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An analysis of Psalm 51

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Psalm 51 is a psalm of David that is written after the prophet Nathan confronts him about his adultery with Bathsheba. So the context here is that this is a psalm written after the psalmist has been confronted about his own serious sin.

Broyles classifies Psalm 51 as a penitential psalm: it is a psalm about sin. As Broyles goes on to explain, this is a psalm prompted by a guilty conscience (rather than by external circumstances) and is unique for “its interest in inner transformation, rather than a transformation of circumstances (e.g., enemies, sickness)” (Broyles 226).

As Broyles describes, the first two verses provide a brief summary of the psalmist’s problem: he has sinned and needs God to “blot out” the sin and wash him clean. These requests are made on the basis of God’s love and compassion (Broyles 227). The psalmist uses several synonyms for sin, each with their own connotations: **transgressions** (rebellion against a norm that defines a relationship), **iniquity** (crookedness or perversion), and **sin** (missing a mark) (Broyles 227).

Verse one uses a chiasm to focus on God’s love. This love is the reason God will help the psalmist, so it’s important for the psalmist to draw attention to it in order to persuade God.

(A) (x) *Have mercy on me, O God* (y) **according to your unfailing love;**

(B) (y) **according to your great compassion** (x) *blot out my transgressions*.

In a chiasm the middle part (the part I labeled “y”) is emphasized, so here the focus is on God’s love and compassion (rather than on the psalmist’s sins).

In the translation used in Goldingay’s analysis, verse two also contains a chiasm (Goldingay 126).

(A) (x) *Wash me abundantly* (y) **from my waywardness**

(B) (y) **from my failure** (y) *purify me*

So after the first verse emphasizes God’s character as the reason why God should help, the second verse emphasizes the error that must be corrected: the psalmist’s sin. Both verses include the request for God’s help (by “blotting out” and “washing”, respectively), so the repetition of the request in both verses also serves to emphasize the request. It’s also worth noting that the verses provide three different acts with different meanings within the metaphor of cleaning: “blot out” is like removing the record of an offense, “wash” is like sacramental washing, and “purify” means cleaning something that has been defiled (to clarify what “defiled” means here, note the explanation from Goldingay: “the effect of sin is comparable to the effect of contact with death… such acts defile a person, conveying an invisible stain, and sacramental washing is one element in removing such defilement”) (Goldingay 127).

Verses three through six are dedicated to the psalmist’s confession. They establish the rules of judgement and set up a contrast between God, the judge who is holy and perfect, and the psalmist, the human who has always been sinful (Broyles 227-228).

Verse three emphasizes the psalmist’s sins.

(A) For I know my **transgressions**,

(B) and my **sin** is always before me

This is also an example of intensification: in the first part of the verse, the psalmist is aware of his sins, and in the second part of the verse this is intensified so that the sin is always present: it is at the forefront of the psalmist’s mind rather than in the background. Eaton also notes that “The rebellious offences had been deliberate, and the penitent one confesses to well knowing them and having them ever before him” (Eaton 206). Here the psalmist is taking responsibility for his sins and acknowledging that this was an intentional sin. This transitions nicely into the psalmist indicating that since the psalmist knowingly did wrong, it is only fair that God judges him.

In verse four, the psalmist affirms God’s authority to judge and affirms that the psalmist has indeed sinned so God is right to judge him (Broyles 228). Verse three and the beginning of verse four match due to their focus on sin, and verses five and six match (in the translation Goldingay uses, this is because both verses start with “Yes”, but in the NIV what links the verses is their reference to the womb), which puts the end of verse four, “So that you are faithful in your speaking, right in your decision”, in the middle of two pairs (Goldingay 127). This position in the middle serves to highlight the key focus of this section of the psalm: it is right for God to judge the psalmist for this sin.

This sin is intensified even further with a merism in verse five:

(A) Surely I was sinful **at birth**,

(B) sinful **from the time my mother conceived me**.

The psalmist was sinful when he was born (and continued to be sinful afterwards), and the psalmist was sinful before he was born. These two elements combined make up the entirety of the psalmist’s existence. Thus this verse highlights the pervasiveness of sin. Goldingay notes that this can be expanded to a larger scale: “One can see how this declaration would apply to Israel as a whole, whose sinfulness goes back to the moment when its relationship with Yhwh was sealed at Sinai (and cf. Ezek. 16), and one can then apply it to the church, which is sinful through and through and always in need of reformation” (Goldingay 129). This is an example of how the psalm could be for corporate penitence rather than just a personal confession.

Verse six uses symmetric parallelism to illustrate a concept, starting with faithfulness and then specifying wisdom:

(A) Yet you desired **faithfulness** even in the *womb*;

(B) you taught me **wisdom** in that *secret place*.

We learn that just as the psalmist was sinful from conception, so he was also taught wisdom from conception. This knowledge granted by God is also how the psalmist is aware that he has sinned (Broyles 228).

Verses seven through twelve repeat the request to be cleansed and also ask for joy (Broyles 228). These requests highlight the idea that “penitence is to lead to full, joyful restoration” (Broyles 228).

Verse seven uses symmetrical parallelism and symbolism to illustrate how clean the psalmist will be after God cleans him:

(A) (x) *Cleanse me with hyssop,* (y) **and I will be clean**

(B) (x) *wash me*, (y) **and I will be whiter than snow**

We see that the psalmist is to be washed with hyssop. The “rite of sprinkling water from a sprig of the hyssop shrub” is a symbol of divine purification, a cleansing so pervasive that “faithfulness and spiritual wisdom may possess his deepest being” (Eaton 207). The word for “wash” has similar symbolism: it is “often applied to ritual (Ps. 26.6, Ex 30.19f.)” (Eaton 207). White is symbolism for cleanliness and purity, so being whiter than snow means being blameless and free of sin, which can only happen through God’s work. Goldingay explains why white has this symbolism: whiteness “is also a natural image for true cleansing, because whiteness contrasts either with bloodiness (Isa. 1:18) or with the dark clothing and dirty appearance taken on by people mourning their sin (e.g., Neh. 9: 1).” (Goldingay 131). The simile “whiter than snow” is also used in Isaiah 1:18 (Eaton 207).

Verse eight uses a metonym: it refers to the psalmist with a crushed spirit due to sin as “the bones you have crushed”. This metonym may be used to indicate that worship of God (and disobedience to God) is done with the whole body. Goldingay suggests that the metonym implies that “the supplicant has felt the results of sin in the body” (Goldingay 132). Eaton also compares broken bones to broken people and says they will be whole after God’s redemptive work: after God makes the sinner “whiter than snow”, then “the people, no longer like 'broken bones' (cf. Lam. 3.4), in wholeness sing and dance their thanksgiving” (Eaton 207).

Verse nine uses symmetrical parallelism to intensify the act of God forgiving the psalmist.

(A) (x) *Hide your face from* (y) **my sins**

(B) (x) *and blot out* (y) **all my iniquity**

At first, God is just not looking at the sins, but then God is taking a more active role in removing the sins. The other intensification is in the description of sins: the second phrase includes “all”, which emphasizes how the psalmist has many sins.

Verse ten uses a chiasm to emphasize the pure heart God will create in the psalmist:

(A) (x) *Create in me* (y) **a pure heart**, O God,

(B) (y) *and renew a steadfast spirit* (x) **within me**

The focus is on the redemptive work of God (the “pure heart” and “steadfast spirit”) rather than on the psalmist himself, because we can be forgiven and made new only by God’s power. As Goldingay points out, “only something that is broken can be made new” and thus the broken heart is a prerequisite for the creation of a pure heart (Goldingay 133). There is also a sense in which God is making new a spirit that was never working properly to begin with; God is creating something completely new (Goldingay 133). The use of “spirit” helps highlight this idea: “because "spirit" draws attention to the dynamism of the inner springs of a person's being, a dynamism that reflects the fact that God is spirit and is the one who breathes spirit into the person” (Goldingay 133).

Broyles also indicates that “The sequence of the petitions also matches the promises of

a new covenant in Ezekiel 36:25-27”: a request for cleaning, then a request for “a new heart” (“a pure heart” in the psalm) and “a new spirit” (“a steadfast spirit” in the psalm), then God’s “Spirit” (not removing “your Holy Spirit” in the psalm) (Broyles 229).

Verses thirteen through seventeen are “a distinctive variation of the vow of praise” (Broyles 229). This psalm is focused on sin, so the praise is written specifically for sinners (Broyles 229). This can be seen in particular with verse thirteen, which says that “sinners will turn back to you”: the sinners who turn back to God (including the psalmist) are the ones who will be giving this praise. This praise is also described in verse fourteen as conditional on God delivering the psalmist from guilt: “Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed… **and** my tongue will sing of your righteousness”. Broyles also indicates that “O Lord, open my lips” indicates that the praise must be “divinely initiated” (Broyles 229). Eaton refers to this opening as “the act of salvation, which fills the mouth with the song and power of thankful praise” (Eaton 207).

Verses thirteen through fifteen each say something about God: “about God's ways (v. 13) God's faithfulness (v. 14), and God's praise (v. 15)” (Goldingay 135). This is a set of “three parallel lines”, which means it is a tricolon (Goldingay 135). This special structure seeks to highlight what God is like, which is an important part of any praise. This is “the promise to give testimony to God's act of deliverance that often appears in a prayer psalm, though it puts an emphasis on the need for God to make that possible” (Goldingay 135).

Broyles also notes that verses sixteen and seventeen specify what kind of praise is appropriate (Broyles 229). Verse sixteen says that sacrifice and burnt offerings are unacceptable (Broyles 229). Eaton suggests that this is because the sins of the psalmists are too severe to be resolved with sacrifice. Verse seventeen uses a form of repetition that is similar to a chiasm in order to emphasize the broken spirit that the psalmist is offering to the Lord.

(A) (x) My sacrifice, O God, (y) **is a broken spirit**

(B) (y) **a broken and contrite heart** (z) you, God, will not despise.

Eaton says this broken heart is “the antithesis of the arrogant heart of the rebellious sinner” (Eaton 207). More important than any material offering the psalmist can give is that they are repentant and not repentant, and a broken heart is the best way to demonstrate this. Broyles notes that “This replacement of ritual sacrifice with a contrite spirit is also found in Isaiah 66:1-3” (Broyles 229).

The last two verses, verses eighteen through nineteen, contain another request that focuses on Israel as a group (rather than the psalmist as an individual) (Broyles 230). The sacrifices mentioned in verse nineteen differ from the sacrifices in verse sixteen in that they are “whole” and they are offered by people who are “righteous” (Broyles 230). This sets up a contrast between the sacrifices offered by the psalmist, who is still marred by sin, and the sacrifices offered by the citizens of Jerusalem, who, as Broyles says the psalm implies, are “repentant” (Broyles 230).

Some commentators think that verses eighteen through nineteen were added later to convert this prayer of individual confession to a prayer of corporate confession (Broyles 230). Eaton puts forth the alternative theory that this psalm is an individual representative (e.g., a king) praying on behalf of the congregation, and thus it would make sense to conclude with a prayer for the well-being of the community (Eaton 206). In this situation, verse nineteen is a promise of sacrifices as a way to give thanks for “the atonement which can only be made by repentance and grace” and “the restoration of right relationship” (Eaton 208). This theory may be supported by the comment made by Goldingay that this psalm is general in its description of sin: it expresses “a general sense of sinfulness and loss rather than referring to a specific sin or a specific experience of chastisement” (Goldingay 124). This use of general language makes the psalm more appropriate for such congregational penitence than a psalm with more specific language might be. In fact, Goldingay does hold the same theory as Eaton.

Goldingay provides additional evidence for this theory. For one thing, verse eleven refers to the Holy Spirit, which in the Old Testament is more associated with the people or the king as representative of the people than with an individual person. Additionally, the way the introductory verses discuss God’s characteristics and the nature of sin resembles the way God discusses his people’s sin in Exodus 34:6-7 (Goldingay 125).

Bibliography

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