On Psalm 51

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 260–339)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

On Psalm 51

[Translated by Andrew Eastbourne] [Migne PG 23, cols. 441-452] [col. 441] (1) To the end. Of understanding. Of David. 51. (2) When Doeg the Idumaean came and reported to Saul and said to him, ”David came to the house of Ahimelech.” The 33rd Psalm was spoken by David when he ”changed his countenance before Abimelech, and he sent him away, and he left.” The current Psalm would be the one following that Psalm in historical sequence. For the Scripture says in Kingdoms, ”And one of the servants of Saul was there that day.” And this indicates the time at which David came into the house of Abimelech and ate the ”loaves of offering,” receiving them from the high priest. For at the very same point in time, Doeg the Syrian, the tender of Saul’s mules, came to Saul and said, ”I have seen the son of Jesse having come to Nob, to Abimelech the son of Ahitub, the priest, and all the sons of his father; and [col. 444] he inquired on his behalf through God, and he gave him provisions. And the king sent someone to call Abimelech the priest, and all the sons of his father, the priests of the Lord in Nob, and they all came before the king,” at which point, on Saul’s order, this same Doeg put to death the priests of the Lord—”305 men who bore the ephod, and he smote the city of Nob with the edge of the sword, including men and women, infants and babies, and calves and donkeys and sheep.”

So when David learned that this had been done in this way, he uttered the words before us, which contain neither an ode, nor a hymn, nor anything else of that sort. For how, in the face of the disaster that happened to so many priests, could he have sung odes of theirs and psalms? Hence, nothing of the kind is written as epigraph, but it was only said ”to the end” and ”of understanding”: [”To the end,”] since the final elements of his words recount the good things, when he says, ”But I am like a fruitful olive tree,” etc.; and [”of understanding,” since discerning] the meaning of the words put forth here requires the understanding that comes from God. Now then, when he was with Abimelech and tasted the priestly nourishment, he changed his ”taste”—or his ”ways,” according to the interpretation of the others—and raised blessings and thanksgivings to God, saying: ”I will bless the Lord at all times; the praise of him is always in my mouth,” etc. But now, when he had learned of the actions of Doeg the slanderer—how he had destroyed so many priests, doing a

diabolical deed—he marshalled the words of the present passage as though against him, saying:

(3) Why do you boast in wickedness, O powerful one? Lawlessness all day long, (4) and injustice, your tongue devised.

The material we have before us was spoken much earlier in time than the history pertaining to the 50th Psalm. For [the history of Doeg] took place, and [the words] were spoken, while Saul was still alive, and before David's kingship. Many long years later, after the death of Saul, and at the end of his own kingship, David made the confession contained in the 50th Psalm, which he placed before [the 51st] because of its connection to the 49th Psalm, as I have already shown. Those Psalms, 20 in number, from 51 to 70, with epigraphs "of David," took their subject-matter from a different point of origin: indeed, they appear to have been spoken while Saul was still alive, before David reigned. For the one before us now was spoken while Saul was still alive, "when Doeg the Idumaean came and reported to Saul…'David came to the house of Abimelech.'" But the 53rd Psalm too was spoken "when the Ziphites came and told Saul, 'Look--is not David hidden with us?'" Also, the 55th Psalm has this epigraph: "When the Philistines seized him in Gath"—and this period too precedes David's kingship, while Saul still survived alive. And the 56th Psalm gives the epigraph: "Of David, when he was running away from Saul into the cave. In the same way also, the 58th Psalm says [in the epigraph], "When Saul sent, and guarded his house, in order to kill him.

The 59th Psalm, however, even though it was spoken after the death of Saul, [col. 445], when David was now king, still preceded the actions relating to Uriah. This is indicated by the heading, which shows the time period involved by saying, "When he set on fire Mesopotamia of Syria, and Syria Soba, and Joab returned and smote the Ravine of Salt—twelve thousand. And this chronologically precedes the confession expressed in the 50th Psalm. Furthermore, the 62nd Psalm was spoken by David "when he was in the desert of Idumaea," while Saul was still living. Consider how more or less the majority of the second part of the book of the Psalms of David (apart from the 50th) include those which were spoken by him before the period of his actions pertaining to Uriah.

The first part of the same book, however, from the first Psalm to the 40th, [seemed to] contradict that order; for that part included those dating after the confession of the 50th Psalm. The third Psalm, then, was spoken by David "when he was running away from Absalom his son." And he was fleeing from his son after the events connected to Uriah. But also in the sixth Psalm, he was mourning for the same actions, saying, "I grew tired in my groaning; I shall wash my bed every night—with my tears I shall moisten my mattress." And the seventh Psalm, spoken "for the words of Cush the son of Iamin," would belong to the same time period. Moreover, also the 17th Psalm has been proved to have been spoken at the end of

David's life. But also the 37th Psalm, with the epigraph "for remembrance," having the same train of thought as the sixth, begins with the same words, saying, "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, and do not correct me in your wrath." And going forward, he makes the same confession as that in the 50th Psalm, besides other passages, also when he says, "For my transgressions have gone over my head…My wounds stank and decayed before my foolishness."

And if you bring together [these indications] for yourself, you will discover that the majority of the Psalms in the first part were spoken after the time period of the history relating to Uriah, whereas those following the 50th Psalm precede [David's] actions regarding Uriah chronologically. Why in the world, then, were the first ones in chronological sequence not put in first place—and instead, those which were spoken first, while Saul was still living, are in the second part of the Psalms—and those which are chronologically last are in the first part? I think they have this arrangement so that the discourse would not move from the better to the worse; for the phrase, "to the end, lest you be destroyed," appears to have been observed also in the case of the Psalms' arrangement. For this reason, the gloomier material was placed first, so that the nicer / more useful material would be kept for second, the worse things being hidden and made to disappear by the appearance of the better ones in second place. And it is likely that David wished to draw a veil over his fault afterwards by means of his prior good deeds. And someone might say that [col. 448] he arranged his confessions first in accordance with tremendous piety, because "the righteous one is his own accuser in the opening prosecution" But since so many things about the arrangement apparent [in the book of Psalms] have been laid bare for you, it is now time to pass on also to the words of Psalm 51 that are before us.

Well then, he writes the words in question after learning what Doeg the Syrian had brought about by means of his slanders against David. Therefore he speaks as though addressing him: "Why do you boast in wickedness, you powerful one?"—or as though addressing the devil, who was at work in him. For he was not unaware of the one who was opposing him at all times and always fighting against him, at one time through Saul, in the current instance through Doeg, and at other times in different ways through different people. So then, the one who is powerless and weak and slight in wickedness, when the better character prevails in him, since he is feebler in wickedness, will hide himself as he sins and is pricked by his conscience, and will repent, and devise for himself a remedy for his own wickedness using confession and true repentance. The one who is powerful in wickedness, however, goes crazy and boasts over it, as though he were making himself more majestic by a great good deed.

And the passage before us appears to me to be describing the character that is the opposite of the one that made the prior confession in the 50 Psalm. For in

that Psalm, after slipping once into wickedness, he repented in the end and wore himself out with confession, and lamentation over his own evil deeds. But the other one, being present in wickedness, says: (7)...And he will scrape you away from the tent, and will uproot you from the land of the living forever —so that the righteous, when they see it, will be afraid and will mock him, saying, (9) ”Look! a man who did not set God before himself as his strength, but trusted in the abundance of his wealth, and empowered himself in his own disaster!”

And this was said as though to Doeg, who was a Syrian by descent, but lived in the midst of Israel—and, I suppose, perhaps even entered the tabernacle of God along with the multitude, pretending to be pious. But it was also said to everyone who is powerful in wickedness, who uses his tongue instead of a sword for the destruction of souls: the ”farmer of souls” would pluck him out just like some bitter and destructive root, even if he seems for some brief time to have been planted in the tabernacle of God and in his Church. Such a person, after being plucked out and cast away far from the tabernacle of the holy, will lie as a pitiable spectacle for the benefit and chastening of those who see him—they will take in with their eyes the severe judgment of God against such a person and will make every effort and guard themselves against falling into a similar situation. Later, when they recall with their memory the former boasting of the one who was powerful in wickedness, his grandeur and arrogance, but also see the humiliation and destruction that pursued him after that, they will consider him a laughing-stock, considering how he has fallen so low from such a height. And they will accept the judgment of God, confessing that it is righteous. Then, they will also go through the reasons why the impious one has suffered these things [col. 449] and justify God’s judgment. For he ought not to have been haughty-minded over riches, nor to have been exalted over the vanity of the present life, but to have made God alone his hope and help, and not to have wavered in this hope. But he abandoned the good anchor of his own soul, and by hanging his hopes on vain wealth he made himself a joke, incurring nothing more than laughter for his vain and thoughtless boastfulness.

(10) But I am like a fruitful olive tree in the house of God. I have put my hope in the mercy of God forever, even forever and ever. From what I have said already, we have learned what sort of end the one who is powerful in wickedness will obtain. But as for me, says David, since I have been taught this by the Holy Spirit, I would never be exalted over abundance of wealth, nor over the vanity of mortal life. For ”vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” But also, as I flee from the path of the one who is powerful in wickedness, I would not sharpen my tongue and my words for the destruction of others, but rather for the benefit of souls and the service of the words of salvation. And in my other actions too, I would become so flourishing and fruitful that my soul would be compared with an ever-flourishing and richly fruitful plant that has been planted in the house of God. For this reason, I say: ”But I am like a fruitful olive tree in the house of God”—or, according to Symmachus’ translation:

”But I am like a flourishing olive tree in the house of God.” For I did not turn away at all from the house of God; rather, after being planted inside it, as it were in God’s own garden, and while enjoying the streams of the spring in the house of God, I became richly fruitful and ever-flourishing, in accordance with the pattern of the planted olive tree that has been received among the ever-flourishing [plants].

But observe that when David said this, he was not in Jerusalem, which the Jewish people considered to be the house of God—for it had not yet been built; and neither was he in the tabernacle built by Moses, which did still exist at that time among the Jews. For when he was fleeing from Saul, he passed his time among others—and yet he did indeed know that he had been planted in the house of God, since he understood the ”house of God” to be the pious way of life. And because he was fruitful—not bearing bitter fruits but sweet fruits full of compassion, he was rightly compared to a fruitful olive tree: the pattern signifying mercy towards one’s neighbors and compassion toward all. Therefore, since he was overflowing with this sort of good things, he logically added, ”I have put my hope in the mercy of God forever, even forever and ever.”

Now, he pointed out that the end of the one who is powerful in wickedness is uprooting and destruction. For it was necessary for the root that bears bitter fruit to be †------ off† by the wise farmer of the universe. But David, like a fruitful olive tree in the house of God, put his hope in the mercy of God for ever, even forever and ever, procuring for himself immortality and eternal life on the basis of his good hope, from which he will never fall away. For according to the Apostle, ”hope does not put us to shame.” Then, having sketched out good hopes for himself as it were on the basis of good fruits, [col. 452] he attributes the responsibility [for all this] to the provider of all good things, saying: ”I shall praise you forever, because you did [this].” For (he says) I did not make myself like a fruitful olive tree, but rather, you did. For grace comes from you. And so I will never cease from the knowledge of your grace, and from praising you; having once put my hope in the mercy of God, ”I shall patiently await his name.” For once the foundation of good hope has been established, we need patience. Therefore, he says, ”I shall patiently await your name, because it is beneficial before your holy ones”—or, according to Symmachus’ translation: ”…because your name is good in front of your holy ones.” Knowing, therefore, that it is good, and productive of good—not for those who are powerful in wickedness nor for those who are to be cast out from among the living, but to the holy ones, he quite rightly said, ”I shall patiently await your name,” being hopeful that I will never fall out of your mercy. In this way, I have put my hope in him forever, even for ever and ever.

Eusebius normally includes the Psalm number at the end of the superscription / epigraph. Ps. 33[34].1; cf. 1 Kgdms [1 Sam.] 21.13[14]. 1 Kgdms [1 Sam.] 21.6[7]. Heb. Ahimelech. 1 Kgdms 22.9-11. 1 Kgdms 22.18-19. Ps. 51[52].10[8].

Ps. 33[34].2[1]. Gk. διάβολος. Gk. διαβολικός. NETS: ”malice.” NETS: ”...of lawlessness all day long? Injustice your tongue devised.” Eusebius’ Greek text here, unlike standard LXX, has the word καὶ (”and”) at the beginning of vs. 4; this changes the likely grammatical construal (to make ”lawlessness” and ”injustice” both the objects of the verb ”devised”). Ps. 53[54].2[1]. Ps. 55[56].1. Ps. 56[57].1. Ps. 58[59].1. Ps. 59[60].2[1]. ”Judah” MT, LXX. Ps. 3.1. Ps. 6.7[6]. Ps. 37[38].2[1]; cf. Ps. 6.2[1]. ὑπερῆραν. Migne has the misprint ὑπερῆσαν. Ps. 37[38].5-6[4-5]. NETS: ”...because my acts of lawlessness went over my head...My wounds stank and festered from before my foolishness.” οἱ τὴν πρῶτοι λελεγμένοι Migne. τὴν is unintelligible; the Latin tr. ignores it: Quid igitur causae est, quod non secundum temporum seriem, qui primi tempore sunt, primi positi sint, sed qui primi, superstite Saule dicti sunt, in secunda psalmorum parte sint constituti...?

Prov. 18.17. Gk. διαβολαί. Gk. διάβολος. The text seems corrupt. Gk. ὁ δὲ παρὼν ἐν κακίᾳ ὥς φησι. The Latin in Migne translates as though the text is ὁ δὲ παρὼν τῷ ἐν κακίᾳ (ὄντι / μένοντι) ὥς φησί: At ei de quo nunc sermo, in malitia degenti dicitur. Ps. 51[52].8, paraphrased. The Gk. implies either ”holy things” (i.e., the apparatus of worship in the tabernacle) or ”holy people.” NETS: ”I hoped.” Eccles. 1.2. Gk γεώργιον. Gk. Ἰουδαίωνπαῖδες (lit., ”children of the Jews / Judaeans”). Gk. τὸ θεοσεβὲς πολίτευμα. Gk. φιλανθρωπία (lit., ”love of human beings”). The same Greek word appears at the next instance of ”compassion” in the translation as well. Migne’s Greek text reads ἀποκταλῆναι; ἀποκταθῆναι (”to be killed”) is suggested in a footnote. The translation reads eradicari. Gk. ὁ τῶν ὅλων σοφός γεωργός. Rom. 5.5. Ps. 51[52].11[9]. NETS: ”I will acknowledge you forever, because of what you did.” The Gk. verb ἐποίησας can mean ”you did,” or ”you made”—Eusebius picks up the idea of ”making” in the following sentence.

Gk. χάρις; alternatively, ”beauty” or ”kindness”—both relevant connotations in this context. Ps. 51[52].11[9]. NETS: ”I will wait for your name,” with a different pronoun (”your” rather than ”his”) in the Greek. But Eusebius’ subsequent citation of the same phrase has ”your,” so perhaps this should be corrected to conform with it. On the other hand, as Eusebius slips from paraphrase to citation and back again, he equally seems to slip between 1, 2 and 3 person references with disconcerting freedom. Gk. χρηστός, which by Eusebius’ time would have sounded identical to Χριστός. Ps. 51[52].11[9]. NETS: ”your devout” rather than ”your holy ones.” This text was commissioned by Roger Pearse, 2010. This file and all material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely. Greek text is rendered using unicode.

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