

WAS PSALM 50 MISPLACED?

SHUBERT SPERO

I

- 1 *A Psalm of Asaph,
God [E], God [Elohim], the Lord has spoken and called the earth,
from the rising of the sun to its going down.*
- 2 *Out of Zion the perfection of beauty, God has shined forth.*
- 3 *May our God come and not keep silent.
Before Him a fire consumes and storms are around Him.*
- 4 *He calls to the heavens above and to the earth,
so that He may judge His people.*

II

- 5 *Gather unto Me My pious ones
those that made a covenant with Me by the offering of sacrifice*
- 6 *And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God He is judge, selah.*
- 7 *Hear O my people and I will speak;
O Israel and I will testify against thee, God, thy God am I.*
- 8 *I will not reprove you for your lack of sacrifices
nor are your burnt offering always before Me.*
- 9 *I will take no bullock out of your house nor he-goats out of your herd.*
- 10 *For every beast of the forest is Mine
as are the cattle on a thousand hills.*
- 11 *I know all the fowls of the mountains
and all that move in the fields are mine.*
- 12 *If I were hungry would I not tell you?
For the world is Mine and all that it contains.*
- 13 *Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?*
- 14 *Offer unto God a thanksgiving sacrifice
and unto the most High pay your vows.*
- 15 *Call me on the day of trouble, I will deliver you and you will honor
me.*

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III

- 16 *But unto the wicked, God says: "Why is it for you
to declare My statutes and take My covenant in your mouth?*
- 17 *Seeing that you hate chastisement and cast My words behind you.*
- 18 *When you see a thief you keep company with him
and your portion is with adulterers.*
- 19 *You employ your mouth for evil and your tongue frames deceit.*
- 20 *When you sit, you speak against your brother;
you slander your own mother's son.*
- 21 *These are the things you have done, should I have kept silent?
You thought I was like you. But I will reprove you
and set your case before your own eyes.*
- 22 *Consider this you who have forgotten God,
lest I destroy from which none will be delivered.*
- 23 *Those who offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, honor Me.
And he who orders his way aright, I will show the salvation of God.*

[The translation of Psalm 50 follows the Old JPS with slight alterations by the author to make it more readable]

In the Book of Psalms there are a total of 12 in which the name of Asaph appears in the superscription. Eleven of these appear as a group and constitute Psalms 73-83. The 12th occurs earlier and appears as Psalm 50. The question arises: Was Psalm 50 simply misplaced or was it located there deliberately and, if so, why? I will attempt an answer by showing a connection between (1) the unusual content of Psalm 50; (2) the special role of the historical Asaph; and (3) the location of Psalm 50 in that portion of the book which ends with Psalm 72.

A quick perusal of Psalm 50 reveals that it contains none of the usual elements of prayer, such as turning to God either in praise or in supplication. Instead, Asaph begins by describing the terrifying phenomena which accompany God's appearance as He goes forth from Zion and reaches out to all the earth (1-4). Calling upon God to judge the peoples, Asaph, in an almost unique gesture, invokes three different names of God consecutively. Then, in an abrupt change, he begins to speak in the first person, as if it were God speaking, addressing a group that had evidently come to the Temple to sacrifice. Employing biting irony, Asaph denounces the idea that God in any sense

needs animal sacrifices. The only two liturgical attitudes sanctioned by Asaph are to come before God in thanksgiving or to petition Him for deliverance (14,15). The force of his criticism is comparable to some of the classic expressions of Isaiah (Isa. 1:11) and Amos (Amos 5:21) on the subject.

In the third and final part of the psalm, Asaph, still speaking in the name of God, turns to the wicked, those who seek out the company of thieves and adulterers and who speak evil and slander their own brothers (16-20). In addition to chastising them (21,22), Asaph poses the question that reflects the unique sensitivity of a prophet: *Why is it for you to declare My statutes and speak of My covenant . . . seeing that you cast My words behind you?* (16,17). Here we have the cutting logic of the prophet, pointing to the inconsistency and hypocrisy of one who ignores God's word in the realm of the moral, yet goes on to proclaim His word in areas that suit him. Or one who utters words in praise of God with the same speech organs he uses to slander, insult and offend (19,20).

What is unusual therefore about Psalm 50 is that this is the kind of subject matter and literary style we associate with the *Sifrai Neviim* [Books of the Prophets], rather than with the *Sifrai Ketuvim* [Books of the Writings].

Let us now turn to the individual to whom this psalm is attributed. Who was Asaph? In establishing the sacred service for the future Temple, David organized the priestly courses and the Levitical choirs and orchestra. The three Levitical families involved are given as Asaph, Heiman and Yedutan, with Asaph in the lead (I Chron. 25:1, 6). In describing the rededication service of the cleansed Temple in the days of Hezekiah, the body of religious songs is referred to as *the words of David and Asaph, the seer* (II Chron. 29:30). This would indicate that Asaph is not only considered the most prominent of the Levitical families that provided singers and instrumentalists, but also that the collection of religious poetry itself that had accumulated towards the end of the First Temple period was attributed equally to David and Asaph.

What was distinctive about the historical experience of Asaph as one of David's chief musicians? It will be recalled that David's second attempt to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was successful. Joyously and to the accompaniment of song, music and dance, the Ark had been installed in a tent near David's palace in the City of David. Then we are told:

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[David] *appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the Ark of the Lord, to celebrate, to thank and praise the Lord, the God of Israel, Asaph, the chief, and second to him . . . with lyre and harp and Asaph with cymbals . . . and with trumpets continually [tamid] before the Ark of the Covenant of God. Then on that day did David first ordain to give thanks unto the Lord by the hand of Asaph and his brethren . . .* (I Chron. 16:4-7).

What follows is an exalted hymn of adoration which are the first 15 verses of Psalm 105, where it appears anonymously.

It seems that not only was Asaph in charge of the liturgical service on the day that the Ark was put in place in Jerusalem, but also that ministering before the Ark became his permanent duty: *And he [David] left there, before the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, Asaph and his brothers to minister before the Ark continually as each day's work required [d'var yom b'yomo]* (16:37).

The significance of this appointment can be appreciated only if we recall the situation that obtained in the country at the time, regarding the central religious shrine. The sanctuary at Shiloh had been destroyed years before and some of the sacred objects dating from the wilderness Tabernacle, including perhaps the large copper altar, had been installed at Gibeon. There David now appointed Zadok as High Priest to preside over the regular sacrificial service. However, having brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, David had to innovate some sort of daily service. Of all the objects in the Tabernacle, the Ark, which had normally been kept out of sight in the Holy of Holies, had been the most sacred and highly venerated. This was not simply because it contained the two stone tablets upon which were inscribed the ten articles of the Covenant, but because it constituted the seat of Divinity itself: *The Ark of God, the Lord that sits upon the cherubim whereon is called the Name* (I Chron. 13:6) and *There I will meet with you and I will speak with you from above the Ark cover, from between the two cherubim . . .* (Ex. 25:22). David could not simply let the Ark sit there in a tent, isolated and unattended. But the altar and the sacrificial service were in Gibeon, disconnected from the Ark and there was no tradition as to what you do just with an Ark.

It is against this background that we must understand the significance of the appointment by David of Asaph to *minister before the Ark continually as every day's work required*. That is to say, David, perhaps for the first time in

Israel's history, designed a regular worship service to consist solely of religious poems (psalms) to be sung daily by a choir accompanied by musical instruments. The task of composing and conducting this musical service was given to Asaph.

What does this tell us about the man Asaph?

1. Preoccupation with the Ark on a continual basis indicates a personal awareness of the felt Presence of God and an appreciation of the awe and sanctity of that experience. Thus, it is to be expected that Asaph's writing will exhibit a marked sense of God-consciousness (see I Chron. 27, 28 and Ps. 50:3). This was shared by David, who had declared: *May I dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the pleasantness of God and to visit in His Temple* (Ps. 27:4).

2. Since the Ark contains the articles of the Covenant which reflect God's demands and Israel's commitment, Asaph's God-consciousness takes on a prophetic character. That is to say, he, like the other prophets, identifies with the demands of God and speaks to the people in His Name. Thus, Asaph is called a *seer* (II Chron. 29:30) and the expression *who prophesied* [*hanibah*] is used in reference to him (I Chron. 25:2). And so in Psalm 50, from Verses 5 to 15, Asaph speaks in the first person in the name of God!

3. Precisely because Asaph had developed a worship service based solely on music and song, he was sensitive to the popular abuse of placing primary religious emphasis upon animal sacrifices. Hence his fierce condemnation in Psalm 50:8-13. The only kind of offering that Asaph does encourage, as he did in Psalm 50, is for salvation (I Chron. 16:35) and thanksgiving (16:34). He is the author of one of the most exalted concepts in the Bible: *Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness* (I Chron. 16:29).¹

In this way, the unusual style and content of Psalm 50 become understandable in light of the particular experience and character of this historic Asaph, the Levite, a colleague of King David.

We are now in a position to explain why Psalm 50 was not grouped together with the other Asaph Psalms (73-83) but deliberately placed earlier in what is called Book II of the Book of Psalms, which ends with Psalm 72. According to Jewish tradition, the Book of Psalms, like the Torah of Moses, is divided into five books. (Book I ends with Psalm 41, Book II with Psalm 72, Book III with Psalm 89, Book IV with Psalm 106 and Book V with Psalm 150. Each

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of these books ends with a concluding doxology indicating it is the end of a division.) However, what is pertinent for our purpose is that the last verse in Psalm 72, which concludes Book II, reads: *Thus are ended the prayers of David, the son of Jesse* (72:20), implying that the psalms up to that point are in some sense the Psalms of David. Now, as a matter of fact, all of the psalms in Book I which bear the name of an individual in the superscription are *le-david*. Of the psalms in Book II, 21 refer to David and to specific historic circumstances in his career (51-72), while there are six psalms attributed to the sons of Korah [*bnai korah*]² (42-49) followed by our Psalm 50.

The general consensus among scholars is that one cannot be sure as to whether the word *ledavid* (or the word *le'asaph* or *livnai korah*) in the superscription of the psalm means "composed by David" or "concerning David" or "in the style of David" or, in the case of *livnai korah*, "to be performed by the Bnai Korah."

The reason for including Psalm 50 in Book II and not with the rest of the Asaphite psalms should now be clear. Evidently, it was determined from the content that this particular psalm was the work of the original Asaph.³ Thus, as a close associate of David in establishing the innovative concept of worship as singing the praises of God and as one who shared with David the mystical intoxication which is to experience the Presence of God, it was decided that this signature-expression of Asaph appropriately belonged among the *prayers of David the son of Jesse*.

NOTES

1. This is repeated in Psalm 96:9.
2. The attribution of certain psalms to "the sons of Korah" as a collectivity might suggest that their role was perhaps that of a choir or an instrumental ensemble. Therefore, in judging the content and style, the editors may have decided that these psalms are "Davidic" but were to be specially performed by the Bnai Korah.
3. The 11 Asaphite psalms which lead off Book III were probably judged to have been written in different periods of the First and even Second Temple by the Levites of the family of Asaph.