Psalm 32 as a wisdom intertext

Psalm 32 is considered by the majority of investigators to be a psalm of thanksgiving with a mix of wisdom poetry. In this article, the thesis is defended that it was devised from the beginning as a wisdom-teaching psalm although it simulates the form of a psalm of thanksgiving in certain respects. The case for this is argued on the basis of the complete integration of its parts, as well as its similarity to Proverbs 28:13–14 and some other wisdom texts. The aim of the psalmist seems to have been to argue (on the basis of a personal experience) that stubbornness in accepting the guilt of sin causes suffering, but that Yahweh is eager to restore an intimate relationship with those worshippers who confess their guilt and are willing to accept his guidance on the way of life.

Introduction

There are two implicit claims in the title of this article: that Psalm 32 is a wisdom text, and that it has meaningful intertextual connections with other known wisdom texts. The first claim may not seem difficult to substantiate. The wisdom features of the psalm have been recognised for a long time.1 Yet, the psalm is generally still described as a psalm of thanksgiving with wisdom features rather than a wisdom psalm.2 Its wisdom features are felt to be ‘heterogeneous,’3 even ill-fitting in the second half of the psalm.4 Yet it is also asserted by some that the original psalm (the ‘Grundpsalm’) was a psalm of thanksgiving already characterised by wisdom and that the two literary types can no longer be ‘disentangled.’5 It will be argued here that the psalm should be read from a wisdom perspective, not a cultic setting of thanksgiving in response to healing after illness. The Gattung and possible setting of the psalm will be discussed in greater detail after its wisdom connections have been considered.

The claim that Psalm 32 has intertextual connections with other wisdom texts, in other words, a literary relationship with other wisdom texts, can also be substantiated, at least partially. Bernard Gosse (2008:67) in his influential book on the redactional influence which the book of Proverbs exerted on other biblical books during the Persian period, singles out as especially notable the connection between Proverbs 28:13 and Psalm 32:5. The Proverbs text reads: ‘One who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but the one who confesses and forsakes (them), will find mercy.’ In Psalm 32:5 the author states: ‘I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not conceal my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to Yahweh,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.’

In this regard, the article constitutes an investigation to determine whether it is possible to confirm a literary link between Psalm 32 and Proverbs 28:13, and to look for more indications of literary connections with wisdom texts. It is argued that Proverbs 28:13 should be read together with Proverbs 28:14 (to which it is connected in a chiastic embrace) and that Psalm 32 as a whole

---

1. Its wisdom features are described by Hossfeld as consisting of typical wisdom speech forms (such as the introductory beatitudes, the admonitions of vv. 6 and 9, and the aphorism in v. 10); wisdom vocabulary (such as the reference to ‘instruction,’ ‘teaching’ and ‘counselling’ in v. 8, the ‘road’ as metaphor for conduct in v. 8, the animal comparisons in v. 9, and the equalising of ‘righteous people’ with those who are ‘upright in heart’ in v. 11); and, finally, the presence of wisdom conceptions (such as the contrast between people who trust in Yahweh and wicked people in v. 10, the deed-consequence connection in v. 10, and the generalisation in terms of all humanity in v. 2). Cf. Hossfeld (1993:200). Hossfeld has advanced from the position of Gunkel, who found clear wisdom motifs only from verse 6 onwards. He interpreted the beatitudes in vv. 1–2 as a modified form of confession (‘das Bekenntnis, das der Dankende vorausgestellt hat, und das die Form eines ‘Segenspruches’ tragt’). See Gunkel (1986:135).


3. Hossfeld (1993:200) describes verses 1–5 as having a unified appearance, whilst verses 6–11 are interspersed much more with heterogeneous elements which hardly fit into the composition.

The text and structure of Psalm 32

I A 1
Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

I A 2
Blessed is the person against whom Yahweh counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deception.

B 3
When I kept silent, my bones became brittle through my groaning all day long.

C 5
I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not conceal my iniquity;

II D (C’) 6
Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

E (B’) 8
I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I want to counsel you with my eye upon you.

F (A’) 10
Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but the one who trusts in Yahweh, with steadfast love he surrounds him.

1 A Maskil of David.

The going of which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not come near you.

Be glad in Yahweh, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the person against whom Yahweh counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deception.

When I kept silent, my bones became brittle through my groaning all day long.

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not conceal my iniquity;

Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I want to counsel you with my eye upon you.

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but the one who trusts in Yahweh, with steadfast love he surrounds him.

Be glad in Yahweh, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

5. The features which are usually described as deriving from a song of thanksgiving are more difficult to connect with thatGattung. It is, for instance, inconceivable that the author would present his own thanksgiving in the form of a general beatitude (vv. 1–2), as Gunkel (1986:135) and Nötscher (1953:61) assert. Delkurt (2010:50) lists the following differences between Psalm 32 and the typical hymn of thanksgiving: There is no formula of thanksgiving; there is no mention of a thanksgiving sacrifice; the enemies and illness play almost no role; and there is very little information about the personal situation of the suppliant.

6. Weber (2010:186) cautions against a strict division between cult and wisdom, stating that one and the same psalm would often display various speech-acts and communicational settings. Those aberrant interpretations of Psalm 32 which read the beatitudes in verses 1–2 as modified forms of thanksgiving, however, serve as a warning against a too rigorous form-critical approach.

7. Hossfeld (1993:204) describes verse 8 as an oracle with typical wisdom formulation and concerns, but verses 9–10 as a redactional addition which shows through its address to a group that it is no longer part of the Yahweh-oracle. The structural analysis shows, however, a strong interconnectedness between verses 6–7 and 10–11, so that verse 9 must be conceived as part of Yahweh’s address to ‘all the godly’ (mentioned in v. 6), ‘the one who trusts in Yahweh’ (mentioned in v. 10), and ‘the righteous’ and the ‘upright in heart’ (both groups of people, mentioned in v. 11). The same objections can be brought against Weiser’s interpretation of verses 8–10 as the words of the psalmist, directed at the community of the faithful. See Weiser (1955:193).
The following exposition is given as a summary of the textual strategy and message of the poem. There is little doubt that the author intended to create two stanzas of equal length. Each stanza has three strophes (A, B, and C for stanza I and D, E, and F for stanza II), of which the first and last in both stanzas are especially tightly interwoven to create an envelope around the middle strophe. The strophes of the two stanzas are also connected with one another in a chiasic pattern (ABC – C’B’A’), so that the poem as a whole also constitutes an inclusion.

In stanza I, strophes A and C are tightly interconnected through the repetition of no less than six words: דָּוִד, יְהוָה, בַּלְעַד, אָדָם, אֶחָד, and יִנָּשְׁבִּי. The general pronouncement on the state of blessedness of the one whose transgression is forgiven (‘lifted’) and whose sin is removed (‘covered’) and against whom Yahweh ‘counts no iniquity,’ expressed in strophe A, forms a polarity with the suffering in body and soul (cf. ‘my bones’ and ‘my strength’) in verses 3 and 4 of the suppliant described in strophe B. The suppliant says in this strophe that he had ‘kept silent.’ In the context of this stanza, יֵשׁוּבּ means implies to have kept silent about sin, thus not to have confessed his transgression and thus to have tried to cover up his sin. As a result, he experienced his ‘bones’ becoming brittle so that he ‘groaned’ all day long. His ‘strength’ dried up as by the dry heat of summer, seeing as ‘bones’ becoming brittle.

10. At a ‘time of finding’ (ָּגַסְת) with יָסַּר in the sense of finding what was sought. Cf. its use in finding God in Deuteronomy 4:29. Kraus (1973:257) expresses the opinion that this phrase, though difficult to understand, definitely relates to Isaiah 49:8 (‘in a time of favour’) and 55:6 (‘seek Yahweh whilst he may be found’). The meaning is: ‘Wer rechtzeitig zu Jahwe Zuflucht nimmt und sich ihm öffnet, der bleibt unberührt von den Wogen des Verderbens.’

11. Possibly as in a deluge of rain because of God’s anger, as יָסַר is used in Ezekiel 12:3. There may be a literary connection also with Psalm 18:17, where the psalmist tells about Yahweh’s drawing him out of ‘many waters’ (ַָשָּאָבְוּ, ֵסָר), the words also used in Psalm 32:6.

The connection between the two middle strophes B and E (or B’) is, in the first place, the fact that the preposition יָסַר is used in both to express the relationship between the suppliant and Yahweh. A part of Yahweh’s ‘body’ also features in both strophes. In strophe B, the psalmist is speaking. He says that, when he kept silent, he had to groan all day, given that the hand of Yahweh was ‘heavy’ upon him (יִנָּשְׁבָּב). In strophe E, Yahweh is speaking (in contrast to the suppliant’s keeping silent). He is announcing his desire to ‘instruct,’ ‘teach,’ and ‘counsel’ the suppliant (the three verbs indicate an abundance of communication), with his eye upon him (יִנָּשְׁבָּב). It would therefore seem that the psalm emphasises the polarity between the ‘hand’ of Yahweh resting heavily on the suppliant whilst giving him ample verbal guidance. This happened after the psalmist decided to break the silence by ‘acknowledging,’ not ‘covering’ anymore, and ‘confessing’ his transgressions (thus accepting a stance of complete openness and communication towards Yahweh).

It turns out that the suppliant suffered like a beast of burden. He carried the heavy burden of his transgression, expressed through the stem יָסַר. 12 Yahweh, however, does not want to treat his followers like horses or mules, but would like to interact intelligently with them, instructing and teaching them in the way they should go, counselling them with his eye over them instead of his hand on them. Once the burden was ‘lifted’ (cf. יָסַר and יָסַּר used as descriptions of the forgiving of sins), this became possible. Keeping silent is therefore equal to acting like an animal (the suppliant only managed to ‘groan’); an animal is handled with bit and bridle and a heavy hand (v. 9). Confessing one’s transgressions, on the other hand, is to act intelligently (cf. יָסַר in v. 9) and in such a relationship one can offer prayer (יָסַר, v. 6), be glad (יָסַר, v. 11), rejoice (יָסַר, v. 11), and shout for joy (יָסַר, v. 11). The threefold mention of rejoicing at the end of the psalm was probably meant to reflect the twofold state of blessedness mentioned at the beginning of the psalm (cf. Weber 2001:159), so that the two stanzas also form chiasmus (ABC – C’B’A’). The sound play of the double יָסַר (‘blessed’) in strophe A with יָסַּר (‘upright of heart’) in strophe F strengthens this perception.

The psalm could therefore not possibly be a haphazard compilation of material from divergent sources, from a
A definition of ‘intertextuality’ in the case of Psalm 32

Psalm 32 has a variety of intertextual connections. One aspect of its intertextuality would be the fact that it was given the heading ידוע, ‘of David,’ ‘concerning David,’ or ‘to David’ or however the construction should be interpreted. This heading establishes a link with King David whose life and purported compositions were organised carefully and very precisely by a single author or group of authors.13 Its contents were organised carefully and very precisely by a single author or group of authors.14 In addition to that, it was carefully edited to fit into its present location by establishing keyword connections with many other psalms from the first Davidic collection (Ps 1–41).15 The objective of the poet was to encourage members of his in-group, those who are ‘godly’ or ‘pious’ (ישׁרי־לב), those who ‘trust’ in Yahweh (משׂכיל), the ‘righteous’ (צדיקים), and the ‘upright in heart’ (שׁרי־לב) not to be rebellious when struck by adversity, but to confess one’s transgressions, to pray to Yahweh at a time when he may be ‘found,’ and to foster an open, wise, and close relationship with Yahweh, one in which there is complete trust in him.

13. Hossfeld (1993:204–205) visualises a cultic background for the ‘Grundpsalm,’ as he calls it. He supposes that confession of sins by the psalmist would have taken place in the temple before Yahweh, but finds no indication in the psalm of the liturgical procedure followed. Verse 8 is interpreted as an oracle of salvation, and he considers it possible that a cultic prophet could have made the declaration. Verse 6 and verses 9–10 are seen by him as redactional extrapalations of this original psalm. Seybold (1996:134) identifies ‘näherende Zusätze’ in 2, 3b, 6, 8a, 9b, and 10a.

14. Verses 8–9 could possibly be omitted without affecting the thread of the discourse (according to Norman Whybray), but this would seriously affect the symmetric form. Cf. Whybray (1996:53).

15. See the helpful remarks by Weber (2001:159).

16. Those lines, whether they were inserted by the author or by editors who planned the present position of this psalm in the book, also have hermeneutical implications.16 They suggest that the psalm forms a unity with its predecessors and successors and should not be read in isolation.

A fourth type of intertextuality and what is especially at stake here is what can be called ‘canonical intertextuality.’ This refers to the fact that a growing body of authoritative literature was continually in need of explication and exposition, and this stimulated the creation of additional texts speaking with an authoritative voice.21 Proverbs 1–9, for example, were understood to reflect the traditions of Deuteronomy in a way which shows how the authors of Proverbs 1–9 had accepted Deuteronomy as authoritative religious instruction and had used it as a mould for their own wisdom teaching in order to establish the idea that their instruction would also be accepted as binding by their own students (cf. Reichenbach 2011:415). Such intertextual links between Deuteronomy and Proverbs can be seen, for example, in the way in which Proverbs replicates Deuteronomy’s call to its audience to listen and preserve the teaching given; the way in which these are linked to promises of a prosperous life; and the way in which road imagery symbolises the relationship of the addressees with the teaching given to them (Reichenbach 2011:125–189). In cases where the date and early authoritative nature of texts can be established with reasonable certainty, the direction of influence can be easily inferred. In other instances it is more difficult; whilst the possibility must always be kept in mind that, in the case of more or less contemporaneous texts or over time, the influence could have been bidirectional. In the case of wisdom psalms, for example Psalm 1, there is reasonable consensus that Proverbs (in addition to other books from the Hebrew Bible) provided the stimulus for the composition of the psalm. It will be argued in what follows that Psalm 32 presents the investigator with ‘intertextuality’ on more or less the same level.

Roland Murphy argues that ‘wisdom influence’ can be shown through the presence of vocabulary, literary forms, or content typical of wisdom and that one can mount a cumulative argument by drawing on all three these factors (Murphy 1996:98). On the basis of all three these criteria being present in Psalm 32, Murphy classifies Psalm 32 as an ‘authentic’ wisdom psalm.22 The questions which concern us here, however, is not only whether Psalm 32 is a wisdom psalm, but whether the book of Proverbs can be shown to have had an influence on its composition.

The connections between Proverbs and Psalm 32

The motif of not concealing one’s sins but rather confessing them

It was previously contended that Gosses correctly identified a literary connection between Proverbs 28:13 and Psalm 32:5. The Proverbs text reads: ‘He who conceals (וּכָל) his sins, he shall surely be punished’ (Proverbs 28:13). However, it is not clear whether this is an intentional reference or not.23 The pessimistic message given in Proverbs 28:13 is that the one who conceals his sins will be punished. However, it is also possible that the psalmist is referring to a situation where someone is punished because they confessed their sins. This would suggest that the psalmist is encouraging the reader to confess their sins, rather than concealing them. This would be consistent with the positive message of the psalm, which is that Yahweh will provide protection to those who confess their sins.

21. See in this regard the sterling work of Mathys (1994). Mathys treats Psalm 33 as one of these meditative creations of post-exilic wisdom.

22. Murphy (1996:103) names (only) Psalms 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, and 128 as wisdom psalms.
transgressions (מִשְׁמַר, will not prosper, but the one who confesses (תָּשֶׁב) and forsakes (תָּמַל), will find mercy.

This aphorism has connections with Psalm 32:5. In that verse, the author states:

I acknowledged (יָדַע הֵילָה) my sin (׃יָנָשָא) to you, and I did not conceal (׃יָנָשָא וַיֵּטֹב) my iniquity (׃יָנָשָא) I said, ‘I will confess (׃יָנָשָא) my transgressions (׃יָנָשָא) to Yahweh,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin (׃יָנָשָא וַיֵּטֹב).

Proverbs 28:13 in fact seems to relate to the whole first stanza of Psalm 32, not only verse 5. Read together with Psalm 32:1, where the verb הָסַר (‘to cover, conceal’) and the noun מִשְׁמַר (‘transgression’) are also used, as well as verses 3 and 4, where the poet describes his condition of suffering during the time when he kept silent (thus tried to conceal his sins and did not confess them as the Proverbs text prescribes), it seems possible that the author of the psalm text is applying the teaching found in Proverbs 28:13 to his own experience in the whole first stanza of the psalm. The three Hebrew words which reflect a literary relationship between Psalm 32 and Proverbs 28:13 are מִשְׁמַר (‘to cover/conceal’), עון (‘offence/iniquity,’ and מִשְׁמַר (‘to confess.’ The only two texts in the Hebrew Bible where מִשְׁמַר in the hifil and הָסַר are used together for the confession of sins are Proverbs 28:13 and Psalm 32:5, providing a strong argument for a literary relationship between the two on the grounds of a shared vocabulary, motif and content. The usual expression for the confession of sins uses מִשְׁמַר in the hithpael, whilst מִשְׁמַר in the hifil (‘to make known’) is also once used to express the confession of sin.

If knowledge of Proverbs 28:13 by the author of Psalm 32 is assumed, one can thus infer that the author of the psalm implies that he tried to conceal his sin by keeping silent about it and that he suffered as a result of this (he did not ‘prosper’ in the language of Proverbs). This carried on until he decided not to ‘conceal’ (׃יָנָשָא piel) his ‘iniquity’ (׃יָנָשָא) any longer, but rather to ‘confess’ (׃יָנָשָא hipil plus הָסַר) his ‘transgressions’ (׃יָנָשָא) to Yahweh as Proverbs 28:13 advises, and that Yahweh then ‘forgave’ (׃יָנָשָא) the ‘iniquity’ of his ‘sin’ (׃יָנָשָא וַיֵּטֹב), in other words, that he found mercy in the language of Proverbs. To have one’s sins forgiven in Psalm 32 could therefore be viewed as the equivalent of ‘finding mercy, obtaining compassion’ (׃יָנָשָא) in Proverbs 28:13.25 Such a person is described as ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’ through the use of two beatitudes at the beginning of Psalm 32. The verb מִשְׁמַר is used twice (in vv. 1 and 5), and a polarity is formed between the positive use (in the piel passive, ‘covered,’ with Yahweh as the inferred subject of the action) and the negative use of the verb (in the piel perfect, ‘I did not conceal,’ with the suppliant as subject). Used with a negation, the negative meaning of the verb is turned into a positive statement. The two uses of מִשְׁמַר in strophe A and B imply that the psalmist was in fact trying to conceal his transgressions during the time described in strophe B, where he kept silent.

It seems significant that Proverbs 28:14, the verse following the pronouncement about the prosperity of those who do not try to ‘conceal’ their sins, but rather ‘confess’ them, also begins with a beatitude: ‘Blessed is the man (׃יָנָשָא וַיֵּטֹב) who always fears (׃יָנָשָא), but whoever hardens his heart will fall into misfortune (׃יָנָשָא).’

The similarity of the beginning of this verse with the beginning of Psalm 32:2 (׃יָנָשָא) is conspicuous. What is more, the teaching of Proverbs 28:14 about obstinacy (hardening one’s heart) also seems to be reflected in the second stanza of Psalm 32, seeing as Psalm 32:9–10 exhorts the reader or listener not to be like a horse or a mule which has no understanding and must be controlled with reins.26 The first stanza thus has a connection to Proverbs 28:13 and seems to apply its teaching to the life of the psalmist, whilst one strophe of the second stanza seems to have a connection to Proverbs 28:14, and possibly serves as an application of its teaching on obstinacy.27

Proverbs 28:13–14 indeed forms a proverbial pair, with verse 14 escalating verse 13 (Waltke 2005:417). The connection between them is that verse 13a speaks of the impotent and verse 14b of the hardened sinner. The two inner cola, 13b and 14a, complete the chiastic arrangement: 13b teaches forgiveness of sin by giving praise to God through confessing sin and abandoning it; verse 14a teaches how to avoid sin in the first place by fostering fear for Yahweh (Waltke 2005:417):

Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes (them) will obtain mercy. Blessed is the person who fears (Yahweh) always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity.

To try to conceal one’s transgressions is therefore connected to hardening one’s heart; to confess and forsake one’s transgressions implies to ‘fear’ Yahweh always. An unusual expression is used to describe ‘fear’ of Yahweh in Proverbs 28:14, namely מִשְׁמַר. There is no object for the verb in the verse, but it seems to express an attitude of meekness (in contrast to pig-headedness) before Yahweh.28 This information strengthens the impression that Psalm 32 was composed as a unity and that the problem which is addressed in the two stanzas together is that of obstinacy against the authority of Yahweh.

23. Plöger (1984:335) remarks that, for the interpretation of Proverbs 28:13, almost all exegetes refer to Psalm 32:3–5. The direction of influence is presumed to be from Proverbs to Psalm 32 in this contribution, however. Another interesting aspect of Psalm 32:1–5 is that it seems to reflect a literary connection with Psalm 38. The description of suffering because of sin in Psalm 38 have been ‘telescoped’ and summarised in Psalm 32.

24. This is also stated by McKane (1970:628).

25. For example, Levittus 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Numbers 5:7; Nehemiah 1:6; and Daniel 9:20.

26. Psalm 38:19, where מִשְׁמַר is also used.

27. The use of the paal of מִשְׁמַר in Proverbs 28:13 may be an indication that the teaching of Exodus 34:6–7 is reflected in this verse. Cf. the description of Yahweh as יָנָשָא וַיֵּטֹב וַיֵּטֹב in Exodus 34:6 with the promise of forgiveness in Exodus 34:7, and the combination of these in Psalm 78:38.

28. Lamparter (1961:162) makes a connection between the defiant silence of Psalm 32:3–4 and the obstinate self-will addressed in 9–10. He also stresses (p. 165) the causative particle (‘therefore…’) which links the second stanza to the first in verse 6.

29. Waltke (2005:417) refers to Van Leeuwen’s remark that Proverbs 28:13–14 together echo vocabulary and themes from Psalm 32. However, the influence probably extends from Proverbs 28 to Psalm 32, not vice versa. For Van Leeuwen’s remark, cf. Clifford et al. (1997:238).

30. Stähli describes its meaning in Proverbs 28:14 as ‘menschliche Ängstlichkeit und Vorsicht’ (human anxiety and caution). Cf. Stähli (1976:413). This does not seem to be very helpful in view of the fact that he also describes the theological use of the root as often referring to the numinous fear of God (p. 412).
Yahweh which causes one to refuse to confess transgressions. The opposite of such obstinacy would be respect for Yahweh which helps one to avoid calamity (עון). The attitude which is encouraged is one of openness and complete trust in Yahweh. Incidentally, trust in Yahweh (and not in one’s own heart) is mentioned in Proverbs 28:25–26 (דרכך כתוב; יבשות עון) and also encouraged in Psalm 32:10 (ההוא יתברך; ויהי יבשות עון). To trust in Yahweh is linked to ‘walking’ in wisdom (דרכך) in the combination of Proverbs 28:25–26, whilst Psalm 32:9 also exhorts to wisdom (עון). The expression to ‘fall into calamity’ occurs also in Proverbs 17:20 and the warning which is given there has an indirect bearing on Psalm 32. Proverbs 17:20 says: ‘The one who has a twisted heart will not find good, and one who is dishonest with his tongue will fall into calamity.’ This may have significance for understanding Psalm 32:2, where the one ‘in whose spirit there is no deceit’ is included amongst the blessed.10 Psalm 32:1–5 thus encourage the righteous to avoid any attempt to deceive Yahweh, to be frank instead about one’s transgressions, and to confess one’s guilt.

The verb עון, ‘to lift, carry,’ is twice used in the sense of the forgiveness of sins in Psalm 32 (vv. 1 and 5). It is used a fair number of times also in other places in the Hebrew Bible to express the forgiveness of sins, occurring with all three synonyms for sin with which it is also closely associated in this psalm. The same does not apply, however, to the verb כסה, ‘to cover’ in the positive sense of forgiveness. Only three verses in the Hebrew Bible use כסה in a way comparable to that in Psalm 32: Nehemiah 3:37, where Nehemiah asks God not to ‘cover (forgive)’ the guilt (עון) of Sanballat and Tobiah; Job 31:33, where Job protests that he had not ‘concealed’ (拜师登錄) his transgressions (עון) like Adam by ‘hiding’ (拜师登錄) his iniquity (עון) in his bosom; and Psalm 85:3, where Yahweh is thanked for forgiving (拜师登錄) the iniquity (עון) of his people, for having ‘covered’ (拜师登錄) all their sins (עון).

The Job verse of拜师登錄 provides a close parallel to Psalm 32:5 where the psalmist says that he did not ‘conceal’ (拜师登錄) (any longer) his iniquity (עון) when he decided to confess.33 The connection with this wisdom context in Job can probably be traced to the influence of Proverbs on both Job34 and Psalms, given that Proverbs, which has about 12% of all instances of拜师登錄, uses it to describe the ‘concealment’ of quite a number of abstract things, inter alia violence (by the mouth of the wicked in 10:6 and 11); hatred (by one who lies in 10:18); transgressions,拜师登錄,拜师登錄, (by love in 10:12); any matter, רע, (by the person who is trustworthy in 11:13); dishonour,拜师登錄,拜师登錄, (by the wise person who ignores it in 12:16); and transgression,拜师登錄,拜师登錄.31

The motif of Yahweh as wisdom teacher

In Psalm 32:8 and 9 (strophe E), Yahweh is speaking and he adopts the role of a wisdom teacher. The wisdom specialisation verb拜师登錄 (hiphil ‘to make wise’) is used, and Yahweh announces that he would like to show the way (拜师登錄拜师登錄) which the suppliant should go. Hossfeld notes that Psalm 16:11 and Psalm 25:8 and 12 provide parallels to this, whilst the intention of Yahweh to ‘counsel’ (비용) the suppliant has a parallel in Psalm 16:7 (Hossfeld 1993:205). According to Psalm 25:8, Yahweh instructs (비용) sinners in the way (비용), in Psalm 25:12 it is the man who fears Yahweh whom he will instruct (비용) in the way (비용) he should choose; and in Psalm 27:11 the psalmist prays that Yahweh would teach (비용) him his way (비용) and lead him on a level path because of his enemies. However, these psalms, which were composed by circles of wisdom-inspired devotees, probably display the same connection with Proverbs as does Psalm 32:8.

In Proverbs 4:11 the wisdom teacher exhorts the student by saying, ‘I teach you拜师登錄拜师登錄 in the way拜师登錄, I let you walk in the paths of uprightness拜师登錄. ’ In Psalm 32, Yahweh adopts the same stance as teacher, although the subject of teaching is not wisdom as in Proverbs 4:11, but拜师登錄 the way the suppliant should go, similar to Psalm 25:8. The road metaphor, however, permeates the whole context of Proverbs 4:11–27. The reference to a ‘level path’ in Psalm 27:11, for instance, has a clear connection to Proverbs 4:26, where the student is instructed to ‘level’ the path of his feet. Proverbs 4:11–27 contrasts the road of the wicked with the road of the righteous (vv. 18–19). Psalm 32 also contrasts the righteous and the wicked: The suffering of the wicked is contrasted with the experience of Yahweh’s covenant love by those who trust in him and with the joy of the righteous (vv. 10–11). What is also significant in this Proverbs context, is that the road of wisdom is called the ‘paths of uprightness,’ whilst the

(by one who is seeking love in 17:9); whilst it is also used of hate covering itself in deception,拜师登錄拜师登錄 (in 26:26). It seems to be a popular expression for ‘hiding’ something in Proverbs, either in a positive or a negative sense and this is also the way in which it is used in Psalm 32:1 (positive) and Psalm 32:5 (negative, similar to Job 31:33).36 The two verses in Proverbs that speak of the ‘hiding’ of transgressions because of love, thus forgiving someone, provide a clear wisdom background for the positive use of拜师登錄 in Psalm 32.

The conclusion from this investigation must be that Psalm 32:1–5 and 9 constitute a response to Proverbs 28:13–14, and that Job 31 as a whole most probably represents a critical response to both these texts.37

31 Cf. also the opposite of trust in Yahweh, namely trust in one’s own heart in verse 26.
32 In Proverbs 28:26, the opposite of trusting in one’s own heart, thus to trust in Yahweh, is described as to ‘walk in wisdom.’ Psalm 32 similarly urges the faithful not to be ‘unwise’ and to take instruction on the way one has to follow.
33 Cf. also the parallel description of the ‘righteous’ in Psalm 32:11 as the ‘upright of heart.
34 The difference is that Job asserts in chapter 31 that he has no iniquity to conceal, whilst the author of Psalm 32 implies that it is not possible to be without guilt.
35 See in this regard the assertion in Job 31:23 that he (Job) did not transgress because he was in terror (비용) of calamity (비용 is used instead of biopsy as in Pr 28:14) from God and could not face God’s majesty. This clearly reflects the attitude propagated in Proverbs 28:14, although Job is doing the exact opposite of what is advised in Proverbs 28:13, whilst he claims to be following the advice.
community of worshippers is called the ‘upright in heart’ in Psalm 32:11. The words of the wisdom teacher are described in Proverbs 4:22 as healing for the whole body of those who find it. There is a conspicuous link to Psalm 32, seeing as it is implied that the suppliant experienced healing when he complied with the wisdom teaching of Proverbs 28:13–14 by confessing his sins.

The verb יָעַשׁ in the hiphil (‘to counsel’) also has wisdom connections. One may point to the prevalence of the cognate word יָעַב, ‘counsel,’ in wisdom psalms, Job and Proverbs.38 The verb יָעַשׁ also occurs in Proverbs 13:10 where it says, ‘Insolence only leads to conflict; but those who take advice are wise.’ This is pertinent to Psalm 32, given that the author also wants to stress the point that the ‘pious,’ those who ‘trust in Yahweh,’ the ‘righteous,’ and the ‘upright in heart’ should take counsel from Yahweh. Negatively formulated, they should not be like a horse or a mule, animals that can sometimes be obstinate because they are ‘without understanding,’ thus unwise (v. 9).39

The use of animal imagery in Psalm 32

Psalm 32:9 possibly also provides a direct link to Proverbs. It says, ‘Insolence only leads to conflict; but those who take advice are wise.’ This is pertinent to Psalm 32, given that the author also wants to stress the point that the ‘pious,’ those who ‘trust in Yahweh,’ the ‘righteous,’ and the ‘upright in heart’ should take counsel from Yahweh. Negatively formulated, they should not be like a horse or a mule, animals that can sometimes be obstinate because they are ‘without understanding,’ thus unwise (v. 9).40

The use of animal imagery in Psalm 32

Psalm 32:9 possibly also provides a direct link to Proverbs. It says, ‘Insolence only leads to conflict; but those who take advice are wise.’ This is pertinent to Psalm 32, given that the author also wants to stress the point that the ‘pious,’ those who ‘trust in Yahweh,’ the ‘righteous,’ and the ‘upright in heart’ should take counsel from Yahweh. Negatively formulated, they should not be like a horse or a mule, animals that can sometimes be obstinate because they are ‘without understanding,’ thus unwise (v. 9).40

The genre of Psalm 32

As a whole, it seems that the objective of the author of Psalm 32 was to offer his own religious experience to the benefit of all who worship Yahweh. This coincides with one of the objectives of a psalm of thanksgiving, but in this case, the psalmist simply uses some elements of the genre for his own purpose. The author also made use of the typical representation found in individual laments about bodily and spiritual suffering as a result of isolation from Yahweh and fellow believers. Because of his experience, the psalmist can advise other believers to worship Yahweh whilst he is to be found. If they do this, it will result in the individual worshipper being protected by Yahweh during a crisis (vv. 6–7). But worshippers can also expect to be integrated again in the community of faithful (v. 7). This is described, through the chiasic form of the psalm, as the result of confessing one’s guilt.

The objection may be raised that sections of the psalm are presented as a prayer; where the direction of communication is from a human to Yahweh (vv. 4–7), which does not fit into a wisdom-teaching psalm. This is also true of some of the other wisdom psalms, however, such as Psalms 25, 73 and 119.

38. For example, Psalms 3:1; 33:10 and 11; 73:24; 119:24; 11 times in Proverbs and 8 times in Job of the 92 occurrences in total.

39. The author of the (wisdom) psalm, Psalm 73, also considers the time of his rebellion a time of stupidity and ignorance, with him being like a ‘beast’ toward Yahweh (73:22). He later discovered that the highest form of happiness is to be in the presence of Yahweh, being guided though the counsel (יָעַשׁ) of Yahweh (73:23–24).

40. The word יָעַשׁ, ‘horse,’ provides a keyword connection between Psalm 32:9 and the adjacent Psalm 33:17. They have connections with separate contexts in Proverbs, however, given that Psalm 33:17 clearly reflects the teaching of Proverbs 21:31, whilst Psalm 32:9 reflects the teaching of Proverbs 26:3.

41. There is a close association between יָעַשׁ (‘to understand’) and יָעַשׁ (‘to approach,’ in Psalm 32:9 and the use of יָעַשׁ, to surround or encircle protectively in vv. 7 and 10).42

42. This use of ‘surround, encircle’ in Psalm 32:10 shows conspicuous similarity with Deuteronomy 32:10, ‘He (Yahweh) found him (Israel) in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he surrounded him, he protected him, he guarded him like the apple of his eye.’

43. Van der Ploeg (1973: 210) also refers to Psalm 49:13 and 21 ‘(animals that perish).’

44. The same idea is expressed by Elihu in Job 33:19: Suffering (יהוֹעַשׁ) on a sick-bed which causes continual strife in a person’s bones (יָעַשׁ) is used as a second option (in addition to a dream) by God to deter that person from a certain action, so that he can save him from certain death.

45. Lamparter (1961:166) points out the similarity of using bit and bridle with what happens to the obstinate Sennacherib whom Yahweh takes away on the road by which he came, against his will and with a hook in his nose and a bit in his mouth (Is 37:29).
and there are conspicuous similarities between Psalm 32 and these wisdom psalms. The opening beatitudes already serve as an indication that the psalm as a whole was intended for instruction. Similar to what happens in Psalm 73, the author expects that fellow believers will take instruction from his experience, his address to Yahweh and Yahweh’s response to this. Furthermore, Yahweh is clearly portrayed in the psalm as the instructor and teacher of the supplicant as well as other upright people (vv. 8–9). Although this is stated in a first person speech by Yahweh himself, the contents do not differ from similar statements in Psalm 25:9 and 12. 46 Only one strophe (B) speaks of suffering and the dominant tone of the psalm is one of gratefulness and joy: Blessedness in having experienced forgiveness (1–2), the expression of thanks for forgiveness (5b), the encouragement of trust in Yahweh (7), and a call to jubilation and joy (11) (Van Uchelen 1971:213).

On the basis of literary connections with Proverbs and similarities with Psalm 25 and Psalm 73, the conclusion must be that Psalm 32 is a wisdom psalm. Teaching which is very similar to that given in Psalm 25 is presented in a different mould in order to create variation and to involve the audience. In addition to the twice-repeated formula of blessing in verses 1 and 2, exhortation of the reader and listener is effected with the help of a confession by the author that he had to be ‘coerced’ by the hand of Yahweh towards the confession of his own guilt. 47 The image of an unwilling horse or mule is used in the second stanza to increase the admonitory effect. The simile of bit and bridle which are used to tame unwilling animals fits the learning curve of the worshipper who had to be convinced through Yahweh’s ‘hand’ which rested heavily on him. In a direct address to the psalmist, and subsequently the whole community of faithful (using a plural jussive form in v. 9), Yahweh also offers to act as a coach and guide on the way of life of members of the audience, and he himself exhorts the audience to abandon rebellious conduct.

**Conclusion**

There can be little doubt that Psalm 32 is a wisdom text with the objective of instructing worshippers, rather than a modified poem of thanksgiving that was composed or used by someone who was restored from illness. The wisdom characteristics in the psalm are not foreign bodies; they rather form part and parcel of a finely structured wisdom composition through which the author intended to provide instruction to fellow believers. In doing so, he was applying the teaching also found in Proverbs. The psalm seems to give an application of the contents of Proverbs 28:13–14, demonstrating through the personal experience of the author that the idea that one can hide one’s transgressions from Yahweh is in itself the most serious transgression and that it is foolish to harden one’s heart in the face of suffering. The psalmist assures his audience that Yahweh is merciful and willing to forgive transgressions. In this he also applies the aphorism about animals’ lack of understanding found in Proverbs 32:9. He insists that Yahweh prefers to have a close relationship with the pious, the righteous, and the upright in heart. Yahweh offers this relationship as a gift to those who are not stubborn but willing to accept his guidance on the path of life and trust in him wholeheartedly, complying with the call to listen to the wisdom teacher found in Proverbs 4:11. The literary context for the interpretation of Psalm 32 seems to be Proverbs and wisdom psalms. The correspondence of these psalms and certain texts in Job with Psalm 32 can best be explained as a mutual indebtedness of certain psalms and Job to the book of Proverbs.

**Acknowledgements**

**Competing interests**

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

**References**


Clifford, R.J., Van Leeuwen, R.C., Towner, W.S., Weems, R.J. & Kolarick, M., 1997, *Introduction to wisdom literature, the book of Proverbs, the book of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the book of Wisdom, the book of Sirach, Abingdon, Nashville* (New Interpreter’s Bible 5).


W.S. Carter & Kolarcik (Hrsg.), *The book of Proverbs (1–40)*, Ugarit-Verlag, Muinch.


**Cf. the beginning of Psalm 119 with a similar repeated formula of blessing, and the idea that it is good that the suppliant was afflicted, seeing as it helped him to learn the statutes of Yahweh (v. 71).**

**46.In both psalms the construction בּוֹי הַמַּעֲלֵה in the hiphil with בּוֹי is used. Cf. Psalm 25:12 and Psalm 32:8. The same idea is also expressed with different words in Psalm 25:4 and 5.**

**47.Cf. the beginning of Psalm 119 with a similar repeated formula of blessing, and the idea that it is good that the suppliant was afflicted, seeing as it helped him to learn the statutes of Yahweh (v. 71).**


