Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

Volume 19, Article 2 DOI:10.5508/jhs.2019.v19.a

"Seek Peace And Pursue It" (Ps 34:15): A Call To Beleaguered Members Of A Community

SOPHIE RAMOND

Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, RAMBI, and BiBIL. Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by Library and Archives Canada and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by Library and Archives Canada. ISSN 1203–1542 http://www.jhsonline.org and http://purl.org/jhs

"SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT" (PS 34:15): A CALL TO BELEAGUERED MEMBERS OF A COMMUNITY

SOPHIE RAMOND
EA 7403, INSTITUT CATHOLIQUE DE PARIS

Psalm 34 is an "acrostic" poem in which the verses are organized in alphabetical order on the basis of the first letter of the first word of each verse. Alphabetical psalms are sometimes interpreted as anthological texts lacking in consistency and devoid of logic.[1] On this basis, Ps 34:15, "Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it" could be interpreted as a simple wisdom teaching having no particular relationship to the rest of the psalm.

This article will argue to the contrary that Psalm 34 unfolds a coherent discourse and, in particular, that the meaning of Ps 34:15 should be interpreted in relation to the preceding verse: "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit" (Ps 34:14). When read as a unit, vv. 14 and 15 suggest that שׁלום (peace) is threatened not by an armed conflict but rather by a harmful speech. What is the harmful speech that jeopardizes peace? What is the nature of the peace to be pursued? Who is the audience who is being called upon to avoid harmful speech and seek peace? What is the social setting that best explains the exhortation to pursue peace?

THE CALL TO SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PSALM

In light of the various key words and the language of good and evil that saturates the text, it can reasonably be argued that Psalm 34 can be read as a coherent unit. The word טוב, (good) is used in vv. 9, 11, 13 and 15; the word רע / רעה (evil) is used in vv. 14, 15, 17, 20 and 22). It can be noted that the word "good" is used for the last time in v. 15 and the word "evil" is used for the first time in v. 14. The two terms occur together only in v. 15; that is, in the exhortation "Depart from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." It is fair to say that vv. 14–15 mark a change of perspective in the text. The first half of the psalm insists that YHWH is good and does good things. The second half focuses

[1] See for example S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), 368.

on the evil for which some will be punished and from which others will be delivered.

From v. 9 to v. 11 there is also an emphasis on the relationship one should have with God: v. 9 states that those who take refuge (חסה) in God will be blessed; v. 10 insists on the fear (ירא) of God; v. 11 mentions the search (דרשׁ) for God. But חסה (to seek refuge) is also present in v. 23; ירא (to fear) in v. 8, and the noun of the same root in v. 12. דרשׁ (to seek) is employed in v. 5. Other words are found several times: שׁמע (to listen) in vv. 3, 7, 12, 18; נצל (to deliver) in vv. 5, 18, 20; צדיק (righteous) in vv. 16, 20, 22 to whom are opposed the עשׂה רע (evildoers) in v. 17, the רשׁע (wicked) in v. 22a and the שׂנאי צדיק (those who hate the righteous) in v. 22b. The recurrence of key-words is a basic law of composition in the psalms. This has a hermeneutical function: the psalms provide their own interpretation by repetition of what is essential to their understanding.[2] It can therefore be argued that Psalm 34 is focused on the protection offered by God to those who seek him and take refuge in him. But the latter are faced with enemies acting in the opposite way and hating them. Thus, the question arises as to the precise nature of the antagonism that leads the faithful to urge God to intervene on their behalf.

That being said, it should be noted that v. 12 introduces a change of tone in the psalm, with an unparalleled formula in the Psalter: "Come, sons, and heed me. I shall teach you the fear of YHWH." The text takes on a more explicit didactic tone, which is not, however, totally missing in its first part. The verb שׁמע is also used in vv. 3 and 7 and reappears in v. 18. Whereas vv. 7 and 18 speak of God listening to those calling or crying out, v. 3 incites the humble to listen to the speaker and to rejoice in doing so. In v. 4, the psalmist invites his audience to magnify God with him. His own resolve to praise YHWH at all times is expressed in vv. 2–3a, so that the root הלל is the prevailing vocabulary of the introductive verses. Three plural imperatives in vv. 9a and 10a give other instructions: "taste and see that YHWH is good [. . .] fear YHWH [. . .]."

The speaker thus appears to be passing on his own experience of being delivered from fear by YHWH and to be inviting his audience to praise God with him. But the situation in which he does so seems to be a difficult one. In addition to fear (מגורה; v. 5) distress is also mentioned (צרה; vv. 7, 18), as well as crying out (קרא on v. 7; צעק on v. 18). In v. 7, עני ("poor, afflicted"), often understood as a self-designation of the speaker himself, most likely refers to victimization rather than poverty.[3] Thus, the psalmist addresses his audience in v. 3 with the term ענוים, which in the context of the psalm points both at a distressing life situation and at a religious attitude. That which happened to the psalmist is exemplary of the fate of the community to which he

[2] L. Liebreich, "Psalms 34 and 145 in the Light of Their Key Words," *HUCA 27* (1956), 181–92.

[3] J. Un-Sok RO, *Die sogenannte "Armenfrömmigkeit" im nachexilischen Israel* (BZAW, 322; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 138–42.

belongs. It can be said that the psalmist is the prototype of the suffering עניים who God rescues. It should be observed, though, that the lexical field that points to poverty, affliction and humility (עני / ענו) shifts, in the second half of the psalm, to the noun צדיק (vv. 16, 20, 22).[4] Although appearances can be deceiving, as states v. 20a ("many are the afflictions of the righteous"), God sides with the righteous.

Thus, to judge from the key words, the main theme of the psalm is the protection God offers to afflicted people who remain faithful to him and who take refuge in him. But why does a psalm dealing with the relationship between YHWH and the afflicted righteous introduce a call to depart from evil and seek peace both in word and deed? Moreover, in such an exhortation the audience is no longer referred to as oppressed or afflicted people but rather as potential evildoers. What is the meaning of שלום ("peace") in this context? It is a question worth asking, all the more given that the last verb of v. 15, רדף ("to pursue"), usually has an aggressive meaning (Ps 7:2.6; 18:38; 31:16; 35:3.6; 69:27; 71:11; 83:16; 109:16; 119:86.150.157.161; 142:6; 143:3). So, what is the nature of the peace to be pursued so resolutely?

The exhortation is expressed with a synonymous parallelism in v. 14:

> "Keep your tongue from evil,
>
> And your lips from speaking deceit."

It extends in v. 15:

> "Depart from evil and do good;
>
> Seek peace and pursue it."

Evil (רע) clearly relates to speaking deceit (v. 14) and departing from evil is, in a more positive formulation, to seek peace (v. 15). Refraining from deceitful speech is indicated as the way to find happiness and fulfillment (v. 13), as in Prov 12:19; 17:20; 18:21; 26:28. Depart from evil is an imperative very much like Prov 3:7. In the Psalter, the sins of the tongue characterize the wicked (Ps 5:10; 10:17; 12:4–5; 15:3; 31:19; 52:4–6; 64:4; 109:2), as does also the sins of the lips (Ps 12:3–5; 17:1.4; 31:19; 59:13; 140:4.10). They have to do with מרמה, that is lies and fraud (Ps 5:7; 10:7; 17:1; 24:4; 35:20; 36:4; 38:13; 43:1; 50:19; 52:6; 55:12.24; 109:2).[5]

In the literary context of the psalm, and in view of the above observations about טוב and רע, it is likely that the exhortation of vv. 14–15 is directed towards evil discourse or speaking deceit in relation to YHWH. The one who is called to recognize the divine goodness (v. 9) and who will not lack good things because he is seeking God (v. 11) is probably here again called to fear him. More concretely, he is called to speak of God or to

---

[4] Note that the Septuagint has for subject of the verb κράζω, in v. 18, οἱ δίκαιοι: "the righteous cried [. . .]." The text is easier to read that the MT, with its indeterminate subject of the verb צעק. The Septuagint more clearly opposes the righteous ones and the evildoers.

[5] Note that מרמה is more often used in the Psalter and in Proverbs.

God in a trustful and faithful way. If he does not do so, he will incur YHWH's punishment (v. 17) or win his own condemnation (v. 22). Thus, peace is understood in v. 15 to be a lasting relationship of trust on the part of the faithful, which results in a truthful discourse. God rewards the faithful by rescuing them from the hand of evildoers. In fact, there is no evidence to read in these verses a call to assume "ethical behavior in one's human relations,"[6] a call to "engage in society building"[7] or to promote common good.[8] As the whole psalm is about divine protection in times of trial, it is more likely that deceitful speech has something to do with words that undermine people's confidence and faith. From this point of view, Ps 34:14–15 may be aiming at something similar to the sin of the tongue of Ps 39:2.4. In addition, the speaker of Psalm 39 tries to restrain his mouth in the presence of the wicked (v. 1); the righteous of Psalm 34 are dealing with wicked people, enemies (v. 22) and evildoers (v. 17). It should be also observed that Ps 34:15a is identical to the first half of Ps 37:27. Leaving aside for the moment the question whether one psalm is quoting the other and which one is doing so, it can be noted that Psalm 37 deals with the challenge of being provoked by evildoers and with the temptation of being envious of wrongdoers (v. 1). Psalm 37 encourages the righteous not to lack confidence because God will rescue him: the wicked will soon perish while the righteous will possess the earth.

At this stage it can be said that, even if anthological, Psalm 34 delivers a unified message: in a situation of antagonism, Yhwh is on the side of those who are beleaguered and take refuge in him. Persecution has to do with speaking deceit, i.e. with deceptive and misleading words that undermine people's confidence and faith. In that context, seeking and pursuing peace is almost equivalent to seeking YHWH, as suggested by the use of the complementary verbs דרשׁ (v. 11 with YHWH as complement) and בקשׁ (v. 15 with peace as complement).[9] Peace is not the absence of war but a faithful and trusting relationship with God and therefore, inference, mutual support within the community.

---

[6] Liebreich, "Psalms 34 and 145," 185.

[7] C.W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms. A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 133.

[8] F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50* (Neue Echter Bibel 29; Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 214. See also F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, " 'Von seinem Thronsitz schaut er nieder auf alle Bewohner der Erde' (Ps 33:14). Redaktionsgeschichte und Kompositionskritik der Psalmengruppe 25–34," in I. Kottsieper et al. (eds.), *Wer ist wie du, Herr, unter den Göttern? Studien zur Theologie und Religionsgeschichte Israels. Fs Otto Kaiser zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 375–88.

[9] See the use of both verbs in two parallel cola in Ps 24:6; 105:4; Prov 11:27. See also the use of דרשׁ + שׁלום in Deut 23:7; Ezra 9:12. In these two texts peace is not the absence of war but rather a lasting and trusting relationship between diverse people.

PSALM 34 IN THE CONTEXT OF PSALMS 3–41

The above observations point to a dimension that could help to go further in the interpretation of the psalm: the phenomenon of concatenation (*Verkettung*) and of interconnection or networking (*Vernetzung*) between the psalms.[10] These phenomena have the effect of creating a continuity between the psalms, which then no longer appear as a succession of heterogeneous poems but rather as the deployment of the same prayer. In other words, the earliest interpretation of the meaning of the psalms can be discerned from their arrangement in the Psalter.

In this respect, scholarship has been very much influenced by the work of Hossfeld and Zenger.[11] They argued that the arrangement of the Psalter reflects a deliberate organization, that is only understandable with reference to the redaction history of the book. For them, the Davidic Psalter (Psalms 3–41) is comprised of four groups delineated by inclusions (Psalms 3–14; 15–24; 25–34; 35–41), with each group being structured around a central text. They observe that Psalms 25 and 34 are both shaped on an alphabetical schema (with omission of the stanza *waw* and with the addition, in the finale, of a verse which remains outside the alphabetic structure [Psalms 24:22 and 34:23]). The whole unit (Psalms 25–34) alternates supplications and individual thanksgivings, with its centre in Psalm 29. This central psalm, by celebrating YHWH who conquered the chaos, shows that the God of Israel is both qualified to answer prayer (Psalm 25) and worthy of thanksgiving (Psalm 34).

From the point of view of the redaction history of the Psalter, this first Davidic Psalter would be the oldest substratum (Psalms 3–41). Many of the psalms of this collection would date back to the period of the First Temple, but they were compiled only at the end of the exilic period or relatively shortly thereafter. They were then reread and other texts were integrated (Psalms 8, 15, 24, 29, 32, 36). All these psalms would have been distributed into four groups: Psalms 3–14 (without 9/10); 15–24 (without 16, 19, 23); 26–32 and 35–41. At this early stage of formation, the whole collection is the expression of the prayer of poor and persecuted people who want to live as righteous ones. In the midst of their distress, they proclaim their confidence that they will soon be saved by God. But a second rereading took place (5th to 4th century BCE) and Psalms 16, 19, 23, 25, 33, 34, 37, 39, 40 were inserted. In these psalms, the poor cease to be a social class and become a religious category who are convinced that they represent the true Israel who, beleaguered from all sides, stand by the assurance that Yhwh will save them.[12]

---

[10] See C. Barth, "Concatenatio im ersten Buch des Psalters," in B. Benzing (ed.), *Wort und Wirklichkeit. Studien zur Afrikanistik und Orientalistik* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976), 30–40; G. Barbiero, *Das Erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit. Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1–41* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999).

[11] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 12–16.

[12] Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 14.

Various studies have examined the correspondences between Psalm 25 and Psalm 34. They observe that their common features can hardly be the result of chance.[13] Particular characteristics point to the conclusion that alterations and adaptations have taken place in both psalms. Both psalms lack a verse beginning with the letter *waw* and add, after the *taw* verse, a further line beginning with the letter *pê*. Moreover, they both use in this particular last verse the root פדה. As stated by Skehan, the initial *pê* of the last verse of each psalm was probably chosen deliberately in order to complete a combination with the *aleph* of the first line and with the *lamed* of the middle line (respectively Ps 25:11 and Ps 34:12). Thus, "by going from *aleph* to *taw* and then adding *pê,* one makes *lamed* the exact middle of the series[14] and sums up the whole alphabet in the name of its first letter."[15] Further, the three letters form the verbal stem אלף that is found in several texts such as Prov. 22:25, Job 15:5; 33:33 and 35:11 with the meaning of learning wisdom (*qal*) or teaching it (*piel*). Obviously such a composition serves, in both psalms, the objective of teaching the fear of God and reflects their wisdom background.

However, it should also be taken into account that in both psalms two verses start with the *pê*: not only v. 22 but also v. 16 in Psalm 25; not only v. 23 but also v. 17 in Psalm 34. Why is there another *pê* verse, that stands outside the alphabetic order? In Psalm 25, the shift from an individual supplication to a collective prayer on behalf of Israel strongly suggests that v. 22 was loosely appended to a pre-existent text.[16] It is likely that Ps 34:17 is also a late interpolation. It can be noted that it is the only psalm using the plural form of עבד in the first book of the Psalter, which suggests that the verse is the result of a process of editing by people defining themselves as "servants."[17] Both psalms use in their respective last verse the verb פדה. The same verb appears thirteen times in the Psalter, especially in the last verse of Psalms 25, 34, 44, 130 and in the next to last verse of Psalms 26 and 71. In most of these verses the idea is that God redeems an individual (Psalms 26, 31, 49, 55, 69, 71, 119), but in four cases it is the nation or a group that is involved (Psalms 25, 34, 44, 78, 130).

---

[13] See for example D.N. Freedman, "Patterns in Psalms 25 and 34," in E. Ulrich et al. (eds.), *Priests, Prophets and Scribes. Festschrift J. Blenkinsopp* (JSOTS, 149; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 125–38; E. Zenger, "Der Psalter," in E. Zenger (ed.), *Der Psalter in Judentum und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 2010), 20–22.

[14] It is also relevant to observe that in Psalm 34, the *lamed* verse is precisely the exhortation to listen to the speaker (v. 12), the turning point in the text.

[15] P.W. Skehan, "The Structure of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy (32:1–43)," *CBQ 13* (1951), 156–68 (160).

[16] Some scholars hypothesize that the last verse of Psalm 25 is a gloss added under the influence of Psalm 34. See for example P.W. Gaebelein, "Psalm 34 and Other Biblical Acrostics: Evidence from the Aleppo Codex," *Maarav 5–6* (1990), 127–43 (136).

[17] U. Berges, "Die Knechte im Psalter: ein Beitrag zu einer Kompositionsgeschichte," *Bib 81* (2000), 153–78 (174). Ulrich Berges also notes that אשׁם, "to be guilty," is taken over from v. 22.

From these observations, it can be concluded that Psalms 25, 34, 44, 130 stand apart. Although it seems a bit contrived to speak of a convention,[18] it could be said that all these endings played a role in the editing of the Psalter: they give it a collective eschatological dimension. Thus, it may be assumed that Psalms 25 and 34 were adapted not only to fit together, but also to advance this theological purpose.[19]

Maintaining the hypothesis that Psalms 25 and 34 form the framework of a unit with its centre in Psalm 29, we could add that the *mem* verse in both psalms are questions (Ps 25:12a and Ps 34:13). In addition, the promise of Ps 25:12b ("He will teach him the way that they should choose") is, however, not answered in the ensuing verses of the psalm. It is not said that God has taught the way to be chosen, in spite of the prayers of v. 4 ("make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your path") and of v. 5a ("lead me in your truth, and teach me"). Yet v. 8 and v. 9 state that God will do so: "good and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right; he teaches the humble his way." Actually, the prayers to benefit from God's teaching receive an answer in Ps 34:12b: "I will teach you the fear (**ירא**) of the Lord." In short, "Psalm 25 includes many prayers for help but does not include any responses. Although the psalmist has confidence that God will respond, this psalm does not indicate anything about God's reaction. Psalm 34 quotes the words of those prayers and declares that God indeed does respond."[20] On a global level it could be argued that the Psalm 34 is the response to the plea of Psalm 25.

It may be assumed that Ps 34:14–15 show the way that should be chosen, God teaching it through the speaker. In that perspective, Ps 34:14–15 give the attitudes to be adopted by the people fearing YHWH. If they do so, they find life and do not lack any good thing. The fear of the Lord has something to do with the desire for life and good. It could also be observed that both psalms provide encouragement to the God-fearers in proclaiming the goodness of YHWH (Ps 25:8 and Ps 34:9, both verses being the *teth* verse).

---

[18] It must be added that there is another psalm ending with the letter *pê,* Psalm 155, that appears in some Syriac manuscripts and in 11QPs[a]. See H. Eshel, S. Kendi-Harel, "Psalm 155: An Acrostic Poem on Repentance from the Second Temple Period," in M. Sigrist and K. Stephens (eds.), *In Memoriam John Strugnell: Four Studies* (Cahiers de la revue biblique, Pendé: Gabalda), 34–65. They assert that the last verse uses the root **פדה** "in order to close the psalm in accordance with the convention found in the conclusion of other biblical psalms" (p. 57).

[19] The eschatological dimension is strengthened in some Hebrew manuscripts and in other versions of Psalm 34. Indeed, some Hebrew manuscripts contain imperatives in v. 6 as it is also the case in Aquila's Greek version, in the Peshitta and in the Vulgate. It is also the case in the Septuagint, the first verb being however προσέρχομαι: "Draw near to him and be enlightened, and your face shall not be ashamed."

[20] R. Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *JHS* 6 (2006), 1–30 (14).

Other parallelisms between the two psalms can be noted, such as between 25:15 and 34:16, 25:16 and 34:17, 25:22 and 34:23.[21] They strengthen the perspective that YHWH rewards the righteous and punishes evildoers. But if Psalm 25 highlights that the God-fearers always experience blessing (cf. especially vv. 12–14), Ps 34:16–22 point out the troubles (v. 18) and afflictions (v. 20) suffered by the righteous. These last verses state that retribution will not readily be experienced. "Notwithstanding his fidelity to Yahweh, the צדיק is forced to cope in an imperfect world and to suffer moments of hardship, hostility, and anguish. Nevertheless, wisdom piety does maintain at this juncture that sooner or later the destruction of the רשׁע and the deliverance of the צדיק will be effectively secured."[22] The question then arises as to the social setting or historical context that could explain the situation in which the righteous have to persevere in fearing God, i.e. in departing from evil and deceit and seeking peace.

Before moving forward with this question, however, it must be observed that other surrounding psalms shed light on the motif of departing from evil and seeking peace. Because of the flexibility of the phenomenon of concatenation, it is indeed legitimate to read the Psalm 34 in connection with texts outside the cluster of Psalms 25–34. From this point of view, if Ps 29:11 asserts that God blesses his people with peace, Ps 35:20–27 denounce those who "do not speak peace (שׁלום), but conceive deceitful (מרמה as in Ps 34:14) words against those who are quiet in the land" (v. 20). The psalmist even imagines that if YHWH does not vindicate him, the adversary will gloat (vv. 21, 25). He, however, hopes that those who stand in solidarity with him will shout for joy and be glad and "say evermore: 'Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare (שׁלום) of his servant'" (v. 27). In Psalm 34 the psalmist refers to himself as "servant" (עבד) and concludes that "the Lord redeems the life of his servants." Both psalms reveal an antagonism between the servants of YHWH and mocking people speaking deceitful words. At this stage it could be said that these psalms draw a distinction between the faithful servants of YHWH and the people fighting against them (cf. Ps 35:1).

THE SOCIAL SETTING OF PSALM 34

Who are the faithful servants of YHWH and who are the people fighting against them in Psalm 34? Eriksson observed that "the psalm contains expressions which reflect a period in life of Israel with great social antagonism."[23] But there is an absence of consensus regarding the time period and the nature of the supposed conflicts. As noted by Bazyliński, scholars tend to put forward a

[21] See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 211; R. Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order," 13–16.

[22] J.K. Kuntz, "The Retribution Motif in Psalmic Wisdom," *ZAW* 89 (1977), 223–33 (232).

[23] L. Eriksson, *Come, Children, Listen to me! Psalm 34 in the Hebrew Bible and in Early Christian Writings* (CBOTS, 32; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991), 90.

dating of the psalm from the 7th to the 4th century.[24] Some of them just provide a general indication and mention its post-exilic origin.[25] A few regard Psalm 34, however, though, as a late psalm.[26] Furthermore, a number of authors consider impossible to determine any social setting for the psalm.[27] Again, the statement made by Eriksson summarizes the prevailing view:

> As far as Psalm 34 is concerned, its life setting is remarkably difficult to state. This has to do both with its general poetic and stylistic character and with its genre. Whether it is seen as a wisdom psalm or not, it shows so many formal peculiarities that it cannot easily be assigned to a specific cultic or social situation.[28]

Regarding this last issue, little has actually been said. Two hypothesis, however, can be singled out. The first one, proposed by Botha,[29] is rather conservative about the dating of the psalm but it offers an attempt to describe its social setting. The assumption is that the psalm aims to provide encouragement to the post-exilic community which was oppressed by foreigners. The second one, promoted by Vermeylen,[30] is that of a late dating of the psalm. The idea is that the Hellenistic period provides an explanation of the groups in conflict in the psalm.

Botha[31] dates the composition of Psalm 34 to post-exilic times and gives it the purpose of encouraging the community of the faithful to keep faith and confidence in YHWH's power to save them from humiliation. Botha argues that v. 23 was added to give the psalm a more positive note. Without it, the original text ended with a reference to the destiny of the wicked. Consequently, the conclusion of the psalm formed a contrast with its beginning, i.e with the urge of always praising God. Botha points

---

[24] S. Bazyliński, *Il giusto affronta l'ingiustizia. Studio di un tema salmico* (Roma: Gregoriana & Biblica Press, 2004), 287. For a rather detailed review, see Eriksson, *Come, Children*, 88–93.

[25] See for example, F. Nötscher, *Die Psalmen* (Würzburg: Echter, 1947), 64; A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms I, Psalms 1–72* (NBC; London: Oliphants, 1972), 268; E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I. With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 147.

[26] B. Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 80. For Duhm many psalms would have been written during the Hasmonean period. M. Buttenwieser, *The Psalms. Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), 840 (for a dating after 400 BCE).

[27] For example, P. Craig, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 278; I. Gous, "Reason to Believe: Cognitive Strategy in the Acrostic Psalm 34," *OTE* 12 (1999), 455–67 (463); S. Eder, " 'Broken Heart' and 'Crushed in Spirit': Metaphors and Emotions in Psalm 34,19," *SJOT* 30 (2016), 15.

[28] Eriksson, *Come, Children*, 92.

[29] P. Botha, "The Social Setting and Strategy of Psalm 34," *OTE* 10 (1997), 187–97

[30] J. Vermeylen, *Quand Israël crie vers son Dieu. Le Psautier et les Psaumes de la Bible* (Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2014), 159–69. I am not aware of somebody else putting forward the same hypothesis.

[31] Botha, "The Social Setting and Strategy," 187–97.

out that the community of believers is described as lacking self-sufficiency: they are "broken-hearted" and "crushed in spirit" (v. 19), people who have experienced fear (v. 5), troubles (vv. 7b, 18b) and afflictions (v. 20a), shame (v. 6b) and the possibility of being condemned (v. 23b).

They can be described as a group of modest people (vv. 3b, 7a) with strong cohesive feelings (vv. 3b, 4b), motivated in their behaviour by reverence for Yahweh (vv. 10a, 12b), by a desire for prosperity and a long life (vv. 10b, 11b, 13) and by hope of divine reward for themselves (vv. 16a, 23b) and for retribution for the evildoers (vv. 17b, 22b). Their social script is determined by their relationship with Yahweh (vv. 12–15) and by the wisdom-tradition, of which the psalm gives ample evidence.[32]

If there is a group referred to as "evildoers" (v. 17a), "the wicked and those who hate the righteous" (v. 22), its relationship with the faithful community is, for Botha, not clear. Only evil is mentioned as something that is spoken (v. 14a), something synonymous with "speaking deceit" (v. 14b); it is the opposite of "doing good" and of "pursuing peace" (v. 15). The interaction between the evildoers and the righteous has to be surmised. What is clear for Botha is that the psalm encourages people to keep on following YHWH. "Its strategy is to propagate the advantages and joy of being a member of the God-fearing community. The dangers of becoming apostate are also spelled out as a means of discouraging any such ideas."[33]

On the basis of close affinities with the book of Deuteronomy (especially Dt 2:7; 8:9 and 26:11; 31:17) and with Psalm 94, Botha dates the psalm after 622 BCE. More concretely, Ps 94:5 may contain a clue to the identity of the "crushed in spirit" of Ps 34:19, for in Psalm 94 the people are described as being crushed (דכא), oppressed. He thus sees in Psalm 34 a portrayal of exilic or postexilic Israel's situation of oppression by foreigners. The psalm was never meant as a thanksgiving. On the contrary, it was intended as a didactic text with the purpose of encouraging the post-exilic community of the faithful in their struggle to come to terms with their oppression by gentile peoples, to persevere in their faith under adverse conditions.[34]

To be part of that [faithful] group who wants to live as righteous people, people who fear YHWH, and who see themselves as people who are humble and trusting in YHWH alone, provides a guarantee of protection and blessing. And that is the foundation for the call to approach the enemies with a wisdom ethics of "pacifism." Trust in YHWH implies that one knows that YHWH will restore order by judging enemies and by vindicating those who wait for him.[35]

---

[32] Ibid., 186.

[33] Ibid., 189.

[34] Ibid., 191.

[35] P. Botha, "Psalm 34 and the Ethics of the Editors of the Psalter," in D.J. Human (ed.), *Psalmody and Poetry in Old Testament Ethics* (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 56–75 (75).

The second hypothesis classifies Psalm 34 as a composition of the Hellenistic period. It is put forward by Vermeylen[36] who gives indicators, such as: the alphabetic structure, the anthological aspect (v. 9b = Ps 2:12b, v. 5a = Ps 37:27a), the recurring pattern of the fear of YHWH, the protective role of the angel (v. 8; see the book of Tobias). According to Vermeylen, the Hellenistic period provides an explanation of the groups in conflict in the psalm. Actually, from the conquest of Alexander, Palestinian Judaism was confronted with a situation of crisis: the social elites of Jerusalem, including officiants of the temple, were gradually seduced by Hellenism. The Jews most attached to the tradition thus became anxious. This divide corresponded to a political antagonism. From about 230 BCE, the effective power in Jerusalem was in the hands of the Tobiads, who were Hellenized Jews allied with the Ptolemy of Alexandria; they were opposed by the traditionalist party grouped around the high priest and which was fearful for its future. But in 200 BCE, the battle of Panium ended with the victory of Antichos III over Ptolemy V, and Judaea fell into the empire of the Seleucids of Antioch. As a result, the high priest's political authority was restored, while the "modernist" party lost its power. The Temple's community was saved! Psalm 34 might have been written to celebrate the event that was perceived as a sign of YHWH's action in favour of his faithful.[37]

Vermeylen states that in the first part of Psalm 34 (vv. 1–11) the faithful people, who were despised by the Hellenized elites, praise YHWH because he had listened to their plea and saved them. In the second part of the psalm (vv. 12–23), from the experience of God's salvation, the psalmist gives a teaching. He encourages his audience to remain faithful to YHWH and warns it against the temptation to hold deceitful speeches (v. 14). The expression "speaking deceit" may be focusing on those who try to combine Judaism and Hellenism. Vermeylen concludes that the emphasis is placed on the invitation to depart from evil (vv. 14–15) because those who have abandoned the Torah will be condemned (v. 22). The final contrast between the fate of the impious and that of the just (vv. 22–23) corresponds to the conclusion of Psalm 1.[38]

It is true that Psalm 34 not only serves along with Psalm 25 as "bookends" to encapsulate a group of psalms, it shares with Psalm 1 the perspective of retribution for both the righteous and the wicked and contains a beatitude very similar to the one of Psalm 2:

Ps 34:9	אַשְׁרֵי הַגֶּבֶר יֶחֱסֶה־בּוֹ	happy are those who take refuge in him
Ps 2:12	אַשְׁרֵי כָל־חוֹסֵי בּוֹ	happy are all who take refuge in him

It also shares with Psalm 2 both an invitation to fear God (Ps 2:11; Ps 34:12) and an invitation to serve him (Ps 2:11; Ps 34:23).

[36] Vermeylen, *Quand Israël crie*, 159–69.
[37] Ibid., 167. My translation.
[38] Ibid., 167–68.

This suggests that Psalm 34 could be understood as playing a role in the dynamic of the first book of the Psalter. At least it could be understood as pertaining to an intentional editorial purpose that gives a certain importance to the idea of taking refuge in God. Indeed, the paired introduction to the Psalter provides a key concept that will be found throughout the first book (fifteen times) of the Psalter, i.e. חסה "refuge" (Ps 2:12; 5:12; 7:2; 11:1; 16:1; 17:7; 18:3.31; 25:20; 31:2.20; 34:9.23; 36:8; 37:40); the same term only appears nine times in the rest of the Psalter. Most of the time this key concept is found in the beginning of the psalms (7:2; 11:1; 16:1; 18:3; 31:2) or at their end (2:12; 34:23; 37:40). It is then possible that the (Davidic) psalms having חסה in their incipits or first lines (see also Psalms 57, 71, 144) were grouped on the grounds of the presence of the same formulaic expression. What is more, Ps 2:12d seems to be a clear sign of editing, the aim of which is to shape the first book around that same key concept. As noted by Creach, the psalm "focuses on the recalcitrance of foreign kings in a wholly negative tone. Therefore, it is difficult to understand why a word of commendation for 'all who seek refuge in the Yahweh' would conclude the work. However, the line makes sense if added as a precursor to the חסה participles and third-person verbal form in David 1"[39] (namely Ps 2:12d and 3–41). Considering the similarity of Ps 2:12d and Ps 34:9b and the fact that the expression better fits in the literary context of Psalm 34, it cannot be excluded that the first one has been influenced by the second one. But Psalm 34 not only asserts that happy are those who take refuge in YHWH (34:9), it also states that none of them will be condemned (Ps 34:23). This last verse is, as already suggested, more certainly a late addition strengthening the affirmation that YHWH will redeem his faithful servants. Psalm 34 also contains the idea that many are the afflictions of the righteous (34:20). Yet חסה characterizes the righteous in Ps 5:12–13 and Ps 37:39–40 and already in the association of Psalms 1 and 2. From all these observations, "to take refuge in" God can be interpreted as meaning to entrust one's life and future to him. In that ways, Psalm 34 pertains to the editorial process of the first book of the Psalter both in highlighting that righteousness is to seek refuge in YHWH and in introducing an eschatological dimension. On the same line, it is not without interest to observe that the *Massorah magna* draws attention to the fact that the expression אשׁרי הגבר is used in Ps 34:9 but also in Ps 40:5; 94:12; 127:5. Now Ps 40:5a is a macarism about the man who trusts in God; Ps 94:12 is one about the man that God disciplines and teaches from his law; Ps 127:5 could be characterized as a picture of a man supported by God. This tends to support the hypothesis that the righteous are portrayed as seeking YHWH and trusting in him and as receiving the assurance that God will redeem them.

It could be added that Psalm 34 shows some affinities with considerations about the righteous and wicked concentrated in

[39] J. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 75.

Prov 3:32–35; 4:14–19 and 10:1–22:16. Its parental appeal (v. 12) is close to a group of exhortations used in Proverbs 1–9 (such as Prov 4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:6.32). With Prov 1–9 it also shares the exhortation to fear YHWH (Prov 1:5; 1:29; 2:5; 3:5.27; 8:13; 9:10). Fearing God is life-giving (v. 13; see Prov. 10:27; 14:27; 19:23); God is a refuge to those who fear him (Prov 14:26). By coordinating this last motif with the one of taking refuge in YHWH, "the psalmist cements their connection such that one takes on the characteristics of the other (vv. 8–9. 22)."[40] In doing so, the psalm gives a "summary" of an expanded portrayal of the righteous—whose principal characteristic is precisely to find refuge in YHWH—that is expanded in the first book of the Psalter. It cannot, however, be concluded from the above observations that Psalm 34 refers to Proverbs, even if it is reminiscent of material, and especially of material about the righteous and wicked, first collected in Prov 10:1–22:16 and also present in Prov 1–9. However, the similarities of this psalm with different traditions of composition, its parallels with Prov 1–9, and the role played by Psalm 34 in the first book of the Psalter, constitute various hints pointing toward the conclusion of a redaction of the psalm and its insertion in the Psalter during the Hellenistic period, as proposed by Vermeylen.[41]

However, there is little evidence to state that Psalm 34 celebrates the return to a pacified situation for the faithful community or to connect its redaction with the battle of Panium as Vermeylen proposes. With its emphasis on the contrasted destinies of the righteous and the wicked, it more likely shares with other texts a preoccupation with the stability of the community. It may be an attempt to convince the audience not to be seduced by Hellenistic culture and not to be misled by deceitful speeches of Jews discarding their traditions in favour of Hellenistic beliefs and lifestyles. It is addressed to believers who are tormented by other Jews who speak deceit, rather than by external enemies. Its literary "mise en scène" is then one of an individual urging his audience to be faithful and supporting this position on the basis of his own experience of divine deliverance. It is also worth noting that the psalm shares common features with texts such as Sir 6:37–7:3. Even a late text such the book of Wisdom, a Jewish production of the Alexandrian diaspora, still contains a polemic against people whose lips speak deceit (Wis 1:6) that could seduce the just (Wis 4:11). Wisdom asserts that despite appearances, the just finds peace (Wis 3:3) whereas people living in great strife due to ignorance call peace what is great evil (Wis 14:22). Again, the question at issue here is not to determine the literary dependence between these texts but rather to highlight

[40] W. Brown, " 'Come, o Children [. . .] I Will Teach You the Fear of the Lord' (Psalm 34:12): Comparing Psalms and Proverbs", in R.L. Troxel, K.G. Friebel and D.R. Magary (eds.), *Seeking out the wisdom of the ancients. Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 86–102 (91).

[41] This conclusion stands in contradiction with Hossfeld and Zenger's assumption that Psalm 34 was inserted in the 5th or 4th century BCE. See above.

that they vouch for the existence of a conflict within the Jewish community under the domination of Hellenistic culture.

If, in Psalm 34, the destinies of the good and wicked form a strong antithesis, it appears that both categories of people are defined in relationship to YHWH. If evil has to do with speaking deceit, i.e with discourses undermining people's confidence and faith, the psalm does not deal primarily with social welfare but rather with faithfulness to God and to ancestral traditions. Psalm 34 gives an answer to the plea of Psalm 25: it shows the way to be chosen, in order to be considered a faithful servant of YHWH. This way is precisely to avoid speaking deceit, to depart from evil and to resolutely seek peace. Thus, peace is here a lasting relationship of trust and faithfulness on the part of the faithful, which results in a truthful discourse that God rewards. However, in a community which appeared to be divided between Jews loyal to the faith of their fathers and Jews who were attracted by the beliefs and customs of Hellenistic culture, seeking peace and pursuing it is not totally unconnected with responsibility for the common good and for the community's good. The psalm is a call to beleaguered members of a community designed to encourage them to remain faithful to their faith and traditions. In doing so, they contribute to maintaining the stability of the community.