

'I HATE THEM WITH PERFECT HATRED' **(PSALM 139:21-22)**

Eric Peels

Summary

In this article the offensive prayer of Psalm 139:21-22 with its dubious utterance of hatred is investigated with regard to its particular language, context and intentions. First, it is argued that the central notion of 'hatred' does not necessarily imply malicious intentions. Subsequently, the immediate context of verses 21-22 is studied. The structure of the psalm strongly favours the idea of an original unity of the psalm, which prevents us from discarding verses 21-22 as a redactional addition. On the contrary, these verses form an integral part of this psalm, which is a meditative confession with three theological motifs in particular: a) God's knowing and searching, b) the ethical issue of the two 'ways', and c) the rejection of the wicked—themes that are strongly interrelated. Within this context, verses 21-22 function as a confession in the negative mode. To the poet hating the enemy is primarily the reverse of his turning and dedication to YHWH. The emphasis is not so much on the emotions of the poet as well as on his choice to take a stand and on his attitude. Next, the utterance of verses 21-22 is examined within its own conceptual and spiritual framework, and its own religious and social life-scene. By hating God's enemies the poet relates to God's own hatred of the wicked and his curse on them. Finally, the question is discussed whether in today's Christian faith and worship such prayers can still have some function.

1. Introduction

Among the offensive passages from the Old Testament with prayers for the downfall of the adversaries Psalm 139:19-22 is unique. Nowhere

else is the hatred against enemies expressed so directly and wholeheartedly. ‘Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies’ (vv. 21-22 NIV). If Psalm 139 had ended with the third paragraph in verse 18 it would have been one of the most beautiful songs in the Book of Psalms, as one scholar remarked in the past.¹ Are not the contents of verses 19-22 a dissonance in the context of the whole psalm, which in itself is moving because of the serene language, full of intimacy and worship? Furthermore, how are these sayings to be combined with some essential elements of the biblical ethos: the call to love one’s neighbour, the need for forgiveness, and the blessing of reconciliation? Numerous deeds and words of violence which daily cast shadows over our society are legitimated by (pseudo)religious motives. The principal roots of violence are greed, jealousy, and hatred—but most important of these is hatred. Therefore Psalm 139:21-22 seems to be a very dubious and objectionable utterance.

The history of interpretation of Psalm 139 reflects the problems people have always had with the contents of verses 21-22. According to classical interpretation,² the hatred in these verses is not directed to the enemies personally but to their deeds or their disposition. Some interpreters just mention that a nationalistic or typically Jewish mentality becomes visible here.³ No less psychological is the view that the utterance of hatred in verses 21-22 is rectified within the psalm itself, in verses 23-24, a prayer which may reflect the insecurity of the poet.⁴ Another view is that verse 21 is an addition which aims to provide a theological foundation for the psalmist’s hatred in verse 22.⁵

¹ So Eduard Reuss in 1893, quoted by E. Würthwein, ‘Erwägungen zu Psalm 139’, *VT* 7 (1957): 170.

² Augustine and Calvin already represent this view. Less spiritualising is the reception of Ps. 139 in Qumran, the community of the Samaritans, and rabbinic traditions, cf. J. Maier, ‘Die Feinde Gottes. Auslegungsgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Ps. 139,21f.’, in *Hairesis. Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 34. (ed. M. Hutter, W. Klein and U. Vollmer; Münster: 2002): 33-47.

³ H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968): 589. C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms II* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907): 499: ‘The temper of the Maccabean wars is unmistakable in this Strophe’.

⁴ For a clear example of this interpretation see H. Schmidt, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I,15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1934): 245.

⁵ K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT; Tübingen: Mohr, 1996): 518.

Many a commentator feels obliged to remark that in verse 22 the psalmist exceeds the limit, or that in this text the imperfection of Old Testament religion becomes apparent.⁶ There are Bible translations and interpretations which just leave out the whole passage. In the interpretation of Psalm 139:22 modern norms and religious convictions often seem to be decisive.

In this paper we will first try to let the notorious text speak for itself. We will investigate its particular language, context, and intentions.⁷ Does the text actually say what the average reader hears it saying? My investigation works from the inside outwards, moving into increasingly wider circles. We will start by making some semantic observations about the central word ‘hatred’ (§ 2). Then we will study the immediate context of verses 21-22 and pay some attention to the structure (§ 3) and the genre (§ 4) of Psalm 139 in order to clarify the place and the particular function of verses 21-22 (§ 5). The results will be put in the wider context of the Old Testament faith (§ 6). Finally, we will briefly consider some biblical-theological and hermeneutical aspects, in order to answer the question whether and how these notorious verses may have a place in today’s personal faith, and in the liturgical life of the church.

2. The semantic field of שִׂנְאָה – ‘hatred’

I use my own translation of verses 21-22: ‘Should I not hate those who hate You, YHWH, and those who rebel against You, should I not despise them? Indeed: with deep hatred I hate them, they have become enemies to me!’ The rhetorical question in verse 21 (הֲלוֹא) suggests that it is self-evident that those who rebel against God (twice a proleptic object)⁸ should be totally rejected by the poet (twice a *yiqṭōl*-

⁶ So for instance A. Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (ATD 14/15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1959): 558.

⁷ Cf. the argument of E. Zenger, *Ein Gott der Rache? Feindpsalmen verstehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994): 129.

⁸ For the problematic orthography of the second object, see H. Bauer and P. Leander, *Historische Grammatik der Hebräischen Sprache* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965): 404 and 497; W. Gesenius and E. Kautzsch, *Hebräische Grammatik* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962): § 72cc; J. C. M. Holman, ‘Analysis of the Text of Ps. 139’, *BZ* 14 (1970): 219.

form with the modal nuance ‘should’, ‘ought to’⁹). The answer in verse 22 contains a *qātal*-form to be read as a performative perfect: ‘I hereby declare to hate...’¹⁰ The nomen regens in the internal object of verse 22a is formed from the root כלה ‘to complete’¹¹: the most absolute form of hatred is meant here.

The central idea of verses 21-22 is hatred. Many scholars *a priori* interpret this idea in a negative affective-emotional way, which is incorrect. The semantic range of the root שנא is much broader. It reaches from neglect, rejection or personal preference to a nasty aversion and animosity, and a whole variety of feelings and attitudes in between.¹² Hatred always creates a distance, yet it does not always imply malicious intentions. There is a big difference between Samson’s hatred towards the Philistine woman (Judg. 15:2—she leaves him indifferent), the hatred of a father who does not discipline his son (which is lack of love, Prov. 13:24) and the hatred which gives rise to murder (Deut. 19:4). Frequently the emphasis is not primarily on the emotions, but on the attitude itself and the actions which follow from it. In particular in the opposition of love and hatred there is the element of choice and preference, often in the context of loyalty. Loving God implies hating evil things (Ps. 97:10; Amos 5:14-15). When David mourns, Joab blames him for behaving in such a way that he exchanges love and hatred in his relationships with those who are faithful to him (2 Sam. 19:6).¹³

As for Psalm 139:21-22, there are three elements which point to an emotional dimension of the utterance of hatred: a) the parallel with the verb קיץ ‘to abhor’ in verse 21 (cf. Ps. 119:158); b) the fourfold repetition of the root שנא; c) the construct state with תכלית

⁹ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991): § 113m.

¹⁰ Joüon–Muraoka, *Grammar*, § 112f; H. Irsigler, ‘Psalm 139 als Gebetsprozess’ in H. Irsigler, ed., *Wer darf hinaufsteigen zum Berg JHWHs?* *Beiträge zu Prophetie und Poesie des Alten Testaments* (Festschrift für S. Ö. Steingrímsson; St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2002): 235.

¹¹ Gesenius–Kautzsch, *Grammatik*, § 128r.

¹² See the discussion of the lemma by E. Lipiński, ‘שנא’, *TWAT* 7:828-39; E. Jenni, ‘שנא’, *THAT* 2:835-37; A. H. Konkel, ‘שנא’, *NIDOTTE* 3:1256-60; cf. Michel, ‘μισεω’, *TWNT* 5:687-98.

¹³ Cf. Hebrew-related expressions in the New Testament like ‘hating one’s father and mother’ (Luke 14:26, cf. Matt. 10:37), or ‘loving/hating one’s master’ (Matt. 6:24).

‘completeness’ in verse 22.¹⁴ However, it would be premature to interpret verses 21-22 on this basis as an outburst of personal hatred and vengeance.¹⁵ From the context it should be made clear what intention the sayings on hatred in these verses have.

3. The structure of Psalm 139

To many an interpreter the transition from the believer’s amazement in verse 18 to the prayer for the death of the wicked in verse 19 is so sudden that he would like to interpret it as the result of a secondary redactional intervention.¹⁶ The combination of pious reflection and passionate vengeance in one and the same psalm seems to be inappropriate. However, in recent research the unity of the psalm has almost unanimously been defended, mainly on the basis of a literary and structural analysis. Apart from the evident *inclusio* in verses 1-3 and 23-24 we can refer to the many words which function as common indicators in verses 1-18 and 19-24.¹⁷ Some scholars state that cohesion is legitimised because of the poetically artistic character of the psalm and its own psychological dynamics.¹⁸ Yet to the average reader the themes and the tone of the psalm seem to change rather abruptly after verse 18. If the psalm is a unity this should be clear on the level of its contents as well.

In the context of our research it is not necessary to develop a detailed proposal about the structure of Psalm 139. Besides, many valuable suggestions have already been made by others.¹⁹ I agree with

¹⁴ Only twice is שׂנאָה immediately connected with a qualifying nomen elsewhere. In both cases this indicates a strong negative feeling (2 Sam. 13:15 with גְּדוּל and Ps. 25:19 with חֶמֶס).

¹⁵ Like C. Aalbersberg-van Loon, *De derde stem en de vierde Stem* (Gorinchem: Narratio, 2003): 220, who discovers behind vv. 21-22 fear, anger and revenge. Her psychological-biographical interpretation does not do justice to the idiom of the psalm.

¹⁶ E. g. Schmidt, *Psalmen*, 245 and S. Wagner, ‘Zur Theologie des Psalms CXXXIX’, in *Congress Volume Göttingen 1977* (SVT 29; Leiden: Brill 1978): 372.

¹⁷ J. C. M. Holman, ‘The Structure of Psalm CXXXIX’, *OTS* 26 (1971), sums up eight roots and words appearing in vv. 1-18 and in vv. 19-24. We can add to his list an important keyword, which is דֶּרֶךְ, ‘way’, in v. 3 and v. 24.

¹⁸ J. Krašovec, ‘Die polare Ausdrucksweise im Psalm 139’, *BZ* 18 (1974): 224-48; and Y. Mazor, ‘When Aesthetics Is Harnessed to Psychological Characterization. “Ars Poetica” in Psalm 139’, *ZAW* 109 (1997): 260-71.

¹⁹ See the subdivisions in Holman, ‘Structure’; L. Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le cœur de l’homme. Etude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale. Tome 3: Psaumes 101 à 150* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1979); M. Girard, *Les Psaumes redécouverts. De la structure au*

Terrien's recent proposal who subdivides the psalm into four paragraphs of six verses each which are symmetrical (vv. 1-6; 7-12; 13-18; 19-24).²⁰ After the opening verses with the confession of God searching (חָקַר), knowing (יָדַע) and discerning (זָרַח) the psalmist, being familiar (סָכַן) with all his 'ways', the first strongly connected three paragraphs develop the theme of God's all-embracing and omnipresent knowledge. With his knowledge and with the power of his hand (v. 5 and v. 10) God reaches far beyond the limits of space and time (the second and third paragraphs). Therefore God is able to read the poet's life as an open book right from the beginning. The deepest thoughts of the psalmist (v. 2) are known to God, who can see in the deepest darkness (vv. 13-16). There God created his kidneys, organ of the deepest emotions (v. 13).²¹ The poet himself loses count when realising how vast God's thoughts are (v. 17). He surrenders to them in full amazement: 'I am still with you' (v. 18b). After this elaboration about God's knowledge, which nothing and no one can withdraw themselves from, the tone of the fourth paragraph changes (vv. 19-24). Verse 19 unexpectedly turns to a prayer to God to destroy his adversaries. This imprecation is emphasised and empowered by the sayings about hatred in verses 21-22. At the end of the psalm (vv. 23-24) the central ideas of the beginning are repeated (יָדַע, חָקַר and בָּחַן, which is an equivalent of זָרַח). They are now transposed to the level of a prayer to God to test the psalmist's 'thoughts' (v. 2 and v. 23) and 'ways' (v. 3 and v. 24).

The issue at stake is how we evaluate the composition and intention of the fourth paragraph. What are the specific place and function of verses 21-22 in the context of the whole psalm?

4. The genre of Psalm 139

The answer to the question above depends on the identification of the genre of the psalm. This is not an easy issue, considering the many

sens. Tome 3: 101-50 (Paris: Bellarmin, 1994); P. Auffret, 'O Dieu, connais mon cœur: étude structurelle du Psaume CXXXIX', *VT* 47 (1997): 1-22; H. Irsigler, 'Psalm 139'.

²⁰ S. Terrien, *The Psalms. Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 874-75. The subdivision into four parts does not deny the evident division into two—between the first three paragraphs and the fourth. Cf. the correct observations made by Holman 'Structure'.

²¹ D. Kellermann, 'כל־יֹת', *TWAT* 4:190.

diverse suggestions already made.²² In what is written about the interpretation of the passage all sorts of classifications have been made: hymn, spiritual song, song of innocence, prayer, psalm of confidence, song of thanksgiving, individual complaint, theological meditation, royal psalm on the occasion of the New Year, song of wisdom, ‘mixed’ genre, etc.²³ The idea of Psalm 139 being ‘a prayer of the accused’ (‘Gebet des Angeklagten’) has been adopted by many. Verses 19-24 are considered to be the key to understanding the whole psalm, which is then interpreted as a prayer of someone who is persecuted, who is hemmed in and accused by enemies yet knowing he is innocent. Life-threatening is the accusation of his enemies: they bring against him the charge of idolatry (the word **עֵצָב** in v. 24a has the meaning of ‘pain’ but also of ‘idol’²⁴). With an imprecation (vv. 19-20) the poet now turns against his accusers and expresses his disgust at them in the utmost distress. Subsequently he entrusts himself to God’s just verdict which will follow on the ordeal to which he submits himself (vv. 23-24). This theory seems to be the most plausible of all ‘gattungsgeschichtliche’ interpretations with respect to the place and function of verses 21-22. In this perspective these verses can be regarded as part of a confession of innocence or a purgatory oath.²⁵

Despite the attractiveness of the hypothesis of a cultic trial by ordeal as the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 139, there are some important arguments against it.²⁶ In the first place a specific accusation and an explicit declaration of innocence are lacking. Although it is not impossible that the collocation **עֵצָב דֶּרֶךְ** in verse 24a contains an allusion to the combination of idolatry and pain (as e.g. in Ps. 16:4), nothing in the psalm refers to a real accusation against the poet. It is more probable

²² Wagner, ‘Zur Theologie’: 360, even uses the term ‘Ratlosigkeit’ in the form-critical research of Psalm 139.

²³ Cf. Wagner, ‘Zur Theologie’: 360, and J. P. M. van der Ploeg, *Psalmen II* (De Boeken van het Oude Testament; Roermond: Romen, 1975): 435-36.

²⁴ Cf. A. Graupner, ‘**עֵצָב**’, *TWAT* 6:302.

²⁵ Some adherents of the cultic explanation are (with several variations): Würthwein, ‘Erwägungen’; H.-J. Kraus, *Die Psalmen II* (BKAT XV/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); Weiser, *Psalmen*; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III, 100–150* (AB 17A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970); Holman, ‘Analysis’ and ‘Structure’; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC 21; Waco: Word Books, 1983), Krašovec, ‘Polare Ausdrucksweise’.

²⁶ We have to leave for now the question whether Israel actually had trials by ordeals. This is convincingly denied by G. Kwakkel, ‘*According to My Righteousness*’. *Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26, and 44* (OTS XLVI; Leiden: Brill, 2002): 151-83.

that the word pairs דרך עולם and דרך עצב in verse 24 indicate the well known alternative of the two ways of living.²⁷ Furthermore, a clear signal of a life-threatening situation is missing. Nowhere does the poet pray for deliverance from personal distress. The poet's main concern is the structural problem of evil and not a specific threat.²⁸ He therefore does not mention his own personal enemies, but only the enemies of God who have become his enemies *ipso facto*.²⁹ Even from verse 19b ('Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!') one cannot deduce a specific situation of distress.³⁰ In this verse the psalmist just uses an expression in which he distances himself clearly from God's adversaries. The issue at stake is not what he is experiencing but what he is confessing. Just as the wicked say to God: 'away from us' (Job 21:14; 22:17), so the believer says to God's enemies: 'away from us' (cf. Ps. 6:8; 101:4; 119:29, 115). A third argument against a specific cultic interpretation of Psalm 139 is the reflective-meditative style of the psalm. Three quarters of the psalm deals with the height and the depth of the 'knowledge of the Most High' (Ps. 73:11). Recent research is therefore right in pointing out the sapiential colouration of Psalm 139.³¹ All this does not fit well in explaining the psalm as a cultic trial by ordeal.

Our conclusion is that form-critical research has not yet led to convincing results in defining the genre and *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 139. The text is so varied and special that it is hard to define one specific genre for it. As to its contents, the psalm contains a carefully composed and stylised confession, in which the poet meditates upon God's omniscience and in which he expresses his surrender and belonging to God. The psalm is not at all a scholarly product of dogmatics. Its tone shows an existential devotion and intimacy. In the whole context of this meditative confession³² there are three

²⁷ The Septuagint translates דרך עצב as ὁδὸς ἀνομίας.

²⁸ So rightly Zenger, *Gott der Rache*: 85-86.

²⁹ Cf. H. Schüngel-Straumann, 'Zur Gattung und Theologie des 139. Psalms', *BZ* 17 (1973): 50. This is also indicated by the aorist ἐγένοντο in the Septuagint. See also Seybold, *Die Psalmen*: 518.

³⁰ Cf. Irsigler, 'Psalm 139': 235.

³¹ Cf. Van der Ploeg, *Psalmen*: 438; Schüngel-Straumann, 'Zur Gattung': 40-41; J. L. Koole, 'Quelques remarques sur Psaume 139' in *Studia Biblica et Semitica Theodoro Christiano Vriezen ... Dedicata*, ed. W. C. van Unnik (Wageningen: Veenman, 1966).

³² This proposal is close to Gerstenberger's, who characterises the psalm as a meditation; see E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001): 406.

theological motifs in particular, which appear to be strongly connected: a) God's knowing and searching, b) the ethical issue of the two 'ways', and c) the rejection of the wicked.

Deeply rooted in Old Testament faith is the conviction that humans are an open book to God. YHWH is a **אל דעות** ('all-knowing God', 1 Sam. 2:3) who knows and searches the thoughts of people (Ps. 44:21; 94:11; Prov. 24:12; Job 23:10; 31:6; Jer. 12:3; 17:10). This is the very issue wicked people resist: 'Does the Most High have knowledge?' (Ps. 73:11). References in Psalm 139 to the kidneys and the heart (v. 13 and v. 23) fit in with the forensic metaphor of the confession that God examines them (Ps. 7:9; 17:3; 26:2; Jer. 17:10). Another motif in the psalm which becomes obvious in the *inclusio*, is that of the two ways. This motif is of fundamental significance for the whole of the Book of Psalms: 'For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish' (Ps. 1:6). The way of falsehood of those living without God is rejected by the psalmist as he prays: 'Preserve my life in your ways' (Ps. 119:37, 104). From these two motifs a third one follows naturally: the rejection of the enemies. When God examines the way of humans the wicked and their attitude are addressed immediately. The poet wants to express as clearly as possible that he has absolutely nothing to do with the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners and the seat of mockers (Ps. 1:1). The psalmist distinguishes his way of life, which is with God, from that of the people living without God. The explicit rejection of the wicked even through an imprecation indicates the poet's position and emphasises his loyalty to YHWH. Mentioning the wicked in Psalm 139 is not caused by their existence being an anomaly to God's omniscience,³³ but it is done to clarify the poet's position when God will judge.

The 'conceptual coherence' of Psalm 139, described above, is not unique. The way in which the psalmist emphasises certain issues, in particular in the elaboration on God's knowledge, is unique, yet we do find a similar complex of thoughts in different variations elsewhere. The clearest example is provided in Psalm 26, in which the psalmist submits himself to God's investigation of his way of living (vv. 1-3, 11). There he explicitly distances himself from those who shed blood and are wicked (vv. 4-5, 9-10). In front of God who tests the kidneys

³³ Contra, e.g., Van der Ploeg, *Psalmen*: 447; Weiser, *Psalmen*: 557; R. Kittel, *Die Psalmen* (KAT; Leipzig: Deichert, 1929): 421.

and the heart (v. 2) he marks his attitude in life by hatred and love: hatred for the company of wicked people (v. 5) and love for the house of God (v. 8). A similar sort of idea we find in Psalm 7 and 17, 'psalms of innocence', with the combined motifs of God's testing, the imprecation, the rejection of the way of the wicked and submission to God. The prophet Jeremiah directly combines the confession of God knowing and testing his with the prayer for curse of the enemy (12:3).

The intrinsic connection of the thoughts and motifs mentioned thus far makes it clear that Psalm 139 is not only a unity in a literary way, but also in content. The theme of God's searching someone's way of life demands that he take an explicit stand against those who object to God's ways. However, the main emphasis in this meditative confession lies in the amazement of the height and depth of God's knowledge and that is why modern readers too easily consider the change of tone after verse 18 as abrupt. Further consideration makes it less abrupt than many think it is.³⁴ In the whole context of Psalm 139 verses 19-22 are no strange element, but an integral part of the Psalm. Now that we have described the main lines of the structure and the very specific genre of Psalm 139, we are able to define the place and the function of the controversial verses 21-22 in more detail.

5. The place and function of the verses 21-22

The quintessence and the specific character of Psalm 139 is undoubtedly the confession of God's omniscience. The root **יָדַע** appears seven times and also seven times a synonym in the semantic field of 'to know' is used. In a compelling way the first three paragraphs develop the theme, finishing off with submission and dedication to God: **עִמָּךְ** 'I with you' (v. 18). In reflecting on the theme the aspect of totality is emphasised by the use of the determinative nomen **כָּל**. God knows 'all' the ways (v. 3), each word 'completely' (v. 4), 'all' the days (v. 16), everywhere (vv. 7-12) and always (vv. 13-16). God knows the poet and hems him in completely, he belongs to him totally.

In line with the confession of the first three paragraphs is the message of the fourth: because the poet belongs to God completely he

³⁴ This interpretation is diametrically opposed to Wagner's view, 'Zur Theologie': 372.

does not want to interact in any way with the wicked he rejects in the most radical way, culminating in a complete (תכלית) hatred. The imprecation in verses 19-20 and the saying about hatred in verses 21-22 are therefore a confession in the negative mode.³⁵ This is also emphasised by the way in which the wicked are introduced. They are *God's* enemies and only then and in that context the enemies of the psalmist.³⁶ Through the sayings in verses 21-22 on the one hand a clear dividing line is set between the psalmist and his enemies, and on the other hand his loyalty to God is emphasised.³⁷ The words of hatred in Psalms 26, 31, 101, 119 function in the same way.³⁸

After this declaration of loyalty the psalm ends with a prayer of trust in God who may judge personally how things are in the life of the poet. When the all-knowing God searches and tests him it will be clear that there is no 'offensive way' (v. 24), which is the way of the wicked he abhors and which leads away from God. May God lead him on the way everlasting, the way of the righteous which is known to God.³⁹

³⁵ As Irsigler, 'Psalm 139': 237, aptly calls it: 'abgrenzende Bekenntnisversicherung' (cf. what is said above about the performative perfect in v. 22a).

³⁶ According to Gerstenberger, *Psalmen*: 404, this may be a possible indication for the setting of the psalm: 'the vv. alluded to are to be located in the communal worship, because only in a communal context is Yahweh's confrontation with hostile groups thematized.'

³⁷ Cf. the way in which the idea of solidarity can sometimes be expressed in Ancient Near Eastern covenants or treaties, e.g. in the treaty of the Hittite king Muršiliš II and king Tuppi-Teššub of Amurru (in translation): '[Whoever] is [My Majesty's] enemy shall be your enemy. [Whoever is My Majesty's friend] shall be your friend'. See text No. 8, § 7 in G. M. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*. (Writings from the Ancient World 7; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999). Cf. M. A. Grisanti, 'קָרַט', *NIDOTTE* 3:898. Compare the confession of Ruth 1:16.

³⁸ Ps. 26:5 'I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked' emphasises the commitment to God in v. 7: 'Yhwh, I love the house where you live'. Ps. 31:6a 'I hate those who cling to worthless idols' is the other side of v. 6b 'I trust in the Lord' and v. 23a 'Love the Lord, all his saints!'. Ps. 101:2-4 connects the upright living in God's presence with hating the behaviour of the wicked and the refusal to have anything to do with them. In Ps. 119 loving God is frequently emphasised by sayings of hatred and abhorrence of those who ignore the law (cf. vv. 53, 97, 104, 113, 127, 128, 163).

³⁹ In a similar way Ps. 26 finishes after the declaration of hatred against the enemies and the love of God's house with the firm confession of the right way ('But I lead a blameless life ... My feet stand on level ground', vv. 11-12). 'Die Bitte um Prüfung des Herzens und der Absichten entspringt nicht theologischer Unsicherheit oder gar, wie viele Erklärer psychologisierend meinen, dem Schuldbewusstsein oder der Angst vor unerkannter Sünde...', so rightly Schüngel-Straumann, 'Zur Gattung': 51 and Zenger, *Gott der Rache*: 84, contra Irsigler, 'Psalm 139': 257. By this the idea of Aalbersberg-Van Loon, *Vierde Stem*, is denied. She regards Ps. 139 as an emotional movement of orientation (vv. 1-18) via disorientation (vv. 19-22) towards a renewed

Considering the whole of our contextual analysis we may conclude the following concerning the place and intention of verses 21-22. Despite what we might think at first view, the text does not contain an outburst of personal feelings of revenge and hatred of a vindictive man. Neither does the total hatred against the enemy expressed by the poet function as an obscure source of jihad-fanaticism by which he sanctifies the aggression against other human beings. To the poet, hating the enemy is primarily the reverse of his turning and dedication to YHWH. In these words he confesses that he radically turns his back to the world of violence ('bloodthirsty men') and wickedness (rebellion against God, v. 21). The emphasis is not so much on the emotions of the poet as well as on his choice to take a stand and on his attitude—though he is very much engaged in it (cf. the parallelism in v. 21). In all this his prayer does not result in interpersonal violence, but he places everything in God's hands by an imprecatory prayer: it is all about God's enemies.

6. The wider religious context of Psalm 139:21-22

Psalm 139:21-22 and similar texts are not a marginal, foreign element in the Old Testament. In order to understand the meaning of this type of saying well, it is important to constantly keep in mind its proper religious background and theological context. In which conceptual framework and in which religious and social life-scene have these words been heard? Some general remarks will be made.

To the Old Testament believer the unique relationship of YHWH with his people Israel is fundamental. God is Israel's Judge, Lawgiver, King and Shepherd; Israel is God's inheritance, his own people, his sanctuary and dominion (e.g. Deut. 32:8-9; Ps. 114:2; Isa. 33:22). By his will (the תורה) he possesses everything in life, there are no 'neutral' areas. In the covenant the religious, legal and national/political community is one and the same.⁴⁰ Therefore keeping the משפטים is essential, for they regulate the life of the community. Obedience and disobedience to the commandments are related to

orientation (vv. 23-24). See also the differing opinion of Th. Booij, 'Psalm CXXXIX: Text, Syntax, Meaning', *VT* 55 (2005): 1-19.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. I* (Stuttgart: Ehrenfried Klotz Verlag, 1968): 36.

salvation and doom, grace and judgement, blessing and curse. Analogous to the Ancient Near Eastern treaties the covenant is guaranteed by curses which are impressed by the cult over and over again (Deut. 31:11). The curse of God is on the rebellious who violates the covenant.⁴¹

In this context the Old Testament frequently mentions God's hatred. YHWH does not only hate various things,⁴² but we also read about his hatred against persons. He hates all those who do injustice and abhors 'bloodthirsty and deceitful men' (Ps. 5:6). The God who tests the righteous and the wicked hates those who love violence (Ps. 11:5). It is even possible that God hates his own people (Deut. 1:27; 9:28; Jer. 12:8; Hos. 9:15). As the people of God Israel has the holy duty to hate the evil and to do away with all uncleanness and wickedness as we read: 'You must purge the evil from Israel' (Deut. 17:12; 19:19; 22:22-23).⁴³ The violent and wicked people should be cut off from the covenant community, because their conduct endangers the whole community (cf. Josh. 7; Pss. 11:3; 82:5).⁴⁴ The love of God and the fear of YHWH imply hating the evil (Ps. 97:10; Prov. 8:13; Amos 5:15, cf. the contrast in Mic. 3:2). The evil should not have a chance of success in Israel (Ps. 140:11). Israel's hope is that one day there will be no more place in the land for the wicked and the unfaithful (Ps. 104:31; Prov. 2:21-22).⁴⁵

In this wide area of tension of a twofold orientation in life (blessing and curse, clean and unclean, righteous and wicked, wise and foolish, love and hatred) the prayer of Psalm 139 resonates. The utterance of hatred in verses 21-22 is embedded in the spirituality of the Old Testament and cannot be dealt with apart from the specific covenant relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. By hating God's enemies the poet relates to God's own hatred of the wicked and his curse on them. By completely taking a stand for God the poet chooses a world of blessing and goodness, of truth and justice.

⁴¹ Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 27:26; 28:16-68; Jer. 11:3; 23:10; Zech. 5:3; Dan. 9:11; Prov. 3:32-34.

⁴² Idolatry (Deut. 12:31; 16:22; Jer. 44:4); all sorts of vices and violence (Prov. 6:16-19; Zech. 8:17); false religion (Isa. 1:14; Amos 5:21); robbery (Isa. 61:8).

⁴³ On the so called 'Ausrottungsformel' with the verb כרת see G. F. Hasel, 'כרת', *TWAT* 4:362-64.

⁴⁴ Cf. J. Jeremias, *Kultprophetie und Gerichtsverkündigung in der späten Königszeit* (WMANT 35; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970): 131.

⁴⁵ Cf. Rev. 21:8, 27; 22:3.

7. Is Psalm 139:21-22 useless or relevant for today?

Now that we have focused our exegesis of Psalm 139:21-22 more precisely, we will briefly return to the questions at the beginning. Although we may now understand the meaning of verses 21-22 more clearly, the sayings about hatred remain an offensive element to our minds and particularly to our feelings. Should words like these still have a place in Christian faith and worship? It is clear that this problem is on the edge of biblical theology and practical theology, hermeneutics and ethics and is therefore beyond the scope of this paper. We therefore confine ourselves to outlining a few biblical-theological points which may help further thinking on the subject.⁴⁶

There are three possible answers:

- 1) For today's faith and worship Psalm 139:21-22 cannot be used at all;
- 2) For today's faith and worship Psalm 139:21-22 still make sense and are useful;
- 3) Psalm 139:21-22 can only be used with modifications in today's faith and worship.

The first answer is rather common, and also understandable, when we take into account the New Testament commandment to love your enemies (Matt. 5:39; Rom. 12:14). Unnoticed, however, an antithetic view of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament may play a role, as if the Old Testament would tolerate a religion of revenge and hatred which the New Testament denies. Another variation on this idea explains Psalm 139:21-22 as a sign of an imperfect stage in which the Israelite religion, which was meant to prepare the Christian faith, found itself in. These constructions have been rightly protested against.⁴⁷ Just as the Old Testament knows of the commandment to

⁴⁶ For a wider reflection see, e.g., P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Zenger, *Gott der Rache*; H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God. The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (OTS 31; Leiden: Brill, 1995); Aalbersberg-van Loon, *Vierde Stem*. Much relevant literature is mentioned by F. van der Velden, *Psalm 109 und die Aussagen zur Feindschädigung in den Psalmen* (SBB 37; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997): 176, notes 91 and 92.

⁴⁷ Cf. H.-J. Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen* (BKAT XV/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979): 233, and N. Lohfink, 'Ist das neutestamentliche Liebesethos dem Ethos des Alten Testaments überlegen?', in *Unsere neuen Fragen und das Alte Testament. Wiederentdeckte Lebensweisung*, ed. N. Lohfink (Freiburg i. B.: Herder Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989): 119-36, who answers the question in the title of his article 'Ist das neutestamentliche Liebesethos dem Ethos des Alten Testaments

love one another,⁴⁸ so does the New Testament speak of hatred, curse, and revenge.⁴⁹ It is too simple to condemn the Old Testament prayer against the enemies on theological or moral grounds borrowed from the New Testament. Besides, the New Testament authors themselves nowhere show any disapproval with regard to the Old Testament imprecations.

The second answer is found in more recent literature, the authors of which argue that passages like Psalm 139:21-22 should just be left as they are, in all their stubbornness and awkwardness, and be integrated into the practice of religion. This sort of biblical language confronts us with the reality of life as it is actually lived, full of violence and suffering. It saves us from dead religious abstractions. Passages like these are considered to have a high therapeutic value.⁵⁰ With the help of these texts we learn how to unmask evil in all its diversity and we are enabled to verbalise feelings of impotence and hatred. In this way inner forces which might otherwise have destructive effects are channelled. Texts like these give a voice to all those silenced by violence and injustice.⁵¹ This opinion certainly contains some valuable thoughts, yet we may doubt whether possible psychological structures of identification justify the direct application of these texts in prayer and worship. The risk of misunderstanding and misuse of Psalm 139:21-22 is considerable,⁵² for instance in a collective context. Anyone who uses these words in prayer should be constantly aware that verses 21-22 are not evil emotions but express loyalty in a negative mode. Besides, there is the risk of reversing the order of 'Thine enemy is my enemy'.

überlegen?' in the negative. See also *inter alios* Zenger, *Gott der Rache*: 56-66; Peels, *Vengeance*: 234-46 and Aalbersberg-van Loon, *Vierde Stem*: 160.

⁴⁸ So, e.g. Exod. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:18, 34; Job 31:29ff.; Ps. 7:4ff.; Prov. 17:5; 24:17-18; 25:21-22.

⁴⁹ We can think of Matt. 21:18-21; 25:41; Acts 8:20; 13:10-11; Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 6:10. Cf. Matt. 11:21-24; 23:33ff.; Luke 18:1-6; 19:27; 2 Tim. 4:14; Heb. 6:7-8; 1 Pet. 2:14. In the New Testament psalms with a prayer for curse, like Ps. 2, 25, 69 and 109 are simply quoted.

⁵⁰ Cf. B. Janowski, 'Dem Löwen gleich, gierig nach Raub. Zum Feindbild in den Psalmen', *EvTh* 55 (1995): 173. In particular the dissertation of Aalbersberg-van Loon, *Vierde Stem*, is instructive. See also G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral. A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1991): 185: 'In fact, meditation upon and application of these psalms could be therapeutic to those who have suffered traumatic hurt (such as child abuse)'.

⁵¹ Cf. Zenger, *Gott der Rache*: 161-62.

⁵² As is rightly argued by Van der Velden, *Psalm 109*: 178.

The third answer to the question above is connected with the incorporation of a biblical-theological perspective. When considering the relationship of the Old and the New Testament from the perspective of the history of salvation we have to take into account continuity and discontinuity. The Old Testament is specifically focused on one people, Israel. Religious life, law and worship are undivided and determine the whole of life, creating clear divisions between blessing and curse, clean and unclean, righteous and wicked. To the Old Testament believer the danger of the power and the victory of evil was a very real issue, even more because they did not have the perspective of an afterlife and a possible judgement after death. The anxious question whether the wicked may rule forever was therefore very real in those days. God's majesty, his honour and his truth were at stake. The words of Psalm 139:21-22 should be put in those specific contexts.

The New Testament proclaims that Jesus Christ is submitted to God's judgement of all evil and animosity and it also speaks of a final judgement on the last day. The interim period is the time of love (Rom. 13:8-14; 1 John 2:10), the time of God's patience and grace (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:9; 3:9; cf. Rev. 6:11 after 6:10). Now is the time when those who used to be enemies of God (Rom. 5:10; Titus 3:3) proclaim the Gospel. This is the time in which the Gospel of Christ goes out worldwide to preserve (John 3:17; 12:47). In the meantime the good seed and the weeds grow together (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43); only at harvest time the Sower (v. 37) will be the Mower (v. 41). The Christian congregation can be tested and purified through suffering for Christ's sake (cf., e.g., Heb. 12:4ff.; 1 Pet. 3:17; 4:12-19). In this interim period the believer's attitude is determined by the words: 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse' (Rom. 12:14). His prayer with respect to the enemy is on the one hand a submission to the One who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23; Rom. 12:19) and on the other hand it is a prayer for forgiveness and conversion of his enemies (Acts 7:60, cf. 8:22). All this does not deny that the New Testament clearly speaks of the zeal for God's honour and his rights and of the desire for all evil and animosity against God to perish (Jas 4:4; 1 Pet. 3:10-12; Rev. 2:6).

From this point of view the question whether the prayer of Psalm 139:21-22 can be used today, should be answered in a balanced way. On the one hand the answer is negative, because these prayers are embedded in specific religious and theological contexts which have changed since the coming of Christ and all He has accomplished. On

the other hand the answer is positive, because to the New Testament church the essence of this prayer is still valid. We may summarise this answer with two German terms: the *Textgehalt* (that is: the radical stand for God and the rejection of all evil) remains ever valid, yet the *Textgestalt* (that is: the hatred against those who behave like God's enemies) is time-bound.

8. Conclusion

To sum up: we cannot speak about the application of Psalm 139:21-22 for today *etsi novum testamentum non daretur*. Beside ethical, psychological and pastoral considerations we need to take into account biblical-theological reasons in an adequate way. The first answer mentioned above ('no') follows from a wrong antithesis between the Old and the New Testament or from an undervaluation of the Old Testament. The second answer ('yes') does not sufficiently consider the differences between the Old and the New Testament. We therefore prefer the third answer, which depending on the situation is either 'yes, providing that' or 'no, unless'.