

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

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### ABSTRACT

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

### A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 12 constitutes a cry for help<sup>1</sup> addressed to Yahweh by someone who represents a group of suffering people.<sup>2</sup> The complaint is that baseness<sup>3</sup> has gained the upper hand<sup>4</sup> in society, and that the faithful have been forced below

<sup>1</sup> Verse 2: "Help (הושיעה), Yahweh!" Cf. the use of the same stem in the noun "safety" (ישע) which describes Yahweh's intervention in v. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. שד, "violence, destruction" and אנקה, "groaning" in v. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. זלות, "vileness" in v. 9. It is a hapax legomenon which is thought to be related to זלל in Targumic and Babylonian Jewish Aramaic and to זלזל in Middle Hebrew. In Syriac, ܙܠܙܠܐܘܬܐ refers to "licentiousness, baseness." See Cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT, electronic version; revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann J. Stamm with assistance from Benedikt Hartmann, Ze'ev Ben-Hayyim, Eduard Y. Kutscher and Philippe Reymond; translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1994–2000), entry 2491 and J. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 116.

<sup>4</sup> רום *qal* inf cst, v. 9.

the surface by oppression.<sup>5</sup> The wicked arrogantly boast that they are in command (v. 5) and they consequently oppress the weak and poor people through lies, flattery and deceit (vv. 3–5) without any regard for God. The situation as it is described could surely have recurred a number of times in the history of Israel and Judah, and it is often described as representative of the time of the monarchy.<sup>6</sup>

Yet I would like to assert that the text should be contextualised within the late Persian period.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this supposition is the links between Ps 12 and those psalms which immediately precede and follow it, and the way in which these connections together seem to form a response to and an explication of Proverbs, in particular Prov 30:1–14. Close connections exist also between Ps 12 and other parts of the Hebrew canon (e.g. Trito-Isaiah),<sup>8</sup> but these books seem to be similar responses to Proverbs so that they provide supporting evidence about the important role of Proverbs in the editing of the Hebrew Bible rather than a separate source for the composition of Ps 12.

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

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

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

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

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 57 and 59 provide interesting parallels. Compare Isa 57:1 with Ps 12:2; Isa 57:15 with Ps 12:6; Isa 59:3–4 with Ps 12:2; Isa 59:13 with Ps 12:3; Isa 59:21 with Ps 12:7.

fied seven times in "a crucible in the earth" or in its "entrance to the earth."<sup>9</sup> It is possibly these "words of Yahweh" as they are formulated in Proverbs, Psalms, and Isaiah (and also other parts of the canon) which were understood to hold the solution to the social and religious distress the author of Ps 12 and his colleagues experience: They contain the promises of Yahweh's intervention against the arrogant, godless upper class through which he will again save the devout and the faithful, the wretched and the poor.

These assertions may seem difficult to prove, but I claim no originality for the idea that Ps 12, in conjunction with its neighbours, forms part of a carefully executed response to Proverbs. As far as I am concerned, Bernard Gosse has already proven that quite a number of poetic compositions in the Hebrew Bible are by and large the result of the editorial work of the wise Yahwists who turned the Psalter (and other parts of the Hebrew Bible) into a direct response to the admonitions and warnings found in the book of Proverbs.<sup>10</sup> My own contribution would simply be to add some evidence to what Gosse has given us and to integrate this into a holistic intra- and intertextual analysis of this particular psalm. In doing so, I endeavour to prove that Ps 12 constitutes a theological response to the problem of secularisation, lawlessness, and gentile rule in the late post-exilic history of Judah, and that the authors' perception of the "words of Yahweh" played a role in this perception. The situation of the author of Ps 12 is analysed with regard to the "word of Yahweh" as it is formulated in Proverbs, especially Prov 30:1–14, while certainty that Yahweh will intervene is also founded on the book of Proverbs.

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

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Gosse, *L'influence du livre des proverbes sur les rédactions bibliques à l'époque perse* (Paris: Gabalda, 2008), 60–61; Bernard Gosse, "L'influence de Proverbes 30,1–14 sur les cantiques bibliques, à travers le Psautier," *ZAW* 119 (2007): 528–538. With regard to Ps 12, Gosse has drawn attention to the following connections: Ps 12:2 serves as a response to Prov 30:14; Ps 12:3 displays a similarity with Is 59:3–4; Ps 12:6 is a response to Prov 30:14; Ps 12:7 displays connections with Prov 30:5, Ps 18:31, 119:140, and 2 Sam 22:31, while he also refers to Prov 2:4 and 10:20; Ps 12:8 is a response to Prov 30:14, and the same applies to Ps 12:9.

**B INTRATEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 12**

	1	לְמַנְצַח עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:	<sup>1</sup> For the music director, according to the Sheminith. A psalm of David.
I	A	2 הוֹשִׁיעָה יְהוָה כִּי־גָמַר חֶסֶד כִּי־פָסוּ אֱמוּנִים מִבְּנֵי אָדָם:	<sup>2</sup> Help, <b>Yahweh</b> , for the devout have disappeared, for the faithful have vanished from humanity!
		3 שׁוֹאֵא   יְדַבְּרוּ אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ שֶׁפֶת חֲלָקוֹת בִּלְבָב וְלִבּ יְדַבְּרוּ:	<sup>3</sup> Everyone utters deceit with his neighbour, with flattering lips they speak heart to heart. <sup>11</sup>
B		4 יִכְרַת יְהוָה כָּל־שִׁפְתֵי חֲלָקוֹת לְשׁוֹן מְדַבֶּרֶת גְּדֹלוֹת:	<sup>4</sup> May <b>Yahweh</b> cut off all flattering lips, (every) tongue that speaks arrogantly,
		5 אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ   לְלִשְׁנֵנוּ נִגְבִּיר שִׁפְתֵינוּ אִתָּנוּ מִי אֲדוֹן לָנוּ:	<sup>5</sup> (of those) that say: “With our tongue we are strong, our lips are with us, Who is master over us?”
C		6 מִשָּׂד עֲנִיִּים מֵאֲנַקַּת אֲבִיוֹנִים עֲתָה אֶקוּם יֹאמֶר יְהוָה אֲשִׁית בְּיָשֶׁע יְפִיחַ לוֹ:	<sup>6</sup> “Because of the violence of (to) the wretched, because of the groaning of the poor I will now rise,” says <b>Yahweh</b> . “I will place in safety the one who longs for it.”
D		7 אֲמֵרוֹת יְהוָה אֲמֵרוֹת טְהוֹרוֹת בְּסֹף צָרוּף בְּעֵלִיל לְאָרֶץ מִזְקָק שִׁבְעָתַיִם:	<sup>7</sup> The words of <b>Yahweh</b> are pure words, silver refined in a crucible in the earth / in its entrance to the earth, filtered seven times.
E		8 אַתָּה־יְהוָה תִּשְׁמָרֵם תִּצְרְנוּ   מִן־הַדּוֹר זֶה לְעוֹלָם:	<sup>8</sup> You, <b>Yahweh</b> , will guard them. You will protect him/us <sup>12</sup> from this generation forever.
F		9 סָבִיב רְשָׁעִים יִתְהַלְכּוּן כָּרָם אֲלוֹת לְבַנֵּי אָדָם:	<sup>9</sup> The wicked walk about everywhere when vileness is exalted among humanity.

The psalm consists of six units,<sup>13</sup> in this analysis marked as six strophes but which could possibly also be considered to be six stanzas. The six strophes

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

<sup>12</sup> The ambiguity was possibly brought about intentionally.

<sup>13</sup> Prinsloo, “Man’s Word – God’s Word,” 390–2, identifies three stanzas: 2–4, 5–6, and 7–9, in which the first and last stanza contains two strophes each. *Die Psalmen 1 bis 72* (vol. 1 of *Werkbuch Psalmen*; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 84 similarly identifies three stanzas: 2–4, 5–6, and 7–9. Both authors contend that the first and last stanza correspond to one another and enclose the middle stanza. The separation of vv. 4 and 5 in this scheme is problematic in my view, since it dislocates the relative sentence beginning in 5 from its antecedent subject and ignores the chiasmic parallel between vv. 4 and 5. There is also too little correspondence between vv. 5 and 6 to link

are demarcated on the basis of subject matter and strong internal connections such as parallels and chiasmic patterns within each unit.<sup>14</sup> Every strophe contains one incidence of the name Yahweh except for the last, and it would seem that it was omitted on purpose in this strophe (v. 9), where the *wicked* are said to be everywhere since vileness has gained the upper hand. Zenger notes that the five occurrences of the divine name is significant, since there is thus an occurrence in the middle, and in that instance (in v. 6b) the name Yahweh also occurs in the middle colon of a tricolon.<sup>15</sup> The six strophes form a chiasmic pattern:

A <sup>1</sup>	Cry to Yahweh for help: The faithful vanish and deceit is everywhere	}
B <sup>2</sup>	Wish that Yahweh will silence the false and arrogant speech	
C <sup>3</sup>	Yahweh's promise to act on behalf of the poor and suffering	
D <sup>3</sup>	Yahweh's words are pure and seven times refined	
E <sup>2</sup>	Confession of faith that Yahweh will protect the faithful	
F <sup>1</sup>	The reason why the wicked is everywhere: the exaltation of vileness	

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

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them together instead of vv. 4 and 5. Johannes P. Fokkelman, *The Psalms in Form: The Hebrew Psalter in its Poetic Shape* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2002), 24 identifies four stanzas: 2–3, 4–5, 6–7, and 8–9. This seems more correct, except for the contrast in mood between vv. 8 and 9 which are grouped together in his scheme and which should probably be separated.

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

<sup>15</sup> Zenger "Psalm 12," 92.

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

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

- The **problem** being addressed is the general (cf. "humanity," vv. 1 and 9) domination (cf. "exalted," v. 9) of society (cf. "walk about everywhere," v. 9) by the wicked (v. 9) who use speech (cf. "speak," v. 3; "lips," vv. 3-5; "tongue," v. 5) in a deceitful (cf. "lies," "flattering" vv. 3 and 4) and boastful way (cf. "big," v. 4,<sup>16</sup> "strong," "with us" and "lord" in v. 5) to obtain power (cf., again, "strong," v. 5) and to oppress (cf. "violence," "groaning" v. 6) the devout and faithful (v. 2); the wretched and poor (v. 6).
- The **result** of this situation is that the devout and faithful have receded into the background (cf. "disappeared," "vanished" v. 2), presumably because they fear those who hold sway and experience a lack of protection against their exploitation. Yahweh is also said to notice the violence (דָּשׁ)<sup>17</sup> with which they have to cope (v. 6).
- The **reaction** of the devout to the problem is that they cry for "help" to Yahweh (v. 2) and "groan" under the oppression (v. 6).
- Their **expectation** is that Yahweh can "cut off" the flattering lips and the boastful tongue of those for whom speech has taken the place of God (cf. vv. 4-5); that Yahweh will "rise" to intervene on behalf of the oppressed (v. 6), that he will put those who long for it in "safety" (v. 6) and will further "protect" (שָׁמַר, נָצַר) them against this category of criminals ("this generation," v. 8) for a long time in future (cf. "forever" in v. 8). In sharp contrast to the "worthless," "deceitful," "flattering" and arrogant use of language by the wicked, the devout put their trust in the pure ("refined" and "filtered") words of Yahweh which are (by implication) true and valuable in contrast.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> In Job 5:9 and 9:10, God is described as the one who "does great things (גְּדֹלוֹת)."

<sup>17</sup> In Prov 24:2, the "violence" which the hearts of the wicked plan and the "distress" which they speak with their lips are combined to form a parallel to Ps 12:3, 5, and 6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Prinsloo, "Man's Word – God's Word," 401 who comes to the conclusion that the interpretation of the psalm hinges on the antithesis between the words of men and the word of God.

## C THE INTERTEXTUAL CONTEXT OF PSALM 12

It is well-known that Pss 3–14 form a subgroup within the first Davidic Psalter. A continuous reading of Pss 9–14 reveals that these psalms all address the same problem,<sup>19</sup> while comparison with Proverbs proves that they are also all related and linked via genetic traits to this collection of wisdom sayings. It does not seem as if the editors who arranged this group of psalms and who established the links with Proverbs wanted to hide the connections. They rather seem to have dropped “white pebbles” for the reader of the Hebrew Canon to pick up the connecting links with Proverbs. One such connection is the expression “smooth lips” (שפתי חלקות), which is used in both vv. 3 and 4 to refer to “flattering lips.” It occurs in only one verse in the Hebrew Bible apart from the two instances in Ps 12, namely in Prov 7:21.<sup>20</sup> Another link is established through the verb פוח II, to “blow,” which has strong connections with wisdom. It is found in Ps 12:6 where it is used to refer to the one who “pants” after safety. It is used four times in Proverbs to refer to the “breathing out” of lies.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

<sup>21</sup> Prov 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9. It is found another three times in Proverbs; once more in the Psalms, namely in Ps 10:5, three times in the Song of Solomon (to indicate the blowing of the wind) and once each in Ezek 21:36 and Hab 2:3. Since the verb פוח occurs in only two places in the Psalter, in Ps 10:5 and Ps 12:6, and also in the same form, it should be interpreted as an intended connection between the two psalms (cf. Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch*, 123). The disdain of the wicked is expressed with this verb in Ps 10:5 (he considers Yahweh to be too far away to be a threat, and consequently “blows” on his adversaries). In Ps 12:6 the “sighing” of oppressed people are probably expressed with this verb, a “blowing” of breath which signifies a longing for rescue from the haughty “blowing” of the wicked. To interpret the meaning of the verb as negative, and to translate “I will put in safety the one against whom he blows/puffs” implies that the offender is introduced, while the focus in the rest of the verse is on the oppressed persons. This is in any case the explanation of Zenger, *Die Psalmen*, 95. Patrick D. Miller, “Yāpîah in Psalm 12:6,” *VT* 29 (1979): 495–501, regards the form as a noun with the meaning “witness,” and translates the colon: “I will place in safety the witness in his behalf.” This destroys the parallel, however, and ignores the fact that a singular suffix (“his”) is made to refer to two antecedents in the plural (the wretched and poor people). Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15;



<p><sup>10</sup>Do not slander a servant to his master (אדון), lest he curse you, and you incur guilt.</p>	
<p><sup>11</sup>A generation (דור) who curses his father and do not bless his mother; <sup>12</sup>A generation (דור) who is clean (טהור) in his own eyes, but are not washed of his own excrement; <sup>13</sup>A generation (דור) – how lofty (רום <i>qal perf</i>) are his eyes, and elevated his eyelids! <sup>14</sup>A generation (דור) whose teeth are swords, whose molars are knives, to devour the wretched (עני pl) from off the earth (ארץ), the poor (אביון pl) from among mankind (מאדם).</p>	<p><sup>8</sup>You will protect him/us from this generation (דור) forever.</p> <p><sup>9</sup>The wicked walk about everywhere when vileness is exalted (רום <i>qal inf cst</i>) among humanity (לבני אדם).</p> <p><sup>6</sup>“Because of the violence of (to) the wretched (עני pl), because of the groaning of the poor (אביון pl), I will now rise (קום),” says (אמר) Yahweh.</p> <p><sup>2</sup>Help, Yahweh, for the devout have disappeared, for the faithful have vanished from humanity (מבני אדם)!</p>

The text in Prov 30 from v. 5 onwards centres around two kinds of speech: the refined words of Yahweh; and in contrast to that, proper and improper words or types of pronouncements. In this regard it forms a parallel to Ps 12. Prov 30:5 begins by stating that every *word* of God is refined. One should therefore not *add* to his *words*, since he will expose the person who does that as a *liar* (v. 6). The author consequently also supplicates God (vv. 7–8) to keep *deceit* and *lies* far away from him. After a second supplication, namely that God would make him neither rich nor poor (v. 8b) but only give him his daily bread lest he *say* the wrong things (אמר), namely to deny the existence of Yahweh with a rhetorical question (“Who is Yahweh?”), and a wisdom adage about *slander* (לשון *hip’il*) and the consequential *cursing* (קלל *pi’el*) in return (which actions also constitute the impure use of the tongue and words), the author proceeds to describe the bad “generation” (דור) of those who *curse* their fathers (קלל *pi’el*) and do *not bless* (ברך *pi’el*) their mothers (once again the inappropriate use or the absence of use of language) (v. 11), a generation of people who are clean (טהור) in their own eyes, but are not washed of their own filth<sup>24</sup> (v. 12), a generation of people with lofty (רום) eyes and uplifted eyelids (v. 13), whose *teeth* are swords and *molars* knives to devour the poor (עניים) from off the earth and the needy (אביונים) from among mankind (מאדם) (v. 14). In this context, it would seem that the references to *teeth* and *dentures* form a

<sup>24</sup> The strong word “excrement” is used (צארה, “dung,” “excrement”).

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

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

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

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

<sup>25</sup> Ps 14:4 forms a parallel to this. It refers to the “evildoers” who have no knowledge and who “eat” people up as if they are eating bread, but do not call upon Yahweh.

<sup>26</sup> See above.

<sup>27</sup> He confesses to being “stupid” (בֶּעֶר) and “lacking in human understanding” (לְאִבְיִת אָדָם) in v. 2. The “confession” of Agur in vv. 2–3 is probably meant as irony: He is a rationalist and has no sensitivity for theological understanding. The words of v. 4 are then to be understood as a critical remark by Agur about human inability to have any knowledge of God. The “son” of this would-be explorer could be understood

Proverbs 30:1 says, "The words (דבר pl) of Agur, son of Jakeh. The oracle (משא). The man declares (נאם): 'There is no god, there is no god and I have prevailed.'" In unvocalised Aramaic, this would be לא איתי אל לא איתי אל לא איתי אל<sup>28;29</sup> while the MT has presented and vocalised this as לְאִיתִיאל לְאִיתִיאל וְאֶכָּל (‘‘to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukal’’). This should be compared to the corresponding Hebrew pronouncement in Ps 10:4, ‘‘The wicked, in his pride (says): ‘He (God) does not care; there is no God.’ These are all his thoughts.’’’<sup>30</sup> The infamous part is formulated as אין אלהים. The same accusation of saying that there is no God is again made in Ps 14:1, ‘‘The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’’’<sup>31</sup> This is also expressed in Hebrew as אין אלהים. Similar to what happens in Prov 30:14, such foolish (see the confession of Agur in Prov 30:2–3) words lead to arrogance and the unscrupulous exploitation of Yahweh’s protégés and proteges. In Ps 14:4, such exploitation is also described with a metaphor of eating,<sup>32</sup> such as is implied in Prov 30:14. Further connections between these psalms and Prov 30 are formed through the repeated assertion about the arrogance of the wicked (cf. Pss 9:21 by implication; 10:2, 4, 13, 18 by implication; and 12:4–5) and by the fact that the ‘‘poor’’ and ‘‘needy’’ are mentioned a number of times in parallel as the oppressed in these psalms: The ‘‘cry of the afflicted (צעקה עניים)’’ are mentioned in Ps 9:13; the ‘‘needy’’ and the ‘‘poor’’ in Ps 9:19; the ‘‘poor’’ in Ps 10:2, 9 and 12; the ‘‘poor’’ and the ‘‘needy’’ in Ps 12:6; and again the ‘‘poor’’ in Ps 14:6. Note also the connection through the arrogant speech of the wicked in Ps 10:7 and Ps 12:4 and 5.

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

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

<sup>28</sup> This form is then understood as a waw consecutive *qal* imperf 1 s of יָכַל.

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

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Gosse, ‘‘L’influence de Proverbes 30,1–14,’’ 530.

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

<sup>32</sup> ‘‘Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and no longer call upon Yahweh?’’

gain and maintain power. The Proverbs text nevertheless still gives hope, since Yahweh's words of promise that he will now rise to put things right are like silver, refined seven times.

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

#### **D THE IDENTITY OF THE OPPRESSORS IN PSALM 12**

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

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

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the confession of Joshua and Caleb in Num 14:9c, "Their protection is removed from them (the people living in the Promised Land), and Yahweh is with us; do not fear them."

personae are charged with involvement in oppression (9:13; 10:7; 12:6 and 14:4; cf. also Prov 30:14); arrogance (9:21; 10:2, 4, 6 and 12:5; cf. also Prov 30:13); persecution (10:2); displaying a lack of ethical principles (10:3; cf. Prov 30:11); displaying disdain for Yahweh (10:3 and 14:1; cf. Prov 30:1 and 9); cursing (10:7; cf. Prov 30:10); wickedness (10:15); a reign of terror (10:18); murdering the upright (9:13, by implication; 11:2) overturning the foundations (11:3); loving violence (11:5); lying (12:3; cf. Prov 30:8); flattering (12:3); displaying general baseness (12:9; cf. Prov 30:12); and the doing of evil deeds (14:1). Many of these descriptions correlate with the description of the bad generation in Prov 30:1–14. Note the description of the atheist in Prov 30:2 as being “stupid” and “without human understanding,” the warning against the danger of being exposed as a “liar” in Prov 30:6; of using “deceit” and “lies” in Prov 30:8; of “denial” of Yahweh in Prov 30:9; of “slandering” in Prov 30:10; of haughtiness in Prov 30:13 and of exploiting poor people in Prov 30:14.

It therefore seems justifiable to infer that the suffering of the righteous people in Psalm 12 can be attributed to oppression by arrogant Jewish and also non-Jewish (cf. the occurrence of גוֹיִם) rulers who use speech as an instrument of deception, fraud, flattery, boasting, and questioning Yahweh’s authority in order to oppress and intimidate believers. Although it is difficult to pin the psalm to a specific date, it is obvious that the historic context of the final form of the text is that of the “piety of the poor,” a theology which developed from the need to restore dignity and provide hope to victims of social and religious oppression in the post-exilic era.<sup>34</sup> It would seem that these people sought comfort in the word of Yahweh and that they found vindication for themselves in those sections which promised that Yahweh would intervene on behalf of those people who represented true humility and piety.

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

It is a topos found in a number of wisdom texts that the words of Yahweh (or the words of wisdom) are compared to silver or gold. It seems that the comparison was initially used to emphasise the value of wisdom being greater than that of material wealth, with ultimate wealth being represented by silver or gold.<sup>35</sup> A different, but related, topos is the purity of words of wisdom. When these are compared to silver or gold, the focus is usually on *refined* silver or gold, and the silver or gold would consequently be described as “pure” or “refined” or of choice quality, or else a polarity will be formed between contaminated human thoughts and speech and the refined words of wisdom. An

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the excursus on עֲנִי/עָנִי in Alphonso Groenewald, *Psalm 69: its Structure, Redaction and Composition* (Altes Testament und Moderne 18; Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 147–149.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Prov 3:14; 8:10; 16:16.

example is provided by Prov 10:20, which compares the "tongue of the righteous," which is like "choice silver" (כסף נבחר), with the "heart of the wicked" which is "of little worth." In Prov 8:6–10, the purity of the words of Lady Wisdom is contrasted with the crooked nature of words of wickedness: "Listen, for I speak noble things, and the opening of my lips is uprightness (מישרים). For my palate speaks "truth" (אמת); wickedness (רשע) is an abomination to my lips. All the words (אמרים) of my mouth are righteous (בחדק); there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all "straight" (נכחים) to the one who understands, and "right" (ישרים) to those who find knowledge. Take my discipline rather than silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold." Proverbs 8:19 in the same broader context again emphasises, "My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice (נבחר) silver." The value of words of wisdom is thus further enhanced by comparing it to refined gold and choice silver.

Not only the "words" of Lady Wisdom are compared to refined gold and silver, but also the "words" or "teaching" of Yahweh. The words of wisdom are therefore identified with the word of Yahweh. The refined nature of Yahweh's word is emphasised for instance in Ps 19:8–11 where his "torah" is described as "perfect" (תמימה), his "commands" (פקודים) as "right" (ישרים); his "commandment" (מצוה) as "pure" (ברה); the "fear of Yahweh" as "clean" (טהורה); and his "judgements" (משפטים) as being "true and righteous altogether" (אמת צדקו יחדו). The complete revelation of Yahweh is then described in Ps 19:11 as "more desirable than gold, even the finest gold" (מזהב רב ומפז רב). There is thus a remarkable parallel between the speech of Lady Wisdom and the complete literary revelation of Yahweh. The same idea, that Yahweh's promise is refined, is also found in Ps 119:140, where it says that "Your word (אמרה) is much refined, and your servant loves it (אהבה)." This love for the word of Yahweh corresponds to the love for (the words of wisdom) to which the student of wisdom is exhorted, for example in Prov 4:5–6, "Acquire wisdom, acquire insight; do not forget, do not turn away from the words of my mouth (אמרי־פי). Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her (אהבה), and she will guard you."

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

A similar polarity is formed in Ps 12 between the speech of the wicked and the "words" of Yahweh which are "pure" and "refined." If Ps 12 is

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

It is noteworthy that the refined nature of Yahweh's word or words is mentioned in a number of texts which can be traced to the editing work of the Yahwistic wisdom editors.<sup>36</sup> It would seem from this that they inserted remarks of this nature wherever they expanded the influence of wisdom by establishing connections with Proverbs. We can sense in this an awareness of a body of literature which contained the true and trustworthy words of Yahweh and which provided hope in a world inundated with the treacherous speech of humans. The "words of Yahweh" in Ps 12:7 can thus be understood to refer in its immediate context to what he says in v. 6, that he will provide "safety." But in a larger context, the text on which the whole psalm builds is Prov 30:1–14, and Pss 3–14 which have been edited by the wisdom editors to form a response to Proverbs, would also be included as the "words" of Yahweh: in the immediate vicinity of Ps 12, it contains Yahweh's answer to what the fools *think* and *say* – the "evil schemes" (מזמות) they devise (Ps 10:2); the foolish *thoughts* that there is no God (Ps 10:4); the *thoughts* of the wicked that he will not be shaken (Ps 10:6); the *cursing*, *deceit* and *oppression*, *mischief* and *iniquity* which fill their mouth (Ps 10:7); the evil-doers' *thoughts* that God does not notice their crimes (Ps 10:11); the *renouncing* of God and the *thought* that God will not call to account (Ps 10:13). In reaction to all this "saying in the heart" and audible speech<sup>37</sup> Ps 12:6 announces what Yahweh says, and those are his pure and refined words, based on his revelation in Proverbs.

## F CONCLUSION

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

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Ps 12:7; Ps 18:31 = 2 Sam 22:31; Ps 119:140; Prov 30:5.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ps 3:3; 4:5; 10:6; 10:11; 10:13; 11:1; 12:5.

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

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