Pride and the Suffering of the Poor in the Persian Period: Psalm 12 in its Post-Exilic Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that Ps 12 should be read, as part of the composition Pss 9–14, as a response to and an explication of Prov 30:1–14 by exponents of Wisdom thinking in the Persian period. The suffering of the righteous people in Ps 12 is described as the result of arrogant Jewish and also non-Jewish rulers who use speech as an instrument of deception, fraud, flattery, boasting, and questioning Yahweh’s authority in order to oppress and intimidate believers. It is proposed that the historic context of the final form of the text was that of the “piety of the poor,” a theology which developed from the need to restore dignity and provide hope to victims of social and religious oppression in the post-exilic era. It would seem that these people sought comfort in the word of Yahweh and that they found vindication for themselves in those sections of the developing “canon” which promised that Yahweh would intervene on behalf of those people who represented true humility and piety.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 12 constitutes a cry for help¹ addressed to Yahweh by someone who represents a group of suffering people.² The complaint is that baseness³ has gained the upper hand⁴ in society, and that the faithful have been forced below

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¹ Verse 2: “Help (הimportDefault), Yahweh!” Cf. the use of the same stem in the noun “safety” (ניטש) which describes Yahweh’s intervention in v. 6.
⁴ וָ galer inf cst, v. 9.
the surface by oppression. The wicked arrogantly boast that they are in command (v. 5) and they consequently oppress the weak and poor people through lies, flattery and deceit (vv. 3–5) without any regard for God. The situation as it is described could surely have recurred a number of times in the history of Israel and Judah, and it is often described as representative of the time of the monarchy.

Yet I would like to assert that the text should be contextualised within the late Persian period. The reason for this supposition is the links between Ps 12 and those psalms which immediately precede and follow it, and the way in which these connections together seem to form a response to and an explication of Proverbs, in particular Prov 30:1–14. Close connections exist also between Ps 12 and other parts of the Hebrew canon (e.g. Trito-Isaiah), but these books seem to be similar responses to Proverbs so that they provide supporting evidence about the important role of Proverbs in the editing of the Hebrew Bible rather than a separate source for the composition of Ps 12.

It is even possible that we have in Ps 12:7 a reference by the Yahwistic wisdom editors of the Psalter to the end result of their own vast editorial work when they speak about the “words” of Yahweh being like refined silver, puri-

5 Cf. v. 2, the “devout have disappeared,” the “faithful have vanished.” is another hapax legomenon. The meaning is inferred from the parallel. If the text is emended to as a form of , the meaning will still be “they have come to an end.”

6 Erich Zenger, “Psalm 12, Hilfeschrei zu JHWH, dem Gott der Armen” in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger Psalm 1-50 (vol. 1 of Die Psalmen; Neue Echter Bibel 29; Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 93 thinks of the late pre-exilic time, similar to the time described in Hab 1:2–4. In an earlier publication, Erich Zenger, Mit meinem Gott überspringe ich Mauern: Einführung in das Psalmenbuch (2nd ed.; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1988), 177, did notice the general, didactic character of the psalm which seems to detach it from a cultic Sitz. He, however, chose to connect it with prophetic modes of expression (“prophetischen Fürbitte”) as a public protest against a corrupt society (178). Johannes P. M. van der Ploeg, Psalm 1 t/m 75 (vol. 1 of Psalmen; BOT; Roermond: J. J. Romen & Zonen, 1973), 90 is one of only a few exegetes who date the psalm in the post-exilic era. He does this on the basis of the vocabulary. Bernhard Duhm, Die Psalmen (KHC 14; Freiburg: Mohr 1899), 36 describes it as “jung” and refers to the time of the Hasmoneans of the second century B.C.E. Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalmen I (BKAT 15.1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 94, considers it impossible to give even an approximate date.

7 Despite the supposition of a majority of exegetes that the psalm has its Sitz in the cult, it is to be regarded as a literary creation which responds to Proverbs together with other psalms in the composition Pss 3–14.

Botha, “Pride and Suffering of the Poor,” *OTE* 25/1 (2012): 40-56

It is possibly these “words of Yahweh” as they are formulated in Proverbs, Psalms, and Isaiah (and also other parts of the canon) which were understood to hold the solution to the social and religious distress the author of Ps 12 and his colleagues experience: They contain the promises of Yahweh’s intervention against the arrogant, godless upper class through which he will again save the devout and the faithful, the wretched and the poor.

These assertions may seem difficult to prove, but I claim no originality for the idea that Ps 12, in conjunction with its neighbours, forms part of a carefully executed response to Proverbs. As far as I am concerned, Bernard Gosse has already proven that quite a number of poetic compositions in the Hebrew Bible are by and large the result of the editorial work of the wise Yahwists who turned the Psalter (and other parts of the Hebrew Bible) into a direct response to the admonitions and warnings found in the book of Proverbs. My own contribution would simply be to add some evidence to what Gosse has given us and to integrate this into a holistic intra- and intertextual analysis of this particular psalm. In doing so, I endeavour to prove that Ps 12 constitutes a theological response to the problem of secularisation, lawlessness, and gentile rule in the late post-exilic history of Judah, and that the authors’ perception of the “words of Yahweh” played a role in this perception. The situation of the author of Ps 12 is analysed with regard to the “word of Yahweh” as it is formulated in Proverbs, especially Prov 30:1–14, while certainty that Yahweh will intervene is also founded on the book of Proverbs.

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9 The expression יִקְרָא לַאֲרוֹן is said to mean “in a crucible on the ground, or in the ground.” Cf. HALOT, entry 7047. Not all dictionaries and Bible translators understand it in this way, however. The word יִקְרָא is derived from עַלָּא, II, “to immerse” if the Ugaritic and Arabic cognates are to be trusted (cf. HALOT, entry 7055). It has been suggested that the preposition ב should be translated as the ב of definition, “…refined in a furnace (down) to the earth,” since the purified metal flows down to the ground. Cf. Gert T. M. Prinsloo, “Man’s Word – God’s Word: A Theology of Antithesis in Psalm 12,” *ZAW* 110 (1998): 392, n. 4, who refers to the commentaries of Delitzsch and Kirkpatrick in this regard. It is possible that the author was thinking of the preparation of the word of God and its distribution through the books of the Hebrew Bible, so that one can translate “The words of Yahweh are pure words, silver refined in its entrance into the earth, filtered seven times.”

B INTRATEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 12

1 For the music director, according to the Sheminith. A psalm of David.

2 Help, Yahweh, for the devout have disappeared, for the faithful have vanished from humanity!

3 Everyone utters deceit with his neighbour, with flattering lips they speak heart to heart.

4 May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, (every) tongue that speaks arrogantly,

5 (of those) that say: “With our tongue we are strong, our lips are with us, Who is master over us?”

6 “Because of the violence of (to) the wretched, because of the groaning of the poor I will now rise,” says Yahweh.

7 The words of Yahweh are pure words, silver refined in a crucible in the earth / in its entrance to the earth, filtered seven times.

8 You, Yahweh, will guard them. You will protect him/us from this generation forever.

9 The wicked walk about everywhere when vileness is exalted among humanity.

The psalm consists of six units, in this analysis marked as six strophes but which could possibly also be considered to be six stanzas. The six strophes

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11 This is understood as a parallel to “everyone with his neighbour,” and not “double-hearted” as is often suggested. So, for instance, Van der Ploeg, Psalm 1 t/m, 90.

12 The ambiguity was possibly brought about intentionally.

13 Prinsloo, “Man’s Word – God’s Word,” 390–2, identifies three stanzas: 2–4, 5–6, and 7–9, in which the first and last stanza contains two strophes each. Die Psalmen 1 bis 72 (vol. 1 of Werkbuch Psalmen; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 84 similarly identifies three stanzas: 2–4, 5–6, and 7–9. Both authors contend that the first and last stanza correspond to one another and enclose the middle stanza. The separation of vv. 4 and 5 in this scheme is problematic in my view, since it dislocates the relative sentence beginning in 5 from its antecedent subject and ignores the chiastic parallel between vv. 4 and 5. There is also too little correspondence between vv. 5 and 6 to link...
are demarcated on the basis of subject matter and strong internal connections such as parallels and chiastic patterns within each unit. Every strophe contains one incidence of the name Yahweh except for the last, and it would seem that it was omitted on purpose in this strophe (v. 9), where the wicked are said to be everywhere since vileness has gained the upper hand. Zenger notes that the five occurrences of the divine name is significant, since there is thus an occurrence in the middle, and in that instance (in v. 6b) the name Yahweh also occurs in the middle colon of a tricolon. The six strophes form a chiastic pattern:

| A¹ | Cry to Yahweh for help: The faithful vanish and deceit is everywhere |
| B² | Wish that Yahweh will silence the false and arrogant speech |
| C³ | Yahweh’s promise to act on behalf of the poor and suffering |
| D³ | Yahweh’s words are pure and seven times refined |
| E² | Confession of faith that Yahweh will protect the faithful |
| F¹ | The reason why the wicked is everywhere: the exaltation of vileness |

Strophes A and F are connected because of the repetition of the concept “humanity” in vv. 2 and 9. This draws attention to the disappearance of the devout and the faithful and the prevalence of deceit and false speech (A, vv. 2–3) which form a semantic parallel to the visibility of the wicked, walking about openly since vileness has gained the upper hand (F, v. 9). Strophes B and E constitute, on the one hand, a wish that Yahweh will exterminate those who speak so falsely and arrogantly and, on the other hand, a confession of the belief that Yahweh will protect the faithful. Strophes C and D are connected since Yahweh “says” (בָּאָמַר) in v. 6 that he will now act, and his “words” (וְאַלֵלֶה) (which include this promise) are described as pure and refined like sil-

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14 Verse 2 has a synonymous parallel between “disappear” and “vanish” and “devout” and “faithful.” Verse 3 has a chiastic parallel formed by the two instances of “speak” and the two descriptions of “with one another.” Verse 4 has a parallel formed between “lips” and “tongue” and the two adjectives in the feminine plural; these two words also form rhyme. Within strophe B, the incidence of “lips” and “tongue” form chiasmus, and this external parallel between v. 5 and v. 6 is strengthened with the semantic correspondence of “speak” and “say” and “big” and “we are strong.” The last two feet of verse line 5 form rhyme. Verse 6 has internal parallelism in its first foot and another parallel between vv. 6b and 6c. Verse 7 again has an internal parallel in its first foot and another between v. 7b and 7c. Verse line 8 also has an internal parallel between “you will guard them” and “you will protect us.”

15 Zenger “Psalm 12,” 92.
ver in v. 7. Within this context, the “refined” words of Yahweh (D) must be taken to refer to his promise to act “now” (C). The vile speech of the wicked and their visibility is therefore contrasted in the psalm as a whole with the pure speech of Yahweh and his promise to act “now” on behalf of the oppressed faithful.

If the textual strategies employed by the poet(s) are taken into consideration, the following summary description of the psalm can be given:

- The **problem** being addressed is the general (cf. “humanity,” vv. 1 and 9) domination (cf. “exalted,” v. 9) of society (cf. “walk about everywhere,” v. 9) by the wicked (v. 9) who use speech (cf. “speak,” v. 3; “lips,” vv. 3-5; “tongue,” v. 5) in a deceitful (cf. “lies,” “flattering” vv. 3 and 4) and boastful way (cf. “big,” v. 4,16 “strong,” “with us” and “lord” in v. 5) to obtain power (cf., again, “strong,” v. 5) and to oppress (cf. “violence,” “groaning” v. 6) the devout and faithful (v. 2); the wretched and poor (v. 6).

- The **result** of this situation is that the devout and faithful have receded into the background (cf. “disappeared,” “vanished” v. 2), presumably because they fear those who hold sway and experience a lack of protection against their exploitation. Yahweh is also said to notice the violence (דשא)17 with which they have to cope (v. 6).

- The **reaction** of the devout to the problem is that they cry for “help” to Yahweh (v. 2) and “groan” under the oppression (v. 6).

- Their **expectation** is that Yahweh can “cut off” the flattering lips and the boastful tongue of those for whom speech has taken the place of God (cf. vv. 4–5); that Yahweh will “rise” to intervene on behalf of the oppressed (v. 6), that he will put those who long for it in “safety” (v. 6) and will further “protect” (תובכל, שומם) them against this category of criminals (“this generation,” v. 8) for a long time in future (cf. “forever” in v. 8). In sharp contrast to the “worthless,” “deceitful,” “flattering” and arrogant use of language by the wicked, the devout put their trust in the pure (“refined” and “filtered”) words of Yahweh which are (by implication) true and valuable in contrast.18

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16 In Job 5:9 and 9:10, God is described as the one who “does great things (נ幫ל, naphal).”
17 In Prov 24:2, the “violence” which the hearts of the wicked plan and the “distress” which they speak with their lips are combined to form a parallel to Ps 12:3, 5, and 6.
18 Cf. Prinsloo, “Man’s Word – God’s Word,” 401 who comes to the conclusion that the interpretation of the psalm hinges on the antithesis between the words of men and the word of God.
It is well-known that Pss 3–14 form a subgroup within the first Davidic Psalter. A continuous reading of Pss 9–14 reveals that these psalms all address the same problem, while comparison with Proverbs proves that they are also all related and linked via genetic traits to this collection of wisdom sayings. It does not seem as if the editors who arranged this group of psalms and who established the links with Proverbs wanted to hide the connections. They rather seem to have dropped “white pebbles” for the reader of the Hebrew Canon to pick up the connecting links with Proverbs. One such connection is the expression “smooth lips” (שְׁפַ֠ת לְוִתָן), which is used in both vv. 3 and 4 to refer to “flattering lips.” It occurs in only one verse in the Hebrew Bible apart from the two instances in Ps 12, namely in Prov 7:21. Another link is established through the verb שָׁמַ֣מ, to “blow,” which has strong connections with wisdom. It is found in Ps 12:6 where it is used to refer to the one who “pants” after safety. It is used four times in Proverbs to refer to the “breathing out” of lies.

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19 Gianni Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit: Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1–41* (ÖBS 16; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 122 points out the connection between 12:9 and 11:3: “In beiden Psalmen drückt sich eine Minderheit aus, die am Rand der offiziellen Gesellschaft steht und eine Art ‘Kontrastgesellschaft’ bildet.” Van der Ploeg, *Psalm 1 t/m 75*, 90, points out that Ps 12:1 and Ps 14:3 bemoan the same problem.

20 It refers to the seductive speaking of a forbidden woman: “... with her smooth lips she compels him” (Prov 7:21). A comparable description is found in Prov 5:3: “For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil” (Prov 5:3).

21 Prov 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9. It is found another three times in Proverbs; once more in the Psalms, namely in Ps 10:5, three times in the Song of Solomon (to indicate the blowing of the wind) and once each in Ezek 21:36 and Hab 2:3. Since the verb שָׁמַמ occurs in only two places in the Psalter, in Ps 10:5 and Ps 12:6, and also in the same form, it should be interpreted as an intended connection between the two psalms (cf. Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch*, 123). The disdain of the wicked is expressed with this verb in Ps 10:5 (he considers Yahweh to be too far away to be a threat, and consequently “blows” on his adversaries). In Ps 12:6 the “sighing” of oppressed people are probably expressed with this verb, a “blowing” of breath which signifies a longing for rescue from the haughty “blowing” of the wicked. To interpret the meaning of the verb as negative, and to translate “I will put in safety the one against whom he blows/puffs” implies that the offender is introduced, while the focus in the rest of the verse is on the oppressed persons. This is in any case the explanation of Zenger, *Die Psalmen*, 95. Patrick D. Miller, “Yāpîah in Psalm 12:6,” *VT* 29 (1979): 495–501, regards the form as a noun with the meaning “witness,” and translates the colon: “I will place in safety the witness in his behalf.” This destroys the parallel, however, and ignores the fact that a singular suffix (“his”) is made to refer to two antecedents in the plural (the wretched and poor people). Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15;
Proverbs 24:1–2 also provides a parallel to Ps 12. It warns the student of wisdom not to be envious of evil men, since their hearts ponder “violence” (שָׂם) and their “lips” (עַל) “speak” (דָּבַר pi) evil. This constitutes a summary of the complaints in Ps 12:3, 4, 5, and 6.

The most fruitful wisdom context for comparison with Ps 12, however, is Prov 30:1–14 which shares a significant number of Hebrew words with Ps 12, and also highlights a spectacular similarity in thought between the two texts. The following words in Ps 12 are also found in Prov 30:1–14:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proverbs 30:1–14</th>
<th>Psalm 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The words of Agur Bin-Jakeh. The oracle. The man (יִשְׂרָאֵל) declares: “There is no god, there is no god, I have finished.”</td>
<td>The words (יִשְׂרָאֵל pl) of Yahweh are pure words (שָׂם qal part pass) in a crucible in/on the earth/in its entry to the earth (יָד).</td>
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<td>2. Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I do not have the understanding of a human (יִשְׂרָאֵל).</td>
<td>3. Everyone utters deceit (שָׂם) with his neighbour, with flattering lips they speak heart to heart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have not learned wisdom, and have no knowledge of holy things.</td>
<td>4. May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, (every) tongue that speaks arrogantly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established (קָום) hip'il all the ends of the earth (יָד)? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know?</td>
<td>5. (of those) that say (שָׂם): “With our tongue we are strong (דָּבַר hip'il), our lips are with us, who (יִשְׂרָאֵל) is master (יִשְׂרָאֵל) over us?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22 A comparison between the two contexts renders the following result:

**Proverbs 30:1–14**

1. The words of Agur Bin-Jakeh. The oracle. The man (יִשְׂרָאֵל) declares: “There is no god, there is no god, I have finished.”
2. Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I do not have the understanding of a human (יִשְׂרָאֵל).
3. I have not learned wisdom, and have no knowledge of holy things.
4. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established (קָום) hip'il all the ends of the earth (יָד)? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know?

**Psalm 12**

1. The words (יִשְׂרָאֵל pl) of Yahweh are pure words (שָׂם qal part pass) in a crucible in/on the earth/in its entry to the earth (יָד).
2. Everyone utters deceit (שָׂם) with his neighbour, with flattering lips they speak heart to heart.
3. May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, (every) tongue that speaks arrogantly.

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Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 62 follows the cue, but translates the last two words as a nominal sentence: “...ich bin ihm ein Zeuge!”

22 I have left out those particles which are too common to be of interest.

23 See below for an explanation.
The text in Prov 30 from v. 5 onwards centres around two kinds of speech: the refined words of Yahweh; and in contrast to that, proper and improper words or types of pronouncements. In this regard it forms a parallel to Ps 12. Prov 30:5 begins by stating that every word of God is refined. One should therefore not add to his words, since he will expose the person who does that as a liar (v. 6). The author consequently also supplicates God (vv. 7–8) to keep deceit and lies far away from him. After a second supplication, namely that God would make him neither rich nor poor (v. 8b) but only give him his daily bread lest he say the wrong things (אמור), namely to deny the existence of Yahweh with a rhetorical question ("Who is Yahweh?"), and a wisdom adage about slander (לשון hip'il) and the consequential cursing (כָּלָל pi'el) in return (which actions also constitute the impure use of the tongue and words), the author proceeds to describe the bad "generation" (דור) of those who curse their fathers (כָּלָל pi'el) and do not bless (ברך pi'el) their mothers (once again the inappropriate use or the absence of use of language) (v. 11), a generation of people who are clean (חיף) in their own eyes, but are not washed of their own filth24 (v. 12), a generation of people with lofty (רומ) eyes and uplifted eyelids (v. 13), whose teeth are swords and molars knives to devour the poor (עדר) from off the earth and the needy (פָּנֵים) from among mankind (מאדים) (v. 14).

In this context, it would seem that the references to teeth and dentures form a

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24 The strong word “excrement” is used ( kullan, “dung,” “excrement”).
Botha, “Pride and Suffering of the Poor,” OTE 25/1 (2012): 40-56

metaphor about the way in which people use their mouths (thus speech) to exploit the poor and defenceless people.25

It is indeed significant that so many Hebrew words found in Prov 30:1–14 are also used in Ps 12. It underlines the fact that the focus of the text of Ps 12 is similar to that of Prov 30:1–14, namely to emphasise the contrast between the refined words of Yahweh and of what he says (אמר v. 6) with the deceitful, flattering, careless, arrogant, or negligent use of language by the godless overlords of society.

If one follows the “white pebbles” strewn in Ps 12, the way thus leads back to Proverbs and to Prov 30 in particular. The links convey the message that the people who run the society being described in Ps 12 have already been (or are simultaneously being) described in Proverbs 30. They are a “generation” of unscrupulous people who exploit the poor through the pernicious use of language. They do not heed the warnings of Prov 30 against the renunciation of Yahweh. When they say (אמר) that they are strong with their tongue and lips and ask “Who is master over us?” they do exactly the same thing as those people in Prov 30:9 who have grown so insolent that they would ask rhetorically “Who is Yahweh?” The implication is that they misrepresent the truth, that they are distorting the word of Yahweh.

It is perhaps appropriate to ask at this point in time whether we can be sure that Prov 30 is the donor text and Ps 12 the recipient. This indeed seems to be the case, especially since there are other connections between Prov 30:1–14 and Pss 9–14 and also connections between Ps 12 and other parts of Proverbs.26 The theme of unscrupulous arrogance, impunity, and the consequent exploitation of the poor as it is described in Prov 30:1–14 is mentioned a number of times in Pss 9–14. This theme is also already announced in Prov 30:1, but it has unfortunately been rendered unintelligible by scribes (or the Masoretes) who could not accommodate the thought that an atheist pronouncement (introduced with the prophetic formula) would be contained in Proverbs, even though the person whose name is “Agur” is made to speak Aramaic and to “confess” that he is a fool.27

25 Ps 14:4 forms a parallel to this. It refers to the “evildoers” who have no knowledge and who “eat” people up as if they are eating bread, but do not call upon Yahweh.
26 See above.
27 He confesses to being “stupid” (בשע and “lacking in human understanding” (לאברות אוס) in v. 2. The “confession” of Agur in vv. 2–3 is probably meant as irony: He is a rationalist and has no sensitivity for theological understanding. The words of v. 4 are then to be understood as a critical remark by Agur about human inability to have any knowledge of God. The “son” of this would-be explorer could be understood
Proverbs 30:1 says, “The words (דיבור הymph) of Agur, son of Jakeh. The oracle (בשון). The man declares (ונאש). ‘There is no god, there is no god and I have prevailed.’” In unvocalised Aramaic, this would be לא אהת אל לא אתי אל לא אתי אל לא (la’ita’al la’ita’al la’ita’al la’ita’al) (to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukal”). This should be compared to the corresponding Hebrew pronunciation in Ps 10:4, “The wicked, in his pride (says): ‘He (God) does not care; there is no God.’ These are all his thoughts.”

The infamous part is formulated as האים. The same accusation of saying that there is no God is again made in Ps 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” This is also expressed in Hebrew as האים. Similar to what happens in Prov 30:14, such foolish (see the confession of Agur in Prov 30:2–3) words lead to arrogance and the unscrupulous exploitation of Yahweh’s protégés and protegees. In Ps 14:4, such exploitation is also described with a metaphor of eating, such as is implied in Prov 30:14. Further connections between these psalms and Prov 30 are formed through the repeated assertion about the arrogance of the wicked (cf. Pss 9:21 by implication; 10:2, 4, 13, 18 by implication; and 12:4–5) and by the fact that the “poor” and “needy” are mentioned a number of times in parallel as the oppressed in these psalms: The “cry of the afflicted (אומרים עניים)” are mentioned in Ps 9:13; the “needy” and the “poor” in Ps 9:19; the “poor” in Ps 10:2, 9 and 12; the “poor” and the “needy” in Ps 12:6; and again the “poor” in Ps 14:6. Note also the connection through the arrogant speech of the wicked in Ps 10:7 and Ps 12:4 and 5.

From these similarities, it becomes clear that Pss 9–14 display a unified response to Prov 30:1–14: In the world of the authors/editors of these psalms, ignorance of wisdom has led to the confident pronouncement of godless people that there is no God, or that he is not able to exert his authority, and these people consequently use their mouths to lie, deceive, flatter and boast in order to

as his student. Agur professes that God is shrouded in mystery. Wisdom answers in v. 5 that God has provided humanity with a true and trustworthy revelation in writing.

28 This form is then understood as a waw consecutive qal imperfect 1 s of יمؤسس.

29 The phrase לא אתי אל appears five times in the Aramaic portions of the Hebrew Bible, and one of these (Dan 3:29) says: “There is no (other) god…” לא אתי אל (than the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). The first to suggest this solution to the riddle seems to have been Robert B. Y. Scott, according to William McKane, Proverbs: A New Approach (OTL; 3rd Impression; London: SCM Press, 1980), 645. Cf. also Bernard Gosse, “L’influence de Proverbes 30,1–14,” 529–30.


31 As Barbiero, Das erste Psalmenbuch, 116 points out, Ps 10:4, 6, 11, and 13 form a series which culminate with inclusio in Ps 14:1. Ps 11:1, 12:5 and 13:5 (which all contain the verb ממנה) could also be seen to form part of this series. See Barbiero, Das erste Psalmenbuch, 117.

32 “Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and no longer call upon Yahweh?”
gain and maintain power. The Proverbs text nevertheless still gives hope, since
Yahweh’s words of promise that he will now rise to put things right are like
silver, refined seven times.

As part of the response to Proverbs, Ps 12 is also linked in a number of
ways directly to the preceding and succeeding psalms. The repeated, emphatic
request “Rise, Yahweh!” in Pss 9:20 and 10:12 is answered by Yahweh himself
in Ps 12:6 when he announces, “Now I will arise…” It is also important to note
the emphasis on insolent, deceptive, and oppressive human speech in Pss 10–
14, the “speaking” or “words” of Yahweh in contrast to this in these psalms,
and the way in which this forms a response to Proverbs where the words of
wisdom and thus, ultimately, of Yahweh, are to be found.

D THE IDENTITY OF THE OPPRESSORS IN PSALM 12

If Ps 12 were composed as a response to Prov 30:1–14 and with direct links to
other psalms in the composition of Pss 9–14, it may be possible to use the
donor text and the wider literary context to learn more about the situation
reflected in Ps 12. Who are the oppressors in Prov 30:1–14 and Pss 9–14? In
Prov 30, they are referred to rather vaguely as “a generation” (זרע) of people
who (among other things) transgress the first commandment of the second table
of the Decalogue (about respect for the parents, cf. Prov 30:11 and Exod
20:12). This word (זרע) occurs only five times in Proverbs, four of which are in
subsequent verses in Prov 30:11–14! It is one of the “white pebbles” dropped
by the wisdom editors of the Psalter in the collection Pss 9–14. In Ps 10:6 it is
used to describe the arrogant self-confidence of the wicked person who thinks
he will endure for generations (זרע) without being shaken. It subsequently
appears in Ps 12:8 where it is used to describe the powerful people who hold
sway and who oppress others, while (in antithesis to this) זרע is used in Ps 14:5
with a positive connotation to describe the “generation of the righteous” with
whom God is said to be (אלים חר נזרע). This forms a polarity with Ps 12:5
where the wicked boast that they have their “lips” with them (שפתיהם אנתון). Their “lips” take the place of God in their lives.33 From these links it would
seem that the bad people could be understood to be Jews themselves, people
who should know better, but act like agnostics and atheists.

In the composition of Pss 9–14, the following general epithets are used
for the personae non gratae: They are referred to as “pagans” (נוצרים, 9:6, 16, 18,
20, 21; and 10:16); “the wicked” (רשעים, 9:6, 17, 18; 10:2, 3, 4, 13, 15; 11:2, 5,
6; and 12:9); “a bad person” (רע, 10:15); “an enemy” (לאב, 9:4, 7; 13:3 and 5);
“an adversary” (זרע, 13:5) and “a fool” (נבל, 14:1). This group of dramatis

33 Cf. the confession of Joshua and Caleb in Num 14:9c, “Their protection is re-
moved from them (the people living in the Promised Land), and Yahweh is with us;
do not fear them.”
personae are charged with involvement in oppression (9:13; 10:7; 12:6 and 14:4; cf. also Prov 30:14); arrogance (9:21; 10:2, 4, 6 and 12:5; cf. also Prov 30:13); persecution (10:2); displaying a lack of ethical principles (10:3; cf. Prov 30:11); displaying disdain for Yahweh (10:3 and 14:1; cf. Prov 30:1 and 9); cursing (10:7; cf. Prov 30:10); wickedness (10:15); a reign of terror (10:18); murdering the upright (9:13, by implication; 11:2) overturning the foundations (11:3); loving violence (11:5); lying (12:3; cf. Prov 30:8); flattering (12:3); displaying general baseness (12:9; cf. Prov 30:12); and the doing of evil deeds (14:1). Many of these descriptions correlate with the description of the bad generation in Prov 30:1–14. Note the description of the atheist in Prov 30:2 as being “stupid” and “without human understanding,” the warning against the danger of being exposed as a “liar” in Prov 30:6; of using “deceit” and “lies” in Prov 30:8; of “denial” of Yahweh in Prov 30:9; of “slander” in Prov 30:10; of haughtiness in Prov 30:13 and of exploiting poor people in Prov 30:14.

It therefore seems justifiable to infer that the suffering of the righteous people in Psalm 12 can be attributed to oppression by arrogant Jewish and also non-Jewish (cf. the occurrence of מָלֵאכָּה) rulers who use speech as an instrument of deception, fraud, flattery, boasting, and questioning Yahweh’s authority in order to oppress and intimidate believers. Although it is difficult to pin the psalm to a specific date, it is obvious that the historic context of the final form of the text is that of the “piety of the poor,” a theology which developed from the need to restore dignity and provide hope to victims of social and religious oppression in the post-exilic era. It would seem that these people sought comfort in the word of Yahweh and that they found vindication for themselves in those sections which promised that Yahweh would intervene on behalf of those people who represented true humility and piety.

**E THE DENOTATION OF THE “WORD OF YAHWEH” IN PSALM 12**

It is a topos found in a number of wisdom texts that the words of Yahweh (or the words of wisdom) are compared to silver or gold. It seems that the comparison was initially used to emphasise the value of wisdom being greater than that of material wealth, with ultimate wealth being represented by silver or gold. A different, but related, topos is the purity of words of wisdom. When these are compared to silver or gold, the focus is usually on refined silver or gold, and the silver or gold would consequently be described as “pure” or “refined” or of choice quality, or else a polarity will be formed between contaminated human thoughts and speech and the refined words of wisdom. An
example is provided by Prov 10:20, which compares the “tongue of the righteous,” which is like “choice silver” (כמסת נבורה), with the “heart of the wicked” which is “of little worth.” In Prov 8:6–10, the purity of the words of Lady Wisdom is contrasted with the crooked nature of words of wickedness: “Listen, for I speak noble things, and the opening of my lips is uprightness (אשתו השירה). For my palate speaks “truth” (אמות), wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words (אמרות) of my mouth are righteous (דבריך); there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all “straight” (נbsites) to the one who understands, and “right” (ישראים) to those who find knowledge. Take my discipline rather than silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold.” Proverbs 8:19 in the same broader context again emphasises, “My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice (נבורה) silver.” The value of words of wisdom is thus further enhanced by comparing it to refined gold and choice silver.

Not only the “words” of Lady Wisdom are compared to refined gold and silver, but also the “words” or “teaching” of Yahweh. The words of wisdom are therefore identified with the word of Yahweh. The refined nature of Yahweh’s word is emphasised for instance in Ps 19:8–11 where his “torah” is described as “perfect” (תורת), his “commands” (פקודות) as “right” (шедירת; his “commandment” (חוה) as “pure” (דבריה); the “fear of Yahweh” as “clean” (חוה); and his “judgements” (משפטים) as being “true and righteous altogether” (אמות תדוק חוד). The complete revelation of Yahweh is then described in Ps 19:11 as “more desirable than gold, even the finest gold” (מהנה בר מענה). There is thus a remarkable parallel between the speech of Lady Wisdom and the complete literary revelation of Yahweh. The same idea, that Yahweh’s promise is refined, is also found in Ps 119:140, where it says that “Your word (אמרות) is much refined, and your servant loves it (אהבה).” This love for the word of Yahweh corresponds to the love for (the words of wisdom) to which the student of wisdom is exhorted, for example in Prov 4:5–6, “Acquire wisdom, acquire insight; do not forget, do not turn away from the words of my mouth (אמרות). Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her (אהבה), and she will guard you.”

It is against this background that Prov 30:5 should be understood: “Every word of God is refined; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” In this chapter, the “words” of God are juxtaposed with contaminated human speech – beginning with the professing of atheism in v. 1, but also contrasted with words that are added to his words (v. 6, words which would constitute lies); falsehood and lying (v. 8); denial of Yahweh (v. 9); slander and cursing (v. 10); cursing parents and withholding blessing from them (v. 11); and the exploitation of the poor and the needy (through one’s mouth) in v. 14.

A similar polarity is formed in Ps 12 between the speech of the wicked and the “words” of Yahweh which are “pure” and “refined.” If Ps 12 is
Botha, “Pride and Suffering of the Poor,” *OTE* 25/1 (2012): 40-56

compared to Ps 18, it would seem that the Yahwistic wisdom editors focussed especially on arrogant human words and the contrast this forms with the refined (and thus true) words of Yahweh. Psalm 18:31 is also related to Prov 30:5. It says: “This God, his way is perfect; the word of Yahweh is refined; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him.” In Ps 18:28 the psalmist acknowledges that Yahweh saves a “humble” people (ישועה), but brings down those who have “haughty eyes” (עירונם דמלא). This corresponds to the “tongue that speaks arrogantly” in Ps 12:4 and the “exaltedness” of vileness in Ps 12:9. It would seem that the suffering of the poor was greatly increased by the unchecked arrogance of the wicked, and the only defence to this was the hope which was based on the trustworthy “words” of Yahweh; the promises which were contained in the book of Proverbs that Yahweh will humiliate the arrogant wicked.

It is noteworthy that the refined nature of Yahweh’s word or words is mentioned in a number of texts which can be traced to the editing work of the Yahwistic wisdom editors. It would seem from this that they inserted remarks of this nature wherever they expanded the influence of wisdom by establishing connections with Proverbs. We can sense in this an awareness of a body of literature which contained the true and trustworthy words of Yahweh and which provided hope in a world inundated with the treacherous speech of humans. The “words of Yahweh” in Ps 12:7 can thus be understood to refer in its immediate context to what he says in v. 6, that he will provide “safety.” But in a larger context, the text on which the whole psalm builds is Prov 30:1–14, and Pss 3–14 which have been edited by the wisdom editors to form a response to Proverbs, would also be included as the “words” of Yahweh: in the immediate vicinity of Ps 12, it contains Yahweh’s answer to what the fools think and say – the “evil schemes” (חסחים) they devise (Ps 10:2); the foolish thoughts that there is no God (Ps 10:4); the thoughts of the wicked that he will not be shaken (Ps 10:6); the cursing, deceit and oppression, mischief and iniquity which fill their mouth (Ps 10:7); the evil-doers’ thoughts that God does not notice their crimes (Ps 10:11); the renouncing of God and the thought that God will not call to account (Ps 10:13). In reaction to all this “saying in the heart” and audible speech Ps 12:6 announces what Yahweh says, and those are his pure and refined words, based on his revelation in Proverbs.

**F CONCLUSION**

It would seem that Prov 30:1–14 constitutes an important context for the interpretation of Ps 12, even for the whole composition contained in Pss 10–14. In these psalms, there is a description of how the irreverent and arrogant,

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36 E.g. Ps 12:7; Ps 18:31 = 2 Sam 22:31; Ps 119:140; Prov 30:5.
cursing and lying and deceiving generation whose speech is described in Prov 30:5–14, was impacting on the lives of the faithful and how the evil overlords of society were oppressing the poor and needy people with what they said and thought. All of this reaches a climax in Ps 12. The suffering of the pious in this psalm can be attributed in particular to the unchecked pride and arrogance of Jewish leaders who lost their moral compass and who had become so complacent as to ask “Who is Yahweh?” In this situation, it was only the pure and refined word of Yahweh, his words of wisdom, which could provide hope, and it was toward the propagation of hope through this word that the editors of the Psalter were labouring to expand its influence.

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