

“Better is the Little That the Righteous Has than the Abundance of Many Wicked” (Ps 37:16): Social and Moral Stratification in Late Persian-Period Judah as Reflected by Psalm 37

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Abstract

This paper offers a social-scientific analysis of Psalm 37, aiming to define its ideological purpose and textual strategy. The psalm is also read as part of the sequence of Pss 35–37 as it was arranged by the editors of Book I of the Psalms. Financial deprivation and public humiliation of a moral upright minority by an immoral upper class seem to have caused growing discontent and feelings of aggression among the psalmist’s in-group. The author of Psalm 37 assumes the role of a wisdom teacher in order to reprimand, exhort and encourage members of the in-group to stay true to their faith under trying circumstances.

Keywords: Psalm 37; social-scientific analysis; wisdom psalm; righteous; wicked

Introduction

Psalm 37 shares some peculiar features with Pss 25 and 34, the psalms which form the bookends of the cluster 25–34; these two psalms have many similarities since they were evidently composed by the editors to correspond to one another. For example, they have the same (unique) acrostic arrangement of verse lines and conspicuous wisdom orientation, although Ps 25 is composed in the style of a lament and Ps 34 in that of a psalm of thanksgiving.

Psalm 37 also has an acrostic form,¹ although it has twice as many verse lines as Pss 25 and 34, with only every second line beginning with the next letter of the alphabet. It also has a strong presence of wisdom forms and images and reflects a similar ideological orientation. However, it is closer to Ps 34 than to Ps 25 in terms of its teaching configuration. About 60% of the text of Ps 25 can be described as direct supplications to Yahweh, with the rest of the verse lines constituting wisdom teaching. In Pss 34 and 37, in contrast to this, the speaker or implied author openly assumes the role of a wisdom teacher who aims to reprimand, exhort and encourage the audience. There are no explicit supplications made in these two psalms. Psalm 37 is even more authoritative, argumentative, and assertive than Ps 34. The wisdom speaker responds, as it were, on behalf of Yahweh to the complaints lodged in Ps 35 (Barbiero 1999, 579). In Ps 34 there still is an element of confession and the approach of the speaker is more invitational. He is presented as a typical member of the in-group addressed in the psalm. Advice is offered about how to achieve happiness and fulness of life (cf. 34:13–15). In Ps 37, prohibitions, commands, and wisdom aphorisms dominate the tone. The functions of the psalm can thus be described as primarily regulatory, persuasive, critical, informative, and group-defining in terms of the possible functions listed by Elliott (1993, 54). The speaker associates himself with the in-group but emerges more strongly as their leader or teacher than is the case in Pss 25 and 34. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Pss 25, 34 and 37 were not composed at the same time or by the same circle of authors.² The same convictions are visible in all three psalms and they probably originated during the same time. They have also been carefully linked to one another by the editors of the Psalms,³ who may have been involved in composing them.

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- 1 The acrostic form is broken in 37:28c, which should have begun with *ṽ*. Various emendations have been proposed, but it is better to accept the text with the probable error as is.
 - 2 It would be a mistake to ascribe Pss 25 and 34 on the one hand and Ps 37 on the other to two stages of conflict, as Ro (2018, 178) does. According to Botha (2007, 546), Pss 25 and 37 employ different modes of expression to convey the same ideological message. For a brief comparison of Pss 25, 34, and 37, see Botha (2007, 561–62).
 - 3 For a discussion of these connections, cf. Barbiero (1999, 564–90).

Psalm 37 is thus a good example of an ideological biblical text.⁴ According to Seybold (1996, 155), the paraenetic parts are concentrated at the beginning (37:1–11) and end (37:32–40). Between these there are teaching sections on the wicked (37:12–20) and the righteous (37:21–31). Its original purpose was to regulate the views and actions of the in-group for which it was composed, to criticise certain aspects of the society in which the author and the audience of the psalm lived, and to advance the cohesion of the in-group by strengthening the moral awareness of its members and by contrasting their ideals and future expectations with the actions of the out-group.⁵

This article aims to correlate the compositional-rhetorical strategy of Ps 37 with its social situation. The purpose is to identify the concerns of the implied author and to determine how those concerns were addressed. According to the psalmist, there are two groups of people in society who stand in opposition to one another in terms of their character and actions. The group identified as the “wicked”, the out-group, is described very negatively in terms of character, actions, and destiny. In contrast to them, words with a positive connotation are used to describe the character, deeds and future of the in-group of “righteous” people. But “good” people also run a risk of doing bad things and the author takes care to warn members of the in-group against wrong or bad actions and to commend correct actions. In the course of giving advice, the author also focuses on problems in society. These descriptions enable the exegete to make deductions about the constitution of the author’s society and the probable date when the psalm was written. Finally, the psalmist is also very clear about how matters will eventually be rectified by Yahweh. This provides another angle of approach for the exegete to analyse what type of society this was and what probable date could be assigned to it.

The article begins by focussing on the stratification in the society of the author, specifically the distinction between the “good” and the “bad” people. Subsequently, it investigates which actions of the wicked and righteous groups the author perceives as problematic and what course of action he advocates. Finally, the teaching of the psalm about how things will eventually turn out is discussed. I also analyse the argumentative strategy of the author and establish how this strategy fits in with a linear reading of Pss 35–37.

4 With Elliott (1993, 12, 130), ideology is understood as an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions and values which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history. Since Yahweh is intimately involved in the beliefs, assumptions and values expressed in Ps 37, “ideology” is merged with “theology” in this text. According to Elliott (2011, 2), each biblical text is not merely a literary composition, but also a social and rhetorical product with literary, theological, or social aims.

5 Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014, loc. 4964) simply state that its purpose “is similar to that of the book of Proverbs – practical instruction for living.” They do add, however, that the problem is the prosperity of the wicked and that the psalm is “a kind of meditation” on this problem. They also state that it is “a pragmatic homily on how to live in the face of the observation that the wicked seem to prosper.”

The Division of Society between the “Wicked” and the “Righteous” in Psalm 37

The out-group in Ps 37 constitutes an identifiable body of people, since they are called “the wicked” (רשעים, plural) eight times (37:14, 16, 17, 20, 28, 34, 38, 40). This substantivised adjective can be translated with “wicked people”, “evildoers”, “impious people”, “unrighteous people”, or something similarly negative. They are sometimes referred to in a generic way in the singular as “the wicked person” (רשע, singular), and this happens five times (37:10, 12, 21, 32, 35). Synonymous descriptions for them include the following: (1) “evildoers” (מרעים, 37:1, 9); (2) “wrongdoers” or “doers of injustice” (עשי עולה, 37:1); (3) “the person who prospers in his way” (מצליח דרכו, 37:7); (4) “the person who carries out evil schemes” (איש עשה מזמות, 37:7); (5) “the enemies of Yahweh” (איבי יהוה, 37:20); (6) “those cursed by him (Yahweh)” (מקלליו, 37:22); (7) “a wicked, ruthless man” (רשע עריץ, 37:35); and (8) “transgressors” (פשעים, 37:38). According to these descriptions, they offend members of the in-group and, in the view of the author, also Yahweh through their character and actions. The in-group is consequently assigned a place on the side of Yahweh.

It seems that they are people who prosper financially (מצליח דרכו, 37:7) because they act illegally, unscrupulously, or unethically in the perception of the in-group (cf. עולה, 37:1 and פשעים, 37:38), but also succeed in getting away with wrongdoing. They do not only deceive people (cf. עשה מזמות in 37:7), but also use violence because they are in a powerful position (cf. רשע עריץ in 37:35). The wicked are openly accused of “plotting” against (זמם, to plan evil) and “gnashing the teeth” against righteous people (37:12). The intention of these actions is to kill the righteous,⁶ as 37:14 and 32 clearly state. The description in 37:14, of “drawing their sword” and “bending their bows” to kill the poor and needy is probably intended to be understood metaphorically and not literally, but the intention to “bring them down” is stated clearly. From 37:33, it is evident that these wicked people have power (cf. the use of יד (hand) in 37:33 and זרועות (arms) in 37:17) over righteous people and could even bring them to trial to remove resistance against their planned actions.⁷

The members of the in-group, in contrast to this, are called “righteous people” (צדיקים, used in 37:17, 29 and 39); or in the singular, “the righteous person” (צדיק, used in 37:12, 16, 21, 25, 30 and 32). They are further described as (1) “those who wait for Yahweh” (קוי יהוה, 37:9), in contrast to “evildoers” (מרעים); (2) “the meek” (ענוים) in contrast to “the wicked person” in 37:10; (3) “the poor and needy person” (עני ואביון, 37:14) and (4) “those whose way is upright” (ישרי דרך, 37:14). All three these terms used in 37:14

6 “Gnashing the teeth” is probably a metaphor from the animal world, “baring the teeth” like hungry predators. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 235).

7 Psalm 37:32–33 promises that Yahweh will not abandon the righteous to the power of the wicked or allow them to be condemned when brought to trial. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 238) think it implies manipulation of the judicial process through bribing the judge or witnesses.

are by implication the target of the “wicked”. Further on, they are described as (5) “the blameless” (תמימים, 37:18); (6) “those blessed by Yahweh” (מברכיו, 37:22, in contrast to “those cursed by him”);⁸ (7) “his faithful” (חסידיו, 37:28, in contrast to “the children of the wicked”); and, finally, (8) “the blameless (תם), (9) the upright (ישר)” and (10) “the man of peace” (איש שלום, 37:37), all three contrasted to “transgressors” and “the wicked” in 37:38. These descriptions and the polarisation of this group with the wicked contain much information regarding the author’s perception of the moral and social situation at the time when the psalm was composed. It is clear that they are perceived as dedicated followers of Yahweh, meek and peace-loving people who try to live an upright life. They are also, in general, less prosperous than the wicked, possibly even poor,⁹ but nevertheless more generous towards compatriots in need.

The two groups are sometimes contrasted antithetically in the same verse line (37:17, 21 and 32): “The arms of the wicked shall be broken, but Yahweh upholds the righteous” (37:17); “the wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives” (37:21). Antagonism between the two groups is mentioned once in the same verse line: “the wicked watches for the righteous and plans to put him to death” (37:32). More often, the opposition or contrast is formulated in succeeding verses or with synonymous words referring to the in-group and the outgroup: “The evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for Yahweh shall inherit the land” (37:9); “the wicked will be no more, but the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace” (37:10–11); “the little that the righteous [singular] has, is better than the abundance of many wicked” (37:16); Yahweh knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever, they are not put to shame in evil times and will be satiated in the days of famine, but the wicked, in contrast, will perish and will “vanish like smoke” (37:18–20).

When Ps 37:28 says that Yahweh loves justice and will not forsake his pious, that they are preserved forever, but that the offspring of the wicked “shall be cut off,” the author refers to removal from the land.¹⁰ Proverbs 2:22 probably served as the donor text in these two instances: the wicked person is like a tree that will be “cut off” and rooted out. In verses 37–38, the righteous person is described with three synonyms as the “blameless”, the “upright”, and “the man of peace” for whom there is a future. The

8 The author alludes here to Genesis 12:3: as the true descendants of Abraham, they are blessed and become a blessing and a source of happiness to others (Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, 236).

9 It is important to note that the psalmist is concerned about poor pious people but is not necessarily poor himself. Being able to compose a text such as Ps 37 implies advanced training and a relatively privileged status. The author was, however, concerned about the vicissitudes in the circumstances of less privileged members of the in-group.

10 It is therefore no coincidence that plant imagery plays such an important role in Ps 37 with its focus on ownership of land: the land was God’s gift to his people, but some members of his people expropriated the land in disregard of the poor to whom it was also given. This injustice had to be corrected.

wicked, as “transgressors”, shall in contrast to this be “destroyed altogether” and their “future” shall be “cut off”. Again, the metaphor of a tree is used (cf. also 37:35).

The actions that are condemned and those that are commended will be discussed in a following section, but it is necessary to remark here that the problem the psalmist wants to address seems to be a growing annoyance among members of the in-group with the lack of justice in society. Righteous people, who should enjoy the blessings of Yahweh, suffer alienation from the land and deprivation of life’s necessities. They are being exploited by unscrupulous and powerful people who seem to be blessed. The ones who cause the greatest frustration are irreverent Jews who exploit their own people.¹¹ That they are Jews can be inferred from the fact that the society to which these groups of people belong questions the justice of the righteous people (cf. 37:6). The wicked people have abundance (37:16) and seem to be blessed because they are successful in life (37:7, 35) and enjoy possession or control of the land (37:9, 11, 22, 28, 29, 34). When the psalmist speaks about the “future” of the wicked in contrast to that of the righteous (37:37–38), it does seem clear that he is thinking of Jews who are transgressing the Torah but have not yet been exposed or publicly shamed for their unscrupulous behaviour.

The Problems in Society Identified by the Author of Psalm 37

The main problem experienced by the members of the in-group of Ps 37 is frustration with regard to justice. Their righteousness is not clear for all to see (37:6). It is the same problem the people who “feared Yahweh” experienced according to Malachi 3:14–18: there was no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. To add to that, the faithful, pious, upright people are exploited by the unscrupulous, wicked evildoers who have more power than they have and who deceive, defraud, and exploit them. The wicked prosper and therefore seem to the community at large to be the ones blessed by Yahweh. They have enough of everything, and their evil schemes are not exposed. They also have no shame. They transgress the Torah (37:38), particularly the commands about taking care of fellow Jews (cf. 37:21, 26). The righteous people, in contrast to them, are the ones who patiently “wait” for Yahweh to restore justice (קוה, 37:7, 34), who know the Torah by heart (37:30–31), who comply with Yahweh’s commands and speak wise words (37:27, 30–31, 34) and who show compassion towards fellow Jews (37:26). They sometimes stumble, but do not fall completely (37:23–24, 31). They sometimes experience hardship (37:16, 19, 39), but know that they are preserved by Yahweh’s faithfulness (37:19, 25) and therefore hold on to the promise that they will take possession of the land (ירש, 37:9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34; נחלה, 37:18). They can

11 The dispute about taking possession of the land also points in the direction of an inner-Israelite conflict. Cf. Johannes Bremer (2016, 359).

consequently trust in Yahweh (37:3, 5) and delight themselves in their relationship with him (ענג, *hitpa'el*, 37:4),¹² even while they are suffering.

For the author of the psalm there is, however, another worrying trend: among the members of the in-group, there is a growing impatience with the situation.¹³ Some of them, it seems, argue that it is time to act on their own. For the author, this is no small matter. As Kraus (1978, 440) remarks, this reaction possibly reveals an impassioned debate about the reality of Yahweh's existence and power. Such impatience is the first step towards revolt against Yahweh (Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, 234). The psalmist consequently uses the opportunity to warn members of the in-group against becoming agitated (חרה, *hitpa'el*) or jealous (קנא, *pi'el*) of evildoers and taking action against them or imitating them (37:1, 7–8).¹⁴ They are therefore exhorted to trust (בטח) Yahweh to act (עשה) in restoring justice (37:3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 28, 34) and to persevere in living an upright life (37:5, 8, 27, 30, 31, 34, 37). That is the reason why the psalmist repeatedly asserts that the wicked will be removed from power and “disappear” from the land (37:9, 10, 15, 17, 20, 28, 34, 35–36, 38), that the righteous will be preserved (37:17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 28, 33, 34, 39, 40) and will enjoy peace and prosperity when the land is restored to them (37:4, 9, 11, 18, 29). The author of the psalm also asserts that real happiness is to be found in a relationship with Yahweh (37:4)¹⁵ and in practising solidarity with the community of righteous rather than enjoying material prosperity (37:4, 16, 22). It is not as if they will be rewarded for their morality: they will experience justice (37:6) and enjoy abundant peace (רוב שלום 37:11) rather than prosperity. Because Yahweh takes care of them, they are even now able to afford help to members of the in-group who are in need by generously giving to them (37:21–23, 25–26).

The Perspective of Psalm 37 on the Restoration of Justice

An important motivation used by the author of Ps 37 to reprimand and exhort his audience is to state that justice will be restored soon. How will this happen? Yahweh will intervene. The fact that Yahweh will act is stated explicitly in a few places, but it is more often implied through indirect statements about what will happen to the wicked

12 According to Köhler and Baumgartner (1994–2000, s.v. ענג), the meaning of ענג in this context is to “take one’s pleasure in”. In Isa 55:2 it refers to taking delight in rich food; in Isa 58:14 it also refers to taking delight in Yahweh, associated with “feeding” on the heritage of Jacob. In Ps 37:11 it is used to describe taking delight in abundant peace (or prosperity). The use in Ps 37:4 has conspicuous similarities with that in Isa 58:14 and Job 22:26 and 27:10. Delighting oneself in Yahweh seems to suggest a comparison with the delight people could have when there is an abundance of food or prosperity.

13 As Gies (2018, 192) puts it, the prosperity of enemies leads to questioning of one’s own ethical standards. One wonders whether it is useful to maintain high moral standards.

14 Barbiero (1999, 587) points out that David demonstrated the same wisdom of leaving judgement to Yahweh through his attitude in 1 Sam 24–26.

15 As Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 234) state, from the delight in Yahweh there grows a delight in life and the power to do good in the midst of evil, but also the art of formulating the right requests.

and the righteous. Sometimes it is implied that Yahweh will act in response to the faithful actions of the in-group, and this then serves as a motivation to comply with the exhortations.

The clearest statement that Yahweh will act is found in 37:5: “Commit your way to Yahweh; trust in him, and he will act (וְהוּא יַעֲשֶׂה).” The commands in this line are not meant as a prerequisite for Yahweh’s intervention; it is rather the assurance that he will act that is used to motivate the audience to leave judgement to him (cf. 37:8). This is the second time in the psalm that the audience is commanded to trust in Yahweh (cf. 37:3). They should trust him to take care of their lives and to intervene on their behalf. “Trust” is the first of a series of five commands to the members of the in-group which begins in 37:3: “trust in Yahweh”; “do good”; “dwell in the land”; “cultivate faithfulness”; and “delight yourself in Yahweh”. At the end of the series (in verse 4), the consequence is stated: “He will give you the desires of your heart.” This is then followed by another series of two commands in verse 5 (“commit your way to Yahweh” and “trust in him”) before the assurance that he will act follows, and in verse 6 it is explained what his action will entail: “He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday” (37:6). The phrase “he will do” (וְהוּא יַעֲשֶׂה) in 37:5 can also be understood in connection with the command to “commit your way to Yahweh” at the beginning of the verse—Yahweh will take care of your life. But justice is part and parcel of Yahweh’s taking care of the life of the individual. Verse 6 forms the climax of the first major argument the author presents to the readers and defines their biggest concern: there is at present no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. In fact, the wicked seem to be the ones blessed by Yahweh and the righteous the ones cursed by him. That is why the author asserts in 37:22 that the (truly) blessed and the (truly) cursed will get their dues. The importance of the restoration of justice is also underlined by the statement in 37:28 that Yahweh “loves justice”.

The first explicit statement that Yahweh will act is thus found in 37:4 (“Delight yourself in Yahweh, and he will give you the desires of your heart”).¹⁶ The gift of Yahweh is not a reward for righteousness, it is the consequence of an intimate relationship. The second explicit statement that he will act is the statement in 37:5 discussed earlier (“Commit your way to Yahweh, trust in him, and he will act”). Yahweh’s acting refers to the preservation of the righteous and the restoration of their justice: when Yahweh acts, the desires of the in-group will be fulfilled (37:4) and the truth of their righteousness will be evident for all to see (37:6). How this will happen is formulated in 37:9 and many times after that with third-person statements, sometimes with passive constructions, implying that it is the result of what Yahweh will do: the evildoers will be cut off or will perish, but the in-group will inherit the land (37:9, 11, 20, 22, 28, 29, 38). Justice will become visible when the wicked disappear, thus when they themselves will no longer

16 Kraus (1978, 440) remarks that such a close relationship was in earlier times the privilege of the king (cf. Ps 2:8 and 20:5).

be visible (their coming disappearance or noticeable absence is clearly formulated in 37:10, 20, and 36). It is also repeatedly implied that it is because of Yahweh's action that they will disappear: by alluding to Ps 1:4 and 6 as well as Ps 2:4, the author of Ps 37 implies that it is because of Yahweh's judgement that the wicked will disappear: "But Yahweh laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming" (37:13); "Yahweh knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever" (37:18); and "but the wicked will perish; the enemies of Yahweh are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish, like smoke they vanish away" (37:20). The simile of the wicked being like chaff which is scattered by the wind encountered in Ps 1 is replaced here by a simile of their being like smoke, but the author of Ps 37 also compares human prosperity to the verdancy of plants and Yahweh's judgement to the disappearance of this verdancy (cf. 37:2, 9, 20, 22, 28, 34, 35 and 38).

Judgement is sure to come, and it will soon come, as 37:2 and 10 assures the readers of the psalm. But a second aspect of the restoration of justice is what Yahweh does or does not do at present. To begin with, Yahweh is not concerned about the threats of the wicked, for he laughs at them when they plot against the righteous (37:12–13). As was stated above, this is an allusion to the plotting of the nations against Yahweh in Ps 2:1–3 and Yahweh's reaction of laughing at them and mocking them in Ps 2:4.¹⁷ Yahweh's laughing is a sign of imminent judgement on those who form the object of his ridicule.¹⁸ Yahweh is ready to thwart the threat against the righteous. In 37:17, the author says that the arms of the wicked will be broken, but that Yahweh upholds the righteous. While the power of the wicked will be removed by Yahweh in the future, he is currently actively supporting the righteous in their struggle against the powerful wicked. The righteous will not be killed unexpectedly, because Yahweh knows their days (37:18; compare this also with Ps 1:6). What is more, they are saved from shame in evil times; they are satiated in the days of famine (37:19). "Satiating" here seems to mean "to have enough", since in 37:16 the psalm says that the little of the righteous is better than the abundance of many wicked. Yahweh preserves the life of his faithful in times of suffering.

Yahweh's protection includes his prevention of bad things happening to the righteous. Included among such bad things are the shame they will be protected against in bad times (37:19); when they fall, they will not be hurled down utterly (37:24); they will not be forsaken by Yahweh (37:28); and their steps will not slip (37:31). Yahweh's protection of the righteous or their preservation in general is sometimes described in conjunction with their own conduct and actions: if the righteous delight themselves in

17 The form קחשׁ is an imperfect, but it should be translated with the present tense because the actions of the wicked to which this is a reaction (37:12) are described with participles, as are the other instances of Yahweh's protection in 37:17 and 18. The imperfect of קחשׁ was possibly used to simulate the form used in Ps 2:4 and thus to accentuate the allusion. The participial form יעדׁ in 37:18 similarly emphasises the connection with Ps 1:6.

18 Cf. Ps 2:5 and Lady Wisdom's laughing when disaster strikes the unwise in Proverbs 1:26.

Yahweh, he will give them the desires of their heart (37:4); if they commit their way to Yahweh and trust in him, he will act (37:5); it is because Yahweh delights in the way of a man, that he establishes the steps of that person (37:23); it is because they turn away from evil and do good that the righteous will dwell forever in the land (37:27); it is because the law of his God is in his or her heart that the steps of the righteous person do not slip (37:31); if one waits for Yahweh and keeps his way, one will be exalted and look on when the wicked are cut off (37:34); it is the man of peace that has a future (37:37); it is because they take refuge in him that Yahweh helps, delivers, and saves the righteous (37:40). Such a connection between right conduct and help from Yahweh is intended to motivate members of the in-group to refrain from taking matters into their own hands and thereby transgressing the Torah themselves. A good member of the in-group is willing to wait for Yahweh to act because he or she trusts in him. Living an upright life according to the Torah and seeking peace, ignoring the irritation of arrogant, wicked people who prosper, and waiting for Yahweh to act is the way to keep his way. That is the way to follow in order to inherit a part of the promised land, to assure a blessed future for one's descendants.

Is it true, as Craigie (Craigie and Tate 2004, 297) asserts, that the overall theme of Ps 37 is retribution and recompense? Kraus (1978, 440) says with regard to Ps 37:6 (my translation):

The commonly accepted 'idea of reward' in Ps 37 is completely out of focus here, because it is not the case that a pious person would be rewarded for his good deeds, but the obedient life relationship as such shines forth as a clear witness to the fact that one belongs to God and about the salvation included in this relationship with God. The question should be put whether not all ideas of 'reward' and 'retribution' purported to be found in Ps 37 should be subordinated to this decisive point of view.¹⁹

The main theme of Ps 37 is that righteous people do not need to fret about living life or coping with injustice but should trust Yahweh to restore justice by returning the promised land to its rightful owners in his own time. Those who misuse it for their own selfish desires will be removed and it will be restored to those people who do not have a desire to enrich themselves to the detriment of others (37:35), but who long for justice, righteousness, peace, and the corporate well-being of Yahweh's people (cf. 37:6, 11, 21), people who long to be blessed so that they could be a blessing to others (cf. 37:26) and who are already content since they are aware of being blessed and privileged in this way (cf. 37:4).

19 "Der in Ps 37 vielfach angenommene «Lohngedanke» tritt hier ganz aus dem Blickkreis, denn es ist nicht so, dass ein Frommer für seine guten Taten belohnt würde, sondern die gehorsame Lebensbeziehung als solche strahlt auf als evidentestes Zeugnis der Gottzugehörigkeit und des in dieser Gottzugehörigkeit beschlossenen Heiles. Es wird zu fragen sein, ob nicht alle «Lohngedanken» und «Vergeltungsideen», die man in Ps 37 finden wollte, diesem entscheidenden Gesichtspunkt unterzuordnen sind."

The Argumentative Strategy of the Author of Psalm 37

The arguments in Ps 37 are rhetorical in nature. It is important to understand that such non-formal arguments differ from formal arguments such as those used in mathematical proofs. In non-formal arguments, there is no chain of ideas in which some are derived from others according to accepted rules of inference. Non-formal arguments rather consist of a web formed from statements and reasons that combine to achieve the desired result (Perelman 1979, 18). How does the author of Ps 37 motivate or convince members of the in-group? The following ways deserve mention:

With Direct Injunctions

The author wastes no time, immediately addressing the problems he has identified by using the first letter of the alphabet twice to formulate two prohibitions with לֹא in verse 1: “Do not get excited because of evildoers; do not be envious of wrongdoers!” (37:1). This is followed by a clear reason why it would be futile to do so in verse 2. After this, five staccato-like positive commands about what should be done follow, concluded by a phrase about the resultant action of Yahweh if these injunctions were to be followed (37:3–4). Such direct commands dominate in the first 11 verses of the psalm where 15 positive or negative commands can be identified and 11 causal or result clauses follow upon the commands in an authoritative, argumentative tone. Additional command sentences, also followed by result or causal clauses, are used in 37:27, 34, and 37, but the rest of the psalm is less directly commanding overall, instead making use of statements combined with adversative statements contrasting the character and fate of the wicked and the righteous respectively. Such comparisons encourage the reader to associate with the in-group, because their future is guaranteed while there is no future for the wicked, and their fate is sealed (cf. 37:12–13; 17, 18–20, 34, 37–38).

By Comparing the Wicked and Righteous Antithetically

Psalm 37 contains various antitheses in which the two social groups are contrasted with one another. Antithesis is a powerful instrument in argumentation, since it involves the audience “to take the reasoning to the conclusion that the pattern dictates” (Tindale 2004, 183). The nature of antithesis is to focus sharply on aspects of contrast between two subjects, allowing similarities to fade into the background.²⁰ It thus enhances opposites, subtly strengthening the idea of incompatibility. The antithesis between the fate of evildoers being cut off but the righteous inheriting the land is repeated throughout the psalm (37:9, 10–11, 18–20, 22, 28, 37–38). In these antitheses, the in-group is called by various epithets such as “those who wait for Yahweh”, “the meek”, “the blameless”, “those blessed by Yahweh”, “the faithful of Yahweh”, “the man of peace”. In doing so,

20 According to Krašovec (1984, 5), “The fundamental trait of the antithesis is that two opposing elements exclude each other in relation to a common idea.” The two elements of an antithesis share certain sememes and therefore relate to the same semantic field but are mutually exclusive with regard to some other sememes.

the author propagates certain characteristics or actions of the in-group, while denouncing those of their opponents. Within the in-group, there is also the contrast between “being agitated” (חרה) and “being silent” and “waiting patiently” (37:7). The possible reactions are contrasted using an imperative for the positive command and a jussive prohibition for the negative, undesirable conduct. According to the psalmist, the decisive contrast between the wicked and the righteous will be revealed “at the end”. According to 37:37, there is “a future” (אחרית) for the man of peace, also described as “the blameless” and “the upright” in the same verse. Transgressors, in contrast, will be “destroyed altogether” and “the future” (אחרית) of the wicked shall be cut off. The “end” or the “future” (in whichever way אחרית is translated), points to the destiny of the two groups: it refers to the conclusion of a way of life in which God’s salvation or judgement of a person will suddenly be revealed (Kraus 1978, 443; cf. also Ps 73:17).

By Assuring the In-group that Justice Will “Soon” Come

This focus of the psalm has been mentioned earlier, but the use of adverbs such as “soon” (מהרה in 37:2) and “in just a little while” (ועוד מעט in 37:10) should be mentioned explicitly. These adverbs about the time of Yahweh’s action do not solve the problem of whether this will be an intervention in this life or in eschatology, but they do provide a clear indication of the urgency with which the author wanted to regulate the behaviour of the audience.

By Enticing the In-group with a Happy and Peaceful Future

The author of Ps 37 is promising those who persevere peace and happiness for a long time, involving also their progeny. Expressions and words like “the desires of your heart” (37:4), “abundant peace” (37:11), “their heritage will remain for ever” (38:18), “abundance” (37:19), “his children become a blessing” (37:26), “so shall you dwell forever” (37:27), “preserved forever” (37:28), “dwell upon it forever” (37:29), and “there is a future for the man of peace” (37:37) are meant to lure rather than convince the audience of the value of a pious way of life.

By Warning the Audience against Transgressing Themselves

The opposite of enticement is dissuasion from certain courses of action. The first such warning is given in 37:8, where the psalmist warns that anger, wrath, and agonising over wrongdoers “only tends to what is wrong” (אך־להרע, 37:8). The “evildoers” are used twice as a description of the outgroup (37:1, 9), but if members of the in-group resort to wrongful activity, they themselves run the risk of becoming wrongdoers. In 37:23, there is a subtle warning contained in the statement that “the steps of a man are established by Yahweh, when he delights in his way.” In order to stay on the road of life, one must conduct one’s affairs in such a way that Yahweh will delight in one’s way. The same encouragement to live according to the Torah is given in 37:30–31: “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.” Yahweh establishes the steps of a person if that person speaks and acts according to the injunctions of the Torah. Psalm 37:27 contains another

direct injunction to “turn away from evil and do good,” and the result of this will be, as the psalmist assures us, “so shall you dwell forever.” In verse 37 there is another instance of indirect encouragement to act in a certain way: “Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace.” Living a blameless and upright life and striving for peace are prerequisites for being assured a future.

By Calling Upon the Authority of Other Biblical Texts when Giving Commands or Making Promises

The author of Ps 37 alludes to certain other psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, and Jeremiah to strengthen his arguments. It was argued above that the author referred to the authority of Pss 1–2 in combination by saying that Yahweh knows the days of the righteous (37:18, cf. Ps 1:6), that he laughs at the plans of the wicked (37:13, cf. Ps 2:4), and that the wicked will perish (37:20, cf. Ps 1:6). Since some of the books of the Hebrew Bible must have been endowed with (at least) a semi-canonical status at the time of writing Ps 37, the author calls upon authority that cannot be easily refuted. The command to not be agitated because of evildoers or to be jealous of successful wrongdoers (Ps 37:1) appeals to the authority of Proverbs 3:31, 23:17–18; 24:1–2 and 19–20.²¹ Psalm 37 repeatedly assures the righteous that they will inherit the land, but that the wicked will be cut off from it. This promise is based on Proverbs 2:21–22: “For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.” Isaiah 58:14 is also used as an authoritative meta-text: honouring the Sabbath will lead to the audience taking delight in Yahweh and taking possession of the land, the heritage of Jacob. Psalm 37:4 commands the audience to take delight in Yahweh so that he can give them the desires of their heart. Isaiah 58:10 promises that those who take care of the hungry and the afflicted will experience how their light rises in the darkness and their gloom becomes like the noonday. This text seems to be alluded to by Ps 37:6 (“He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday”).²² But knowledge of Proverbs 4:18–19 seems to have also played a role in the composition of Ps 37:6.²³

Using Metaphors and Similes

Similes and metaphors provide vivacity to Ps 37, but at the same time these literary tropes are put to effective use as arguments. Evildoers and wrongdoers will soon fade like grass and wither like green herbs (37:2); one should “roll” one’s way onto Yahweh (37:5), thus entrust it to him to guide it in the right direction;²⁴ the righteousness of the

21 Cf. Barbiero (1999, 586). The beginning and end of Proverbs 24:1–22 and Ps 37 have conspicuous similarities. Cf. Ps 37:1 with Proverbs 24:1, 19 and Ps 37:37–38 with Proverbs 24:20 (Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, 230).

22 Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 236) state that “being satiated” in 37:19 is a metaphor for enjoyment of the produce of the promised land as a gift of Yahweh, referring to Deuteronomy 8:10–12.

23 Cf. the discussion of Botha (2007, 554–55) on the use of both texts.

24 Cf. the explanation of Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 234) with reference to Proverbs 26:27.

in-group will be brought forth as the light and their justice as the noonday (37:6); the enemies of Yahweh are like the glory of the pastures that vanish like smoke (37:20); the author saw a wicked, ruthless person, spreading himself like a green laurel tree, but he disappeared (37:35). The comparison of success with verdant plants is thus used several times. The whole metaphoric complex of a vibrant tree compared to chaff and stubble being blown away or burnt and the smoke of the fire disappearing in the air, is called to mind. This suggests that success is fleeting if it is not rooted in a relationship with Yahweh. The metaphor of a tree being cut off (37:9, 22, 28, 38) ties in with this simile: the wicked will disappear from society because Yahweh will bring their prosperity and progeny to an end. The attacks of the wicked on the righteous, described as drawing the sword and bending the bow (37:14) is probably also metaphoric in nature, and their sword entering their own heart and their bow being broken is a fitting military metaphor for their demise (37:14–15). The arms of the wicked (37:17) is a metaphor for their power over the righteous, and when they are broken, the hold they have over the powerless will come to an end. The metaphor of life as a road being travelled is also used a number of times (37:23, Yahweh establishes the steps of a man when he delights in his way; 37:24 though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong; 37:31 the steps of the righteous do not slip because the law of his God is in his heart; 37:34 the righteous must wait for Yahweh and keep his way). Finally, Yahweh is also pictured metaphorically as a stronghold in time of trouble, and the righteous are saved by him because they take refuge in him (37:39–40). If a simile or metaphor has a striking way of explaining relationships or the character of a person, the mind is overwhelmed by the resemblance to such an extent that the truth of the comparison will hardly be questioned.

By Referring to His Own Indisputable Experience

A final argumentative technique which must be mentioned is when the implied author calls upon his own (imagined) experience to add weight to an argument.²⁵ For instance, the author claims to have witnessed the expansion of the success of a wicked, ruthless man, spreading like a green laurel tree, but this person passed away and no trace of him could be found. Though the author took trouble to seek him, he was gone (37:35–36). Another instance is when the implied author tells of his long life of experience, from young to old, during which he had never observed the righteous forsaken or his children begging for food (37:25). There is no arguing against the wisdom of lifelong experience expressed by the author in this verse.

25 Kraus (1978, 439) warns that the autobiographical stylising, which is a typical means of wisdom teaching, should not be undervalued. He refers to Proverbs 24:30–34 and Sirach 51:13–16 and 33:16–19 as good examples of this style.

Psalm 37 as the Conclusion of a Linear Reading of Psalms 35–37

After the conclusion of the palindromic cluster of Pss 25–34, with Ps 29 and its focus on the presence of Yahweh in the temple in the middle of this group, the final group of psalms of the first Davidic Psalms begins with Ps 35. This psalm is a lament about and supplication for help against personal enemies who persecute the psalmist without cause (35:1–7). The psalmist prays for them to be shamed and destroyed and promises to give thanks to Yahweh in the great congregation when this happens (35:4–6, 26–28). He also mentions the deceit of his enemies against those who “live quietly” in the land (35:20) and requests Yahweh to give a cause for joy to those who delight in his righteousness (35:27). Psalm 36, in turn, contrasts the evil ways of a wicked person who convinces himself that his iniquity will not be found out (36:2–3) with the steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and judgements of Yahweh (36:6–8). The temple is described as a place of refuge for all humanity where they can find protection, nourishment, and insight (36:8–10). It ends with a prayer not to be driven away by the hand of the wicked (36:12) and a confident confession that the evildoers already lie fallen, unable to rise again (36:13).

There are numerous thematic and keyword connections between the three psalms. The urgent call for help in Ps 35 seems to have already been answered in Ps 36:13. But the personal distress of the suppliant of Ps 35 is put in a general perspective in Ps 37 when the general animosity between the righteous and the wicked and the proper response from the righteous is described. The character of the wicked person, who plots trouble and commits deceit with his mouth according to Ps 36:3–4, is the same as the character of the wicked person described in Ps 37:7 and 12.²⁶ The enemies of the psalmist of Ps 35:16 “gnash” their teeth against the psalmist (חרק עלי שנימו); so does the wicked person of Ps 37:12 against the righteous (חרק עליו שניו). The enemies of Ps 35 are consequently identified with the wicked people, the same outgroup also described in Pss 36 and 37, whilst the psalmist of Ps 37 is identified as a member of the in-group of righteous people. Psalm 37 also speaks with the same conviction as Ps 36 about the speedy demise of the wicked. In Ps 35, the psalmist asks Yahweh to let his enemies be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of Yahweh driving them away (35:5). The use of the words “chaff” and “wind” establishes a connection with Ps 1:4. It was shown above that Ps 37 has similar connections with Ps 1, combined with links to Ps 2, and that the image of the enemies of Yahweh being like the glory of the pastures that go up in smoke, together with the simile of the wrongdoers fading like grass and withering like green herbs, have similar connections with Ps 1 and Yahweh’s judgement. The enemies of the psalmist in Ps 35 are represented as erstwhile friends (35:13–14) who seized the opportunity to attack the psalmist when he stumbled (35:15). They are thus represented as the personal enemies of the psalmist but are unmasked as the enemies of God also in Ps 37:20. In

26 Cf. also the reference to “transgression” (פֶּשַׁע) in 36:2 and in 37:38. As Barbiero (1999, 576) remarks, the contrast between what is good (טוֹב, 36:4, 5 and 37:3, 16, 27) and bad or evil (רָע, 36:5 and 37:7) is similar between Pss 36 and 37.

both psalms, they are accused of exploiting the poor and needy (עני ואביון, 35:10; cf. 37:14, עני ואביון). The same contrast between the two groups described in Ps 37 is also found in Ps 36: while it is transgression that “speaks” in the heart of the wicked (36:2), the heart of the righteous is different, since they have the law of their God in their heart (37:31), causing their mouth to “utter” wisdom and their tongue to “speak” justice (37:30).²⁷ A direct link is established through repetition of the verb הגה from 37:30 back to 35:28: The tongue of the suppliant will “tell” the praise of Yahweh. This also establishes a connection with Pss 1:2 and 2:1.

Psalms 35–37 consequently form a purposeful unit. The psalmist calls for help to Yahweh in Ps 35; in Ps 37 a wisdom teacher answers the suppliant of Ps 35 in the name of Yahweh. When the wisdom teacher speaks in Ps 37, it is therefore as if God is reacting to the plea to him not to keep silent in Ps 35:22 (Barbiero 1999, 579). The change between the situation described in Ps 35 and that described in Ps 37 was brought about by the “messianic” Ps 36 between them (cf. the title “Of David, the servant of Yahweh” in 36:1). The personal enemies of the psalmist mentioned in Ps 35 are now identified as wicked people who have succumbed to evil and arrogance (36:2–5). But a vision of the steadfast love of Yahweh, of his righteousness and impenetrable judgements (36:7) brings the insight (36:10) and the conviction that wickedness will be removed (36:13). This certainty is the perspective from which Ps 37 operates, exhorting its audience to be silent, to wait for Yahweh to act, and to trust him to put matters in order. He is the one who will act, who is able to save, the strong refuge of the upright (36:8; 37:40).

Conclusion: The Purpose and Plan of Psalm 37

The way in which Ps 37 was devised and its connections with Pss 35–36 point to the late post-exilic period and probably more specifically the early Hellenistic period as a probable time of composition.²⁸ The problem in society which the author needs to address is one where pious followers of Yahweh have to contend with compatriots who exploit them, disregarding the Torah and effectively setting themselves up as enemies of the pious as well as of God. This description could, of course, be true in any period of Israelite history,²⁹ so that David could comfortably be named as the author of each

27 Barbiero (1999, 576–77) says that the three domains of human life, namely heart, mouth and action are all involved in the contrast between the wicked and the righteous in Pss 36–37.

28 Kraus (1978, 439) simply says it originated in a relatively late period, and that it is close to the Torah psalms, with post-exilic themes and tradition complexes. Seybold (1996, 155) dates it in the late post-exilic, and possibly Hellenistic, period. It is noteworthy that it was considered particularly relevant for the community at Qumran, who interpreted it in terms of the community of poor, the priests, and the teacher of righteousness (cf. Seybold 1996, 155).

29 Ross (2011, 802–03) refers to the concern for righteousness, obedience to the Torah, and hope for vindication through divine judgement on the wicked as characteristics of the psalm which are not unique to the post-exilic time. These things, however, became much more pronounced in the post-exilic period.

psalm in the collection. But the dependence of Ps 37 on Proverbs as a literary composition, on Pss 1–2 and Trito-Isaiah (to name only a few texts), points to a time long after the exile.³⁰ Knowledge of the problems the Jews had to contend with under Persian and Hellenistic rule and insight into the political situation in the Hellenistic period point to these periods as the most probable time of composition. The situation is dangerous, since the pious followers of Yahweh are getting agitated and run the risk of resorting to unethical behaviour themselves. It is time for Yahweh to act. By assuring the in-group that this will soon happen, the author attempts to calm them down, to encourage them to persist in the way of the quiet and humble in the land, thus in God's way.

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30 Hossfeld and Zenger (1993, 229) date the psalm in the fifth century B.C.E. since, in their view, it corresponds to the optimism of the friends of Job but shows no sign of the problematising of this kind of deed-consequence connection. Job is a very late composition, since it alludes to several late psalms, including Ps 37. Kynes identifies 12 parallels between Job and Ps 37, with Ps 37 being the source of the allusions in Job. Cf. Kynes (2012, 42 n. 119). In recent scholarship, Job is generally dated between the fifth and third centuries B.C.E. (Kynes 2012, 51).

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