 'all the nations' (vv 10-12). The 'in-group' on an international level, her allies, showed a lack of concern (vv 8-9) and even some attempts to get rid of her (v 13). This period of suffering (possibly during exile) is interpreted as a 'disciplining' by Yahweh (v 18). But through Yahweh's intervention on behalf of them, the matter was resolved and they could take up their place in the international community again ('I will not die, but I will live' vv 17-18). This occurrence is described metaphorically as the choosing of a previously rejected stone⁶⁴ for the position of honour in the building (v 22).

In gratitude for his display of covenantal kindness, Yahweh is praised by all Israelites. The other references to the in-group in verses 19, 20 and 26 should then be taken as references to those who officially control entrance to the community of righteous or to Jerusalem or the temple as a holy area. David Hamidović (2000) has argued that the references to 'gates' in verses 19 and 20 should be taken as the gates of Jerusalem and not the doors of the temple or

⁶² Gunkel ([1929] 1968:509) thinks that this simply refers to the individual who comes to thank God and is (for the moment!) the centre of attention. As was noted above, however, what is described is the reversal of prominence: what was not considered acceptable has now become the most honoured through the intervention of Yahweh.

⁶³ This is in any case the frame within which the individual-sounding song of thanksgiving is set. Gunkel notes that the phrase 'Let Israel say ...' is typical of this genre (Gunkel [1929] 1986:505).

⁶⁴ Yahweh would then be the subject of this action and one could think of Israel's insignificance in Egypt or the trauma of exile as points of reference for this saying.

temple court⁶⁵. The parallels with Isaiah 26, a song in which it is asked that the gates (of Jerusalem) be opened so that the righteous nation may enter, make such an interpretation possible. The gates of righteousness would then refer to the gates of Jerusalem. Isaiah 26 also refers to the hand of Yahweh being raised and asks for the enemies to be put to shame and consumed by Yahweh's fire of judgement (Is 26:11). If Israel as a whole is meant, verse 19 should be interpreted as a call to those who control access to Jerusalem or the temple, a group of Israelite leaders or priests: 'Allow me to return!' Perhaps such a post-exilic setting in which Israel's restoration from international shame to a position of honour is celebrated is the best solution after all. Such a celebration could have taken place during the Feast of Tabernacles, which would explain the mentioning of 'tents'⁶⁶ and 'foliage'⁶⁷ and 'light'⁶⁸ in the psalm. It could also have been used at the Feast of Passover, which would explain its use in the liturgy of this festival during the first century of the Common Era⁶⁹, the connection with Exodus 15 and the way in which segments of this psalm were used during the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem.

⁶⁵ His argument is that justice is the prerequisite for entry into a city in the Bible and extra-biblical material; while, on the other hand, purity is always the prerequisite for entry into a temple. The association of the gates with justice is shown *inter alia* by the fact that court cases were heard in the gates: 'la porte est un lieu où la justice est rendue' (Hamidović 2000:548). Justice or righteousness implies that sins have been punished and divine pardon has been given. After gaining entry into Jerusalem in vv 19 and 20, the community gives thanks to Yahweh in vv 21-25 before arriving at the temple with v 26.

⁶⁶ Cf v 15. De Vaux (1974:497-498) speaks of the feast of 'Booths' or 'Tabernacles' (תּוֹכָס) being called 'the feast of Tents' in later texts like 2 Macc 10:6-8 and Josephus' *Ant.* XIII, xiv, 5. This last reference is wrong, however (it should be *Antiquities* Book XIII Chapter *xiii* Paragraph 5). In the translation consulted (Whiston 1982, cf under Josephus) the name used is 'feast of tabernacles'. The other text that refers to 'tents' (טוּלְהָא) and 'feast' or 'meeting' (דְּלִמְמָה) is Hs 12:10, but De Vaux (1974:497) is doubtful whether this refers to the feast. He thinks rather simply of the desert period.

⁶⁷ As מַיְתוּבֵי can also be translated, cf v 27.

⁶⁸ Cf v 27. De Vaux (1974:496) says that even in New Testament times 'the leading figures in the community ... would dance in the Temple courtyards, singing and brandishing lighted torches'.

⁶⁹ Seybold (1996:10) refers to mPes 4:7; 9:3; tPes 3[4]:11; Mt 26:30, and Mk 14:26 to prove the connection of the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113-118) with Passover. He says that the leading motif of the corpus is the Exodus tradition and classifies Pss 116 and 118 as texts from the end of this liturgy, forming the thanksgiving.

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Phil J Botha, Department of Ancient Languages, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa. *E-mail: phil.botha@up.ac.za*