Psalm 53 in Canonical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 53 is an adapted version of Ps 14, crafted to fit in among a cluster of psalms consisting of Pss 52–55. Each of these psalms is described in their respective headings as a "Maskil," while Pss 52 and 54 each also have a biographical link to the time of persecution of David by Saul. It is argued that various contexts have to be taken into consideration for a full understanding of Ps 53: the differences between Pss 14 and 53; Ps 53's links to the cluster of Pss 52–55; the connections it has with Proverbs, and the connections it has with the history of David in 1 Samuel via the two biographical notes in the cluster which seem to apply to it as well. When all these contexts are taken into consideration, Ps 53 appears to be an explication of certain texts in Proverbs, as if applying the truths of wisdom teaching to the experiences of David.

A   INTRODUCTION

Psalm 53 is often treated simply as a duplicate of Ps 14 and sometimes also as its more corrupt version.[1] Hossfeld and Zenger provide a welcome exception to this tendency. They consider Ps 53 to be a separate psalm and the differences between the two psalms as intentional redactional changes made to the text of Ps 14 in order to produce a new composition in Psalm 53.[2] The opposing view,

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[1]   In commentaries it is often glanced over, referring the reader back to Ps 14, and is considered by some to be the corrupt form of a text which was better preserved in Ps 14. A good example of this approach is provided by Hans-Joachim Kraus, who discusses the psalm only once (as Ps 14) and attempts to abstract from the two versions the most probable original text. Psalm 53:6, which differs considerably from Ps 14:5, is consequently glossed over in favour of the "simpler and clearer" Ps 14:5. Cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen* (vol. 1; BKAT 15/1; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 104. With regard to Ps 53:6, he remarks, "Die ohne kühne Konstruktionen kaum erkennbare Bedeutung dieser Aussagen ist auf dem Wege über die einfachen, durchsichtigen Sätze in Ps 14₅ zu finden." He interprets Ps 53:6 as an explication of the judgement which Ps 14:5 only mentions cursorily. Kraus, however, refuses to go the way of Charles C. Torrey and Karl Budde, who reconstructs an "Urtext," describing this as too far-reaching and partly also too arbitrary (Budde writes in reaction to the proposals of Torrey). Cf. Charles C. Torrey, "The Archetype of Psalms 14 and 53," *JBL* 46 (1927): 186–192; and Karl Budde, "Psalm 14 und 53," *JBL* 47 (1928): 160–183.

[2]   The differences between the two psalms are "by no means traceable to sloppiness or to mistakes in hearing or writing, but . . . to be explained in terms of redaction criticism." They choose this option from four different possible scenarios concerning the

that Ps 14 developed out of Ps 53, is not accepted in this investigation since all the differences between the two psalms (even instances where Ps 53 seems to have the more complicated reading, as well as the "elohistic" formulation contained in Ps 14:2) can be more satisfactorily explained as editorial changes made to Ps 14 so as to produce Ps 53.[3] This point of view will also be defended in the following comparison of the two psalms.

The "small" differences between Ps 14 and Ps 53 Hossfeld and Zenger understand as changes made to the text of Ps 14 to let Ps 53 fit better into its present context. Thus in the case of Ps 14:1, the change from "they do abominable *deeds* (עלילה)" to the reading in Ps 53:1, "they do abominable *injustice* (עול)," Hossfeld and Zenger (correctly) interpret as an intensification in the version of Ps 53.[4] Another small difference is found in Ps 14:3, where the reading "*all have gone astray* (הכל סר), all of them together are perverse" was changed to become in Ps 53:4, "*in its totality it (humanity) has become disloyal* (כלו סג), all of them together are perverse." This change they describe as a more nuanced and pointed assertion in comparison to Ps 14:3, remarking that it can also be regarded as stylistic editing,[5] and that this supposition is supported by the fact that in Ps 53:5 the expression of totality found in Ps 14:4, "*all* who do evil (כל פעלי און)," is absent. It has only "those who do evil (פעלי און)."

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origin and development of the two psalms. Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (vol. 2 of *Psalms*; ed. Klaus Baltzer; trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005), 36–39, quotation from 38. See also Pierre Auffret, "'Qui donnera depuis Sion le Salut d'Israël?' Etude structurelle des Psaumes 14 et 53," *BZ* 35 (1991), 217–230, who comes to the same conclusion on the basis of a structural analysis of the two psalms.

[3]   In this regard, see also the discussion of Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (FAT 9; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994), 116-117. For an alternative view that both Ps 14 and Ps 53 are adaptations of an original text, see Christoph Rösel, *Die messianische Redaktion des Psalters: Studien zu Entstehung und Theologie der Sammlung Psalm 2–89* (CalTM; Stuttgart: Calwer 1999), 57–61. Rösel remarks that Ps 14:5-6 has the more easily understandable text in comparison to Ps 53:6, but that this view also has its difficulties (p. 60). A crucial remark of his, and one which needs review, is that no redactional purpose can be detected behind the differences between these verses. Cf. Rösel, *Die messianische Redaktion des Psalters*, 60.

[4]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 38. In my view, the phrase in Ps 53 actually now constitutes an instance of tautology.

[5]   Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters*, 116, remarks that the use of סוג in Ps 53:4 in comparison to סור in Ps 14:3 is less common, but still to be considered as a change made to Ps 14. From my point of view, and in view of the metaphor of harming innocent people being described as "eating" in this cluster of psalms, it is possible that the redactors wanted to establish a connection to Prov 14:14, "From his ways the disloyal of heart (סוג לב) will be satisfied, and a good man from his." This verse basically confirms retribution, a point of view also reflected in Ps 53.

Concerning the more important differences, Hossfeld and Zenger state that both psalms seem to have been edited to fit in with their neighbours.[6] This concerns Ps 14:5–6 and Ps 53:6. Psalm 14 has: "There they were in great terror, *for God is with the generation of the righteous. You may shame the plans of the poor, but Yahweh is his refuge.*" Psalm 53:6 in turn has: "There they were in great terror *like there was no terror, for God has scattered the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them.*" Hossfeld and Zenger note that the reference to Yahweh as a *refuge* fits better in the context of the laments and petitions in Pss 3–7 and 10–14, where חסה, "seek refuge," is found in 5:12; 7:2; and 11:1. Psalms 10–14 also constitute a cohesive group of "psalms of the poor," and therefore Ps 14:6 can be traced to the "exilic" redaction that created the sub-composition Pss 3–14. For an attempted explanation of the meaning of the wording in Ps 53:6, see below.

The concluding petition, found in both psalms (14:7 and 53:7), Hossfeld and Zenger consider to have been added later in the case of Ps 14, but they are uncertain whether it was part of Ps 53 or whether it was added when the psalm was inserted between Pss 52 and 54.[7] In their view, Ps 14, the model, was slightly altered from a psalm which has the "poor people" as a group in view, to Ps 53, a psalm which "considers the individual as a victim of evildoers and aims to give that individual the courage to resist."[8]

Psalm 14	Psalm 53
לַמְנַצֵּחַ לְדָוִד ¹	לַמְנַצֵּחַ עַל־מָחֲלַת מַשְׂכִּיל לְדָוִד: ¹
אָמַר נָבָל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הִשְׁחִיתוּ הִתְעִיבוּ עֲלִילָה אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב:	אָמַר נָבָל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים הִשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עָוֶל אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב:
יְהוָה מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל־בְּנֵי־אָדָם לִרְאוֹת הֲיֵשׁ ² מַשְׂכִּיל דֹּרֵשׁ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים:	אֱלֹהִים מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל־בְּנֵי אָדָם לִרְאוֹת ³ הֲיֵשׁ מַשְׂכִּיל דֹּרֵשׁ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים:
הַכֹּל סָר יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב אֵין ³ גַּם־אֶחָד:	כֻּלּוֹ סָג יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב אֵין ⁴ גַּם־אֶחָד:
הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ כָּל־פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן אֹכְלֵי עַמִּי אָכְלוּ לֶחֶם ⁴	הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן אֹכְלֵי עַמִּי אָכְלוּ לֶחֶם ⁵

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6   See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 38–39.

7   Friedhelm Hartenstein, "'Schaffe mir Recht, Jhwh!' (Psalm 7:9): Zum theolo-gischen und anthropologischen Profil der Teilkomposition Psalm 3–14," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; BETL 238; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 229–258, on pages 236–237 points out the connections between Ps 3:9 ("Salvation belongs to Yahweh") and Ps 14:7 ("Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!"). This, together with the quotation of the enemy found in Ps 3:3 and of the fool found in Ps 14:1, also noted by Hartenstein, make it highly probable that Ps 14:7 was added by the redactors of the cluster Pss 3–14 to Ps 14, and that it already had this conclusion when the psalm was inserted between Pss 52 and 54.

8   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 39.

יְהוָה לֹא קְרָאוּ׃	אֱלֹהִים לֹא קְרָאוּ׃
⁵ שָׁם פָּחֲדוּ פָחַד כִּי־אֱלֹהִים בְּדוֹר צַדִּיק׃	⁶ שָׁם פָּחֲדוּ־פַחַד לֹא־הָיָה פָחַד כִּי־אֱלֹהִים פִּזַּר עַצְמוֹת חֹנָךְ הֱבִשֹׁתָה כִּי־אֱלֹהִים מְאָסָם׃
⁶ עֲצַת־עָנִי תָבִישׁוּ כִּי יְהוָה מַחְסֵהוּ׃	
⁷ מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשׁוּעַת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ יָגֵל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל׃	⁷ מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשֻׁעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשׁוּב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ יָגֵל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

Table 1: A comparison between Ps 14 and Ps 53

This article aims to confirm and support the position of Hossfeld and Zenger that the immediate context of each psalm should be taken into consideration in its interpretation. But it seems that even they have overlooked certain aspects of the context into which Ps 53 was inserted after it was edited for this position. They remark that Ps 53:6, which displays the most significant differences from Ps 14:5–6, has not such strong *semantic* connections to the neighbouring psalms of Ps 53.[9] This finding is technically correct, yet it seems that this verse does establish important *contextual* connections to the whole cluster of Pss 52–55. The biographical notes which have been inserted into the headings of Pss 52 and 54 play an important role in this view. These "canonical contextualizations" of two of the four psalms in the cluster of Pss 52–55, inserted by the redactors, seem to relate to Pss 53 and 55 as well. If Ps 53 is read from the perspective that it is a prayer of David during the time of his persecution by Saul, its sixth verse makes better sense.

Psalm 52	Psalm 53	Psalm 54	Psalm 55
To the choirmaster.	To the choirmaster:	To the choirmaster:	To the choirmaster:
–	according to Mahalath.	with stringed instruments.	with stringed instruments.
A Maskil of David,	A Maskil of David.	A Maskil of David,	A Maskil of David.
when Doeg...	–	when the Ziphites...	–

Table 2: A comparison between the headings of Pss 52–55

The "canonical perspective" mentioned in the title of this article thus refers to the fact that the books of Samuel seem to already have attained the position of authoritative (proto-canonical) texts when Pss 52–55 were grouped together by the redactors. The message which the redactors of 1–2 Sam

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9   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 39. They do say that such connections are not entirely lacking and refer to the motif of siege which relates to the "military topos" of Ps 52: "hero," "tent," and the "eating" in 53:5 (which corresponds to the "devouring" in 52:6). In this regard they have overlooked the fact that Proverbs provides the context for these motifs, and that they are not primarily military motifs in Ps 52. Cf. my article, Phil J. Botha, "'I Am like a Green Olive Tree': The Wisdom Context of Psalm 52," *HvTSt* 69/1 (2013), Art #1962, 8 pages.

intended their readers to extract from the history of Saul and David was applied and confirmed by the redactors of Pss 52–55 in creating the cluster. Furthermore, from an intertextual analysis of these psalms it seems that the book of Proverbs (in addition to the Pentateuch and certain prophetic books) had also already attained the status of authoritative material, since the psalms of the cluster seem to serve as an exposition and application of various texts in Proverbs, especially Prov 1–2 and Prov 30:1–14. How this applies to Ps 53 will be explained in this article.

It is thus argued here that a full understanding of Ps 53 can only be hoped for if it is interpreted as part of the cluster 52–55, also taking the connections to the history of David into consideration, and if it is understood against the background of wisdom theology, thus noting possible connections to Proverbs as well as 1 Sam 2:1–10 and 2 Sam 22–23. These poetic texts at the beginning of 1 Sam and the end of 2 Sam were inserted into the books of Samuel as a kind of theological frame, and this was possibly done by the same redactors who inserted Ps 53 into its present location.[10] Their purpose, it seems, was to provide an exposition of the teaching of 1 Samuel and Proverbs with a view to the particular theological problems experienced by the post-exilic community of which they formed part. Psalm 53 thus served to strengthen the message of Ps 52, a psalm which was described by Walter Beyerlin more than 30 years ago as a late post-exilic wisdom composition which was intended to reconfirm the doctrine of retribution.[11]

The subsequent procedure in this article will be to discuss the structure and meaning of Ps 53 on its own; this will be followed by a discussion of the redactional changes in comparison to Ps 14 and the connections of Ps 53 with the rest of the cluster and with the history of David; and finally a discussion of the wisdom influence on Ps 53 as part of the cluster in order to explain the way

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[10]   In this regard one can point out the similarities between the biographical note in Ps 18:1 (= 2 Sam 22:1) and the two notes found in Ps 52:2 and Ps 54:2. The biographical note in the heading of Ps 18, as well as v. 51c, are ascribed to a redactor of the Samuel books by Martin Kleer. See Martin Kleer, *"Der liebliche Sänger der Psalmen Israels": Untersuchungen zu David als Dichter und Beter der Psalmen* (BBB 108; Bodenheim: Philo, 1996), 27. According to these notes, the psalms in this cluster were seen as expressing the theological perspective of David before the death of Saul, and 2 Sam 22 his perspective after the death of Saul. Hans-Peter Mathys has argued convincingly that 1 Sam 2:1–10 and 2 Sam 22 and 23 can be described as post-Deuteronomistic, wisdom-oriented interpretation of the two books of Samuel, which have a connection also with Deut 32–33. Cf. Hans-Peter Mathys, *Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlicher Zeit* (OBO 132; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1994), 126.
[11]   Walter Beyerlin, *Der 52. Psalm: Studien zu seiner Einordnung* (BWANT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980), 131.

in which history and wisdom were used to provide hope for the faithful at the time when the composition was made.

B   PSALM 53: ITS STRUCTURE AND MESSAGE

			לַמְנַצֵּחַ עַל־מָחֲלַת	[1]To the music director; according to Mahalath.
			מַשְׂכִּיל לְדָוִד:	A Maskil of David.
I	A	2	אָמַר נָבָל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹהִים	[2]The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
			הִשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עָוֶל	They bring to ruin and do despicable injustice;
			אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב:	there is no one who does good.
	B	3	אֱלֹהִים מִשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל־בְּנֵי אָדָם	[3]God looks down from heaven on humanity,
			לִרְאוֹת הֲיֵשׁ מַשְׂכִּיל	to see whether there is a wise person,
			דֹּרֵשׁ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים:	anyone who seeks God.
	C	4	כֻּלּוֹ סָג יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ	[4]All humanity has diverged, together they became corrupt;
			אֵין עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב	there is no one who does good,
			אֵין גַּם־אֶחָד:	there is not even one.
II	D(A′)	5	הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן	[5]Do they not know, those who do evil,
			אֹכְלֵי עַמִּי אָכְלוּ לֶחֶם	who eat up my people like they would eat bread,
			אֱלֹהִים לֹא קָרָאוּ:	who do not call upon God?
	E(B′)	6	שָׁם פָּחֲדוּ־פַחַד לֹא־הָיָה פָחַד	[6]There they were struck with terror such as never has been,
			כִּי־אֱלֹהִים פִּזַּר עַצְמוֹת חֹנָךְ	for God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you;
			הֱבִשֹׁתָה כִּי־אֱלֹהִים מְאָסָם:	you have shamed (them), for God has rejected them.
	F(C′)	7	מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יְשֻׁעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל	[7]Oh, that there would come from Zion salvation for Israel!
			בְּשׁוּב אֱלֹהִים שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ	When God restores the well-being of his people,
			יָגֵל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל:	let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad!

1   Notes on the Text

Verse 1: מחלת is best treated as inexplicable. Various proposals relate it to a melody (indicating the opening word of the song to whose melody is referred); to sickness (the word is then understood as a construct state of מחלה, "sickness"); to a musical instrument (referring to חלילה, "flute"); or to a type of dance (requiring the word to be pointed as מְחֹלַת, "a round dance").[12]

Verses 2–7: The psalm is not to be understood as a corrupt version of Ps 14, therefore the text should not be emended to conform to that of Ps 14.

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[12]   See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 35 at note a.

Verse 5b: Literally "the eaters of my people (like) they eat bread" seems best interpreted as "those who consume my people (as indifferently as if they were) eating bread."

Verse 6: שם פחדו־פחד contains *figura etymologica*, referring to a great fright. לא־היה פחד is more difficult to explain, but should probably be understood to describe the terror, namely one such as had never occurred before. It could also mean "where there was no (real/imminent reason for) terror."[13]

2   Stichometric Segmentation, Poetic Devices, and Message of the Psalm

If the Masoretic disjunctive accents are honoured, Ps 53 should be demarcated into six tristichic verse lines.[14] It must be conceded that some of these verse lines are exceptionally long, comprising 10 (vv. 2 and 3), 11 (vv. 5 and 6), or even 13 (v. 7) stressed units. But support for the demarcation of six tristichic verse lines is provided by the fact that each of the six, with the exception of v. 6, is demarcated by *inclusion*: Verse 2 by repetition of אין ("there is not") in the first and third colon; v. 3 by repetition of אלהים as the first and last word; v. 4 by the parallel formed between כלו ("its totality") as the first word and אחד ("one," which expresses the same thought in combination with the negative particle אין) as the last word;[15] v. 5 by repetition of לא ("not" in combination with "not know" and "not call") at the beginning and end; and v. 7 by the repetition of ישראל at the end of respectively the first and third cola.[16] In v. 6

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[13]   So also Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 36 and note h. While Hossfeld and Zenger interpret the subjects of the fright, those who were terrified, as the evildoers, Van der Ploeg thinks that they refer to the people of God: "There they suddenly shuddered from fright! There was no reason for fright, for God scattered the bones of your besiegers . . ." (my translation of the Dutch). This is also the view of Budde, "Psalm 14 und 53," 167. This seems improbable in view of the fact that the evildoers form the subject of v. 5. See Johannes P. M. van der Ploeg, *Psalm 1 t/m 75* (vol. 1 of *Psalmen*, BOT; Roermond: J. J. Romen & Zonen, 1973), 328–329. In the case of Psalm 14, Van der Ploeg thinks of the evildoers as the ones who suddenly experience terror which causes panic. Cf. Van der Ploeg, *Psalm 1 t/m 75*, 96. Tate sees in the phrase a reference to the suddenness with which the fear strikes the evildoers. See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalm 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 40 at note 6c.

[14] Contra Jan P. Fokkelman, *85 Psalms and Job 4–14* (vol. 2 of *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: at the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis*; SSN; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 423 who finds tristichs only in vv. 4 and 5, two distichs each in vv. 1, 2, 4 and 7b, and a monocolon in v. 7a.

[15]   The parallel term יחד ("together") which is used in the same stich is also etymologically related to אחד ("one"). Cf. Walter Dietrich and Samuel Arnet, *Konzise und aktualisierte Ausgabe des Hebräischen Lexicons zum Alten Testament* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 212.

[16]   Pieter van der Lugt, *Psalms 42–89* (vol. 2 of *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*; OtSt 57; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 112 interprets the repetition of ישראל as

there is rhyme of the first and last word, שׁם and מאסם, which also seems to serve the function of inclusion.

Stanza I consists of vv. 2–4, which constitute three strophes, namely A, B, and C. The stanza itself is also demarcated by *inclusion*, since the phrase "there is no one who does good" is repeated in the first and last strophes (vv. 2c and 4b). The stanza forms a logical unit. A "fool," who serves as representative of the apostate people, is presented as thinking that there is no God. It is explained that those whom he represents consequently ignore justice and act with impunity to such an extent that it is said hyperbolically that no one remains who does what is good. God is curious to see whether any wise human has remained who displays any respect for him, but his investigation, simulating the state of affairs in Gen 11, confirms that all humanity has diverged and gone bad, so that there is no one who does good, not even one. Ironic antithesis is created between the notion that "*there is no* (אין) God," God's investigation to see whether *there is* (הישׁ) a wise person who seeks God, and his conclusion that "*there is no one* (אין)*, not even one* (אין גם אחד)." There is *Steigerung* from the observation made in strophe A about the absence of anyone who does what is good, to the concluding statement in strophe C that there is *not a single one*. This is again to be understood as hyperbole which emphasizes the corrupt state of humanity, since it transpires later that some members of God's people have remained loyal (v. 7). Another antithesis is formed between the "fool" (נבל) who denies the existence of God and the "wise" (משׂכיל) who would be looking for God.

Strophe B thus subtly denies the point of view of the "fool" that there is no God, since it describes God's point of view that there is, by way of polarity, no wise person or, for that matter, anyone who seeks God. There is consequently antithesis between strophe A and strophe B, while strophe C constitutes a climactic confirmation of the finding of strophe A that there is no one left who does good. The repeated אין of strophe A is echoed in strophe C, where both occurrences of אין form a parallel to the second אין of strophe A, but antithesis to the first אין of strophe A. The structure of the stanza could thus be described as chiastic, of the type ABA′.[17] Strophe C is the only strophe in the psalm which does not contain the word "God," a silent testimony to the fact that the total corruption of humanity is hyperbolically stressed in it.

The beginning of a new stanza is demarcated in v. 5 with a rhetorical question, introduced with הלא. Strophe D in stanza II forms a parallel to strophe A in stanza I, lending support to the notion that a second stanza begins at v.

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epiphora (the repetition of words at the end of succeeding stichs or verse lines) and uses this as an argument to divide the verse into two bicola instead of three.

[17]   See Beat Weber, *Die Psalmen 1 bis 72* (vol. 1 of *Werkbuch Psalmen*; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 91.

5. The doing of *injustice* (עָוֶל) and the *absence* of any one who "*does good* (עֹשֵׂה־טוֹב)" in strophe A is developed into a "positive" description of those who "*do evil* (פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן)" in strophe D. "Good" and "evil" thus form a polarity, but the absence of anyone who "does" good confirms the remark that they "work evil." Attention is drawn to the parallel between strophe A and strophe D through the assonance and alliteration of עָוֶל ("injustice") and אָוֶן ("evil").[18] The *ruin* which evil people do and the *despicable injustice* which they commit, mentioned in strophe A, is explained in strophe D as "eating" the people of God with such disregard for justice and for God that they do it casually, *like people who are eating bread*, in strophe D. The thoughts of the evildoers in strophe A, their "*saying*" in their heart that there is no God, is explained in strophe D as *not calling* upon God, while the "*fool*" of strophe A and those he represents, is described in strophe D as people who "*do not know*," using a rhetorical question with a parallel wisdom concept (compare "not know" with "fool") to emphasize the fact. There is repetition of the negative particle אֵין in strophe A, while there is repetition of the negative particle לֹא in strophe D. Because of the parallel between strophe A and strophe D, the latter is designated as A′.

Stanza II as a whole is also demarcated by inclusion, since עַמִּי, "my people," mentioned in strophe D is repeated in strophe F as עַמּוֹ, "his people." This stanza can thus also be described as having a chiastic arrangement of strophes (ABA′). The group of "people" mentioned as the possession of God in strophe D is also further identified in strophe F as "Jacob" and "Israel." The question arises what it is that the evildoers "do not know," as strophe D states. Strophe E explains this as the fact that terror will strike them, intense terror like there has not been previously, and it also identifies God as the cause of that terror. Strophe E therefore forms a parallel to strophe B in the sense that God's response to injustice is described in both. In strophe B he is simply investigating whether there are any wise people left who seek him, but in strophe E he is implied as the cause of terror of the evildoers, the one who scatters the bones of those who threaten his people and who has rejected those offenders. Where he is described as inspecting humanity "from heaven" in v. 3a, he is represented as being present on earth ("there") in v. 6a, so that the alliteration of מִשָּׁמַיִם and שָׁם draws attention to this contrast and development.

Strophe F in turn stands in contrast to strophe C. The complete absence of any good among humanity (and the symbolic absence of God, who is not mentioned in strophe C), which causes strophe C to end on a pessimistic note, stands in opposition to the presence and anticipated action of God and the reactive joy of his people in strophe F. From the despair in strophe C there is movement to hope for salvation and the restoration of the fortunes of Israel in stro-

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[18]   Cf. also Van der Lugt, *Psalms 42-89*, 113. In his analysis (I: 2–3; II: 4–6; III: 7), the two forms are "exactly linear."

phe F, an occurrence which would cause them to rejoice and be glad. The message of this contrast seems to be that only God can provide a transition from the moral low point in strophe C to the hope of a restored fortune in strophe F. The joy of such a restoration is highlighted through the rhyme of יָגֵל with יַעֲקֹב and of יִשְׂמַח with יִשְׂרָאֵל in the very last stich. There is also emphatic sibilance, first of צ, שׁ, and שׂ, and then of שׁ-שׂ and שׁ-שׂ in v. 7. This alone provides unequalled poetic quality and rhythm to the verse which can be described as the climax of the psalm.

The demarcation of strophes and stanzas proposed here is similar to that suggested by Beat Weber, although he demarcates vv. 2, 4 and 6 each as containing two bicola; and v. 3 as containing one bicolon.[19] Only vv. 5 and 7 are (in my view) correctly demarcated by him as tricola. Weber notes that the beginning and end of the psalm are connected in the fact that the atheistic "*speaking*" of the fool eventually founders in the closing *rejoicing* of the people of God.[20] He also draws attention to the similar emphasizing of God's reaction to human folly in the two central strophes of each stanza, and the highlighting of "absolutisms" ("no," "all," "together," and "not even one").[21]

Sound is used very effectively to highlight polarities in the poem. The alliteration and assonance used to construct the parallel of הִשְׁחִיתוּ and הִתְעִיבוּ, two verbs which describe the actions of the evildoers in strophe A, is contrasted with the reaction of Yahweh in strophe B, described as הִשְׁקִיף which makes use of the same *hi-i* sounds, but without the plural ending. The implication is that their unjust activities are duly perceived by God. There is also rhyme between הֲיֵשׁ and דֹּרֵשׁ in strophe B.[22] This possibly serves to highlight the meticulous investigation of God of all humanity with respect to their motives. The poet also made use of a number of instances of wordplay, which all serve a particular purpose. In strophe C, there is an etymological connection between יַחְדָּו and אֶחָד, establishing inclusion between the beginning and end of v. 4, and emphasizing the complete absence of anyone who does good. In strophe D, the repetition of the stem אכל produces alliteration and can be described as adnomination (the repetition of words with the same root). In v. 6 there is the similar device of figura etymologica (פחדו־פחד) which is strengthened with an additional use of פחד at the end of the line (again adnomination). This repetition strengthens the intensity of terror the evil-doers will experience. In v. 7, there is another instance of figura etymologica in the use of בשוב שבות עמו . This stands in contrast to the phrase אכלי עמי אכלו in strophe D, highlighting

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[19]   Weber, *Psalmen 1 bis 72*, 90.
[20]   Weber, *Psalmen 1 bis 72*, 91.
[21]   Weber, *Psalmen 1 bis 72*, 91–92, describes the structure of Ps 14 and only refers back to it when discussing Ps 53.
[22]   Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 66 sees a play also in v. 3 between בל and לב.

the complete change in fortune of Israel when God eventually intervenes. The joy of this occasion is also emphasized through the alliteration of יְשֻׁעוֹת with יִשְׂרָאֵל and the rhyme of יָגֵל with יַעֲקֹב and of יִשְׂמַח with יִשְׂרָאֵל. In strophe D, there is rhyme between פֹּעֲלֵי and אֹכְלֵי, and assonance between יָדְעוּ and אָכְלוּ, and partially also with קָרָאוּ. These instances of rhyme and assonance establish a connection between the inclination of the evildoers and the effect it has on the people of God. The assonance also establishes a connection with פָּחֲדוּ in strophe E, highlighting the consequences of their deeds, namely "progressing" from not knowing, "eating," and not calling upon God, to experiencing extreme terror.

The effect of the demarcation into two parallel stanzas with three corresponding strophes each, and of the chiastic arrangement within each stanza, is that the present, general insolence and impunity of the evildoers is set in opposition to the knowledge of God and his willingness to intervene for the sake of his people. The gloomy atmosphere created by the absence of anyone who does good and seeks God in strophe A is countered by the intervention of God and the certainty of eventual rejoicing when he will restore the fortunes of his people in strophe F. The wish that salvation would come for Israel from Zion at the beginning of strophe F is not a cry of despair, but a prayer for action from God, constituting the device of invocation. There is certainty that he will restore the well-being of his people in 7b and c, and anticipation of the joy that will accompany this so as to extinguish the atheistic thoughts and deeds of the rest of the world.

C   THE REDACTIONAL INTEGRATION OF PSALM 53 INTO THE CLUSTER OF PSALMS 52–55

Hossfeld and Zenger consider Ps 52 as a description of the profile of evil people, while Ps 53 subsequently describes and laments their destructive action.[23] But Ps 53 also proclaims divine judgement on these transgressors, envisaging rescue of the persecuted when God intervenes. Psalms 54 and 55 subsequently "petition for that saving divine judgement."[24] They point out the following connections between Pss 52 and 53:[25] first, the "hero" who is addressed in Ps 52 has two elements in common with the fools in Ps 53, namely that the addressee in Ps 52 *does* intrigue (52:4) and prefers evil to *good* (52:5); similarly, the fool of Ps 53 *does* nothing *good* (53:2, 4). Second, the "hero" of Ps 52 uses "words that devour" (52:6), and this is comparable to "eating up my people" in Ps 53:5. They also state that the temple is explicitly mentioned in Ps 52:10, but more implicit and concealed in Ps 53:6. Following the (erroneous) suggestion of Michael Goulder that the whole cluster of psalms is to be inter-

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[23]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 43.
[24]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 44.
[25]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 34.

preted in view of David's experiences during his flight from Absalom (thus at the *end* of his career),[26] instead of his experiences during his flight from Saul (at the *beginning* of his career) as the biographical notes in the heading of Pss 52 and 54 explicitly state, they also seriously consider his interpreting the metaphor of "eating" and "devouring" as military action.[27] Since Goulder thinks that these psalms were written *for* David *during* the time of his flight from Absalom,[28] he completely misses the connections of these metaphors with Proverbs.

The redactional changes made to Ps 53:6 in comparison to Ps 14:5–6, Hossfeld and Zenger explain in terms of their military interpretation of v. 5: "God puts an end to their war of destruction by casting his crippling, even destroying 'divine terror' over them, as in the so-called holy war."[29] The "camp" that surrounds those threatened with death is therefore a hostile military encampment (as in Pss 3:7, 17:9, and 27:3), and the scattered bones they interpret as a sign of the crushing defeat (as in Exod 14:30, 2 Kgs 19:35; and 2 Chron 20:24). This description of the defeat of the enemy is intended to give the weak and persecuted assurance that God "rejects" these transgressors, that is, that God condemns and despises them, calling upon their victims to resist their evil actions.[30]

It is proposed here that Ps 53 should be interpreted in view of its context within the cluster, and consequently, within the context of the history of David's persecution by Saul rather than within a prophetic or holy war context.[31] The motifs which the cluster of Pss 52–55 displays are: (1) the arrogance

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[26]   Goulder begins with Ps 51 and consequently dates the cluster of Pss 51–71 to the Succession Narrative (by ignoring the references in the headings of Pss 52 and 53). Cf. Michael Goulder, *The Prayers of David (Psalms 51–72)* (vol. 2 of *Studies in the Psalter*; JSOTSup 102; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 24–30.

[27]   They describe Goulder's military interpretation as possible, but in their opinion secondary, but state that it could also refer to military conflicts in the time of David in Israel, or to a foreign political opponent of Israel. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 34. On page 42 they point out that "eating the flesh" of the suppliant and the "encamping of an army" do occur in close proximity in Ps 27:2–3. In this psalm, as in Ps 53, these are separate metaphors, however, since it is "evildoers" (מרעים) who approach the suppliant to eat his flesh.

[28]   He thinks that Pss 52–59 were written by a priest who accompanied David on his retreat from Jerusalem. Cf. Goulder, *Prayers of David*, 28.

[29]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 43. In stating this, they seem to reflect the view of Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters*, 117, who describes the terror as a motif typically associated with the holy war of Yahweh.

[30]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 43.

[31]   Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 39 describe the whole psalm as being shaped by invective and threat while they find the description of the transgression in vv. 2–5 to be especially close to the characteristics of prophetic speech. The *perfecta* is interpreted in this contribution as referring to God's judging of Saul, which serves as an example of his disposition towards arrogant wrongdoers and as a promise to his

and insolence of evildoers;[32] (2) the manifestation of this arrogance through the violation of the rights of innocent people, especially through the use of language;[33] (3) the trust of the faithful that God will intervene;[34] and (4) descriptions of the judging and punishment of the evildoers and the subsequent reaction of the righteous.[35]

Of these motifs, only the third one (a declaration of trust) is not so evident in Ps 53.[36] The *insolence* of the evildoers in Ps 53 can be seen in their (arrogant) self-deliberation that there is no God,[37] their lack of knowledge about God and his judgement, and the consequent matter-of-factly harming of the people of God as though they were eating bread (53:5). It is not stated in Ps 53 that they do this through deceit, but the description of the offenders as evildoers (פעלי און) who are not doing any *good* (אין עשׂה־טוב) and the parallel

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people that he will again intervene, rather than mere "prophetic perfects" as they are described by Hossfeld and Zenger. Hossfeld and Zenger criticise Beyerlin, *Der 52. Psalm*, 66–67 for over-emphasizing the influence of wisdom and disregarding the prophetic proclamation of judgement in Ps 53 (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 40), but this is because they fail to be convinced by Seybold's description of Ps 52 as a wisdom composition and the strength of the connections between Pss 52 and 53.

[32]   Cf. the "boasting" of evil of the "hero" in 52:1; the failure of this man to make God his refuge and his trust in his riches instead of in God in 52:9; the insolence of the evildoers who (casually) eat up God's people like they are eating bread and "do not call upon God" in 53:5; the failure of the "ruthless men" to "set God before themselves" in 54:5; and the enemy who "do not change and do not fear God" in 55:20.

[33]   Cf. the mention of the "tongue," "deceit," the preference of lying more than speaking what is right, and the "words that devour" of the "deceitful tongue" in 52:4–6; then the fool "saying" in his heart that there is no God, and the consequent corrupt, abominable activities of the evildoers who "eat" up the people of God in 53:2 and 5; subsequently the oppression of the wicked who use their tongues for violence and strife, ruin and oppression, and, finally, the speech of the opponent being smooth as butter, while he was hiding war in his heart, and his words being softer than oil, yet drawn swords in reality, in Ps 55.

[34]   Cf. 52:10; 54:8; and 55:24.

[35]   Cf. 52:7; 53:6; 54:7 and 9; and 55:20 and 24. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 51-100*, 36 also note the greater emphasis on judgement in Ps 53 in comparison to Ps 14: "Psalm 53 places more stress on God's judgment on the oppressors, even though the perspective of hope for the oppressed is not lacking here."

[36]   Psalm 53:7b does state the eventual intervention of God and the subsequent rejoicing of his people as something which is expected, so that trust is implicitly present.

[37]   The pronouncement that there is no God forms a connection between Ps 14:1 and Ps 12:5 where the arrogant offenders ask, "Who is Lord over us?" The same remark in Ps 53:2 therefore links back to the arrogant boasting of the "hero" and his plotting, sharp, deceitful tongue in Ps 52, for in Ps 12:3–5 the psalmist also complains about the tongue that boasts and speaks deceitfully. Cf. the verb גבר *hipʿil* ("be strong" with the tongue) in Ps 12:5 and the address of the representative offender as גבור ("hero") in Ps 52:3.

this forms with the "worker of deceit" (עשה רמיה) who loves evil more than *good* in Ps 52, serves to portray them as similarly inclined in the case of Ps 53. Concerning the punishment of the evildoers, Ps 53 can be seen to have been edited to express this more clearly than Ps 14.[38] There consequently is a connecting line that runs from the judging of the "hero of pretence" in Ps 52:7 (and his being shamed in 52:8) to the judging and shaming of the arrogant evildoers in Ps 53:6, and from there to the annihilation and shaming of the enemies in Ps 54:7 and 9b, and finally to the humbling of the enemy in Ps 55:20 and the death of the "men of blood and treachery" in Ps 55:24. In all the psalms of the cluster, judgment of the wicked includes shame and ends in their death.

There also is a conspicuous similarity between the psalms of this cluster in the descriptions of the wrongdoers' deficient relationship with God. In all four psalms, this relationship is formulated negatively, as the *absence* of the correct inclination:

52:9   "...the man who *would not make* (שׂים) *God his refuge*, but *trusted* in the abundance of his riches..."
53:1   "The fool *says* in his heart, '*There is no God.*'"
53:5   "*Don't* those who work evil *know*, who ... *do not call upon God?*"
54:5   "they *do not set* (שׂים) *God before themselves*"
55:20   "they *do not change* and *do not fear God*"

This similarity probably contributed to the redactors' desire to insert Ps 53 between Pss 52 and 54.[39] There is a persistent choice *for* evil and *against* God; *for* apostasy and *against* worship. Another similarity within this group which may have prompted the redactors to insert Ps 53 in its present location is the wrongful and harmful use of language. Only Ps 54 does not contain this common element, but it occurs in Pss 52, 53, and 55:

52:3   "why do you *boast* of evil"
52:4   "your *tongue* plots destruction, *like a sharp razor*"
52:5   "(you love) *lying* more than *speaking* what is right"
52:6   "You love all *words* that *devour*, O deceitful *tongue*"
53: 2   "The fool *says* in his heart, 'There is not God'"
53:5   "those who work evil, who *eat* up my people as they *eat* bread"
55:10   "divide their *tongues*; for I see violence and strife"

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[38]   Compare Ps 14:5, "There they were in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous," with Ps 53:6, "There they were in great terror as there had not been terror, for God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you have shamed (them), for God has rejected them."
[39]   It is of course also possible that they themselves added some of these descriptions to strengthen the profile of the cluster. The third colon in Ps 54:5, with its similarity to Ps 52:9, seems to have been added for this purpose.

> 55:22 "his *speech* was smooth (חלק) as butter, yet war was in his heart; his *words* were softer than oil (משמן), yet they were drawn *swords*."

The transgressions of the evildoers include arrogant speech (boasting), but especially *deceit* (lying, making use of a deceitful tongue, making one's speech smooth as butter and one's words softer than oil in order to hide murderous intentions). This kind of speaking is also represented more than once with the metaphoric complex of the tongue or words being *dangerous* like a knife (or razor)[40] or swords. Words that "devour" others or people who harm others with their words like they would by stabbing them with "swords" are metaphors often encountered in Proverbs. Proverbs 12:18 compares the "rash speaking" of a person to sword thrusts, and in contrast to this, the tongue of the wise person to healing. Proverbs 19:28 says, "A worthless witness mocks justice, and the mouth of wicked people devours (בלע *pi'el*) injustice (און)."[41] Proverbs 30:14 says, "There is a generation (דור) of people whose teeth are swords (חרבות), whose jawbones are knives (מאכלות), to devour (לאכל) the poor (עניים) from off the earth, the needy (אביונים) from among mankind." It is fairly obvious that this verse served as the inspiration for Ps 14:4 in view of the fact that Ps 14:5 remarks that God is with the "generation" (דור) of the righteous, while the next verse (Ps 14:6) refers to the victims of these evildoers as the poor (עני).[42] Psalm 53:5, the equivalent of Ps 14:4, therefore also has Prov 30:14 as background.[43] Proverbs 30:14 (people whose teeth are swords and

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[40]   The word תער can refer to a short knife, scribe's knife, or razor. Cf. Dietrich and Arnet, *Konzise und aktualisierte Ausgabe*, 663.

[41]   The second part of the parallelism seems to imply that a wicked person uses his mouth deceitfully to create a living.

[42]   Cf. also the parallel reference to the poor (עניים) and the needy (אביונים) in the closely related Ps 12:6, and the offences of the evildoers as being lies, flattering lips, and tongues that boast (12:3–4) for the context of Ps 14:4 and thus, eventually, Ps 53:5. The absence of any one who does good in all humanity (בני אדם), which is so emphatically proclaimed in both Ps 14 and Ps 53, is also better understood in the context of Ps 12:2–3, "Save, O Yahweh, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man (מבני אדם). Everyone utters lies to his neighbour; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak." For the connection between Ps 12:7 and Prov 30:5, see my article, Phil J. Botha, "Pride and the Suffering of the Poor in the Persian Period: Psalm 12 in its Post-Exilic Context," *OTE* 25/1 (2012): 40–56. In that article I have followed the suggestions of Bernard Gosse, *L'influence du livre des Proverbes sur les rédactions bibliques à l'époque Perse* (Supplément no. 14 à Transeuphratène; Paris: Gabalda, 2008), 61.

[43]   The inspiration for Ps 55:22 also comes from Proverbs, but from a different context. Prov 5:3–4 describes the lips of the forbidden woman as dripping honey, her speech as smoother (חלק) than oil (משמן), but herself in the end being bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword. The author (or redactor) of Ps 55:22 cleverly

whose jawbones are knives) is understood to imply that some people are so unscrupulous and avaricious that they would rob poor people of their livelihood and feast on their profit.

When one compares Ps 12 with Ps 52 (two of the psalms which precede the two different versions of Ps 14), it becomes increasingly clear why the redactors opted for a slightly changed version of Ps 14 to be used as Ps 53. The same or similar links which exist between Pss 12 and 14 also exist between Pss 52 and 53. These links can be described as the disappearance of the righteous because of the ascendancy of wicked people, the arrogant insolence of evildo-ers who boast that they are masters of their own destiny and consequently abuse the rights of innocent people, and finally, the conviction that Yahweh will intervene and restore faith in him by punishing the insolent wicked.[44] Psalm 53 must also have seemed to the redactors to provide a bridge to Pss 54 and 55, where there is a much stronger element of supplication. The invocation in Ps 14:7 (=53:7), "Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion," which serves to connect Ps 14:7 to Ps 9:15, thereby uniting the cluster of "Psalms of the poor," prepares in the case of Ps 53 the way for the more persis-tent supplication in Ps 54:3–4[45] and Ps 55:2–3.[46] Psalm 53:6 was consequently reformulated to eliminate the reference to the "shaming of the counsel of the poor" and to include a reference to the shaming and death of the evildoers, couched in the language of David's history. This provided an additional link between all the psalms of the cluster, as will be argued in the next section.

D   THE CONNECTIONS OF PSALM 53 WITH THE HISTORY OF DAVID

It was claimed above that Ps 53 displays connections to the history of David, and that the two biographical notes which relate Pss 52 and 54 to the distress of David's flight from Saul, were meant to include Pss 53 and 55 as part of his theological reflection at the time. The heading of Ps 52, found in vv. 1–2, establishes a link to Doeg, the Edomite, who came and told Saul, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech" (1 Sam 22:9). This (false)[47] witness led to

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disguised his source by splitting the comparison and using a synonym for a two-edged sword. Proverbs 12:18 also compares reckless speaking to sword thrusts.

[44] Cf. also the description of Hartenstein, "'Schaffe mir Recht, Jhwh!'," 249–253 of the reaction of Yahweh to the arrogant disposition of humankind in Pss 11–14, espe-cially in view of the pronouncement about the superiority of Yahweh in Ps 8:2 and 10. He states, "Die Gottesleugner *setzen sich selbst an die Stelle Gottes*" (p. 249).

[45] Ps 54:3–4, "O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth."

[46] Ps 55:2–3, "Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan..."

[47] He misrepresents the facts to imply that Ahimelech was part of the "conspiracy" of David.

the murder of all the priests who lived in Nob, their families, and all the animals of the town. The priests were killed by Doeg himself, since Saul's bodyguard was not willing to kill the priests of Yahweh (1 Sam 22:17–19). This information makes it clear why Doeg's tongue can metaphorically be compared to a "sharpened razor" and why his words can be said to "devour" people in Ps 52:4 and 6. Psalm 52 was not composed with this situation in mind, but it was afterward applied to how David must have felt when he heard of the murder.[48] The annihilation of the wicked which is described in Ps 52:7, using the language of judgement supplied by Prov 1–3,[49] seemed (to the redactors) a fitting description of the kind of death which Doeg deserved. King Saul is, however, not exonerated by the reference to Doeg in the heading. He was the principal instigator of this mass murder and he is by implication the one who "would not make God his refuge (מעוז), but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction," as Ps 52:9 says.[50]

In Ps 53, the one verse which was edited substantially by the redactors, namely v. 6, seems to reflect connections to the life of David. Psalm 53:6 says, "There they were in great terror, like there was no terror (before)! For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them." It has been suggested that the author of this verse had the situation in mind when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E..[51] Because he was so arrogant, the angel of Yahweh struck down 185,000 soldiers in the camp (מחנה) of the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:35). Sennacherib had to return home where he was killed by two of his sons in the temple of his god Nisroch (2 Kgs 19:36–37).

It is, however, Saul who was "rejected" by Yahweh, described with the same verb, מאס, as in Ps 53:7. In 1 Sam 15:23, Samuel tells Saul, "Because you

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[48]   Pss 52 and 53 must have been composed in the late post-exilic time in view of their connections with Proverbs. It was still later when they were incorporated into this cluster by the redactors. For a description of the aim of the composer of Ps 52, see Beyerlin, *Der 52. Psalm*, 96. Beyerlin dates Ps 52 to the late Persian period.

[49]   This refers to the metaphor of a storm which will snatch and tear out the wicked. Cf. Prov 1:27; 2:22 and 3:25. Compare also Ps 52:9, "the man ... who sought refuge in his own destruction" with Prov 1:18, the wicked who "lie in wait for their own blood" and "set an ambush for their own lives."

[50]   This is not stated in this way in 1 Sam, but David, his opponent, refers to God who is his "strong refuge (מעוז)" in 2 Sam 22:33. Psalm 52:9 is based on Prov 11:28, "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf"; while the description of Prov 11:27 also played a role in describing the offender of Ps 52:3 as loving evil and not good.

[51]   Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 42 says that commentators "regularly recall the overthrow of Sennacherib's army." He, in turn, refers to the "fairly common" self-destruction of enemies from dread and panic in OT accounts (Josh 10:10; Judg 7:19–23; 1 Sam 14:20; 2 Kgs 7:3–8; Ezek 38:21–23).

have rejected the word of Yahweh, he has also rejected you as king." This judgement is repeated in 1 Sam 15:26. In Samuel's rebuke in 1 Sam 15:23, he describes the sin of Saul as rebellion (מְרִי) and presumption (פצר *hip'il* inf cst), and compares it inter alia to iniquity (אָוֶן). It is noteworthy that this last-mentioned word occurs only once in the two books of Samuel, namely in this verse, while it is also used in Ps 53:5 to describe the "workers of iniquity" who "eat" the people of God.

In 1 Sam 16:1, Samuel is ordered to anoint one of Jesse's sons, since Yahweh has rejected (again מאס) Saul as king over Israel. After Saul's rejection and David's selection as the new king, notably not on the basis of the "height of his stature" (גבה קומתו) but because of what was in his heart (cf. 1 Sam 16:7 where David's tall brother Eliab is also "rejected" by Yahweh), Saul pursued David a second time into the wilderness and, while in hot pursuit, "encamped" (חנה as in Ps 53:7) on the hill of Hachilah (1 Sam 26:3).[52] This happened as a direct consequence of the Ziphites going to Saul to reveal the whereabouts of David (1 Sam 26:1), an incident hinted at in the heading of Ps 54:1–2. David subsequently rose and came to the place where Saul had "encamped" for the night, while the army was "encamped" around him (חנה is used both times, 1 Sam 26:5). For the second time in his life David had the opportunity to kill Saul, but he would not do so, since he regarded him as the anointed of Yahweh and told Abishai that the day would come when Yahweh would strike Saul, or his day would come, or he would go down into battle and perish (1 Sam 26:10). David took Saul's spear and pitcher of water, and afterwards, from a safe distance, ridiculed Abner for not guarding the king. At this occasion Saul acknowledged that he had acted "foolishly" and had made a big mistake. David replied with a wish that his life might be precious in the sight of Yahweh, like Saul's life was precious in his own sight, and that Yahweh might deliver (נצל *hip'il*) him out of all tribulation (מכל־צרה) (1 Sam 26:24). The fact that "David" thanks God in Ps 54:9 that Yahweh "has delivered (נצל *hip'il*)" him "out of all tribulation (מכל־צרה)," suggests that this is also the incident to which Ps 53:6 refers.

Saul's day came soon after this, just as David had expected. Afraid of being caught alive by the Philistines, Saul killed himself, but his head was cut off on the following day by the Philistines and sent, together with his armour, throughout their land (1 Sam 31:9). The men of Jabesh-Gilead later fetched Saul's body and those of his sons from the wall of Beth-Shan, burned it in Jabesh and buried their bones (עצמתיהם) under a tamarisk tree (1 Sam 31:9–13). In a way, the bones (עצמות) of the ones who encamped (חנה) against

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[52]   Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters*, 117 makes a similar connection between the military motif of "encamping" and the headings of Pss 52 and 54 which locate the psalms during the time of David's persecution by Saul.

David were thus scattered.[53] We also know that Saul became very afraid (ירא and בהל *nipʿal* is used, but not פחד as in Ps 53:6) the night before his death when he was told by Samuel in a vision that he would die the following day (1 Sam 28:20–21).

Why is the anxiety of the enemy then described with the expression פחדו־פחד לא־היה פחד? One possible answer to this is that פחד, "terror," is used three times in Prov 1 to describe the calamity which will strike the simple ones, scoffers, and fools who hate knowledge and ignore wisdom. This "terror" is compared to a storm and a whirlwind in Prov 1:27. This description provides another link between Ps 53 and Ps 52, since the death of the "hero" is described in Ps 52:7 as a "breaking down," "snatching," and "tearing" from his tent, and an "uprooting" from the land of the living, similar to the destruction by a whirlwind. The inspiration for this description was Prov 2:22 (the treacherous will be "torn" from the land, with נסח as in Ps 52:7) and Prov 15:25 (Yahweh "tears down" the house of the proud, again נסח), in both cases using a comparison between judgement and a strong wind.[54]

E   THE WISDOM FEATURES OF PSALM 53

Similar to what is the case with Ps 52, Ps 53 has many connections with wisdom.[55] Psalm 53:2, "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God" is a wisdom aphorism.[56] But Bernard Gosse has pointed out the connection of the statement that "there is no God" with the original form of Prov 30:1.[57] This problematic statement of atheism is also addressed in Ps 10:4 (it states that all the thoughts of the wicked are that "there is no God") and Ps 14:1 (= 53:2) ("the fool says in

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[53]   Note how "David" thanks Yahweh in 2 Sam 22:15 for having "scattered" his enemies (although פוץ is used and not פזר as in Ps 53:6).

[54]   Cf. also Prov 12:3 which says that "No one is established by wickedness, but the root (שרש) of the righteous will never be moved." Note the "uprooting" (שרש *piʿel*) of the wicked in Ps 52:7. The strong wisdom connections of Pss 52 and 53 with Proverbs makes it improbable that the genre of Ps 53 is close to that of a "prophetic mocking speech or taunt," as Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 41 asserts. The fools of Ps 53 are probably post-exilic Jews who have abandoned their religious orientation to cooperate wholeheartedly with foreign overlords. Artur Weiser, *Psalm 1–60* (vol. 1 of *Die Psalmen*; ATD, 4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1955), 110 also finds reminiscences of the speech and thinking of prophets in Ps 14 (he has no separate discussion of Ps 53).

[55]   Robert A. Bennett investigated the wisdom motifs in Ps 14 and Ps 53, and found these predominantly in the reference to נבל and עצה (the last-mentioned only in Ps 14, in what he calls the "prophetic elements"). Cf. Robert A. Bennett, "Wisdom Motifs in Psalm 14 = 53 – *nābāl* and *ʿēṣāh*," *BASOR* 220 (1975): 15–21, 15.

[56]   See Van der Ploeg, *Psalm 1 t/m 75*, 1973, 95 on Ps 14.

[57]   Cf. Bernard Gosse, *L'influence du livre des Proverbes*, 60–61.

his heart, 'there is no God'") is consequently closely related to this.[58] Before Prov 30:1 was camouflaged by concerned scribes, the verse contained an expression of atheism in Aramaic: "The words of Agur, the son of Yaqeh. The oracle (המשא), the declaration (נאם) of the man: 'There is no God (לָא אִיתַי אֵל), there is no God (לָא אִיתַי אֵל), and I will prevail.'"[59] It is no coincidence that it is a "fool" who makes this pronouncement in Ps 53:2, and that Ps 53:5 asks whether the offenders "do not know," for in Prov 30:2, Agur, who pronounces the absence of God, confesses that he is "too stupid" (בער) to be a man, and that he does not have the "understanding" (בינה) of a human (אדם). He also confesses to not having learned wisdom, nor to have knowledge (דעת) of the Holy One (Prov 30:3).

The atheistic "fool" (נבל) of Ps 53:2 is further contrasted with a wise person (משכיל), further described as someone who "seeks God," in Ps 53:3. According to the wisdom texts, there is a close connection between knowledge of and respect for Yahweh and this kind of wisdom. In Prov 16:20, the person who has this kind of wisdom (משכיל על־דבר) is compared to one who "trusts in Yahweh." [60] Jeremiah 9:22–23 [61] (Hebrew text) establishes a connection between Ps 52 and Ps 53, since Ps 52 castigates the "mighty man" who "boasts" in evil (v. 3) and trusted in his "riches" (v. 9), and Ps 53 the fool who does not "understand" (v. 3) and does not "know" (v. 5). What it is that the evildoers do not know, can possibly be gleaned from Jer 9:23, namely that they do not know Yahweh, and they do not know that Yahweh is the God who prac-

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[58]   Ps 10 is closely related to Ps 14, and therefore it also displays connections with Ps 52. Compare Ps 10:7, "His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity" with Ps 52:4–6. Kraus, *Psalmen 1*, 107 points out the similarities with Ps 36:2–3, "Transgression speaks (נאם) to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated." These verses are strongly reminiscent of Prov 30:1–2. The rest of Ps 36 also displays connections to Pss 12 and 52. See also the description of Hartenstein of Ps 9/10 as a later centre of the collection Pss 3–14 in Hartenstein, "'Schaffe mir Recht, Jhwh!,'" 253–258.

[59]   See Gosse, *L'influence du livre des Proverbes*, 60. He makes a connection between Ps 10:4 and Prov 30:1, and links Ps 10:4 also to Ps 14:1 and 3. He considers Prov 30:1 to be a parody of Exod 3:2–14, the declaration of Yahweh that he is "I am who I am," and the last word of Prov 30:1, ואכל as a play on Exod 3:2, about the bush which was burning, but not consumed (אֵינֶנּוּ אֻכָּל).

[60]   The first will "find good" and the second is called "blessed."

[61]   "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man (גבור) boast (הלל *hitpaʻel*) in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches (בעשרו), but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands (שכל *hipʻil* infinitive absolute) and knows (ידע *qal* infinitive absolute) me, that I am Yahweh who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on earth."

tices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on earth.[62] To "seek God" in Ps 53:3 and Ps 14:2 is an expression which has a connection to Ps 10:4, which again points to Prov 30:1 – Ps 10:4 says, "the wicked, in the pride (גבה) of his face does not seek (בל־ידרש) God."[63] In view of the importance of Prov 30:1, the background of Ps 53:5, "Do those who work evil not know (לֹא ידעוּ), who eat up my people as the eat bread, and do not call upon God?" must most probably be sought in Prov 30:3 and 13–14, "I have no knowledge of the Holy One," and "There are those – how lofty (רמו) are their eyes, how high their eye-lids lift! There are those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives, to devour the *poor* from off the earth, the *needy* from among mankind (מאדם)." If the connections between Ps 12:6 (the plundering of the *poor* and the groaning of the *needy*) are considered, it seems unmistakeable that Ps 12 and Ps 14, and therefore also Ps 53, have connections to Prov 30:1–14.[64] Psalm 14, and thus Ps 53, takes issue with arrogant atheism which is the root cause of the exploitation of the people of God. As a response to pronouncements of atheism (such as was possibly expressed in Prov 30:1–2), the psalms of the cluster must probably be considered a late post-exilic response to the problem of apostasy among influential Jews.

F   PSALM 53 AS AN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY AND WISDOM

In its position as the fourteenth psalm, this poem is closely related to Pss 10 and 12, and like them it takes issue with arrogant atheists who deny the existence of God.[65] In its context there (as Ps 14), the notion that there is no God or that God does not take note of what happens on earth, is described as paving

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[62]   I have argued in another publication that the author of Ps 52 must have had access to both Prov 11:27–31 and Jer 9:22. It is significant that Ps 53 seems to extend the connections of the cluster to Jer 9:23. See my article, Botha, "'I am Like,'" 6. Alfons Deissler, *Psalm 119 (118) und seine Theologie: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der anthologischen Stilgattung im Alten Testament* (MünThSt; München: Karl Zink Verlag, 1955), 199 describes Jer 9:22–23 as the most enlightening commentary on Ps 119:99, "I have more understanding (שכל *hip'il* perfect) than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation." He describes שכל *hip'il* as referring in all its occurrences, including Ps 53:3, to a religious-moral substance ("einen religiös-moralischen Tatbestand") which points to knowledge and life-changing recognition of Yahweh ("die Erkenntnis und lebensformende Anerkenntnis Jahwes").

[63]   Some translations take בל־ידרש as part of the thoughts of the wicked, namely that God does not investigate, but it is possible to see a parallel between the wicked who "does not seek him" and whose thoughts are that "there is no God."

[64]   The conspicuous similarities of these pronouncements with Jer 10:25, Gosse, *L'influence du livre des Proverbes*, 162–163 connects primarily to Ps 79:6–7 and secondarily also to Prov 30:1–14.

[65]   Cf. the connections between Ps 10:3–4, 11 and 13; Ps 12:5; and Ps 14:1.

the way for the abuse of human rights by wicked people.[66] It was argued above that these two motifs are possibly related to and form a reaction to Prov 30:1–14. In Pss 10–14 there consequently is also emphatic confirmation that God *does* take note and *will* intervene on behalf of the oppressed.[67] In the position of Ps 53, the pronouncement that the evildoers *do not know* about God's judgement, *do not call* upon God, and consequently "*eat up*" the people of God as they would eat bread (Ps 53:5), is highlighted through the connections with Ps 52:9, the man who "*would not set* God as his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction,"[68] and Ps 54:5, "For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; *they do not set* God before themselves." Again it is the *atheistic* pronouncement in Ps 53:2 that catches the eye, but also the *arrogant* offences of evildoers because God is no factor in their lives. Once again, Prov 30:1–14 seems to have played a role in the composition of at least Pss 52 and 53. What is new in the case of Ps 53 (in comparison to Ps 14), is the connections to the history of David. In the books of Samuel, it is Saul's *arrogance*, rather than the denial of the existence of God, that is emphasized. And yet, when Samuel announces to Saul that God has rejected him as king, he makes a comparison between Saul's insubordination and idolatry.[69] The song of Hannah, which "prophetically" explains the differences between Saul and David and gives reasons why the one was (would be) rejected and the other elected, highlights the danger of being *arrogant* and extols the advantages of being humble in the sight of God.[70] The same applies also to 2 Sam 22, where v. 28 states that Yahweh saves a humble people (עם עני), but that his eyes are against the haughty (רמים) to *humiliate* (שפל *hipʿil*) them. It would therefore seem that the redactors of this cluster of psalms wanted to propagate the same attitude which David displayed when faced with unjust persecution by arrogant, powerful people: To put their trust in God and to wait for his intervention to save them by striking the arrogant and irreverent enemies. The faithful would eventually shame[71] their opponents, for God rejects those who display arrogant insolence and atheism.

G   CONCLUSION

Psalm 53 can be read on its own and as such it provides hope to the people of God whose rights are abused by arrogant evildoers who regard God as being of no consequence. To those "Israelites" who are "wise," who do "seek after God"

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[66]   Cf. the similarities between Ps 10:2–3, 5–10; Ps 12:3 and 6; and Ps 14:4.

[67]   Cf. the similarities between Ps 10:14–18; Ps 12:6 and 8; and Ps 14:2 and 5. See also the description of Hartenstein, "'Schaffe mir Recht, Jʜwʜ!,'" 251.

[68]   Cf. the danger of apostasy accompanying the prospect of becoming rich which is mentioned in Prov 30:8–9.

[69]   1 Sam 15:23, cf. 26. It seems to be an unwitting prophecy of Samuel that Saul in the end would also commit the sin of divination mentioned in v. 23.

[70]   Cf. 1 Sam 2:3 and 7–10.

[71]   Cf. the use of בוש *hipʿil* in Ps 53:6.

and do "call upon" him, the psalm gives the assurance that God is aware of the abuses by "fools" who do not believe that he makes any difference. The arrogance of these evildoers will change to shame when God intervenes, while the suffering of God's faithful will be replaced by joy and celebration (53:5–7).

Since it is also rooted in the wisdom of Proverbs, Ps 53 further strengthens the wisdom conviction that only fools take no account of God or think that they can abuse the rights of other people without repercussions.[72] The psalm confirms the conviction of Proverbs that pride goes before destruction[73] and that the fear of Yahweh is hatred of evil, while those who have found wisdom, will hate pride, arrogance, the way of evil and perverted speech.[74]

Read in conjunction with its neighbours, it becomes clear that the evildoers of Ps 53:5 happen to be rich people who use lies and deceit to exploit others (52:4–6). Because they have despised wisdom, they will be uprooted from the land of the living (52:7). God will return the evil which they have done to them (54:7).

Via the two biographical notes in Pss 52 and 54, the reader of this cluster is reminded of the experiences of David who was unjustly persecuted by an arrogant and irreverent leader, but who would not take justice into his own hands and rather trusted Yahweh to protect him and take care of his enemy. What eventually happened to Saul was a consequence of the fact that Yahweh had rejected him and had elected David as his successor because of his humility and uprightness. The judgement spoken of in Proverbs overtook Saul, so that David triumphed over his enemies. The experience of David establishes the truth of Proverbs and converts Ps 53 into an instrument of wisdom teaching, a Maskil of David.

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[72]   Cf. Prov 2:1–15.
[73]   Prov 16:18.
[74]   Cf. Prov 8:13.

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