



PSALM 51: SOME INTERPRETATIONS EXAMINED

Robert Murray, SJ

The Psalm in its place beside Ps. 50

Our portion for study this year is approximately the first half of Book 2 of the Psalter. This portion further divides into two halves: the headings of Psalms 42 to 49 all refer to the 'Sons of Korah' while Psalms 51 to 57 all refer to David. In between the two groups stands Psalm 50; like the Korahite psalms it is ascribed to a levitical singer, but only one, Asaph. (His name reappears over Psalms 73-83, after which the Korahites return with a few psalms.)

Michael Goulder, in his ingeniously argued book *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (Sheffield, JSOT Supplement Series, 1982), makes a strong case that the ordering of the psalms in Book 2 is both deliberate and full of clues to the lost history of the northern cult centre of Dan. I mention this here only because at one point in his proposed reconstruction Goulder suggests that Ps. 50 was inserted where it is, 'as the psalm most like to 51' (p. 200). Indeed, a careful examination of the two psalms suggests that they do belong together, as a series of reflections on how humans (as a people and as individuals) stand before God in all their actions from evil to righteous, on the value of sacrifices, and how to live in ways pleasing to God. So I will start by reviewing the main links between 50 and 51.

(i) *Forensic images.* Ps. 50 pictures the Lord of the whole cosmos calling heaven and earth to be witnesses at the tribunal to which he summons his covenant people, to hear his judgment on their behaviour (50:4-7). In Ps. 51:5-6 the tribunal is over; all the charges against 'David' have been heard; he can do nothing but plead guilty.

(ii) *God's judgment on the offering of animal sacrifices* (50:8-15). God does not forbid these but does not wish for them; he prefers a sacrifice of thanksgiving (*todah*) and payment of vows (50:14-15 and 23). This judgment is less outright than those expressed in the name of God by many prophets (see Isaiah 1:11-12, Amos 5:21-22, Micah 6:6-8 and Jeremiah 7:21-23); the balance in Ps. 50 between God's rejection and acceptance of sacrifices is most closely paralleled by Ps. 51:18-19 and 21.

(iii) *Sin and its healing.* The last section of Ps. 50, a severe indictment of sinners, especially against loyalty and sincerity, has thematic parallels with a large part of Ps. 51, with the obvious difference that in the latter 'David' accuses himself of sin totally, though not in particulars; without excuse or qualification he throws himself on the loving mercy of God and shows himself both repentant and set on producing fruits of repentance, whereas the sinners described in Ps. 50 are blinded by self-

delusion and hypocrisy in their worship. Compared with the abundant expressions of joy in being forgiven in Ps. 51, Ps. 50 ends with God calling the sinners to offer sincere *todah*, and promising salvation (*yesha*^c) to those who take the right way.

Ps. 50, from v. 7 on, represents the speaker as God himself. This implies that the person actually uttering the words (in speech or song), at least on the first occasion, was acting in the role of prophet, as God's mouthpiece or messenger. A number of psalms seem to be in this form, suggesting that there were regular 'cultic prophets', attached to main shrines and later drawn from the levitical choirs; a notable example is the Asaphite Jahaziel, on whom the spirit of prophecy fell, to assure King Jehoshaphat of victory against a superior invading force (2 Chronicles 20:14-17).

The Speaker of Psalm 51

In contrast to Ps. 50, Ps. 51 is entirely spoken by an individual repentant sinner. Is he necessarily a single person speaking solely for himself? Could he be someone who could represent the whole people, implicitly inviting them to make the confession of sin and repentance their own? Of course, **the traditional heading** is against this: the speaker is **King David** after his adultery with Bathsheba and his constructive murder of Uriah. The Old Greek version ('LXX') and all those which follow it accept this as beyond question, while most scholars regard all the headings as later inventions. Yet – without any concession to fundamentalist literalism – could not David, during his long prostration and fast (2 Samuel 12:16-18) have been not merely interceding for his child's life, but also mentally composing the psalm? An alternative could be that a poet with great imaginative gifts composed the psalm and gave it dramatic force by ascribing it to David in the circumstances referred to in the heading. As Jonathan Magonet observes, the psalm fits the story very well.

But certain factors tell against the heading being original. Exactly half the psalms are headed *leDavid*, with or without musical directions. Of these 75, only 13 have references to episodes or places connected with David's life, mostly before he became king. Only Psalms 51 and 3 ('when David fled from Absalom'), are said to refer to events during David's reign. But (as has been strongly argued by scholars from Sigmund Mowinckel to John Eaton), a far larger proportion of the psalter responds best to analysis as being focused on **the Davidic kings in the first temple**, playing a central part in the new year festival which annually renewed the covenant God made with David. This covenant, quite distinct from that of Mount Sinai, is celebrated in Ps. 89. Ps. 72, headed 'for Solomon', invokes blessings on him and, through him, on the whole kingdom. It was Solomon who fulfilled David's wish to build the temple; the service of dedication (1 Kings 8) was conducted not by a high priest but by the sacral king himself. This account, edited according to Deuteronomic theology, has no hint of the king's sacral role, but Solomon's long prayer envisages a range of persons whose reasons for coming to pray might throw light on many of the psalms: individuals laden with their private troubles, groups, or the whole people threatened by disasters. Sometimes the king might come alone without ritual to pray for his people, as Hezekiah did in face of the Assyrian challenge to Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:14-19 = Isaiah 37:14-20); he might come to give thanks for his own healing (Isaiah 38:9-19), or in a crisis he could lead as many of his people as the temple could hold. I think this is the religious context of Ps. 44, a lament of the people after defeat (of the northern kingdom, Coulter plausibly argues); the plural voice is interrupted three times by one speaking in the first person, who is surely the king.

A unique ascription, neither Davidic nor individual

Jewish tradition has generally stayed with the heading of Ps.51 as we know it. But among the early Bible translations there is a quite different heading in the Syriac Bible, the so-called 'simple' version (*Peshitta*), which is generally agreed to have been translated for the most part by Jews in Edessa, though the last books seem to have been translated by Christians. The Syriac heading, like that of a considerable number of psalms in this version, begins by defining the psalm as prophecy: then follows 'on the people in Babylon, as confessing that they have sinned, and asking for mercy'. The translation of the whole text of the psalm, however, preserves the first person, yet David seems to be forgotten. We are on the way to all use of Psalm 51 by gatherings for penitential worship, perhaps like the fasts and lamentations referred to by Zechariah (7:5 and 8:18), and thereafter in liturgies of both Jews and Christians.

Jewish and Christian use of Ps. 51 in worship

It seems that only Christians sing or recite the whole psalm in regular worship. In the Catholic 'Divine Office' which all the clergy, men and women in religious vows, and many of the laity recite daily (monks and nuns sing the psalms antiphonally); this psalm, always called the *Miserere*, is the first in morning prayer on Fridays. I cannot say anything precise about Byzantine and Oriental practice, but it probably remains the prototype which the West followed.

Only one verse, 17, brings Jewish and Christian traditions together; in both it is detached from its original penitential context, to introduce an act of worship:

*O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth will declare thy praise.*

In Jewish worship the verse is traditionally recited silently by all (but often sung in Reform synagogues) immediately before the *Amidah*. In Catholic practice, the verse opens Morning Prayer every day; in Anglican worship several services include responsories between priest and people which begin with this verse and end with the first half of v. 12 answered by the second of v. 13.

I take the pleas for washing and purification (51:4 and 9) as metaphorical, though expressing a real spiritual experience. I have not researched Jewish interpretations, but I wonder how significant hyssop is in the psalm; could it have been supposed to have healing qualities as well as its use with water? In Catholic Sunday worship the Mass regularly used to begin with Ps. 51:9 sung in Latin to a plainsong melody:

*Asperges me hyssopo et mundabor;
lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor.*

*Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be made clean;
wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow,*

followed by the first verse of the Psalm, while the priest walked down the centre aisle and back, sprinkling the people with holy water, but real hyssop was not prescribed. The practice is regrettably often dropped, but it may be recovering its popularity. The same ritual procession and sprinkling takes place at the Easter Vigil after the font for baptism has been blessed, but then the accompanying chant is Psalm 42:1,

as the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, my God.

Some critical divergences in interpretation

I shall examine just two passages, verses 7-8 and 14, because translations made it possible to misuse both as Christian proof-texts: the first for the doctrine of original sin, the second for episcopal authority.

Psalm 51:7-8: Till recently, most Christian translations had something like:

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

(Revised Standard Version, 1952).

'Behold' is, of course, obsolete in English. It was a sign to draw attention, translating Hebrew *hin-nēh* or *hēn*: in this case the latter. But what was it calling for attention to? A strictly literal translation would be:

*In guilt was I writhed over [with birth-pains],
and in sin my mother grew hot for me.*

Even if the previous verses have made it clear that the speaker is accusing *himself* of sin, and accepting the divine Judge's sentence of guilt, the fact is that the *subject* of conception and childbirth is the psalmist's mother, while her son, from conception to birth, is the *object* of her two actions. Can he mean that she shared sin and guilt with him? I fear that the translators of the old Greek, by an added verb, may have hinted at that. Literally, it reads:

*behold, I was conceived in lawlessnesses [why plural?],
and in sins my mother yearned for me (ekissēsen me).*

The time would come when a reader of the Greek alone, influenced by Stoic insistence on reason controlling passion, might think her guilty of disorderly emotion. But any sensible reader today, preceded by the whole of Jewish tradition, will rule out maternal sinfulness. The psalmist was simply referring to the first two key moments in his existence. But what sin could a foetus, and then newborn baby, be guilty of?

To discuss this would lead us into the whole subject of Jewish and Christian teachings on **human proneness to sin**, prior to actual sin: the doctrine of the two *yetzarim* and the various Christian theories of '**original sin**' inherited from Adam as a result of his disobedience, first formulated by St Paul (Romans 5:12), who also confesses that he shares the experience that 'when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand' (Romans 7:15-24). In a way, the Jewish and Christian doctrines are parallel.

But back to our psalm, verses 7-8. The unsatisfactory translation quoted above has been considerably improved in the New RSV of 1989:

*Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

Jonathan Magonet, in the second edition of his delightful book *A Rabbi Reads the Psalms* (London, SCM Press, 1984), reveals what makes all the difference: identical in spelling to *hēn* – 'behold', there is another *hēn*, actually Aramaic but fairly common in Biblical Hebrew, meaning 'if' and introducing a conditional clause. This enables Jonathan to translate:

*Even if I was born in guilt,
and my mother conceived me in sin,
Behold!, the truth is what You desire within me
and in my inmost heart You show me wisdom* (pp. 112-114).

This may not explicitly absolve the psalmist's mother, but 'even if' changes v. 7 from reported fact to rejected possibility, and this is surely right.

Suddenly the idea came to me – isn't v. 7 is about the 'bad' yetzer's having been there from the beginning, while v. 8 is about the 'good' one responding to God's guidance? If I may paraphrase, rendering yetzer by 'impulse':

*Even though I harbour [the bad impulse for] sin since I was born –
indeed, ever since the first moment of my formation in my mother's womb,
You take delight in my cherishing, deep down, [the good impulse for] integrity,
and hidden in my heart, You teach me wisdom.*

(I render *emet* by 'integrity' because it involves the whole person, not merely speaking the truth.) The only difficulty about bringing in the two *yetzarim* is that as an opposed pair of impulses it is post-biblical; in the Bible *yetzer* is neutral, connected with the way God formed (verb *yatzar*) each creature. The evil *yetzer* appears in Genesis 6:5, after the fallen angels have begun to corrupt humankind. However, I submit that a contrast of this kind seems to be implicit in verses 7 and 8.

Time fails for me to outline a distinctively Christian reading of these verses (if that is possible). As a doctrine taught in the Catholic Church, the theme of 'original sin', still based on a reading of the paradise and fall story as history, though lacking any satisfactory meeting-point with intelligent ethical thinking, has become a burden which many are only too glad to drop. Now that Catholic teachers are encouraged, since a papal encyclical in 1943 and (more forcibly) the second Vatican Council (1962-65), to base exegesis on trying to investigate what a biblical writer would have meant *in his time and social context*, and what literary genre he was using, we Catholics cannot do better than to learn from Jewish teachers, past and present.

Psalm 51:14 is my other chosen passage. It is the third of three verses which form an elegant little pattern. In each the repentant sinner, 'David', asks God for the renewed grace of closeness to Him, each verse mentioning some gift of *ruach*. With Jonathan's permission I will quote from his version (the 'a's and 'b's are mine):

51:12 (a) *Create a pure heart for me, God* (b) *and put a firm and steadfast **spirit** in me.*
13 (a) *Do not cast me away from Your presence* (b) *or take Your holy **spirit** from me.*
14 (a) *Give me back the joy of Your salvation* (b) *and let a willing **spirit** uphold me.*

12a: 'David' asks God to re-create the essential organ for relationship with Him.

13a: 'David' asks God not to break or end that relationship again.

14a: 'David' adds to 12a the prayer that the renewal of heart, now called salvation, may be crowned by joy.

12b and 14b: 'David' prays that his restoration may be maintained by a strengthened and generous spirit, and

13b: that the gift may never be withdrawn.

I think we can understand this quite simply. The psalmist, once faithful in belief and worship, has fallen into a sinful state which makes him feel alienated from God; now God's grace is drawing him back. In v. 14b the psalmist asks for a '*willing*' spirit (*ruach nedivah*). The root *ndb* connotes readiness to volunteer for action or freewill offerings; secondly, perhaps linked by generosity, it

can suggest lordly status or nobility of thought. But in the following centuries Greek philosophy began to influence religious thinking, first Jewish, then Christian. Could this explain why the royally subsidized 'Seventy' translators rendered *ruach nedivah* by *pneuma hēgemonikon*, 'a spirit of leadership'? The Old Latin followed, with 'a princely spirit' (*et spiritu principali confirma me*). The serious result of the LXX's choice was surely due to the influence of Stoic moral teaching. This developed Plato's analysis of the human person into higher and lower parts: the higher, reason, must control the lower (the 'passions'). In 'IV Maccabees' the fictionalized 'seven sons' assure each other that they can deaden their sensitivity to torture by enlightened reason. In Stoic terminology reason was called *to hēgemonikon*, and this became an essential element in Christian moral and ascetical teaching. But that was not all. Just as Paul had described the various functions in the Church by the analogy of different parts of a body, the *hēgemonikon pneuma* was appropriated to the Church's hierarchy; handing-on of this by laying-on of hands is central in the oldest order for episcopal ordination. Irenaeus identifies this lordly gift with the Holy Spirit in all its Biblical manifestations. Some way from the *Miserere*?