PSALM 34 – DOES THE HEADING FIT?

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Psalm 34 is one of several psalms in which a heading links the poem with a historical event. The JPSA 1962 translation calls this poem *(A Psalm) of David when he feigned madness in the presence of Abimelech, who turned him out, and he left*. The heading is followed by a 22-line alphabetical acrostic poem which lacks a *vav*-verse but ends with an extra *peh*-verse which praises God for redeeming those who believe in Him.[1] Oesterley[2] thought the heading was inappropriate and inserted by mistake. Buttenweiser[3] asserted that "poetically the hymn is worthless". Driver[4] regarded the alphabetical acrostic as a mere artificial device without logical purpose. Though the poem makes no explicit reference to the event named in the heading, Jewish tradition maintained that the psalm was linked to that episode and esteemed the psalm sufficiently to use it in the liturgy. The present writer believes that the traditional view could well be right.

FEIGNING MADNESS

The Hebrew heading is rather vague. If it indeed refers to David feigning madness, the redactor/s must have chosen not to spell out the details and used a euphemism which is rendered into English in a range of ways. The JPSA 1962 translation is *feigned madness.* The JPSA 1917 version says *changed his demeanour*. The early editions of the Singer prayerbook[5] say *changed his behaviour*. Robert Alter says *altered his good sense*, using 'sense' to mean rational, accepted behaviour.[6] The Hebrew is *b'shannoto et ta'amo*, which, according to Rashi, is a euphemism for acting like a *shoteh* or idiot. Ibn Ezra says that *ta'am* has two meanings (physical and mental) and here it indicates soundness, sanity, stability (as in Psalm 119:66, Proverbs 11:22 and Job 12:20). There is a play on words in verse 9 which says *ta'amu ur'u, taste and see (that the Lord is good)*, using *ta'am* in a non-physical sense. Metzudat David and Metzudat Tziyyon think that what David did in the palace of Akhish was to behave strangely and talk unintelligibly.

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The context appears to be an incident in I Samuel 21:11-16. Fleeing from Saul and fearing danger, David came to King Akhish of Gath. There he was recognized by the brothers of Goliath who were courtiers of Akhish. They saw him as a threat (see their words about him in I Samuel 18:7). David saved himself by pretending to be insane (*vayit'holel* – probably meaning *he talked wildly*) and was mocked and thrown out, ensuring that he could live to face another day. However, there is an apparent discrepancy between the two texts. Where the psalm speaks of his appearing before Avimelekh, I Samuel says it was Akhish. If (with Rashi) we understand Avimelekh as the formal name for a Philistine king - following the pattern of Pharaoh as the Egyptian royal title, separate from the personal name of a given Pharaoh - and Akhish as the king's personal name, the two men are identical and the discrepancy is explained. The Midrash to Psalms[7] embroiders the Biblical account by suggesting that the royal palace was not unaccustomed to eccentric behaviour because the king's wife and daughter were both insane. No wonder the king says (verse 16), *Do I lack madmen* [*meshuga'im*] *that you have brought this fellow to rave for me*?

According to the Midrash, David had previously told God that he was puzzled by madness and saw no purpose in its existence, but by means of the Akhish episode God proved that it could be a life-saver, for had David not put on this pretence he would probably not have escaped alive. On another occasion, according to the animal stories in Jewish legend, God showed David that spiders too had a purpose.[8] These episodes seem part of the way God instructed David to show wisdom in the way he conducted himself as king. Samson Raphael Hirsch says in his commentary that David sought this guidance from God, as hinted at in verse 3 with its *darashti, I turned to the Lord.*

When I Samuel speaks of David feigning lunacy, verse 14 of the text says that he *scratched marks on the doors of the gate and let his saliva run down his beard*. Both apparently were forms of crazy, irresponsible conduct. Rabbinic literature has a somewhat similar notion (BT *Hag*. 3b) when it says that a person who destroys whatever people give him is a *shoteh*, an idiot.[9] The factors behind madness are not analysed. The fact that David could play-act in this way suggests that a person can assume the guise of madness.

The Midrash we have quoted implies that it is possible for madness to benefit people in some fashion. This seems to justify the statement in the final

verse of the psalm, which begins with a *peh* which does not fit in to the alphabetical scheme but declares that God redeems (*podeh*) the life of His servants, i.e. uses the instrumentalities and agencies He chooses to bring them benefit. This binds together the beginning and end of the psalm, justifies the psalm title and indicates why the content of the psalm focuses on David's gratitude for his escape from death. It refutes Oesterley's claim that the psalm heading is inappropriate and entered the Book of Psalms 'by mistake'.

It is true that the psalm itself does not mention lunacy at all. All it does is to acknowledge David's deliverance from evil. There is a Jewish tradition that the psalm is linked with the madness episode, but that in itself is not necessarily conclusive evidence. The question remains, why is the madness not spelt out? The question applies to all the psalms which have 'historical' headings: if the historical links are valid why are they not clearly mentioned in the text? In the case of Psalm 34, one answer is that David is focussing on his escape and not on the stratagem he employed for it – though there are hints in verses 14 and 19 that he has a bad conscience about his actions which involved misusing the gift of speech. Alter thinks the link is not so much in the words but the focus on God's redemptive or rescuing power.[10] It is a mark of the 'historical' psalms that they are not chronologies but poetic musings about suffering and release, e.g. Psalm 7 concerns Cush; Psalm 18 mentions David's enemies and Saul.

ALPHABETICAL ACROSTIC

Psalm 34 is an alphabetical psalm with a missing letter *vav*, though there is a hint of a *vav* in verse 6b. Arthur Marmorstein[11], pointing out that the psalm text is disjointed if it goes straight from *heh* to *zayin*, thinks the missing *vav* verse might be *ufodeh Ado-nai nefesh avadav vesole'ah lehatat yedidav* (*And the Lord redeems the life of His servants and pardons the sin of those who love Him*), found in a version of the Amidah. If he is right, this verse must have been dislodged and moved (without an initial *vav*) to become verse 33 of the psalm. Another defective alphabetical psalm is 145, where there is no *nun* verse.[12] Such defects in an alphabetical scheme might indicate scribal error or early orthological fluidity. Acrostics were probably an aid to memory. It is also likely that poets used them as a framework for the chant-

ing of their poems – presumably by an assembly, usually in responsive form. Adele Berlin believes that the poet wanted to enlist the whole alphabet to show the greatness of God.[13] Though this style of writing constrains the author to fit his work into a pre-existent mould, the acrostic does not necessarily prevent the author from organizing his thoughts, but if Psalm 34 is an example it is rather unsatisfactory in that it does not seem to allow in-depth analysis of the themes he touches on, such as redemption and theodicy. Still, it is too easy a judgment when Buttenweiser sweepingly dismisses this psalm as 'poetically… worthless'. To assess the poetical worth of the psalm, it has to be looked at, not against Biblical poetry as a whole but in relation to alphabetical acrostic psalms.

An example of the alphabetical acrostic poem is Psalm 145 (*Ashrei*). In this psalm (like Psalm 34) the poet commences with a declaration that praise of God is always in his mouth. Then he sets out the Divine traits and deeds that call forth his praise. Is there a logic in the order in which he lists God's attributes? In one sense, possibly not, but he is not writing as an analytical philosopher but as an impressionable emotional poet who looks from side to side of the Creation and at the way the Creator cares for His creatures, and is lost in admiration at everything he sees. Put at its lowest, Psalm 34 is no worse – and in one major respect, if we follow the interpretation found in Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary,[14] it is actually better.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS

Hirsch explains that the poem is autobiographical, presenting a series of personal reflections on David's own experience: 'This chapter refers to an event in David's difficult life which surely represents the nadir of all the affliction… Cast down from the heights to such depths of despair, David here proclaims those cardinal truths that contain so much practical wisdom'. The poet was in danger, had the brainwave that led to a successful tactic, and now thanks God for his escape, which he celebrates in verse.

Seeing, though, that the poem is alphabetical, is the thinking organized and systematic? Is the poet writing randomly, swinging from theme to theme, from thought to thought, from memory to memory, wherever the sequence of the *aleph-bet* leads him? The present author submits that Driver is wrong that the poem contains no logical development. Despite the fact that this is not a

philosophical treatise, it is possible to discern in the poem an overall theme – Divine protection and rescue of the righteous – illustrated in the interplay between personal memory and Wisdom-Literature type reflection.

Evidence that the psalm is indeed autobiographical is the *zayin* verse (verse 6). The Hebrew says, *zeh ani kara*, which is usually translated, *This poor* (or *afflicted*) *man cried*… The Soncino version[15] is adamant when it says in its commentary, 'The Psalmist is not referring to himself'. But why not? If we take the verse as a personal reflection it identifies the poor (or afflicted) man as David, though his name is not spelt out. True, once he has decided to use an alphabetical acrostic the author has to find an opening word for the verse beginning with *zayin*, and whatever word he chose would have been open to criticism. Still, *zeh* does seem a somewhat strange choice when one considers the range of nouns, verbs and adjectives that begin with *zayin*. The Psalmist had other options from which to choose: Psalm 145, for example, begins its *zayin* verse with the word *zekher*. Psalm 25:6 has *zekhor*, from the same root. Other *zayin* possibilities are the range of words deriving from the roots *zayin-mem-nun* or *zayin-kuf-nun*. The context of the verse itself offers us no conclusive proof that the Psalmist is speaking of himself as *zeh ani*, but he certainly could be, and this is the way that Radak (David Kimchi) understands the verse.

Apart from the conventional *this poor man cried*, there is a quite different way of understanding the word *zeh*, seeing it as a demonstrative like *hinneh*, *Behold!* This would give the phrase *zeh ani kara* the sense of *Look*, (or *here is*) *a poor man crying!* This is the approach taken by the 1962 JPSA version, which says, *Here was a lowly man who called*… The *lowly man* could and probably does refer to David, though we grant that it does not have to. An analogy is *zeh E-li v'an'vehu*, *Look, (this is) my God and I will enshrine Him)* (Ex. 15:2).

The autobiographical verses make up only part of the psalm. Four sections are discernible – 1. Personal (verses 1-5), 2. Impersonal (verses 6-11), 3. Personal again (verses 12-15) and 4. Impersonal again (verses 16-23). In the personal sections, the poet is recalling his experiences: in the impersonal sections, he is a Wisdom teacher. The poem moves from style to style. Sometimes it is subjective: sometimes it is objective. The alternation of sections

provides an element of drama, of emotional feeling contrasting with intellectual reflection.

EPILOGUE

After the alphabetical acrostic is complete, verse 22 gives us a *peh* verse referring to God redeeming (saving, protecting) the life of His servants: *The Lord redeems the life of His servants; all who take refuge in Him shall not be ruined* (JPSA 1962 version; the 1917 version has *desolate* instead of *ruined*). This could of course be an editorial addendum, but it is likely that it is the deliberate work of the poet himself. Possibly he has a rhetorical purpose. After he has presented us with the poem he has designed, he deliberately departs from the acrostic to proclaim that whatever happens on earth amongst human beings, the righteous are assured of Divine protection.

David has a habit of affirming God's redemptive power. Apart from a similar conclusion to Psalm 25, he acclaims redemption in (for example) II Samuel 4:9 and I Kings 1:29. Thus the *peh*-verse is almost like a Davidic stylistic signature.[16]

LITURGICAL USAGE

Apart from individual verses borrowed by the liturgy here and there, the whole psalm figures in the Sabbath and festival morning services. Possibly its theme was thought to encourage a sabbatical mood, though there is a tradition that it was a Sabbath when David feigned madness.[17] Marmorstein, however, found the psalm in a version of the weekday liturgy, though this did not become the accepted usage.[18]

CONCLUSION

If Oesterley is right that the heading of Psalm 34 is there by mistake, the same should apply to all the 'historical' psalms. It is more likely that naming a historical setting is not intended to open up a historical analysis but to provide a spur and occasion for a poetical meditation. Without the historical event the poet might never have been stimulated towards these thoughts. Presumably this is what tradition sees as the link between the heading and the content of the poem.

NOTES

1. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 2, s.v. 'Acrostics', L. Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2017).
2. W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: SPCK, 1962 ed.), p. 414.
3. M. Buttenweiser, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated* (NY: Ktav, 1969 ed.), p. 849.
4. S.R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (NY: Meridian, 1956 ed.), p. 368.
5. S. Singer (ed.), *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962 ed.), p. 22.
6. R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (NY: WW Norton, 2007) on Psalm 34.
7. W.G. Braude (ed.), *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 408-10; *Second Alphabet of Ben Sira* (many eds.); cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 4, cols. 548-60.
8. Isa. 59:5, Job 8:14; *Second Alphabet of Ben Sira.*
9. BT *Hag*. 3b lists several indications of madness including a person who goes out alone at night or dwells in a cemetery. Codifiers distinguish between an eccentric and an idiot (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 1:5).
10. R. Alter, *op. cit.*
11. A. Marmorstein, 'The Attitude of the Jews Towards Early Christianity', in *Expositor*, vol. 49 (1923), pp. 383-389. The Amidah version he cites is MS Bodl. 2731, p. 20a.
12. R. Apple, 'Addenda to Psalm 145', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 44:4 (2016) and the bibliography there.
13 A. Berlin, 'The Rhetoric of Psalm 145', in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (eds. A. Kurt & S. Morschauer) (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 17-22.
14. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms* (trans. Gertrude Hirschler), (Jerus./NY: Feldheim, 1960 ed.), pp. 240-49.
15. A. Cohen (ed.), *The Psalms* (Hindhead, Surrey: Soncino, 1945), p. 100.
16. We have already noted Marmorstein's view about the reference to redemption being dislodged from earlier in the psalm and moved to this position, possibly so that the psalm will not end on an unpleasant note.
17. Cited by S. Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisra'el* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), p. 62.
18. A. Marmorstein, *loc. cit.*