

Jewish and Christian Approaches to Psalm 35

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1. Psalm 35

Psalm 35 is a difficult text, which does not play an important role either in Jewish or in Christian tradition. Some textual problems, and the dramatic descriptions of the enemies, provide manifold challenges for the interpretation. The psalm is full of metaphors. Like in other individual laments, in the characterizations of the enemies we find overlapping areas of images: war, hunting and wild animals.¹ In addition to that, body language plays an important role in Ps 35.

Biblical exegesis strives toward a »neutral, scientific« explanation of the text, its structure, imagery etc. At the same time, it cannot – and should not – be avoided that the Jewish or Christian background of the interpreter influences the exegesis. Thus, the following remarks to Ps 35 include examples of Jewish and Christian exegesis from different periods and contexts.

1 Of David.²

1 לְדָוִד

Strive, o YHWH, with those who strive with me.³

Fight against those who fight against me.

2 Take hold of shield and buckler,
and rise up as my help.

3 Draw out a spear and close⁴
against my pursuers.

Say to my soul: I am your salvation.

4 Let those be ashamed and humiliated
that seek after my life.

Let those be turned back and be abashed
that plan evil against me.

5 They shall be like chaff before the wind,
the angel of YHWH thrusting.⁵

רִיבָה יְהוָה אֶת־רִיבֵי
לָחֶם אֶת־לֹחְמָי:

2 הַחֹזֶק מִגֹּן וְצַנָּה
וְקוּמָה בְּעֹזְרוֹתַי:

3 וְהִרְקֵת חֲנִית וְסָגַר
לְקִרְאֵת רִדְפָי

אָמַר לְנַפְשִׁי יִשְׁעֲתֶךָ אֲנִי:
4 יִבְשׂוּ וְיִקְלְמוּ

מִבְּקֵשֵׁי נַפְשִׁי

יִסָּנוּ אַחֲוֹר וְיִחַפְּרוּ
חֲשָׁבֵי רָעָתִי:

5 יִהְיוּ כַמֶּזֶץ לַפְּנִירוֹת
וּמִקְלָף יְהוָה יִדָּחָה:

¹ See B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 117.

² Some versions of the Septuagint and the *Vetus Latina* add ψαλμός (a psalm), which would correspond to מְזִמֹּר.

³ This translation is plausible in parallelism to the second colon (see H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen* 1–59 [1989] 424; A. Basson, *Metaphors* [2006] 136). In contrast, some Hebrew manuscripts and the Syriac version read רִיבֵי (my fight / argument).

⁴ The Masoretic text is difficult at this point. Therefore, many exegetes suggest a different vocalization: וְסָגַר (and the pike / javelin), reading a noun in parallelism to חֲנִית (spear) instead of a verb: see M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (1965) 208, 210–11; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen* 1–59 (1989) 424–25; A. Basson, *Metaphors* (2006) 136.

6 Their way shall be dark and slippery, the angel of YHWH pursuing them.	6 וְהִירְדָּם חֹשֶׁךְ וְחַלְקָלְקוֹחַ וּמְלֹאֵךְ יְהוָה רֹדְפָם:
7 For without cause they hid a pit for me, their net. Without cause they dug for my life. ⁶	7 כִּי־הֵנָּם טָמְנוּ־לִי שַׁחַת רֶשֶׁתָם חָנָם חָפְרוּ לְנַפְשִׁי
8 May disaster come upon him unawares and his net that he had hidden catch himself. May he fall in it, in disaster.	8 חֲבוּאָהּ שׁוּאָה לֹא־יָרֵעַ וְרֶשֶׁתוֹ אֲשֶׁר־טָמַן תִּלְכְּדוּ בְשׁוּאָהּ יִפֹּל־בָּהּ:
9 But my soul shall rejoice in YHWH, exulting in his salvation.	9 וְנַפְשִׁי הִגִּיל בַּיהוָה חַשִּׁישׁ בִּישׁוּעָתוֹ:
10 All my bones shall say: YHWH, who is like you, delivering the poor from the one too strong for him, the poor and needy from the one who robs him.	10 כָּל עַצְמוֹתַי תֹּאמַרְנָה יְהוָה מִי כָמוֹךָ מַצִּיל עָנִי מִחֹזֶק מַמְנֹו וְעָנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן מִגְּזֹלוֹ:
11 False witnesses will rise up, asking me about things I do not know.	11 יִקְוּמוּן עַדֵי חֶמֶס אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָרַעְתִּי יִשְׁאַלּוּנִי:
12 They will repay me evil for good, childlessness ⁷ for my life.	12 יִשְׁלְמוּנִי רָעָה תַּחַת טוֹבָה שָׂכוֹל לְנַפְשִׁי:
13 But I – in their sickness –, my clothing was sackcloth. I afflicted myself with fasting. May my prayer return into my lap.	13 וְאֲנִי בַחֲלוּתָם לְבוּשִׁי שֶׁקַּ עָנִיתִי בְצוּם נַפְשִׁי וַחֲפִלְתִּי עַל־חִיקֵי תְּשׁוּבָה:
14 As though it had been my friend or my brother, I went about, Like the grief of a mother ⁸ I bowed down mournful.	14 כְּרֵע־כָּאֹחַ לִי הִתְחַלַּכְתִּי כְּאֶבְל־אֵם קָדַר שַׁחֲוִיתִי:
15 But at my stumbling they rejoice and gather, they gathered themselves together against me, smiters ⁹ and those I do not know,	15 וּבְצַלְעֵי שִׁמְחוּ וְנֶאֱסַפוּ נֶאֱסַפוּ עָלַי נֹכְחִים וְלֹא יָרַעְתִּי

⁵ According to the *lectio difficilior* of the Masoretic text an object is missing. Following the Septuagint some exegetes suggest adding an object suffix: רוּחַם (thrusting / pushing them), in parallelism to רֹדְפָם (pursuing them) at the end of v.6: see BHS; P.C. Craigie, Psalms 1–50 (1983) 283–284; H.-J. Kraus, Psalmen 1–59 (1989) 424–426; A. Basson, Metaphors (2006) 137.

⁶ In the Masoretic text the object of חָפְרוּ is missing. Therefore, following the Syriac version, many exegetes suggest changing the word-order and reading שַׁחַח at the beginning of v.7b: »For without cause they hid their net for me, they dug a pit for my life without cause«: see P.C. Craigie, Psalms 1–50 (1983) 283; H.-J. Kraus, Psalmen 1–59 (1989) 424, 426; F.-L. Hossfeld / E. Zenger, Psalmen I (1993) 218; A. Basson, Metaphors (2006) 137. Although the reading becomes easier and the rhythm of the verse is improved, Hebrew manuscripts provide no reason for this change.

⁷ The text-critical problems of this term are discussed below.

⁸ The Septuagint reads the participle ὡς πενθῶν καὶ (like mourning and) instead of a noun. This reading could imply the vocalization קָאֶבְל־אֵם in Hebrew (see BHS App.). Some exegetes follow this proposal: see M. Dahood, Psalms I (1965) 213; P.C. Craigie, Psalms 1–50 (1983) 283; H.-J. Kraus, Psalmen 1–59 (1989) 425, 426; A. Basson, Metaphors (2006) 137. The Septuagint and Peshitta alike omit *mother*.

⁹ The participle or adjective נֹכְחִים is rather unusual; in 2 Sam 4:4, 9:3 it means »crippled«. It is derived from נָכַח meaning to beat / smite in *hi*. here. Others propose conjectures like חֹכְחִים, »oppressors« (see P.C. Craigie, Psalms 1–50 [1983] 283, 285, following 4QPs⁹) or

they tear me and do not cease.

16 They impiously mocked more and more,
gnashing at me with their teeth.

17 Adonai, how long will you look on?

Bring back my life from their ravages,
From young lions my only one.

18 I will thank you in the great congregation,
among many people I will praise you.

19 My treacherous enemies shall not rejoice over me,
those who hate me without cause shall not blink the eye,

20 for they do not speak of peace,
but against the quiet ones of the land¹⁰
they devise words of deceit.

21 They opened wide their mouth against me
and said: Aha, aha, our eyes have seen it.

22 You have seen it, YHWH, do not be silent,
Adonai, do not be far away from me.

23 Wake up and rise for my defense,
my God and Adonai for my cause.

24 Judge me according to your justice,¹¹
YHWH, my God,¹²

and they shall not rejoice over me.

25 They shall not say in their heart:

Aha, like our desire.

They shall not say:

We have swallowed you up.

26 They shall be ashamed and humiliated together,
those who rejoice at my misery.

They shall wear shame and dishonor,
those who make themselves great against me.

27 They will rejoice and be glad,

those who delight in my justice,

and they will always say:

Great is YHWH,

קָרְעוּ וְלֹא תִדְמּוּ:

16 בַּחֲנָפִי לַעֲגִי מְעוֹן

חָרַק עָלַי שְׁנִימוּ

17 אֲדֹנָי כַּמָּה תִרְאֶה

הַשְׂבִּיבָה נַפְשִׁי מִשְׂאֵיהֶם

מִכַּפְרִיִּים יַחֲדָתִי

18 אֲוֹדֶךָ בְּקֹהֶל רַב

בְּעַם עֲצוּם אֶהְלֶלְךָ

19 אֶל־יֹשְׁמָחוּלֵי אִיבֵי שָׂקָר

שֹׂנְאֵי חַסֵּם יִקְרְצוּ־עֵינָי

20 כִּי לֹא שְׁלוֹם יִדְבְּרוּ

וְעַל רְנַנֵי־אֶרֶץ

דִּבְרֵי מִרְמוֹת יַחֲשִׁבוּן

21 וַיִּרְחִיבוּ עָלַי פִּיהֶם

אָמְרוּ הָאֵחַ הָאֵחַ רָאֵתָה עֵינֵינוּ

22 רְאִיתָה יְהוָה אֶל־תִּתְרַשׁ

אֲדֹנָי אֶל־חֲרַחֵק מִמֶּנִּי

23 הַעֲרִידָה וְהַקִּיצָה לְמִשְׁפָּטִי

אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲדֹנָי לְרִיבִי

24 שִׁפְטֵנִי כְצִדְקָךָ

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי

וְאֶל־יֹשְׁמָחוּלֵי

25 אֶל־יֹאמְרוּ בְלִבָּם

הָאֵחַ נַפְשֵׁנוּ

אֶל־יֹאמְרוּ

בְּלַעֲנוּהוּ

26 יִבְשׁוּ וַיִּחַפְּרוּ יַחְדָּו

שִׂמְחֵי רַעְתֵּי

יִלְבְּשׁוּ־בִשְׂת וּכְלָמָה

הַמַּגְדִּילִים עָלַי

27 יִרְנוּ וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ

חֲפְצֵי צִדְקָי

וַיֹּאמְרוּ תִמְדָּ

יִגְדֵל יְהוָה

«strangers» (see *H.-J. Kraus*, Psalmen 1–59 [1989] 425–26; *F.-L. Hossfeld / E. Zenger*, Psalmen I [1993] 218–19; HAL 2000, Art. נְכָדָה).

¹⁰ רְנַנֵי־אֶרֶץ (the quiet ones of the land) is a *hapax legomenon*. According to *Craigie*, Psalms 1–50 (1983) 285, it is »a poetic description of the pious congregation or nation as a whole.«

¹¹ Some Hebrew manuscripts read כְּצִדְקָתְךָ (according to your justness / deeds of justice) instead of כְּצִדְקָךָ (according to your justice / salvation). While MT stresses YHWH's general justice, the reading would mean a single and specific act of justice. The semantics of both terms are similar: see HAL 2000, Art. צִדְקָה and צִדְקָי.

¹² In the reading of MT, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי (YHWH, my God) belongs to the first part of the verse. The Syriac version omits אֱלֹהֵי completely. Others, e.g. *H.-J. Kraus*, Psalmen 1–59 (1989) 425, 426, pull it to the second half of the verse, deleting the copula ו in front of the following אֶל.

who delights in the well-being of his servant.
 28 Then my tongue will declare your equity,
 all day long, your praise.

הַחֶפֶץ שְׁלוֹם עַבְדּוֹ
 28 וְלִשׁוֹנִי תִהְיֶה צְדִיקָה
 כָּל-הַיּוֹם תִּהְלֶתֶךָ

Psalm 35 is an individual's lament.¹³ It can be divided into three sections, each one starting with the situation of the enemies and ending with thanks and praise to יהוה: vv.1-10, 11-18 and 19-28. The praying process in Ps 35 moves from fight (רִיב; v.1) to praise (תהלה; v.28) three times.¹⁴ The entire psalm consists of appeals to YHWH, elements of lament and descriptions of the enemies.

It is not possible to determine either a specific »Sitz im Leben« or the concrete misery that forms the background of Ps 35. It is characterized by forensic terminology of justice and law,¹⁵ and hints at the situation of an accused person. At the same time, it contains elements of the prayer of a sick person.¹⁶ One possible explanation is a combination of these two backgrounds: the motif of the »passio iusti« entering a prayer of an invalid.¹⁷ It can be described as a prayer »for deliverance from personal enemies.«¹⁸ In addition to that, military overtones hint at a royal prayer: The threat of the enemies might not only be an individual problem, but an »international« one as well.¹⁹ These descriptions point out single aspects among the variety of facets of Ps 35.

Like in most psalms, we can expect a historic development from pre-exilic origins (maybe vv.1-6, 11-18) to exilic (vv.19-25) and post-exilic editing (vv.7-10, 26-28).²⁰ It is not possible to assign the psalm to one specific historic context.²¹

Verse 1 is programmatic, explaining the theme of the whole psalm: an appeal of the psalmist to YHWH to fight against the enemies. YHWH's words יְשַׁעְךָ אֲנִי (I am your salvation) in v.3b represent a condensed promise to the psalmist. This short sentence has been interpreted as »Musterbeispiel eines »priesterlichen Heilsorakels.«²² It is not possible to identify such an event. The »Stimmungsumschwung« causing the change from lament to praise cannot be explained in a one-dimensional way with an external event.

¹³ See already *H. Gunkel / J. Begrich*, *Einleitung* (1985) 172; *M. Dahood*, *Psalms I* (1965) 210.

¹⁴ See *M. Kronemeijer*, *Struggle* (2005) 98.

¹⁵ See *B. Weber*, *Werkbuch* (2001) 170.

¹⁶ See *K. Seybold*, *Psalmen* (1996) 145.

¹⁷ See *L. Ruppert*, *Der leidende Gerechte* (1972) 41.

¹⁸ *M. Dahood*, *Psalms I* (1965) 210.

¹⁹ E.g., *P.C. Craigie*, *Psalms 1–50* (1983) 286, proposes an international treaty against the Israelite king.

²⁰ See *F.-L. Hossfeld / E. Zenger*, *Psalmen I* (1993) 216.

²¹ See *A. Basson*, *Metaphors* (2006) 140.

²² See *H.-J. Kraus*, *Psalmen 1–59* (1989) 428.

Psalms of lament like Ps 35 show a praying-process. The dialogue between God and psalmist forms the structure of the whole psalm.²³ The triangle of psalmist – YHWH – enemies, and the fast movement between them, characterizes the psalm.

2. The enemies

Psalm 35 contains manifold descriptions of the enemies and their deeds. The terms used to describe them are not neutral, but depict the enemies in hostile action against the psalmist. According to the classification of Keel,²⁴ most of the terms belong to the «אֵיבֵי»-group describing the general dichotomy. We find a high variety of terms for the enemies, each name occurring only once: In the first and third parts of the psalm (vv.1-10, 19-28), the enemies are described in their actions against the psalmist, marked with the 1st person sing. suffix: יְרִיבֵי (those who strive with me) and לְחָמֵי (those who fight with me) in v.1, רֹדְפָי (my pursuers; v.3), מְבַקְשֵׁי נַפְשִׁי (those who seek after my life) and חֹשְׁבֵי רָעוּתִי (who plan evil against me) in v.4, אֵיבֵי שָׂקֶר (my treacherous enemies) and שֹׂנְאֵי חַנּוּם (those who hate me without cause) in v.19, שֹׂמְחֵי רָעוּתִי (those who rejoice at my misery) and הַמְגַדְּלִים עָלַי (those who make themselves great against me) in v.26. In the psalm's middle section (vv.11-18), we find epithets without suffixes: עֲדֵי הָקֶם (false witnesses; v.11) and נֹכְחִים (smiters; v.15). It is typical for the names of the enemies to be participles functioning between noun and verb.²⁵ Additionally, in v.17 we find the enemies described metaphorically as animals, כְּפִירִים (young lions), in a climax that illustrates their concrete threat.²⁶

Beside these clear participle-noun epithets referring to the enemies, we find various descriptions of their deeds in verbs: e.g., they »hide« (טָמְנוּ) a pit and »dig« (חָפְרוּ) for the life of the psalmist (v.7). Thus, in v.7 an image of hunting is used for characterizing the hostile deeds of the enemies. While in v.7 the enemies act like hunters, in vv.15 and 17 they are compared to wild animals that »tear« the psalmist apart (קָרַע), and are identified as young lions (כְּפִירִים). Their threatening actions can be rather concrete: they »gather« (אָסְפוּ) against the psalmist (v.15). Another aspect of their deeds is seen in their verbal attacks in a context of justice and law: False witnesses »rise up« (קוּמוּ) and »ask« (שָׁאֵל) things the psalmist does not know (v.11). Their »speaking« (דַּבֵּר) and »devising« (חָשַׁב) have negative consequences for the psalmist (vv.20, 21).

²³ See B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 76–77.

²⁴ See O. Keel, *Feinde* (1969) 107–109; B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 105–106.

²⁵ See O. Keel, *Feinde* (1969) 98–99.

²⁶ Concerning the image of the lion in ancient Israel and its context, see P. Riede, *Netz* (2000) 150–194; especially to Ps 35:15-17 see *ibid.*, 183–185.

Images of justice and law, on one hand, and hunting and war, on the other, are interwoven to describe the enemies and the harm they cause to the psalmist. These images are not only used for depicting the threat of the enemies, but for appealing to YHWH, as well: YHWH is asked for support in the fight against them. Sensing a threat to his life, the psalmist turns to God and asks for help. Especially the images of YHWH as warrior and the imprecations of the enemies present a challenge for interpretation.

The medieval Jewish commentators Rashi and Ibn Ezra answer this challenge with interpretations that follow the Masoretic text as closely as possible. They maintain the difficult imperative form וּסְגֹר (and close) after which the object seems to be missing. Rashi explains it in the following way: הֵגֵן בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיהֶם כַּמְחִיצָה²⁷ (divide between me and them like a partition wall). Ibn Ezra gives a similar explanation: לְסַגֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם, שְׁלֵא יִשְׁגִּיחוּ בְרַדְפָּם אַחֲרָיו²⁸ (to close on them / bar / block them, so that they do not reach him while they follow after him). Even those commentators who argue in favor of an understanding of וּסְגֹר as a noun in parallelism to הַיָּגֵן (spear), succeed in doing so without changing the Masoretic vocalization. David Qimchi (Radak), for example, gives both explanations: the possibility of »closing« the way so that the enemies cannot pass, as in Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and an explanation of וּסְגֹר as a noun: שֵׁם כְּלֵי מַלְחָמָה²⁹ (the name of a weapon for war).

In these old commentaries we find a tendency of accepting the threat of the enemies as part of the reality. At the same time, they are aware of the fact that the wishes about the downfall of the enemies are fantasies of a powerless people. The appeal to YHWH as warrior is a prayer for support, which assigns all power not to humans, but to YHWH.

3. Body language in Psalm 35

Beside the imagery of war and hunting, justice and law, mentioned above, references to various parts of the human body run through Ps 35 like a red thread.³⁰ Images of the body are used to describe the complex relationship between the individual, God and the enemies.

Body parts of the psalmist that are mentioned in Ps 35 are עֲצְמוֹת (bones; v.10), חֵיק, (lap / bosom; v.13) and לְשׁוֹן (tongue; v.28). The עֲצְמוֹת provide the psalmist's body with stability and hint at the whole person that is capable of YHWH's praise. They play an important role not only in Ps 35, but in the anthropology of the Hebrew Bible in general (cf. Gen 2:21-22; Ps 139:15; Job

²⁷ See *M. Cohen*, *Psalms 1, Mikra'ot Gedolot* (2003) 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 107.

³⁰ Regarding body-language in the psalms and in the Hebrew Bible, in general, see: *S. Gillmayr-Bucher*, *Body Images* (2004); *S. Schroer / Th. Staubli*, *Körpersymbolik* (2005).

10:11; Koh 11:5).³¹ In Biblical anthropology, חיק (lap / bosom) is located at the »lower, outer front of the body where loved ones (infants and animals) are pressed closely.«³² It can be ascribed both to men (Gen 16:5) and women (Deut 28:56). According to v.13, חיק is a place of prayer and praise (תהלה), but of mourning as well. The wish of the returning of the prayer to the lap of the psalmist may hint at the genuine character of this prayer.³³ The praying לשון (tongue) is declaring and uttering YHWH's equity (v.28).

The body parts of the enemies visible in Psalm 35 are: שיניים (teeth), עין (eye), פה (mouth) and לב (heart). The enemies gnash with their teeth (שיניים; v.16). This is an example of their threatening behavior: in many psalms, the mouth, lips, tongue and teeth of the enemies are used as weapons for their dangerous utterances.³⁴ If we try a close reading of v.19, the opening of the third section of Ps 35, we find semantic elements that are significant for the whole psalm: body language is linked with a wish that the enemies should not rejoice over the psalmist. The enemies wink their eye (עיין; v.19). עין קרין (ב) is a rather rare phrase in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 35:9, Proverbs 6:13 and 10:10 hint at a blinking of the eye with negative, pejorative connotation: blinking or squinting one's eyes can be an »expression of derision or mockery.«³⁵ The enemies open their mouth (פה) widely (v. 21). Thus, certain organs of the head of the enemies are used as weapons for negative utterances. Verses 16 and 21 describe the *status quo*: the mocking and taunting of the enemies. In v.19 the psalmist expresses the hope that the enemies will not gloat over him. The לב (heart) is not only the seat of emotions, but a place of consideration, thoughts, and plans (v.25). It can stand *pars pro toto* for the whole person.³⁶

Being the central anthropological term of the Hebrew Bible, נפש (throat / soul / life / vitality / person)³⁷ is a »Leitwort« in Psalm 35, as well. Aside from the many other connotations alluding to a big semantic field, the נפש has a physical location in the throat. The enemies »seek« (בקש; v.4) and »dig« (חפר; v.7) after the psalmist's נפש. The נפש is a place of hope for encounter and nearness between psalmist and YHWH (vv.3, 9). נפש in v.12 is not only the soul, but the whole person. The נפש, the life, the vitality, the whole person of the psalmist is pursued by the enemies and is looking for help in יהוה. In v.13, נפש is a place of mourning and fasting: again this fasting is not only a

³¹ See D. Bester, *Körperbilder* (2007) 179–182.

³² HAL 2000, Art. חיק.

³³ See HAL 2000, Art. חיק.

³⁴ E.g., Ps 109:2-3, 120:2-3; see S. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Body Images* (2004) 308–309.

³⁵ See HAL 2000, Art. קרין.

³⁶ See S. Schroer / Th. Staubli, *Körpersymbolik* (2005) 33–44; B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 166–173; D. Bester, *Körperbilder* (2007) 190–194.

³⁷ See S. Schroer / Th. Staubli, *Körpersymbolik* (2005) 45–54; B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 204–114; D. Bester, *Körperbilder* (2007) 236–239.

spiritual one, but affects the body as well. Only in v.25 is the נפש of the enemies mentioned. In all other verses it is the נפש of the praying person. The enigmatic expression הִיאָחַח נַפְשֵׁנוּ (Aha, like our desire!) can be a triumphant and proud utterance of the enemies. The psalmist wishes to avert this kind of statement. In v.25 the location of נפש in the body, in the throat, is visible:³⁸ In *parallelismus membrorum* to the second half of v.25 בָּלַעַנּוּהוּ – (we have swallowed you up) – one can imagine the engulfing throat of the enemies. Thus, the נפש of the psalmist is moving between the area of the enemies and the nearness to YHWH. Verse 17 links the two areas in which the נפש is placed: at the moment it is in the area of influence of the enemies, but the psalmist appeals to YHWH to bring him out of this influence.

As we have seen, many parts of the human body are important elements of the multi-faceted imagery of Ps 35. The Jewish tradition takes up this body language. It is elaborated, e.g., in Midrash Tehillim,³⁹ where the praying person is identified with David. After a collection of interpretations to Ps 35:1 and Ps 35:2 discussing God's fight against the enemies, Midrash Tehillim concentrates on Ps 35:10. Using v.10a as a starting-point, the midrash collects examples to illustrate כָּל עַצְמוֹתַי הַאֲמַרְנָה יְהוָה מִי כָמוֹךָ (all my bones say: YHWH, who is like you; Ps 35:10) in detail: »The Holy One, blessed be He, asked David: ›David, what wilt thou do for Me?‹ And David answered: ›I shall praise Thee with all the parts of my body‹ (אני אשבּחך בכל אבריי).⁴⁰ David's answer is not taken literally from Ps 35:10a, but paraphrases the verse. Thus, the midrash is aware of the central role of the עצמות in Ps 35:10, the term being used generically for body parts (אברים).

This opening is followed by an enumeration of body parts, from the head to the foot, all used for God's praise. Each body part gets support from a proof-text, taken from different parts of the Hebrew Bible. While many body parts are enumerated in Midrash Tehillim, the following considerations concentrate on the body parts for which Ps 35 is read as proof-text. Body parts from Psalm 35 that are elaborated on in the midrash are עין (eye), פה (mouth), לִשׁוֹן (tongue) and לֵב (heart). No distinction is made between body parts ascribed to the enemy and those attributed to the praying person, but they are all ascribed to David, as psalmist, praising YHWH.

³⁸ E.g., *M. Dahood*, *Psalms I* (1965) 209, 215, translates נפש as »throat« here.

³⁹ The dating of Midrash Tehillim is difficult. It was collected over a long period, probably from the 3rd to the 13th centuries; see *W.G. Braude*, *Midrash* (1959) xxxi; *B. Wellmann*, *David* (2007) 15–27. The following considerations are based on the edition of Buber, who used MS Parma. It is obvious that Midrash Tehillim collected and edited older interpretations. It is not possible to discuss the complex questions of its literary development in the framework of this article.

⁴⁰ *W.G. Braude*, *Midrash* (1959) 413. Braude's English translation used the Buber edition: MTeh (*S. Buber*) to Ps 35,10 (1966) 247.

A prooftext for David's praise of YHWH with his עין is Num 15:39: »With my eyes, when I fulfill the precept: It shall be unto you for a fringe that ye may look upon it.«⁴¹ The context in Num 15:37-41 is the laying of »fringes« (ציצית). Looking at the fringes will make the Israelites remember and fulfill YHWH's commandments, instead of following the lust of their hearts and eyes. While the blinking of the eyes in Ps 35:19 is a pejorative activity of the enemies against the psalmist, the midrash links it to a positive activity in which the eyes are engaged: laying fringes, looking at them, remembering and doing the commandments is an act of praising YHWH. The ambivalent aspect of the blinking of one's eyes from Ps 35:19 can be seen at the end of Num 15:39, which declares what the eyes should not do: »You should not go about after your heart and your eyes, after which you go astray [יגרה]«.

YHWH being praised by David's mouth becomes linked, in the midrash, to Ps 145:⁴² »With my mouth, I speak Thy praise [בפי אני מהללך], as when *My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord* [Ps 145:21].«⁴³ According to rabbinic practice, the context is relevant for the interpretation, even if only a single word or part of a biblical verse is cited. Thus, it is worth reading not only Ps 145:21a, but the whole verse:

תְּהַלֵּל יְהוָה יְדְבַר־פִּי וַיְבָרֵךְ כָּל־בָּשָׂר שֵׁם קְדוֹשׁ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד (My mouth will speak the praise of YHWH, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever). In this intertextual⁴⁴ link between Ps 35:10 and Ps 145:21, not only the mouth is mentioned, but in a climactic parallelism »all flesh« (כל־בשר), as *pars pro toto* for the whole person, blesses YHWH.

As prooftext for God's praise with one's לשון (tongue), Midrash Tehillim uses Ps 35:28: »with my tongue, when *My tongue shall speak of Thy righteousness*.«⁴⁵ Starting with the citation of v.10, the midrash is also illustrating v.28, the permanent תהלה, the on-going and everlasting praise of YHWH. Not the threatening enemies, but the uttering of YHWH's righteousness / justice / equity (צדק) all day long has the last word in Ps 35.

YHWH's praise with the heart gets support from Ps 119:11:⁴⁶ בְּלִבִּי צִפְנֹתִי לֵבִי אֶחְטֵא־לְךָ (In my heart I have hidden your word⁴⁷ that I might not sin against you). While in Ps 35:25 the לב is a place of the hostile and triumphant considerations and plans of the enemies, in Ps 119:11 it is where the psalmist hides YHWH's word and commandments. The intertextual link

⁴¹ W.G. Braude, Midrash (1959) 413.

⁴² MTeh (S. Buber) to Ps 35:10 (1966) 248.

⁴³ W.G. Braude, Midrash (1959) 413.

⁴⁴ Concerning the concept of intertextuality see M. Grohmann, Aneignung (2000) 29–38, 112–125.

⁴⁵ W.G. Braude, Midrash (1959) 413.

⁴⁶ In this case there is a mistake in the English translation of W.G. Braude, Midrash (1959) 413, referring to Ps 118:11 instead of Ps 119:11.

⁴⁷ Some Hebrew manuscripts, the Peshitta, and the Septuagint read the plural form.

shows that a wide range of activities can occupy the heart. The second half of Ps 119:11 has parallels to Num 15:39, looking at the negative consequences that should be avoided. Integrating the context of the long acrostic Psalm 119, especially vv.9-16, the fulfillment of the commandments is elaborated. Additional body-language plays an important role in Ps 119:13: *בְּשִׁפְתַי סִפְרָתִי* בְּלִי מִשְׁפָּטֵי-פִיךָ (With my lips I told all laws of your mouth).⁴⁸ This verse links the body of the psalmist with YHWH's body. It is an example of the important task of body-language: establishing a relationship and intensive communication, especially between the psalmist and YHWH.⁴⁹

Altogether, this midrash stresses the positive side of Psalm 35, the appeal to YHWH for help, which is stressed especially at the end of each section (vv.10, 18, 28). It does not only enumerate the parts of the human body, but demonstrates their function in prayer. According to Midrash Tehillim, the whole body offers praise to God in Psalm 35, which encompasses the daily *mitzvot* of *shema*, *tefillin* and *zizit*, all day long. The midrash creates an intertextual network of verses between Ps 35 and other biblical texts. It links biblical texts with contemporary rabbinic customs. Thus, the midrash links prayer with Halacha and offers a holistic interpretation of Ps 35. Prayer is not only a verbal or intellectual activity, but activates the praying person as a whole. It is performed with the whole body and has consequences in daily-life activities, for the praying person and the whole community.

4. *שָׂכוּל* (childlessness) as climax of the enemies' threat (Psalm 35:12)

In verse 12, Psalm 35 links body language with the threatening activities of the enemies in a specific way. A close reading of this singular verse opens many possibilities of understanding.⁵⁰ One threatening aspect of the enemies is *שָׂכוּל לְנַפְשִׁי*. According to v.11, *עֲרֵי הַמָּס* (false witnesses) rise up – maybe assigned by the enemies – and repay the praying person »evil for good« (*רָעָה תַחַח טוֹבָה*). The climax of this action is the multifaceted *שָׂכוּל לְנַפְשִׁי* (be-reavement⁵¹ / childlessness / loss of children for my soul / myself / my life). Many exegetes have had difficulties with the semantics of this construct, which is singular in its combination: Although there is no evidence from Hebrew manuscripts, some see it as a scribal error and change the vowels, read-

⁴⁸ A few Hebrew manuscripts, the Peshitta and variants of the Greek translations read *צְדִיקָךְ* (your righteousness / justice) instead of *פִּיךָ* (your mouth).

⁴⁹ See S. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Body Images* (2004) 305.

⁵⁰ For more details about the following interpretation, see M. Grohmann, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt* (2007) 227–40.

⁵¹ *Ch.A. and E.G. Briggs*, *Commentary* (1951) 301.

ing: שָׁכוּ ל: »they are on the lookout for my life.«⁵² Others understand the term metaphorically and translate it in a more general way: Verlassenheit⁵³ / Vereinsamung⁵⁴ (»loneliness« or »ravaging«).⁵⁵

The Septuagint is close to the Masoretic text – καὶ ἀτεκνία μου τῆ ψυχῆ μου (and childlessness for my soul) and the Vulgate has the same literal understanding: sterilitatem animae meae (sterility for my soul). Luther, e.g., follows this tradition and interprets *sterilitas* in a spiritual way, as making the soul unhappy.⁵⁶ Jewish interpretations try to stay as close to the Hebrew text as possible. Samson Raphael Hirsch, e.g., translates »Kinderraub an meiner Seele«,⁵⁷ and Buber has »Verwaisung«. Radak explains שָׁכוּ לנַפְשִׁי in the following way: וְהַדְּבָר הַזֶּה הוּא כְּמוֹת לַנֶּפֶשׁ (This thing / action / affair is like death for my life / my soul).

שָׁכַל is a multifaceted root, and it is difficult to find an English or German equivalent to שָׁכוּ ל; translations, naturally, reflect only one facet. We find the noun שָׁכוּל only here and in Isa 47:8-9, where it stands in parallelism to אִלְמָן (widowhood). As a verb, שָׁכַל in the *qal* means »losing children« / »being bereaved of children.« According to Gen 27:45d, Rebecca is afraid of being bereaved of her sons, and Jacob utters the same fear in Gen 43:14a. The term always hints at a sudden and violent action, usually the death of children (e.g. in 1 Sam 15:33a, by the sword). שָׁכַל does not only mean the sudden loss of children who have been born, but of those unborn, as well. שָׁכַל in the *piel* can mean »having (or causing) a miscarriage« (2 Kings 2:19, 21). The root שָׁכַל occurs thirty-four times in the Hebrew Bible; it is an element of poetic language. Often it comes up in spoken words, addressed either to God or to another person.

I suggest making visible »the bereavement / the sudden loss of – born or unborn – children.« It is left ambiguous in Ps 35 whether false witnesses really can cause childlessness or bereave the praying person of born children. In an inter-textual reading with Ps 137:9, the brutal killing of children can be an aspect both of the polemic against enemies and their threatening deeds.

⁵² A. Basson, *Metaphors* (2006) 137; see P.C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (1983) 283: »they lie in wait for my life.« See H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen 1–59* (1989) 424, 426; H. Schmoldt, Art. שָׁכַל *šākol* (1993) 1327.

⁵³ See A. Weiser, *Psalmen 1* (1987) 202.

⁵⁴ See the German Elberfelder translation: *vereinsamt ist meine Seele*.

⁵⁵ M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (1965) 208.

⁵⁶ See M. Luther, *Werke*, WA 55 (1993) 308: »que mala sunt ›sterilitas‹; quia anima mea non fuit delectata nec fructum bonorum meorum ex illis cepit seu gaudium« (which evils are »barrenness«? My soul cannot be delighted nor accept the fruit of my good deeds or joy).

⁵⁷ S.R. Hirsch, *Psalmen* (1914) 170.

⁵⁸ The Hebrew text is cited according to the edition of M. Cohen, *Psalms 1*, *Mikra'ot Gedolot* (2003) 107.

Even if it does not hint at a reality, it hints at a particular image. Like in Ps 137:9 and other psalms, it is hard to distinguish between the »real« threat of the enemies and the fantasies of the psalmist. The inner world of the psalmist and the so-called »reality« are linked more than in the modern world.⁵⁹

שְׂכֹל לְנַפְשִׁי (childlessness for my life) is an extreme image, illustrating the רעה, the »evil« and threat of the enemies. It opens many possibilities for imagining some kind of reality standing behind the metaphor, as if the enemies kill the children in front of their parents, killing the spiritual and moral »products« of the soul of the praying person.⁶⁰ The pain caused by their activities is the same as that caused to a mother or father who is bereaved of her or his children. Even if it is not clear whether the enemies really have the power to cause childlessness, it is important to keep in mind the background of the term שְׂכֹל as one facet of the threat. The meanings of שְׂכֹל – »bereavement of born and unborn children / childlessness« – are still present in modern Hebrew.⁶¹

Even Ps 35:13-14 can be read in this context. The prayer that the psalmist wants to return into his bosom (וּחְפְּלֵי עַל-חִיקֵי תְשׁוּבָה) can be a prayer of »supplication for the bereaved.«⁶² While most exegetes read כְּאִבְל־אִם in v.14 as *genetivus objectivus* – »like the grief / mourning about a mother«⁶³ –, the Hebrew construct can equally mean »like the mourning of a mother« (*genetivus subjectivus*). Rashi is very diplomatic, hinting at both possibilities: כְּבֵן בְּנָה (like a son, mourning about his mother, or: like a mother, mourning about her son). One aspect of the threatening deeds of the enemies is that they can even cause childlessness to the psalmist (שְׂכֹל לְנַפְשִׁי; v.12).

This interpretation may receive some support from another context: If we link our interpretation of a mourning parent in vv.13-14 with the superscription of Ps 35, לְדָוִד (of / to David; v.1), we find a specific connection to the life of David. There is no doubt about the secondary status of this superscription, which assigns Ps 35 to the Davidic psalms. While in thirteen superscriptions of psalms, לְדָוִד is followed by a concrete situation, in Ps 35 no specific location in the David narratives is mentioned. It does not make David the au-

⁵⁹ See H. Weippert, *Welterfahrung* (1998) 15–17; B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 110.

⁶⁰ See S.R. Hirsch, *Psalmen* (1914) 170.

⁶¹ E.g., an Israeli-Palestinian organization for people who have lost an immediate family member in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and which works for peace and mutual understanding, calls itself משפחות שכולות (bereaved families):

<http://www.theparentscircle.org/>

⁶² Ch.A. and E.G. Briggs, *Commentary* (1951) 305.

⁶³ See, e.g., H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen* 1–59 (1989) 425; K. Seybold, *Psalmen* (1996) 144; B. Weber, *Werkbuch Psalmen* 1 (2001) 169; M. Bauks, *Feinde* (2004) 81.

⁶⁴ Rashi to Ps 35:14: M. Cohen, *Psalms* 1, *Mikra'ot Gedolot* (2003) 108.

thor of the psalm, but it guides the reader in a specific direction, offering one model of identification amongst others.⁶⁵ Because of the superscription לְדָוִד, pre-modern exegetes – both Jewish and Christian – linked the psalm with the life of David: Qimhi, for example, states that Ps 35 is situated in David's flight before Saul: הַמְזִמֹּר בְּבִרְחוֹ מִפְּנֵי שָׂאִיל.⁶⁶

According to 2 Sam 11:27 and 12:13-25, David mourns his first child, born by Bathsheba. His fight for the life of this first child is described dramatically in the narrative. The loss cannot be offset by David's many other children (cf. 2 Sam 3:1-5). We do not find any literary congruence between 2 Sam 11:16-17, 21-22 and Ps 35:13-14 – apart from the verb שׁוּב (*qal*: return / come back; *hi.*: return / bring back) which occurs in different forms in both texts – but an intertextual reading of both passages reveals an allusion to David's mourning in the psalm.⁶⁷ Following this context, even יְחִידָחִי (my only one) in Ps 35:17 – in parallelism to נַפְשִׁי (my life / my soul) – can allude not only to the life of the psalmist himself, but to the loss of a child.⁶⁸

This link with the life of David is not an explanation of Ps 35, but it is a possible reading showing the manifold intertextual allusions that the Hebrew text creates. Like in every interpretation, the context determines the reading, to a great extent. After following a few lines of Jewish approaches to Ps 35 we turn to an example of Christian exegesis.

5. John 15:25 and aspects of Christian interpretation

Turning to the New Testament opens another possible contextualization of Ps 35. In the New Testament we do not find an exact quote – neither of the Hebrew nor of the Greek text – of Ps 35, but a short passage out of Ps 35:19 is cited in a specific way in John 15:25:

But it was to fulfill the word
That is written in their Torah:
»They hated me without a cause.«

ἀλλ' ἵνα πληρωθῆ ὁ λόγος
ὁ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ αὐτῶν γεγραμμένος
ὅτι ἐμίσησάν με ὠνεάν.

⁶⁵ See *D. Erbele-Küster*, *Lesen* (2001) 52–54.

⁶⁶ *M. Cohen*, *Psalms 1, Mikra'ot Gedolot* (2003) 107. Yefet ben 'Ali Halevi, a Jewish exegete in the 10th century who was born in Iraq, offers another proposal, relating Ps 35 to »Gog, Edom, Ishmael, and the enemies of the righteous servant among Israel«; see *U. Simon*, *Approaches* (1991) 94.

⁶⁷ See *M. Grohmann*, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt* (2007) 234–235.

⁶⁸ יְחִידָחִי can be a term for a single son or daughter; cf. Gen 22:2, 12, 16; Jdg 11:34; see *M. Grohmann*, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt* (2007) 233–234.

The introduction formula is rather long and detailed. The construction ἀλλ' ἵνα is elliptical, and most translations add a phrase.⁶⁹ It occurs not only here, but several other times in John, as well (e.g. John 1:8; 9:3; 11:52). Νόμος (law / Torah) hints at the whole Hebrew Bible and leads the reader to expect a citation from the TNK. The formulation ἐν τῷ νόμῳ αὐτῶν (in their Torah) shows both distance from the Torah and, at the same time, its authoritative use as »proof-text.«⁷⁰ What follows is not an exact but a modified citation of a passage from Ps 35:19 (34:19 LXX). We find the term שׂנְאִי הַנֶּחֱמָ (those who hate me without cause) in Ps 69:5 (68:5 LXX), as well. Ps 69 is cited frequently in the NT in the context of the suffering of Jesus, so that John can be taking the image from either of the psalms.⁷¹ In addition to these two possible citations, John 15:25 could be an allusion to the hatred, persecution and fight without cause in Pss 109:3 and 119:161. The motif of »passio iusti,« the suffering of the righteous one being persecuted without reason, stands in the background of John 15:25.⁷²

Three words from the Septuagint are used. The participial form of the verb – οἱ μισοῦντές με δωρεάν (those who hate me without cause) – is changed to a finite aorist verb: ὅτι ἐμίσησάν με δωρεάν (they hated me without cause), thus creating a sentence. This small syntactic change implies a significant semantic shift: In the Old Testament versions – both the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint – the climax of the verse lies at the end of the sentence, in the main clause: »Those who hate me without cause *shall not* blink the eye.« This aspect is omitted completely in the New Testament interpretation: Here the emphasis lies on δωρεάν (without cause). Neither the hope that the enemies will not blink their eye and gloat over the psalmist (Ps 35:19) nor the high number of the enemies (Ps 69:5) is important for the evangelist. In Psalm 35, the term שׂנְאִי / δωρεάν does not appear only in verse 19, but occurs twice in v.7, too,⁷³ making it an important motif in this psalm, as well. The citation of an Old Testament verse in the New Testament, or even the allusion to one, creates a universe of possible intertextual links and connections between the texts. For example, body language is an element that is common to both Ps 35 and Ps 69: according to Ps 69:5 the number of שׂנְאִי הַנֶּחֱמָ (those who hate me without cause) is greater than the number of hairs on the head of the psalmist (שְׂעֵרוֹת רֵאשִׁי).

⁶⁹ See, e.g., *H.N. Ridderbos, Gospel* (1997) 525: »But this occurred that...«, »but it had to be that.«

⁷⁰ See *M.J.J. Menken, Quotations* (1996) 141.

⁷¹ *M.J.J. Menken, Quotations* (1996) 145, argues that either Ps 35(34 LXX):19 or Ps 69(68 LXX):5 could have been the source of this quotation, »with a slight preference for Ps. 68:5 LXX.« In a similar way, *G.R. Beasley-Murray, John* (1999) 276, pleads for a citation of Ps 69 in John 15:25.

⁷² See *L. Ruppert, Jesus* (1972); *H.N. Ridderbos, Gospel* (1997) 526.

⁷³ Only in the Syriac translation, the Peshitta, do we find it omitted both times in this verse.

The »I« of the psalmist is identified with Jesus in John 15:25. Jesus is speaking as the innocent being accused without cause. Considering the context of Psalms 35 and 69, God is supporting the one who is hated without cause. Context of this citation is Jesus' second farewell-discourse (John 15:1–16:33). The disciples of Jesus, being the addressees of the speech, are confronted with the hatred of the world (John 15:18–16:4). The hatred of the enemies in the psalm is interpreted as the hatred of the world. The hatred against Jesus' disciples has its cause in the hatred against Jesus himself. The function of the psalm-citation is to show the hatred against Jesus and his disciples as something not arbitrary, but within God's plan and will.⁷⁴

Although only three words from Ps 35 are used in the New Testament, they are symptomatic of Christian readings of the psalm. According to Christological interpretation, the enemies who threaten the psalmist, or the people of Israel, altogether, have been read as the enemies of Christ. While in John 15:25 the enemies of Pss 35 and 69 (34 and 68 LXX) represent the hatred of the world, the Christological interpretation of the old church and subsequent centuries identify the enemies with the Jews.⁷⁵

This interpretation has had significant impact on Christian Bible exegesis and has promoted anti-Jewish prejudices. The »hate-speech« of some psalms, which is part of Psalm 35, as well, has been a problem for Christian theology. The polemics against enemies in the psalm have nothing in common with the Christian ideal of selfless love. In recent years this tradition of interpretation has been questioned and revised. A holistic interpretation of psalms like Ps 35 shows that these texts offer a chance to integrate negative emotions like hatred, anger or fury into prayer.⁷⁶ They show the strategies of a people without power to deal with a situation of real threat.

Although the different contexts must not be ignored, modern exegesis can learn from traditional Jewish Bible interpretation: a real close reading of the Hebrew text reveals its manifold meanings, making the best out of the Masoretic text and trying to understand it without conjectures. The Masoretic text is an important basis for a common reading. It provides many possibilities for reading the multi-faceted nuances of Biblical Hebrew – especially in challenging texts like Ps 35.

⁷⁴ See *P.C. Craigie*, *Psalms 1–50* (1983) 288–289; *K. Wengst*, *Johannesevangelium* (2001) 147, 151.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Luther's superscription to Ps 35 (34 LXX) in *M. Luther*, *Werke*, WA 55 (1993) 304: ORATIO CHRISTI AD PATREM IM / precantis propheticæ / retributionem et vindictam suis inimicis Iudæis Crucifixoribus Psalmus (prophetic prayer of Christ to the father for retribution and revenge on his enemies, the Jews who crucified him).

⁷⁶ See *E. Zenger*, *Gott der Rache?* (2003); *M. Kronemeijer*, *Struggle* (2005) 100; *B. Janowski*, *Konfliktgespräche* (2006) 125–133.

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