‘I am like a green olive tree’: The Wisdom context of Psalm 52

The article revisits the thesis of Walter Beyerlin from 1980 that Psalm 52 is a paraenetic-didactic Wisdom poem from the late Persian period. Beyerlin reached his conclusion from a comparison of Psalm 52 with post-exilic Wisdom psalms such as Psalms 37, 49, and 73. The direct literary influence that Psalm 52 received from the book of Proverbs and the motifs it shares with Jeremiah 9 are investigated here, since the author contends that the Wisdom influence on the Psalm was even greater than Beyerlin had envisaged. The article comes to the conclusion that the author(s) of the Psalm attempted to compose a psalm by establishing a network of allusions to a corpus of authoritative texts, inter alia, the Wisdom psalms. The end product is a brilliant composition which interprets the teaching of Proverbs for the needs of a group of Jewish believers who probably lived at the end of the Persian period.

Introduction

This article is an attempt to determine the literary context, and from this, the probable theological-historical context for the understanding of Psalm 52. A similar investigation has been undertaken by Walter Beyerlin more than 30 years ago (Beyerlin 1980). Beyerlin came to the conclusion that Psalm 52 is a paraenetic-didactic Wisdom poem with the objective of leading the community in which it was composed out of its distress and crisis to a renewed hope of salvation and trust in Yahweh (Beyerlin 1980:92). The time of its composition was dated between the middle of the 5th century and the second half of the 4th century BCE (Beyerlin 1980:95).

Beyerlin based his investigation largely on the literary connections of Psalm 52 with Psalms 37, 49, and 73, three important post-exilic Wisdom poems. He was unfortunately not taken seriously enough. A reconstructed cultic use of the Psalm is still seen by many as the proper key for interpreting the Psalm. In their recent, authoritative and thorough exposition of Psalm 52, Hossfeld and Zenger (2007:64–65) play down the connections Beyerlin found between Psalm 52 and post-exilic Wisdom psalms. They state that they do not deny the Wisdom character of the Psalm, but would like to emphasise that that is only one characteristic of the ‘Psalms of the Poor’ (amongst others) and that the connections are not as strong as Beyerlin asserts (Hossfeld & Zenger 2007:64).

It is the objective of this article not only to confirm the findings of Beyerlin, but also to submit that even he has underestimated some important Wisdom connections and that the Psalm should most probably be interpreted as a late Persian period composition in which the author deliberately alluded to Proverbs in order to apply Wisdom teaching to the problems of his community. It could not, as Hossfeld and Zenger think, have originated in its present form in the time of the First Temple (Hossfeld & Zenger 2007:65). The connections with especially Proverbs; Psalm 49, and Jeremiah 9 (in addition to its links with Ps 37 & 73) seem to prove that Psalm 52 should be treated as a literary creation similar to Psalm 12 which was intended to provide hope to victims of
TABLE 1: The structure and a translation of Psalm 52.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza</th>
<th>Strophe</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I A</td>
<td>בְּאֵלָהָיָּהָוּ lýהךְ</td>
<td>יִָתְּצ֪ ָלנַצח</td>
<td>You will judge your people, the remnant of Israel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>לְמֹ֔רֶפֶּה</td>
<td>יִֶֽתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>and be silent with the sons of the wicked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>כְּֽמַֽיָּהָוּ lýהךְ</td>
<td>יִָתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>like a sharpe razor, O worker of deceit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>לְמֹ֔רֶפֶּה</td>
<td>יִֶֽתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>and shall laugh at him, saying,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>רֹֽמֵה</td>
<td>יִָתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>But God will break you down forever;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>לְמֹ֔רֶפֶּה</td>
<td>יִֶֽתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>he will snatch and tear you from your tent;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>קְרֻ֣֘בֶֽה</td>
<td>יִֶֽתְּנָהְךָלְךְ</td>
<td>he will uproot you from the land of the living. Selah.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Psalm 52 as an exposition and application of the teaching of Proverbs

Hossfeld and Zenger are aware of the similarities between Psalm 52 and the ‘Psalms of the Poor’, Psalms 4 and 11–14. They seem to be unaware, however, of the extent to which these psalms were influenced by Proverbs and still describe them as ‘vorexilische Armensalmen’ (Hossfeld & Zenger 2007:63).

I have recently suggested that these psalms and Psalm 12 in particular constitute a response to and an explication of Proverbs 30:1–14 and that the connections with the prophetic books in these psalms are to be explained as a result of a similar influence exerted by Proverbs on the prophetic books (cf. Botha 2012:40–56). In making these assertions, I was merely following the lead provided by Bernard Gosse (2007:528–538) and working this out in greater detail in the case of Psalm 12. In the case of Psalm 52, it could therefore be prudent to attempt to prove the dependence of the Psalm on Proverbs and to investigate the connections between Psalms 52 and Jeremiah 9, since the last mentioned chapter also displays remarkable similarities with Psalm 52.

The implication, which will not be investigated further here, is that there is also a dependency of Jeremiah 9 on Proverbs, and a complex process of composition and editing of both Psalms and Jeremiah in which the book of Proverbs played a decisive role. In this regard, the whole thesis of Bernard Gosse specifically, Gosse has noted a connection with Proverbs 2:22 on the theme of the punishment of the wicked. He points out that the verb נָסָח (to tear away) which is used in Psalm 52:7 occurs only in this verse in the Psalter and elsewhere only in Deuteronomy 28:63, Proverbs 2:22 and Psalms 15:25, 14, proving a literary connection with Proverbs (Gosse 2007:76). The mention of the ‘tent’ in Psalm 52:7 from which religious, social and financial exploitation in the late Persian period. The Sitz im Leben of the Psalm is rather an attempt to interpret what had by then been regarded as the authoritative teaching of Yahweh by a teacher of the Torah in a situation of exploitation, and certainly not a legalistic rite of the cultic community to sanction a curse on one of its members who was condemned to punishment by death for his misdeeds, as Weiser (1995:279) would have us believe.

Psalm 52 is not a haphazard compilation of pre-existent texts, but a cleverly devised instrument of communication which was subsequently provided with a heading to integrate it into a developing corpus of canonical texts. Its contents seem to be arranged to form two stanzas, the first of which has three strophes and the second two. The stichs and verse lines have been demarcated in accordance with the Masoretic system of accents rather than a hypothetical metrical scheme (see Table 1).

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7. Reichenbach (2011:116) discusses the dating of Proverbs 1–9 and comes to the conclusion that it was composed in the late Persian period (450–333 BCE). He says it cannot be determined more precisely, but nevertheless suggests that the probable date of finalisation would be in the decades shortly before 333 BCE if Psalm 52 is dependent on Proverbs 1–9 (as it certainly seems to be), it must reflect the post-exilic social problems in Judah.

8. They provide a comparison of the similarities in form and content between Psalm 52 and these psalms. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (2007:62–63).

9. It will be argued that the author of Psalm 52 had the book of Proverbs at hand in more or less the same form that it has today and this could hardly have been in existence before the exile.


11. ‘But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you (for example) from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living.’

12. ‘[A]nd you shall be torn out (לָּשְׂחֵ֥ת) of the land that you are entering to take possession of it.’

13. ‘But the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be torn out (ﷺ) to be read as a Hof'al of it.’

14. ‘Yahweh will tear down (ﷺ) the house of the haughty people.’
the ‘mighty man’ will be torn away and the assertion that the ‘house’ of the ‘haughty persons’ will be ‘torn down’ in Proverbs 15:25 further strengthens the connection with Proverbs. Deuteronomy 28:63 probably displays the same dependency on Proverbs 2:22.

Hossfeld and Zenger (2007:66–70) refer to the following verses which display thematic similarities between Psalm 52 and Proverbs or both Proverbs and Jeremiah:

- verse 4: Proverbs 11:6 and 18:21
- verse 5: Proverbs 6:12–19; 12:13–19; 14:6a and Jeremiah 9:2 and 4
- verse 7: Proverbs 2:22; 12:3 and 30:14
- verse 9: Jeremiah 17:7; Proverbs 10:2; 11:4, 28 and 18:23

They are thus aware of the sapiental and prophetic connections, and the importance of especially Proverbs 10–12 as well as Jeremiah 9 and 17 in the interpretation of Psalm 52 as is evident from this list compiled from their commentary. They would, however, describe these connections as similarities rather than allusions and did not undertake a systematic investigation. When the connections are compared more synoptically, it becomes clear that Psalm 52 does not only contain more connections with Proverbs than Hossfeld and Zenger as well as Gosse have pointed out, but that the Psalm presents the reader with a résumé and application of the teaching of Proverbs on the difference between righteous and wicked people in terms of trust, the misuse of power and speech, the judgement of Yahweh, and true blessedness.

It is perhaps important to point out that the use of rare words in two different contexts, especially if they are used in the same expression or with similar subjects and objects (such as יִדְרַע which was discussed above), can be used to prove a literary interconnectedness. A multitude of thematic correspondences should, however, not be disregarded. It seems that the author of Psalm 52 had internalised the teaching of Proverbs and then re-cast this teaching – which speaks in the third person about fools and wise people and wicked and righteous persons – in a direct, second person address to the wicked and to Yahweh. In doing this, he has not necessarily used the same words, but has often expressed exactly the same idea in different terms and in a simulated dialogic situation instead of a simulated didactic one.

What are the issues addressed in Psalm 52?:

- The presumptuous boasting (‘Why do you boast?’) of a wicked person (‘of evil’, ‘O worker of deceit’) who has attained a position of power (‘O mighty man’) through schemes of (verbal) deception (‘your tongue plots destruction’) is criticised.
- The audience is assured of the protection provided by the steadfast love of God for the righteous (‘The steadfast love of God endures all day’).
- The destructive and deceitful use of language (‘your tongue plots destruction’, ‘O deceitful tongue’, ‘you love lying and not speaking what is right’) which harms innocent people (‘like a sharp razor’, ‘you love all words that devour’) are criticised and unmasked as taking the wrong option when choosing between good and evil (‘you love evil and not good, lying and not speaking what is right’).
- The wicked are warned that God will punish them by using metaphors suggesting the demolishing of a house (‘God will break you down forever’) or the uprooting of a tree in a strong wind (‘he will snatch and tear you from your tent’, ‘he will uproot you from the land of the living’).
- The righteous are assured and the wicked are warned that God will ridicule (‘they shall laugh at him’) of a place of refuge (‘see the man who would not make God his refuge’, ‘and was strong in his own destruction’) and who trust in their riches (‘but trusted in the abundance of his riches’) is criticised.
- The typical attitude of the righteous is commended, namely to trust in the steadfast love of God (‘1 trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever’), to thank God always (‘I will thank you forever’), and to wait for his name in the presence of the godly (‘I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly’), since
- The righteous are assured of stability and blessing, comparable to the vitality of a green olive tree which was planted in the house of God (‘but I am like a green olive tree in the house of God’).

Psalm 52 as an assertion of the teaching of Proverbs 1–3

It would seem that the author of Psalm 52 had absorbed the teaching of Proverbs and echoed this teaching in a similar way as is the case in, for instance, Psalm 1 and Psalm 37. The connections between Psalm 52 and the post-exilic Wisdom Psalms which Beyerlin had studied turn out to be the result of a mutual indebtedness to Proverbs and inter-connectedness by way of common origin or editing. The links with Proverbs 1–3 mean that the book of Proverbs was probably available to the author of the Psalm in more or less the same form that it has today in the Masoretic tradition. The Psalm seems to echo the teaching of Proverbs 1–3 in the following ways:

- Proverbs 1:12 warns the student of Wisdom not to join in when invited by sinners to ambush innocent people in order to swallow (‘יהלָך’) them alive. In Psalm 52:6, the protagonist is accused of loving ‘all words that devour’ (םֶלֵע). Through this allusion, the antagonist in the Psalm is described by implication as a ‘sinner’ (Pr 1:10) who is ‘greedy for gain (םֶלֵע וַעָבָר)’ (Pr 1:19). This last description is congruent with the representation in the rest of the Psalm, since the antagonist is described, using a different expression, as someone who ‘seeks refuge in his own greed (יהלָך וַעָבָר)’ (Ps 52:9).
• In Proverbs 1:16, the feet of the sinners against whom the student of Wisdom is warned, are said to ‘run’ to evil (עָרַב). The antagonist of Psalm 52:5 in turn is said to ‘love’ evil (עָרַב) and not good. He therefore has the same inclination.

• The ‘simple ones’ of Proverbs 1:22 are asked how long they will love (וַתַּהֲקִימוּ) simplicity. The antagonist of Psalm 52 is accused of loving (וַתַּהֲקִימוּ) evil and not what is good (v. 5), lying and not speaking what is right (v. 5) and also of loving (וָטַעַר) – all words that devour (v. 6). Through multiple allusions to Proverbs 1–3 (see below), the author of Psalm 52 has thus amalgamated the description of the ‘sinners’ in Proverbs 1:7–19 with that of the ‘simple’, the ‘scoffers’, as well as the ‘fools’ found in Proverbs 1:22–33. The author of Psalm 1 has also fused the two types (cf. the clever combination of ‘sinners’, יָרֵעָה, from Proverbs 1:10, the ‘road’ metaphor from Proverbs 1:15 and the ‘scoffers’, לְצִיסִים, from Proverbs 1:22 in Psalm 1:1).

• In Proverbs 1:26, Lady Wisdom warns that she will laugh (שׂחק) when calamity strikes the fools who would not listen.15 The antagonist of Psalm 52 is warned in a similar way that the righteous will laugh (שׂחק) when God breaks him down and tears him from his tent (v. 8).

• According to Proverbs 1:27, terror will strike the fools like a storm and calamity come on them like a whirlwind; those who listen to Lady Wisdom, on the other hand, will dwell securely (Pr 1:33). The punishment of the antagonist is described in Psalm 52:7 as the demolishing of a house and the uprooting of a tree similar to what takes place in a storm; the protagonist, in contrast to this, is confident that he is safe like a green olive tree in the house of God (Ps 52:10), calling to mind also the image of Psalm 1:3 and 4.

• Proverbs 2:12 and 14 promise that Wisdom will rescue the student of Wisdom from the way of evil (עָרַב), from people who speak (דבר) deceitfully (יִתְפָּשֵׁס) and who rejoice in doing evil (עָרַב עֹשֵׂה). The antagonist of Psalm 52 is accused of loving evil (עָרַב) and lying and not speaking (דבר) what is right, whilst he is also called a worker of deceit (שׂחק עָרִים חָטָא). This is reflected in Proverbs 2:22.

• Proverbs 2:22 warns that wicked people will be cut off from the land (ארץ) and treacherous people will be torn out (hasOne) of it. According to Psalm 52:7, the antagonist will be snatched and torn (hasOne) from his tent and uprooted from the land (ארץ) of the living. He is consequently identified with the ‘wicked’ and ‘treacherous’ people of Proverbs 2. The threat is no longer expropriation, however, but death. This is in line with the teaching of Psalm 49:12–15 which is also reflected in Psalm 52.

• Proverbs 3:5 admonishes the student of Wisdom to trust (belief) in Yahweh with all his heart; the speaker of Psalm 52:10 confesses that he trusts (belief) in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. The formulation is less direct, and the speaker in Psalm 52 also declares that he will wait for the name of God, rather than for God as is advised in Proverbs 20:22.16 This could be taken to suggest a gap in time between the publication of Proverbs and the composition of Psalm 52.

• Proverbs 3:7 admonishes the student of Wisdom not to be wise in his own eyes, but to fear (ירא) Yahweh and turn away from evil (עָרַב); the antagonist of Psalm 52 is accused of boasting in evil (עָרַב) and loving it (עָרַב) and not good (vv. 3, 5); the reaction of the righteous when he is punished, on the other hand, is that they will fear (ירא) v. 8). The antagonist of Psalm 52 is consequently described by implication as the opposite of a wise person, since he is arrogantly pursuing evil, whilst the teaching of Proverbs is vindicated when his punishment comes and the righteous people respond with greater reverence for God.

• Proverbs 1–3 uses tree imagery to warn the fools that they will eat the fruit of their actions (Pr 1:31) and to propagate Wisdom as a tree of life for all who embrace it (Pr 3:18). At the same time, it warns that wicked people will be ‘torn from’ the land (Pr 2:22). Psalm 52 uses tree imagery to warn that the wicked person will be uprooted from the land of the living (v. 7) and to describe the verdancy of the righteous person who trusts in God’s steadfast love (v. 10). This provides another parallel with Psalm 1 where verdancy and fruitfulness are contrasted with the instability of chaff in a wind.

Psalm 52 as a reflection of the teaching of Proverbs in general

Many of the themes found in the first three chapters of Proverbs are treated more extensively in the rest of Proverbs, whilst the rest of Proverbs also provides more detailed parallels to Psalm 52.

Pride goes before destruction

The Psalm, for instance, reflects the general Wisdom teaching that arrogance is especially hateful to Yahweh, that arrogance comes to a fall and that self-trust and self-reliance lead to eventual shame and disgrace.18 This theme is encountered in Proverbs 8:13, for instance, which teaches that the fear of Yahweh implies to hate (לנשׂים) evil (עָרַב) and that Lady Wisdom hates (לנשׂים) pride, arrogance, the path of evil (עָרַב וְרָדָד), and the perverse mouth. This verse features ironically in Psalm 52, since the seemingly ‘mighty man’ of Psalm 52:3 is ridiculed for boasting (לנשׂים) in evil (עָרַב) and is said to love (לנשׂים) evil (עָרַב) (52:5), and to trust (לנשׂים) in the abundance of his riches (52:9). By loving what she hates, he is thus the opposite of Lady Wisdom and a prime example of someone who does not fear Yahweh.

On the matter of trust, the Psalm also seems to allude directly to Proverbs 11:28, where the warning is issued that ‘he who trusts in his riches (לנשׂים) will fall, but the righteous (לנשׂים)’
will flourish like foliage.’ This verse in Proverbs helps us to understand why the antagonist’s downfall in Psalm 52 is described as being ‘uprooted’ (שור) from the land of the living, and why the protagonist’s confidence is compared to ‘a green olive tree’ in the house of God’ (Pss 52:7 & 10). Proverbs 12:3 also seems to have played a role: ‘A man shall not be established by wickedness; but the root (שור) of the righteous (רשע) shall not be moved.’

Proverbs teaches in a number of places that Yahweh hates haughtiness and it uses the same word (🎁) as Psalm 52:3 to discourage boasting about the day of tomorrow (Pr 6:17). It is difficult to avoid the deduction that this verse, together with Proverbs 11:28 and others, served as an inspiration for Psalm 52:3. Similarly, in Proverbs 30:8-9, the author asks to be given neither poverty nor riches (ሁות) in order to prevent him from shaming the name of Yahweh and becoming arrogant and consequently denying dependence on Yahweh. According to Proverbs, the problem with being rich is precisely that wealth might seem to provide protection. According to Proverbs 10:15, a rich man’s wealth is his fortified city (יהוה נ colormap) whilst according to Proverbs 13:8, the ransom for the life of some people is their riches (שור). Psalm 49:8 corrects the wrong understanding of this verse in Proverbs by stating explicitly that no one can give a ransom for someone else’s life, and Psalm 52 links up with both Proverbs 13:8 and Psalms 49:7 and 8. The criticism of Psalm 52:9 is levelled precisely at the antagonist who would not make God his refuge (יהוה יָבֹא) but trusts in the abundance of his riches (cf. also Ps 49:7) and seeks refuge in his own greed (��ו). Such desire (יהוה) can become a trap which captures the faithless, according to Proverbs 11:6.

**Judgement in the form of a whirlwind**

It has already been pointed out that the author of Psalm 52 uses tree imagery to describe the divergent fates of the evil antagonist and faithful protagonist. Within this allegorical complex, calamity in the form of a storm will put an end to the prosperity of the wicked according to Proverbs. The same motif is also found in Psalm 1 and Psalm 52 and there is little doubt that it has been extracted from Wisdom. Proverbs 2:22 namely promises that the treacherous will be torn out (אָנָכָו) of the land. Proverbs 10:25 defines the calamity more clearly: ‘When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever.’ Proverbs 12:3 adds to this: ‘No one can be established (יהוה) through wickedness, but a righteous root (שור) cannot be moved.’ It thus seems significant that Psalm 52:7 uses the cognate verb of the noun לֵשׁ to describe the uprooting of the antagonist (לالتهابן). 20

But the author of Psalm 52 also refers to the house imagery of Proverbs in a very clever way. He contrasts the fate of the protagonist, who is like a green olive tree in the ‘house’ of God (vv. 7 & 10). The use of the word ‘tent’ already implies a lack of permanency, whilst the ‘house of God’ and the suppliant’s trust in the steadfast love of God ‘forever and ever’ stand in stark contrast to this lack of permanency. A similar discrepancy is therefore offered as the one found in Proverbs 3:33 where it says, ‘the curse of Yahweh is in the house (יְהוָה) of the wicked; but he blesses the home (יְהוָה) of the righteous.’ The positive association of ‘house’ and the negative association of ‘tent’ are inverted in Proverbs 14:11 which basically have the same teaching: ‘The house of the wicked shall be overthrown; but the tent of the upright shall flourish.’ This reversal can possibly be explained as an emphasis on the greater prosperity of the wicked or an idealisation of the trust of the Israelites who relied on Yahweh when they lived in tents in the wilderness. However it may be that the author of Psalm 52 made a clever choice by strengthening the antithesis through association of ‘tent’ with the antagonist and contrasting this with the ‘house’ of God, not of an individual righteous person. The same motif of demolition and uprooting by trial through storm is also found in Proverbs 10:25 where it says: ‘When the storm passes through, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever’ and Proverbs 10:30 which states that: ‘The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land.’ Proverbs 12:7 similarly declares that: ‘The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous shall stand.’ The author of Psalm 52 has therefore made effective and innovative use of a metaphorical complex about the fate of the wicked and that of the righteous which is well documented in Proverbs.

**Yahweh abhors evil schemes**

Another theme which was already encountered above in Proverbs 1:10–14 is that of the plotting and planning of wicked people to do harm to innocent people. It is found very often in Proverbs, and is also reflected in Psalm 52. The student of Wisdom is for example warned in Proverbs 3:29, ‘do not plot (לָעְבֹּד) evil (רחשא) against your neighbour.’ In Proverbs 6:14, worthless and unjust people are described as those ‘in whose heart is perversion’ and who are ‘plotting (לעב) evil (רחשא) continually ( Elasticsearch).’ 21 Proverbs 15:26 in turn warns that ‘Yahweh abhors the plans of the wicked (אֲרֵצָה תּוֹכָהוֹ)’ and Proverbs 24:2 says evil men’s ‘hearts contemplate (ָלטָפַת) violence (ץ) and their lips speak harm.’ In Psalm 52, the antagonist is also accused of evil planning, especially of verbalising these evil schemes with a dangerous tongue. Through metonymy, the ‘tongue’ of the antagonist is said in verse 4 to ‘plot destruction ( LIABILITY PLOT)’. The antagonist is described in the same verse as a ‘worker of deceit’ who uses his tongue like a sharp razor, that is, as a weapon against other people. Similar metaphors are found in a number of places in Proverbs. Proverbs 11:9 says that the godless person uses his mouth to destroy his neighbour. According to Proverbs 12:18, the ‘rash words’ of some people are like sword thrusts, whilst the tongue of the wise heals. In the same vein, Proverbs 30:14 speaks of those ‘whose teeth are swords, whose malars

20 It is possible that Jeremiah 11:19a also contributed to the formulation of this verse: ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living (יהוה יָבֹא), that his name be remembered no more.’ Cf. also the occurrence of the expression ‘a green olive tree’ in Jeremiah 11:16 and the same image in Psalm 52:10. Jeremiah 11:16 uses the image of a storm combined with fire to define the consuming power of Yahweh’s judgement.

21 In this regard, it may be meaningful that Psalm 52:3 asserts that ‘the steadfast love of God [endures] all day’ in the verse immediately preceding the accusation that the tongue of the ‘mighty man’ plots destruction.
Wrongful use of language

One last similarity between Psalm 52 and Proverbs that should be discussed is the motif of the misuse of language to deceive and take advantage of people. In addition to arrogant boasting in evil, the antagonist of Psalm 52 is accused of using his tongue to plot destruction (יָבֵשׁ) (v. 4); using it like a razor for deception (יָרָז) (v. 4); using it to lie (רָשָׁע רָשׁ), instead of speaking what is right or just (יָשָׁר) (v. 5); and using it to form words that devour other people through deception of the tongue (לְשׁון־רָשָׁע) (v. 6). Proverbs 13:5 teaches that a righteous person hates lying (יָרָז) (v. 7). Antagonist of Psalm 52 does the opposite, since he loves lying (לְשׁון שָׁרָא) (v. 8) and avoids speaking what is right (דְרוֹר) (v. 9). In the contrast, this is tantamount to saying that in the view of the antagonist the Psalms is not a righteous person, but someone who is wicked (cf. Pr 13:5b). Deception, lying, the use of the mouth to commit violence and the tongue for destruction are often mentioned in Proverbs as the habit of fools and wicked people: Proverbs 14:8, 'the folly of fools is deception (רומס);' 10:6b (= 10:11b) 'the mouth of the wicked conceals violence'; 10:32 'the speech of the wicked is perverse'; 12:6 'the words of the wicked lie in wait for blood'; 12:17 'who speaks the truth (יָשָׁר) (v. 5) gives honest evidence, but a false witness utter deceits (רומס);' 17:4 'a liar (רָשָׁע שָׁק) pays attention to a destructive tongue (לְשׁון־רָשָׁע);' 17:20 'he who is deceitful (שָׁק) (v. 10) with his tongue (לְשׁון שָׁק) falls into calamity.' The author of Proverbs 30:5–14 prays in verse 8, 'keep deception and lies from me.' This last mentioned composition in Proverbs in fact lists a whole range of wrong uses of language – adding anything to the words of God and thus being found out as a liar (Pr 30:6); falsehood and lying (Pr 30:8); arrogant denial of God (Pr 30:9); slander and cursing (Pr 30:10); and using one’s mouth to devour the poor and the needy (Pr 30:11); and using one’s mouth to speak untruth, and thus being found out as a liar (Pr 30:14). It would seem that the author of Psalm 52 drew strength from the unanimous condemnation of presumed influential people in Proverbs and propagated its message of hope to those righteous and pious people who suffered as a result of such arrogance and verbal exploitation. In this regard, Psalm 52 seems to be a close relative of Psalm 12.

The relationship of Psalm 52 with Jeremiah 9

When all the places where the expression ‘to boast in’ (בַּעֲשָׂרָה יְבַשֵּׁל) occurs in the Hebrew Bible are compared, it immediately becomes clear that there must be a close relationship between Jeremiah 9:22–23 and Psalm 52.3. The Jeremiah text appears to be the donor text in this case. Especially Jeremiah 9:22bc, ‘...why do you boast in evil, O mighty man?’ (מֵאָשֶׁר תַּבְטַח בְּעַשָּׂרָה יְבַשֵּׁל) seems close to Psalm 52:3, ‘...why do you boast in evil, O mighty man?’ The connection is further strengthened by the description of the ‘mighty man’ in Psalm 52:9 as someone who ‘trusted in the abundance of his riches’ (רַבָּה בֶּן־שָׁרוֹא), since riches are mentioned in Jeremiah 9:22 as that about which the rich man boasts. The antagonist of Psalm 52 is thus both powerful and rich. The matter is further complicated when we consider that Proverbs 11:28 was identified above as one of the sources used by the author of Psalm 52:9 (‘He who trusts in his wealth will fall, but the righteous will flourish as foliage’), and Psalm 49:7 is also drawn into the comparison (‘those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches’). It definitely seems as if the author of Psalm 52 had access to Proverbs 11:28, especially if verses 27–31 as a whole are taken into account:

Jeremiah 9:22 is critical for three types of boastings: wise people ’boasting in their wisdom’, a ‘mighty man (מצד) boasting in his might’; and a rich person ‘boasting in his riches’ (משוער). In the next verse, the instruction is given that anyone who would want to boast should boast about the fact that they understand and know Yahweh and know that he practices steadfast love (רַפַח), justice, and righteousness on earth (or: in the land), the things in which he delights. It would seem that the author of Psalm 52 combined two of the three parallel types of boasting found in Jeremiah 9:22 – the person who considers himself to be a ‘mighty man’ is now said to boast in ‘evil’; but he is the same person who ‘trusted (instead of ‘boasted’) in the abundance of his riches.’ Jeremiah 9:22 could thus have been combined with Proverbs 11:28 to arrive at the portrayal of a wicked man who boasts of evil and trusts in his abundant wealth. The notion of the abundance of riches the author of Psalm 52 probably borrowed from Psalm 49:7, since this addition to the Jeremiah text was necessary in Psalm 49:7 to form a chiastic parallel between ‘who trust in their wealth and in the abundance of their riches they boast.’ In this verse the psalmist of Psalm 49, who is busy encouraging himself not to be afraid of wicked deceivers, describes his opponents as people who ‘trust their wealth’ (משוער) (v. 14) and ‘boast in the abundance of their riches’ (משוער בֶּן־שָׁרוֹא), using in the second stich the same expression as in Jeremiah

22.Cf. the occurrence of similar images in Psalms 53:5, 57:5, 59:8, 64:4 and 140:4; and see Proverbs 25:18: ‘A man who bears false witness against his neighbour is a war club, and a sword, and a sharpened arrow’.

23.This is considered to be a serious transgression in the Old Testament, according to Van der Ploeg (1973:326), who also refers to Psalm 59:8 in addition to Proverbs 17:4 and 12:18.


25.Psalm 34:15 similarly seems to have been inspired by Proverbs 11:27 – ‘Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.’ Anderson (1985:404) sees a connection between Psalm 52:5 and Psalm 34:15.

26.The second half of the verse has been translated as a parallel to the first half, taking it to mean that the righteous have a life-giving influence on those in their vicinity, saving the lives of other people through their prudence. See also the rendering of the New International Version (NIV) of this verse.
The four contexts can be compared as seen in Box 1.

Psalm 49 focuses on the contrast between rich and poor people and the conviction of the rich people that their riches will save them. It then goes on to explain that money is not able to redeem the soul of a person; that people who enjoy honour because of their riches will die like animals. The suppliant, however, is confident that God will redeem his soul from death and thus vindicate his trust in Yahweh. The author of Psalm 52 has taken over the motif of boasting in the abundance of one’s riches from Psalm 49, but it seems that Jeremiah 9 also played a role in the composition of Psalm 52, since the wicked is addressed as: ‘O mighty man’ (istinguish) and prevailed in his own destruction (_destroyer_).27

Psalm 49:6–14 seems to be a polemic against a wrong interpretation of Proverbs 13:8.

27. The noun _mrm_ plays an important role in the Psalm and other psalms in the vicinity: it occurs in Psalms 54:4 and 9; and also in Psalms 55:12 and 57:2. In all three psalms the destruction is associated with dangerous words and speech — cf. Psalm 55:10 and 22 (softer than butter and more soothing than oil, yet hiding war and really being drawn swords) and Psalm 57:5 (people whose teeth are spears and arrows, and whose tongue is a sharp sword). In these formulations, Proverbs 25:18 definitely seems to have been consulted.

119 and many others, was also used in the composition of Psalm 52. For the author of Psalm, Proverbs was immensely important, although his theological position had already shifted some distance from the teaching that one finds in Proverbs. The situation for which it was crafted must have been in the time which Beyerlin proposed, namely between 450 BCE and 300 BCE, a time when a number of Judeans experienced financial and political oppression by influential leaders from their own people.

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