

# THE HEADING OF PSALM 52

by

Samuel A. Meier

*The Ohio State University*

The following excursion into the book of Psalms is appropriate in a context honoring Reuben Ahroni, for his interests have led him to make contributions that have advanced the appreciation of the psalter (Ahroni, 1982). This discussion of the Masoretic heading for Psalm 52 is offered as a modest tribute to a good friend and colleague.

The chaos that reigns in the textual stability and interpretation of the Psalm headings can be easily understated. Many of the terms that are found there were already inscrutable to the Bible's earliest translators and remain perplexing today. What concludes a psalm in the Masoretic text may introduce the following psalm in the Septuagint.<sup>1</sup> Waltke (1991), modifying a proposal made by Gevaryahu (1975), has shown that certain phrases now introducing the Psalms as headings can be understood as postscripts originally appended to the preceding psalm in the collection. The relative stability of the Psalm headings within the Masoretic tradition<sup>2</sup> masks a considerable variety of alternatives that surface in other traditions: in the Brill critical edition of the Peshitta psalter, the first verses are entirely omitted because the variations in formulation are completely different from the Masoretic text, and even within the Syriac tradition they differ wildly among themselves (cf. Barnes, 1904, pp.

1. For example, the position of "Hallelujah!" is textually unstable in Pss 104:35, 105:45, 106:48, 113:9, 115:18, 116:19, 117:2, 135:21, 146:10, 147:20, 148:14, and 149:9. In the case of Ps 117:2, even the Masoretic tradition is indecisive with manuscripts preserving both options. The Masoretic text does not preserve it at all between Psalms 118 and 119, but the Qumran Psalms scroll read it at the end of Ps 118:29 while the Septuagint preserves it introducing Ps 119:1.

2. The only major variation within the Masoretic tradition in the case of Psalm 52:1-2 is that instead of reading the name Ahimelech, two Hebrew manuscripts read Abimelech, reflecting the tradition found in the Septuagint. The alternation between those two names is a textual problem even within the text of 1 Samuel itself; see McCarter on 1 Sam 21:2 (1980, p. 347) and 2 Sam 8:17 (1984, pp. 253-254).

lii-liii). With respect to Psalm 52 in particular, not all textual traditions preserve the connection with David's flight and Doeg's report to Saul. Ethiopic and Syriac Psalters preserve a number of formulations which tend to connect this psalm with Hezekiah and the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of more than one historical setting proposed for this psalm, it is appropriate to inquire into the exegesis that generated the Masoretic heading, for it is the contention of this essay that its original significance has been obscured by subsequent interpretation.

For the director. *A maskil*. Of David. When Doeg the Edomite came and informed Saul and said to him, "David came to the house of Ahimelech." (Ps 52:1-2)<sup>4</sup>

I have found no one who disagrees with the notion that the historical context established by this introit is designed to focus upon Doeg<sup>5</sup> or Saul<sup>6</sup> as the object of the vituperations that follow in the psalm.<sup>7</sup> After all, any one familiar with the narrative of 1 Samuel 21-22 knows that Saul gave the order

3. In printed Ethiopic Psalters one finds the heading "About Hezekiah" (*ba'enta hezeqyās*), with manuscripts preserving also phrases such as "About Sennacherib" (*ba'enta senākrem*) or "Prophecy about Hezekiah" (*tenbit ba'enta hezeqyās*). These reflect the extensive influence of the Syriac tradition where there are a number of titles for this psalm also focusing on the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem; cf. the title in the Urmi Bible, "On the wickedness and effrontery of Rabshaqeh when he taunted Hezekiah" (*'al 'awluteh wmarāhuteh drab šaqe' dhasseb lhezayā*).

4. Versification throughout is that of the Masoretic text, at variance with most English translations.

5. Doeg is by far the most commonly identified wicked man in this psalm. Cohen (1945, p. 165) explains the dissonance between Psalm 52 and 1 Samuel as a function of genre: "Should not...some allowance be made for the difference between poetical and prose treatment?" Childs (1971, p. 145) provides a reason why this psalm should be pictured as talking about Doeg: to supply an answer to a question that the book of 1 Samuel leaves unresolved, namely, what was Doeg's fate commensurate with his treachery?

6. Hengstenberg (1855, p. 211), Alexander (1864, p. 236), Makrakis (1950, p. 292). Among the earliest interpretations, Josephus identifies Doeg as a wicked man but still blames Saul for the outrage (*Antiquities* VI. 260-268).

7. Even among those who find the rubric inappropriate for Psalm 52, there is still agreement that the rubric is designed to identify either Saul or Doeg as the wicked man of the psalm (Mowinkel, 1924, p. 88; Dahood, 1968, p. 12; Tate, 1990, pp. 33, 36). Among those who find the rubric irrelevant for the psalm, one may still find specific identifications of the wicked man such as a cult prophet (Croft, 1987, p. 158), John Hyrcanus (Treves, 1988, p. 51), or possibly even Nehemiah (Snaith, 1934, p. 30). More generally, the cursed man may be seen as representative of those corrupted by wealth (Eaton, 1967, p. 143) or foreign rulers (Buttenweiser, 1969, p. 764).

to massacre innocent priests and their families, and that Doeg was the one who carried out the order.

Some assert that "the ascription identifies the villain with Doeg" (Cohen, 1945, p. 165), but a more cautious reading of the rubric confirms that it is not precise in identifying the wicked man in the psalm. Instead, it simply summarizes a biblical story, serving as a memory-jogger for one already familiar with the narrative background of 1 Samuel. It is the reader who must identify the morally appropriate features that correspond with each character named in the rubric: Doeg, Saul, David, Ahimelech. The introduction to Psalm 52 does not explicitly perform this task for the reader. Nevertheless, specific features of this psalm and the narrative of 1 Samuel imply that the one who penned it intended a different interpretation than that which has come to predominate. Who is the wicked man whom the psalm is addressing? To answer that question, one must turn first to the narratives that form the backdrop to the psalm.

#### *Doeg in 1 Samuel 21-22*

Apart from Psalm 52:2, Doeg appears in only six other verses in the entire Bible, all of them in 1 Samuel 21-22.<sup>8</sup> The meager material is out of all proportion to the extensive tirades that have been devoted to Doeg in Jewish and Christian traditions for the past two thousand years.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in recent scholarship one finds McCarter using deprecating language of Doeg, "the skulking Edomite" (1980, p. 349), a "sinister figure...lurking in the temple" (1980, p. 365). Rabbinic sources consistently depict him as one of the most heinous individuals who ever lived.<sup>10</sup> Does the text justify such pejoratives? The only six verses where Doeg appears outside of Psalm 52 are here presented in full for scrutiny (NRSV):

Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord; his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds. (1 Sam 21:8)

8. There are midrashic attempts to locate Doeg elsewhere in the Bible. The unnamed courtier in 1 Sam 16:18 (*ʿehad mēhannēʿārim*, "one of the young men") who recommends David to Saul as a skillful musician is identified as Doeg, making this recommendation with evil intent in the hopes he can arouse Saul's jealousy against David (Sanhedrin 93b).

9. The extensive allegorizing in early Christian exegesis tended to see Doeg as figurative of the Antichrist or Judas. See Cassiodorus' influential sixth century *Expositio psalmarum*.

10. For a survey see Ginzberg (1938, pp. 66-88).

Doeg the Edomite, who was in charge of Saul's servants, answered, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech son of Ahitub; he inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine." (1 Sam 22:9-10)

Then the king said to Doeg, "You, Doeg, turn and attack the priests." Doeg the Edomite turned and attacked the priests; on that day he killed eighty-five who wore the linen ephod. Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; men and women, children and infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep, he put to the sword. (1 Sam 22:18-19)

David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul." (1 Sam 22:22a)

When Doeg is first presented to the reader (1 Sam 21:8), it is in a parenthetical remark that is strategic for the later development of the narrative. There is little in this remark that alerts the reader to the role that Doeg will eventually play, and the writer reveals here neither antipathy nor fondness for the character. The fact that Doeg is highly placed in Saul's administration<sup>11</sup> can not be used as a critique of character, for at least two individuals with whom the narrator is sympathetic - David and Jonathan - are so positioned. His Edomite gentilic is similarly unimpressive for pre-judging his character, for the diverse ethnic composition of the administration of the early kings (including David) is well attested.<sup>12</sup> If the narrative were penned at a time of heightened animosity toward Edom,<sup>13</sup> then one might argue for a veiled

11. Cf. 1 Sam 22:9 (*wēhū' nissāb 'al 'abdē šā'āl*). One cannot be confident as to what precisely Doeg superintended: his supervision of shepherds (*'abbir hārō'im*; 1 Sam 21:8) may be a scribal error for "runners" (*hry'm < hry'm*) in the light of 1 Sam 22:17. But the LXX translates the phrase such that he becomes the keeper of Saul's mules (cf. McCarter, 1980, p. 348). In any case, the position itself is useless as a clue to an authorial set-up of Doeg's character.

12. Note the noble Uriah the Hittite in David's army (2 Sam 11) and David's foreign bodyguards, the Cherethites and Pelethites (Greenfield, 1962). The Hittite Uriah is listed elsewhere among David's mighty men as an elite soldier (2 Sam 23:39), along with an Ammonite of similar stature (2 Sam 23:37) and other (even Transjordanian) ethnic elements in 2 Sam 23:36-39 (McCarter, 1984, pp. 489, 493-494, 499). Ittai the Gittite is depicted as a faithful foreigner (*nokrī*, 2 Sam 15:19; cf. vv 18-22) entrusted with the command of one-third of David's forces alongside Joab and Abishai (2 Sam 18:2). There is little xenophobia in the books of Samuel in contrast to some later elements in post-exilic Judaism: even though the Philistines are the single most sustained enemy in 1-2 Samuel, some Philistines are depicted sympathetically (e.g., Achish king of Gath and Ittai the Gittite).

13. Later rabbinic exegesis exploited the Edomite designation to disparage Doeg, but since Edom becomes a rabbinic emblem for hostile Rome, this cannot be used to explore the text of 1 Samuel. The consonants of Edom (*'dm*), identical to the consonants for "red," were revocalized to suggest how bloody Doeg was, or how he would disgracefully make his opponents in debate

inuendo undermining Doeg's character; but there is no anti-Edomite strain in the books of Samuel.<sup>14</sup> Even more problematic is the fact that one can not be sure that Doeg was an Edomite (*ḏmy*), for the common confusion of *dalet* and *resh* results in many textual witnesses that understand him to be an Aramean (*ʾrmy*).<sup>15</sup> Which is original?

On the contrary, if there is a detectable foreshadowing in this verse introducing Doeg, it is arguably a positive predisposition on the writer's part. Doeg is in the vicinity of Yahweh's sacred precinct, and he is there because of a commitment to Yahweh: *neḥsār lipnê YHWH* ("detained before the Lord"). Although this phrase appears nowhere else in the Bible, two verses earlier David had used the same root (*ʾāsārāh* [*qal* passive], v. 6) to describe the putative state of sanctity of his unseen entourage. Because there is evidence for the special privileges accorded to Edomites in the sanctuary (Deut 23:8-9), corresponding to their unique, genealogically proximate relationship (Israel/Jacob was Edom/Esau's brother), it is apparent that Doeg is being depicted as one in close touch with Yahweh's cult. His relationship to the cult is not clear. Some scholars speak of his being "detained in the precincts of the sanctuary, and precluded from entering it, by some ceremonial impurity" (Driver, 1912, p. 175; cf. NJPS footnote). However, it should be stressed that the preposition *min* "from" is employed when the *niphal* form of the verb indicates that something is held back or restrained from something else (cf. *mēʾal* in Num 25:8; 2 Sam 24:21, 25; 1 Chr 21:22). One would therefore expect *millipnê* (instead of the present *lipnê*) in the verse under discussion if the intent were to depict Doeg as one prevented from approaching the sacred. It is possible that the unique phrase in 1 Sam 21:8 is the verbal counterpart to an infrequent noun *ʾāsārāh* (eleven times in the Bible) which seems to have designated a cultic occasion marked by some type of restraint upon the worshippers.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Doeg's detention before Yahweh (*neḥsār lipnê*

blush with shame (*Midraš Tehillim*, Psalm 52).

14. In only two other places is Edom mentioned in 1 and 2 Samuel, and in neither is Edom highlighted. Saul's victories over Edom (1 Sam 14:47) and David's subjugation of Edom (2 Sam 8:13-14) are described in the context of victories over other nations.

15. Josephus (*Antiquities* VI. 244, 254, 259) presents Doeg as an Aramean, following the LXX and Old Latin, a perspective which was predictably widespread in early Christian interpretation (e.g., Origen, Didymus the Blind, Ambrose of Milan).

16. Wolff (1977, p. 33) indicates that although *ʾāsārāh* often simply means "assembly," it may also signify "'withdrawal from work' and thus 'solemn holiday,'" citing Lev 23:36, Num 29:35, and Deut 16:18. Driver (1901, p. 195) notes that the term designates "a gathering or assembly..., from *ʾsr* 'to hold in, confine, enclose,' esp. one held for a religious purpose."

*YHWH*) may mean that he is participating in an *‘āsārāh*-assembly. Regardless of which of the two interpretations is correct, Doeg in either case is clearly a non-Israelite who is nevertheless a committed Yahwist, submitting to the requisite cultic dictates of a Yahwistic shrine.<sup>17</sup> These are reputable credentials for a man about whom the author has as yet supplied no other information.

When next Doeg appears, he is responding to Saul's tirade against his own men, as Saul accuses them of complicity with David and failing to report David's actions to him. Doeg does his duty in reporting to his king what he has seen. All that he reports, except for one item, can be confirmed as unembellished, accurate statements. He reports no dialogue for apparently he heard nothing. His words describing David's arrival at Nob and his visit with Ahimelech correspond precisely to the earlier narrative:

David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. (1 Sam 21:2)

"I saw the son of Jesse come to Nob to Ahimelech the priest." (1 Sam 22:8)

He next claims that the priest gave David the sword of Goliath. This, too, agrees with what the reader had been told when the priest informed David that Goliath's sword was available should he need it:

"The sword of Goliath...is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod: if you will take that, take it, for there is none here except that one." David said, "There is none like it; give it to me." (1 Sam 21:10)

Thirdly, Doeg informs Saul that the priest provided David with provisions (*sêdāh*), also in accord with the earlier narrative: "The priest gave him [David] holy bread, for there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence" (1 Sam 21:7). Curiously, Doeg actually understates the offense in making no reference to the kind of provisions given by the priest to David (cf. Miscall, 1986, p. 134). If the narrator were interested in depicting Doeg as a scoundrel, he could easily have had Doeg stress to Saul David's possible transgression of the *sancta*. Instead, Doeg relates to Saul what he saw with conciseness in short phrases that are to the point and unembellished. He has no reason to do otherwise, for Doeg may have been under the same impression that David gave to the priest, namely, that David was operating

17. Later Jewish tradition emphasized that Doeg was not an outsider but possessed intimate acquaintance with the Torah (*Sotah* 21a; *Haggiga* 15b; *Midrash Tehillim* Psalm 3:4, 49:2, 119:50) as a leading member of the Sanhedrin (*Midrash Tehillim*, Psalm 52).

under King Saul's orders (1 Sam 21:3, 9). There would have been no reason up to this point for Doeg to have thought otherwise of this universally admired general and favorite of the king.<sup>18</sup> There is nothing inflammatory in Doeg's words: they relay information to Saul that corresponds to the reality of which the reader has already been informed. It is indefensible to describe Doeg's words as a "betrayal" of David (Delitzsch, 1871, p. 144).

Nevertheless, there is one piece of information that comes as a surprise to the reader and may provide grounds for labeling Doeg as a liar: "he [Ahimelech the priest] inquired of the Lord for him [David]." There is indisputable evidence that this is not an exaggeration: the priest himself, when confronted by Saul, affirms five verses later that he did inquire of God on David's behalf: "Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? By no means!" (1 Sam 22:15).<sup>19</sup> Given the sad textual state of the books of Samuel, where entire paragraphs have been omitted by mistake,<sup>20</sup> it is quite possible that the priest's oracle-inquiry was narrated (as other oracle inquiries in Samuel<sup>21</sup>) but lost through scribal error. In any case, Doeg remains unimpeached as a reliable witness whose words correspond to what is depicted as actually happening. He does not interpret what he sees, nor does he seek to account for what transpires. He does not orchestrate facts in any way that might suggest a prejudice for or against David and the priest.

With the third appearance of Doeg in 1 Sam 22:18-19, the reader may find good cause to consider him a reprehensible character. At this point, unlike all of Saul's other men who refuse to kill the priests, Doeg is specifically singled out by Saul to slay them, and he obeys. Indeed, he exceeds his orders by not only killing the priests but also exterminating their families and even their animals - not a living thing remains. It has been pointed out that this event echoes Saul's earlier failure in 1 Samuel 15 to exterminate the Amalekites, when Saul was ordered by Yahweh to kill men, women, children, and animals.<sup>22</sup> The tragic irony is obvious as Saul fails to

18. In the narrative progression, Saul's affection toward David fluctuating with hostility seems to baffle Saul's men (1 Sam 18:2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 17, 19, 21-22; 19:1, 6-7, 10-11). It certainly baffles David and Jonathan (1 Sam 20:1-2) immediately before David's flight to Nob.

19. *Hahillōti* may be translated as either "to profane" or "to begin." Assuming the former possibility, one may translate as the REB, "Have I on this occasion done something profane in consulting God on his behalf?"

20. For example, a paragraph should be inserted within 1 Sam 10:27 (McCarter, 1980, pp. 198-199) and another within 2 Sam 11:24 (McCarter, 1984, pp. 278, 283).

21. 1 Sam 23:2, 4, 9-12; 30:7-8; 2 Sam 5:19, 23-24.

22. Miscall (1986, p. 136); see already *Yoma* 22b.

exterminate non-Israelites in the one case, while in the other case he succeeds in obliterating an entire Israelite community. But it is precisely this parallel that makes Doeg's actions comprehensible. He is not a vicious rogue who can not wait for an opportunity to kill; he instead has learned from Saul's negative example the tragedy of failing to follow through in executing orders. Because a prophet had once berated Saul for not slaying an entire community when told to do so, from Doeg's perspective he must make sure that Saul, along with himself, is not open to such a charge again. Doeg also may have had the positive example of David who, when told by Saul to acquire 100 Philistine foreskins as a dowry, presented Saul with double the slain originally requested (1 Sam 18:25-27).<sup>23</sup> It is a tragic and misguided obedience, and Doeg may justifiably be labelled a murderer, but he is obeying his king with defensible motives. There is no place even implicit in the text where base motives can be argued for Doeg's actions.

In the final mention of Doeg outside of Psalm 52, David simply affirms how he knew that Doeg would report to Saul what he had seen take place between the priest and David. There is no aspersion cast upon Doeg, for as an official in Saul's employ, who as yet had known nothing of David's flight from Saul, Doeg is simply doing what his king expects of him. David underscores Doeg's relative innocence in doing what he is ordered by his king when David points the finger at himself, not Doeg: "I am responsible for the lives of all your father's house" (1 Sam 22:22). Throughout the narrative of 1 Samuel 21-22, Doeg has behaved as a loyal official of the king, reporting accurately what he has seen without prejudice. He is certainly not a liar,<sup>24</sup> and the most for which he can be indicted is that he aimed to please his (apparently) threatened king by an efficient obedience that resulted in the loss of innocent human life.

23. So MT and Old Latin: LXX indicates that David still killed only one hundred Philistines (McCarter, 1980, p. 316).

24. Commentators who read 1 Samuel unprejudiced by a particular interpretation of Psalm 52 admit that Doeg "was no liar, at the most only an informer, who told Saul the truth" (Tate, 1990, p. 36; cf. Mowinckel, 1924, p. 88; Anderson, 1972, pp. 402-403; Stuhlmüller, 1983, p. 262).

*David in 1 Samuel 21-22*

If there is one characteristic that identifies David in these chapters, it is that he is a liar. The first words from his mouth in this section are a calculated subterfuge as he informs a perplexed priest, "The king has commissioned me (*siwwani*) with a matter and said to me, "Let no one know anything of the matter with respect to which I am sending you (*ʿānōkī šōlēhākā*) and about which I have commissioned you (*siwwitikā*)" (1 Sam 21:3a). David is, of course, running for his life from king Saul who is determined to kill him (1 Sam 20:30-42). Not only does he lie about receiving a commission from king Saul, but he eloquently elaborates and embellishes the falsehood by placing words on Saul's lips that Saul never spoke. The three times in this statement that he repeats how Saul has sent (*šlh*) or commissioned (*swh*) him underscore that this is not a casual misstatement but a deliberate deception.

David's second lie is in response to the priest's query as to why David is traveling alone.<sup>25</sup> Presumably David's first lie (a secret mission of the king) should have preempted any further need to explain, but David waxes eloquent anyway: "And as for the young men, I have made an appointment<sup>26</sup> for such and such a place" (1 Sam 21:3b). David wants the priest to believe that David is accompanied by an entourage from the king, even though the larger narrative makes it clear that Jonathan alone knows of David's flight (1 Sam 20:39-42), that David comes to Nob alone (*wayyāqom wayyēlak...wayyābō*?, 1 Sam 21:1-2), and that David's further travels after leaving Nob are as a solitary figure (*wayyāqom...wayyibrah...wayyābō*?, 1 Sam 21:11). When he flees to Philistine territory he is still unaccompanied (1 Sam 21:11-16), and he leaves Philistia alone (*wayyēlek...wayyimālēt*, 1 Sam 22:1). No one joins him until the reader is explicitly informed in 1 Sam 22:1-2 that after reaching the cave of Adullam, "his brothers and all his father's house heard and came down there, and there were gathered to him any man in distress...."

When the priest considers provisioning David with sacred bread, he returns to the issue of David's unseen entourage and their need for a certain degree of cultic cleanness, specifically abstention from sexual intercourse. David spins a third lie in response:

25. Reis (1994) pictures both David and the priest posturing publicly to mislead Doeg. Her error is apparent in three initial assumptions that cannot be supported from the narrative: "Ahimelech...suspects that David is in flight from Saul.... The priesthood sympathizes with David, I believe, and Ahimelech wants to help him" (p. 62).

26. Cf. McCarter (1980, pp. 346-347) and Driver (1912, p. 173).

Indeed women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy? (1 Sam 21:6, [NRSV 21:5])

David emphasizes the continuity of his present behavior with all his previous missions (*kitmól šilšōm*) on the king's behalf. To do so, he must make up further details about his non-existent entourage and consequently wades deeper in deception.

The next time David speaks, he lies again. He needs a weapon, for, in his haste to elude Saul, he had neither time to prepare provisions nor to arm himself. Instead of being satisfied simply to ask the priest for any available arms ("Is there not in your hand a spear or a sword?" 1 Sam 21:9a), he proceeds to embellish his deception with a fourth lie: "I took in hand neither my sword nor my weapons because the king's commission was urgent" (1 Sam 21:9b). The phantom mission of the king has not only become a secret mission, and then a mission with a number of other men, and even further a mission in which the men are in a requisite state of sanctity, but now it has become an urgent mission. Every time David has opened his mouth up to this point he has lied, and the narrator appropriately depicts the inevitable compounding of lies that plague the liar.

It is these lies that doom the priest when Saul later interrogates him. The priest is under the misimpression (generated by David) that Saul sent David on a covert mission, and it is only natural that the priest will therefore do his best to deny to Saul any knowledge of David's activity. He therefore only vaguely alludes to David's activities in the most general of terms, and concludes by noting, "Your servant knows nothing of all this, great or small" (1 Sam 22:15). This is precisely the wrong answer. Saul's passion is that he wants people to inform him freely of David's activities (1 Sam 22:8; 23:19-23). The priest, misled by David, believes that he is cooperating with the king by maintaining ignorance of the "secret" mission. David's lies have trapped the priest into silence, and so inviting his own execution. As David himself confesses to the sole surviving priest, "It is I (*ʾānōkî*) who am responsible<sup>27</sup> for every life of your father's house" (1 Sam 22:22b).

27. The significance of the MT *sabbōtî* in its standard meaning, "I have gone around," is peculiar, and the ancient versions and modern translations translate it as if the consonants *sbty* were *hbtv* (Driver, 1912, p. 182).

*Psalm 52*

It is not easy to classify formally Psalm 52, hovering as it does between a lament and a didactic psalm. As Kraus (1961, p. 393) writes, "Grosse Schwierigkeiten bietet die Analyse und Bestimmung der Gattung in Psalm 52.... Man wird doch an zwei disparate Teile denken müssen, die später zusammengefügt worden sind." Dahood (1968, p. 12) laments the "inability of scholars to fit this Psalm into one of the standard literary categories." Westermann (1965) considers it a lament of the individual and a didactic psalm (p. 80), and a declarative psalm of praise of the individual (p. 102). Sabourin (1972, pp. 349-395) treats it as a didactic psalm, specifically a prophetic exhortation along the lines of Isa 22:15-19 (p. 398; cf. Weiser, 1962, p. 411). Gerstenberger (1988, pp. 215-218) analyzes it as communal instruction, a metamorphosis of older complaint forms. There has been little progress over the past 100 years since Gunkel (1892, p. 228) observed that it was "nach seiner Gattung nicht ganz leicht zu bestimmen."

In spite of the psalm's elusive genre, there is no dissent that the wicked man who is excoriated in this psalm is primarily depicted as a liar whose tongue is his chief liability<sup>28</sup>:

Why do you boast (*tithallel*) in evil...?  
 Your tongue devises mischief like a sharpened razor...<sup>29</sup>  
 You love...deception more than speaking truthfully...  
 You love all destructive words,  
 Oh, deceitful tongue.

If one filters this psalm, unembellished with midrash, through the lens of 1 Samuel 21-22, as Ps 52:2 invites the reader to do, the only possible application of these words is to David. They become an appropriate exposition of David's concluding confession that he is the one responsible for the deaths at Nob: David's deceitful tongue brought about the destruction of the innocent. These words become the self-reproach by which David, speaking to himself, convicts himself and confesses his sin.

28. The initial verses are commonly perceived as reminiscent of a prophetic rebuke, particularly of Isa 22:15ff. (Kraus, 1961, p. 393; Weiser, 1962, pp. 411-412; Croft, 1987, p. 158; Tate, 1990, p. 35).

29. This interpretation follows the Masoretic accentuation (cf. NJPS, NIV, NASB, AV). Others repunctuate: "You devise mischief, your tongue is like a sharpened razor" (cf. RSV, NRSV, NEB, REB, NJB, NAB).

The literary function of the opening verses of Psalm 52 as an apostrophe by David addressed to himself is not problematic. Other psalms depict speakers addressing themselves, most lucidly when there is a vocative of self-address, "O my soul!"

Bless Yahweh, O my soul!...  
 Who forgives all your sins,  
 Who heals all your diseases,  
 Who redeems your life from the pit,  
 Who crowns you with loyal love and mercy,...  
 So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.  
 (Ps 103:1-5)

The second person addressed in these verses is not the psalmist's audience but himself, his "soul." In the book of Psalms, a psalmist addressing himself in this fashion may ask his "soul" (*napšî*), i.e., himself, to bless Yahweh (Ps 103:1, 2, 22; 104:1, 35), to praise Yahweh (Ps 146:1), to wait (Ps 62:6), and to return (Ps 116:7). Apostrophes to oneself are also found outside poetry, as when Qohelet records his ruminations as words addressed to himself:

I said in my heart, "Come (2ms) now, I will test you (2ms) with pleasure, and enjoy (2ms) what is good." (Ecc 2:1)

Read in this fashion, the opening words of Psalm 52 represent David's self-indictment, his appraisal addressed to himself of the truly heinous crime for which he is responsible.<sup>30</sup>

The psalm continues by detailing the consequences that will plague the man whose deceitful tongue brings destruction (vv 7-8). All of these, when read from the perspective of 1 Samuel, are entirely appropriate for David. In 1 Samuel, kingship was not depicted as an irrevocable gift from God: Saul through his disobedience saw his kingship and dynasty terminated. David's kingship, too, is susceptible to the same contingencies that brought down Saul, at least up until 2 Samuel 7.<sup>31</sup> One need only recall the consequences that resulted from David's sin with Bathsheba, when David acknowledges his sin

30. David's reputation in battle makes the reference to the "warrior" (*gibbôr*) in v 3 quite appropriate in this context as an ironic or satirical comment of self-abnegation. There is no biblical evidence that Doeg could be described as a *gibbôr*, apart from the dubious valor required to massacre a priestly community.

31. One should add these elements to the royal themes observed in Psalm 52 by Eaton (1975, p. 73).

and affirms that he deserves death (2 Sam 12:5-13). As David sees Saul's demise, so he fears for his own:

So God will break you down for ever,  
 He will snatch you up and tear you away from your tent,  
 And uproot you from the land of the living. Selah.  
 And the righteous will see and fear, and laugh at him.<sup>32</sup> (Ps 52:7-8)

The correspondence with David's sin with Bathsheba is of more than passing significance for understanding the exegesis that motivated the introduction to Psalm 52. It is probably no accident that the two psalms associated with David's sin with Bathsheba and David's sin in lying to the priest at Nob are juxtaposed in the psalter. This thematic congruence is reinforced by their rubrics which along with Psalm 54 have a similar structure found nowhere else among psalm introductions.<sup>33</sup> Both psalms, when read through the interpretive lens of the books of Samuel, picture David acknowledging his sin and his precarious position before God, and then moving on to an expression of confidence. In the words of Psalm 51 (vv 5, 13, 15):

For my transgressions I know,  
 And my sin is before me always....  
 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
 And do not take your holy spirit from me....  
 I will teach rebels your ways.

32. The words on the lips of the mocking righteous in v 9 introduce a new indictment moving beyond the psalmist's focus upon a malicious and deceitful tongue to a misplaced trust in wealth ("Behold the man who did not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his wealth, relied upon his mischief"). The psalmist himself never describes the wicked man as wealthy but instead employs the voice of those who gloat to convey this perspective. This is the only reference in the psalm to the wicked man's status as a wealthy man, which the writer of the rubric finds it acceptable to overlook: wealth is a quality which is never said to characterize either Doeg or David.

33. Of the thirteen psalms containing a reference to an historical context, only Psalms 51, 52, and 54 begin with *bēbō' (PN)*, where the subject of the verb is respectively Nathan, Doeg, and the Ziphites. As Tur-Sinai (1950, pp. 271-272) observed, these three do not appear in the order which they would be expected if they were arranged in chronological order (cf. already the fourth century Ambrose of Milan's *De apologia prophetæ David* #41-42). Childs (1971, p. 148) raises but does not answer the question: why are the "historical psalm titles clustered so thickly among Pss. L-LX?" It is evident that some editorial unity is present in these psalms.

In Psalm 52 there is also a statement of confidence following the acknowledgment of sin:

But<sup>34</sup> I,<sup>35</sup> like a green olive tree in the house of God,  
 Will<sup>36</sup> trust in the loyal love of God for ever and ever.  
 I will praise you forever because you have acted,  
 And I will wait for your name.... (Ps 52:10-11)

The peculiar congruence of the two rubrics for these juxtaposed psalms prompts mutual illumination of the respective texts. When Psalm 52 begins with, "When Doeg came (*bēbō* [PN])....", there is no necessary focus upon Doeg any more than when Psalm 51 begins with the same phrase describing Nathan: "When Nathan came (*bēbō* [PN])...." In both cases, the coming of the individual in question provides the narrative background for David's ultimate awareness of his offense: Nathan purposefully reveals David's fault directly to David, and Doeg's speech to Saul unintentionally sets in motion a series of events that eventually expose David's lies.

At the time of the composition of the biblical text, the writers felt comfortable in depicting their heroes and heroines as humans who shared the faults and weaknesses of humanity. Post-biblical tradition tended to exalt the stature of these figures to dimensions greater than life, minimizing their shortcomings. The psalm introductions hover between these two extremes. However, it is only the post-biblical tendency that encourages one to see Doeg or Saul as the wicked man of this psalm, for the one who originally penned the rubric of Psalm 52 perceived the poem as a self-indictment and confession

34. With good reason, the *waw* introducing v 10 is typically translated as adversative, for the *waw* adversative is a common feature of individual laments marking a transition to a confession of trust (Westermann, 1965, pp. 70-75). The thematic contrast can be easily seen in the different objects of the verb *bth* (vv 9, 10) and the varying tree imagery (vv 7, 10).

35. A predication "I am like a green..." appears in many translations (NEB, NIV, NRSV, NASB, REB, NJPS), but the translation employed here follows that of the NJB and NAB (cf. Dahood, 1968, p. 11). The former choice prejudices one to perceive the psalmist as a different person from the wicked described in the first part of the psalm, while the latter is non-committal and allows either the traditional interpretation or the view espoused here.

36. Although the verb is in the perfect (*bāhiti*), it should be translated as future in accord with the temporal adverbs that accompany it ("forever and ever") and the parallel verbs in the imperfect that follow in v 11 (*ʾōdēkā, waʾāqawweh*). On the alternation of prefix and suffix forms in poetry see Niccacci (1990, pp. 193-197). Most English translations translate it as a characteristic present-future ("I trust" - NRSV, NASB, REB, NJPS, NJB). Translations of the perfect as past tense, "I trusted...forever and ever," (Weiser, 1962, p. 411) do not make sense with these particular adverbs.

by a David who, according to the narrative trajectory of 1 Samuel, had lied but eventually recognized the tragic consequences of his deception. Far from seeing how the rubric "makes a clumsy use of the narrative" (Briggs, 1907, p. 12), it is apparent that it is the readers of the text who have been clumsy in misreading an ancient exegete's brief note intended to guide the reading of Psalm 52 (like Psalm 51) as a confession and not an execration.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahroni, R. 1982. "The Unity of Psalm 23," *Hebrew Annual Review* 6:21-34.
- Alexander, J. 1864. *The Psalms Translated and Explained*. Edinburgh.
- Anderson, A. A. 1972. *The Book of Psalms: Volume 1 Psalms 1-72*. New Century Bible. London.
- Barnes, W. E. 1904. *The Peshitta Psalter According to the West Syrian Text*. Cambridge.
- Briggs, C. A. 1907. *Psalms, Volume 2*. International Critical Commentary. 1907.
- Childs, B. S. 1971. "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16:137-150.
- Cohen, A. 1945. *The Psalms*. Soncino Books of the Bible 7. London.
- Croft, S. J. L. 1987. *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 44. Sheffield.
- Dahood, M. 1968. *Psalms II, 51-100*. Anchor Bible 17. Garden City.
- Delitzsch, F. 1871. *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*. Volume 2; translated by Francis Bolton. Reprint 1973, Grand Rapids.
- Driver, S. R. 1901. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*. Third edition, International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1902. *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. Tenth Edition. New York.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1912. *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*. Second edition. Oxford.
- Eaton, J. H. 1975. *Kingship and the Psalms*. Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 32. Naperville.
- Eaton. 1967. *Psalms*. London.
- Gerstenberger, E. S. 1988. *Psalms - Part 1*. The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 14. Grand Rapids.

- Gevaryahu, H. M. I. 1975. "Biblical Colophons," *Congress Volume: Edinburgh, 1974*, pp. 42-59. Supplement to *Vetus Testamentum* 28; ed. J. A. Emerton. Leiden.
- Ginzberg, L. 1938. *Legends of the Jews*. Volume IV. Philadelphia.
- Greenfield, J. C. 1962. "Cherethites and Pelethites," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 557. Nashville.
- Gunkel, H. 1892. *Die Psalmen*. Göttingen.
- Hengstenberg, E. W.. 1855. *Commentary on the Psalms. Vol. 2*. Edinburgh.
- Kraus, H-J. 1961. *Psalmen*. Second Edition. *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* 15/1. Neukirchen.
- Makrakis, A. 1950. *Commentary on the Psalms of David*. Chicago.
- McCarter, P. K. 1980. *I Samuel*. Anchor Bible 8; Garden City.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *II Samuel*. Anchor Bible 9; Garden City.
- Miscall, P. D. 1986. *I Samuel: A Literary Reading*. Bloomington.
- Mowinckel, S. 1924. *Psalmenstudien VI. Die Psalmsdichter*. Reprint 1961. Amsterdam.
- Niccacci, A. 1990. *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose*, Translated by W. G. E. Watson. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 86. Sheffield.
- Reis, P. 1994. "Collusion at Nob: A New Reading of 1 Samuel 21-22," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 61:57-73.
- Sabourin, L. 1974. *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*. New York.
- Snaith, N. H. 1934. *Studies in the Psalter*. London.
- Stuhlmüller, C. 1983. *Psalms I (Psalms 1-72)*. *Old Testament Message* 21. Wilmington.
- Tate, M. E. 1990. *Psalms 51-100*. *Word Biblical Commentary* 20. Dallas.
- Treves, M. 1988. *The Dates of the Psalms: History and Poetry in Ancient Israel*. Pisa.
- Tur-Sinai, N. H. 1950. "The Literary Character of the Book of Psalms," *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 8:263-81.
- Waltke, B. K. 1991. "Superscript, Postscripts, or Both," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110:583-596.
- Weiser, A. 1962. *The Psalms*. *Old Testament Library*. Philadelphia.
- Westermann, C. 1965. *The Praise of God in the Psalms*. Translated by K. R. Crim. Richmond. [*Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen*. 1961. Göttingen.]
- Wilson, G. H. 1986. *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. *Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series* 76. Chico.