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PSALM 51: “TAKE NOT YOUR HOLY SPIRIT AWAY FROM ME”

ABSTRACT

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament makes one aware of numerous references to the Holy Spirit. The New Testament is thus normally the focus for studies on pneumatology. However, there are many references to רוח in the Old Testament of which 107 refer to God's activities in nature and in the lives of human beings. In these passages רוח is translated as “spirit”, indicating the work of the Spirit of God. Pentecostals believe that the presence of the Spirit of God in the lives of believers during the Old Testament period was sporadic and temporary. It was only after the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that the Spirit came to dwell permanently within believers. This article challenges that assumption by analysing Psalm 51. Such analysis reveals that the Spirit of God lived permanently in the life of an Old Testament believer, and ascertains the role of the Spirit of God in the life of the worshipper.

1. INTRODUCTION

A cursory reading of the New Testament draws the reader's attention to numerous references to the Holy Spirit. Therefore studies on pneumatology focus on the New Testament. Hildebrandt (1995:xvi) points out that few references to the Old Testament are found in the majority of literature on the subject over recent decades. However, there are many references to רוח in the Old Testament. The word רוח occurs 378 times in the Hebrew Bible, and 11 times in Aramaic in the book of Daniel (Albertz & Westermann 1997:1202). These statistics do not reflect the various semantic fields of רוח (cf. Albertz & Westermann 1997:1202-1220 for a comprehensive discussion on this). Hildebrandt (1995:1) has shown that of the 389 references to רוח approximately 107 refer to God's activities in nature and in the lives of human beings. In these passages רוח is translated as “spirit”, indicating the work of the Spirit of God.

In Pentecostal circles it is believed that the presence of the Spirit of God in the lives of believers during the Old Testament period was sporadic and temporary. The Spirit only occasionally came over a person when s/he began to prophesy or perform some miraculous act, after which the Spirit departed from that person. It was only after the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that the Spirit came to dwell permanently within believers (cf. Möller 1997:

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8). This article challenges that assumption by analysing Psalm 51. Such analysis reveals that the Spirit of God lived permanently in the life of an Old Testament believer, and ascertains the role of the Spirit of God in the life of the worshipper.

2. STRUCTURE, *SITZ IM LEBEN*, *GATTUNG* AND DATING

2.1 Structure

The superscriptions in verses 1-2 contain musical and historical information. Such double superscriptions occur 13 times in the Psalter (Gerstenberger 1988:212). The heading *מזמור* (verse 1) means “song” or “psalm” and refers to singing accompanied by music (cf. Kraus 1993:22). It occurs 57 times in the Psalter, 35 times of which it also carries the title *לדוד* (:22). Verse 2 places the psalm historically in the time of David’s sin with Bathsheba. I will return to this issue shortly.

The body of the psalm can be divided into two main sections, namely verses 3-11 and verses 12-19. Verses 20-21 were probably added to the psalm at a later stage, from exilic or post-exilic times. The first section can be subdivided into verses 3-4, 5-8, and 9-11, whereas the second section can be divided into verses 12-14, 15-16, and 17-19. Both sections are structured in terms of concentric patterns (cf. Gaiser 2003:385-386; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:16-17; Terrien 2003: 402-403).

Verses 3-4 form the initial plea for forgiveness. The first person suffixes attached to verbs focus the attention on Yahweh’s actions on behalf of the poet: *חנני* and *טוהרני* emphasise that only Yahweh can forgive, whereas the first person suffixes attached to nouns highlight the sin of the psalmist: *פשעי*, *מעוני* and *רמחמאתי*. This, in turn, contrasts with Yahweh’s love and mercy by the use of the second person suffixes attached to nouns: *כחסדך* and *רחמיך*.

In verses 9-11 this plea for forgiveness is repeated, thus forming an *inclusio* with verses 3-4. The first person suffixes attached to verbs emphasise Yahweh’s deeds of forgiveness: *תחטאני* and *תכבסני* whereas the first person suffixes attached to nouns highlight the poet’s sin: *עונתי* and *מהטאי*. This section ends with words similar to those at the beginning of verses 3-4: *מחה* (3) and *מחה* (9). The unusual word sequence of object followed by the imperative in the final position accentuates the comprehensiveness of the psalmist’s plea: “Cleanse me from all my iniquities” (cf. Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:16).

The middle section, verses 5-8, focuses on two contrasting issues: the sin of the poet and the righteousness of God. Verses 5, 6ab and 7 emphasise the sin of the psalmist, whereas verses 6cd and 8, in particular, highlight God’s righteousness. Because the poet sinned against God (5-6ab), God’s righteousness

has been offended and He will act justly against the sinner (6cd), because He loves truth (8a). Yet again God shows his mercy in the face of the sin of the poet, because He will make his wisdom known to the psalmist (8b). In my opinion, חכמה should be understood in this instance as the source for righteous living. God's righteousness demands that sin be punished. The poet, having offended God's righteousness and deserving God's judgment, is on the receiving end of God's mercy. God makes his wisdom known to the psalmist, enabling him to live righteously.

The second section begins with a plea for renovation of heart and spirit, in which the Spirit of God will play a major role (12-14). רוח is used three times in this section. The second of these, רוח קדשך (verse 13), is a clear reference to God's Spirit, while the other two, נכון רוח (verse 12) and רוח נדיבה (verse 14), refer to the human spirit which God must renew by the working of his Spirit. The spirit of human beings is the focus for God's renewing work, as was the case in verse 8.

Verses 15-17 form the middle of this section. The poet wishes to testify to God's saving righteousness by using instruction (verse 15) and praise (verses 16-17). As was the case in the first section, God's righteousness is the focus in this instance.

Verses 18-19 end this section and focus on the presentation of a broken spirit and heart as the sacrifice that pleases God. This part relates to the first part (verses 12-14) in terms of similar statements concerning heart and spirit. רוח נשברה (verse 19) refers to the human spirit, i.e. the inner transformation of man.

As stated, verses 20-21 were added to the psalm at a later stage in order to update it according to Zion theology (cf. Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:18).

2.2 *Gattung*

Psalm 51 is one of 7 penitential prayers in the Psalter (cf. Clifford 2002:249; Gerstenberger 1988:215; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:15; Van Uchelen 1977:82; cf. also Human 2005:119 for a list of penitential prayers outside the Psalter); the others are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143. The first words of the psalm, "Be merciful to me" (תניני), set the tone for the remainder of the psalm: Petition to God for forgiveness of sin, a process in which the Spirit of God plays a key role.

2.3 *Sitz im Leben* and dating

The heading of the psalm places it historically in the time of David's sin with Bathsheba. Most commentators doubt the Davidic authorship of the psalm (cf. Anderson 1981:389-390 for a detailed discussion of the issue; cf. also Leupold 1969:399-400 for a defence of Davidic authorship). Terrien (2003:403) argues

that לְדָוִד should be understood as "for David" and that a later editor was responsible for referring to David's disgraceful affair with Bathsheba.

Neither the arguments for nor those against Davidic authorship are conclusive. The language of the psalm does not specifically mention either David's affair with Bathsheba or the murder of Uriah. Yet there are sufficient correlations between the psalm and the narrative in 2 Samuel 11-12 to at least consider the superscription a possible scenario for the historical *Sitz im Leben* (cf. Tate 1990:12-13 for a discussion of these similarities).

3. ANALYSIS OF PSALM 51

The initial petition (verses 3-4) immediately focuses on the heart of the matter: The psalmist pleads for the grace of God. The verb חָנַן usually expresses the attitude of a superior to an inferior (Anderson 1981:391; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005: 19; Tate 1990:13) and it means not only "to have pity on" but also "the transfer of a reality of renewal" (Terrien 2003:404). The poet is aware of his own sinfulness; he takes his sin as well as his relationship with God very seriously (cf. Weiser 1962:402). He realises that his only hope is that God should transform him by bestowing his free grace upon him; therefore he appeals to God's unending, never-ending love. God's love (חֶסֶד) is an indication of his steadfast loyalty to his covenant. Although human beings will sin and thus break the covenant, Yahweh will stay true and loyal. Yahweh's grace is "a divine quality of persistent love", the expression of his unshakeable faithfulness and loyalty that will never abandon the sinner (cf. Terrien 2003:404).

The plea for God's grace is based on the realisation that only the encompassing greatness of Yahweh's compassion can obliterate the ugly stain of sin in his life. רַחֲמֶיךָ (your compassion) is always used in the plural (the singular form of the word means "womb"). This may imply that God's compassion has a feminine trait, i.e. it never forgets the child it has conceived and nourished (cf. Anderson 1981:391; Terrien 2003:404). Only God's grace and mercy is sufficiently powerful to wash away the guilt and shame caused by sin and iniquity in his life. This opening plea for mercy "explodes from an overflow of shame and terror. It conveys all at once the enormity of the act that induced this shame and terror" (Terrien 2003:404). The psalmist knows that he is guilty before Yahweh, who is his judge. However, in Psalm 51 the God who judges is also the God who saves. Thus God's judgement, which confronts the sinner with his sin, is "an act of compassion that aims not at destruction, but at rescue and new creation" (Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:19).

The psalmist uses three images to describe his separation from God and his desire for restoration. This does not mean that he committed three kinds of sin, but it refers to the comprehensiveness of his sin and the acknow-

ledge that only God can restore him to fellowship. פשע (verse 3) primarily refers to rebellion against authority whereas מַחֲדָּה (verse 3) may refer to a written record of his sinful deeds, for which he now pleads to be forgiven (cf. Anderson 1981:392; Davidson 1998:167).

The second image refers to sin as a stain that cannot be removed by human means: עָן refers to deliberate, not accidental, sin whereas כִּבֵּס is a verb of vigour, usually referring to the washing of clothes (cf. Anderson 1981:392-393; Davidson 1998:167). The poet thus uses a powerful image to describe God's washing him to obliterate the stain that sin left in him.

The third image is taken from cultic life, where the psalmist prays to be cleansed from sin as a "defiling uncleanness" which broke his fellowship with God and placed him outside the community of believers (Anderson 1981:393; Davidson 1998:167).

In the second strophe (5-6) the psalmist acknowledges his awareness of his sin. His confession, i.e. that his sin is always before him, shows the enormity of his feelings of guilt and shame. He also recognises that his sin, which hurt another human being, is ultimately a sin against God. Not only has he caused social harm by means of murder and adultery, but his actions were particularly evil before God. In essence, sin is not a moral, social, ethical or psychological problem; it is a theological problem, a violation of the relationship with Yahweh (cf. Brueggemann 1984:99; Tate 1990:17). Ultimately, when humans sin, they will have to deal with God. This knowledge and confession of his sin made him realise that he is not entitled to anything but the honest judgement of God. Therefore he takes the first step towards true penitence: He sees matters as they really are and with full awareness of his own responsibility, admits and confesses his sin (cf. Weiser 1962:403).

The enormity of humankind's sinful condition before God then hits him (verses 7-8). This expression of solidarity with the human race should be understood as an explanation and not an excuse for his sin (Terrien 2003:405). He perceives an even more dreadful and serious truth, namely that his life is dominated by sin. Sin is a permanent state that affects his relationship with God (Van Uchelen 1977:85). The statement that he was sinful from the time of his conception by no means indicates that the sexual act or matrimony is sinful, but the psalmist refers to the fact that man is born into a world filled with sin (cf. Brueggemann 1984:99; Davidson 1998:168; Weiser 1962:405). The psalmist confesses his involvement in human sinfulness from the beginning of his life.

As stated in the structural analysis of the psalm, God's mercy is God's response to the sin of humankind. By making his wisdom known to the psalmist, God will enable the poet to live in righteousness before God. חַכְמָה should thus be understood as the source for righteous living. God's desire is that human

beings live a life of truth, that their inner being be transformed. אמת in the innermost parts indicates that God seeks those whose external behaviour is consistent with the inner reality of their being (cf. Wilson 2002:775). This is only possible when God reveals his wisdom to the psalmist. It speaks of God's loyalty towards those who call on him and trust in him for forgiveness. God thus responds not in judgement, as he has every right to do, but with grace and mercy for a new, transformed life.

This inner work of God in the heart of the poet should be understood in conjunction with verses 12-14 which focus on the inner transformation of the psalmist via the creation of a new heart and steadfast spirit. It will further be argued in this article that the inner transformation is the result of the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God in his life.

In the next strophe (9-11) the psalmist renews his plea for forgiveness. The imperatives emphasise that God should take action to make new life a reality. According to Exodus 12:22, a bunch of hyssop was sprinkled on the blood of the sacrificial lamb at the first Passover as a symbol of cleansing and purification (cf. Lev. 14:4, 6, 49-52; Num. 19:6). The prayer that God must wash him with hyssop thus expresses his desire to be cleansed from his sin and guilt. He wishes to be in good ritual and spiritual standing with God.

The effects of sin in his life are compared to the crushing of bones (verse 10). Yahweh did the crushing, emphasising the fact that the psalmist's relationship with God has suffered severely. The worshipper now longs for the restoration of that relationship and prays that God will hide his face from his sins. When God hid his face the psalmist used to experience abandonment and God forsakenness (cf. Ps. 10:1; 13:1; 27:9). Yet he pleads that God will hide his face from his sins, resulting in the restoration of his relationship with God. When God hides his face from sin, the result will be an outpouring of his grace, mercy and love in the life of the sinner.

Terrien calls verses 12-14 the "core strophe" of the psalm (2003:400). The psalmist prays for the creation of a new heart (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26). The verb ברא is used only for God (Mays 1994:202; Terrien 2003:406). No man, only God, has the power to absolve from sin. Kraus (1993:505) promotes a similar view in that human beings cannot create a pure heart, that no ritual can restore it to life. Only God working independently and creatively can renew the heart of humankind and effect inner transformation. The poet continues his prayer by asking for a steadfast spirit. רוח refers to the human spirit and not to God's Spirit. Such a steadfast spirit provides the foundation that will enable him to stay pure and faithful in his relationship with God.

In verse 13 the psalmist prays that God should not take his holy Spirit from him (קדשך אל־תקח ממני ורוח). The only other references to "holy Spirit" in the

Old Testament are found in Isaiah 63:10-11. The poet acknowledges that he needs the presence of Yahweh in his life. He realises that his sin necessitates certain changes in his own spirit, but he is convinced that without the presence of God's Spirit in his life all would be in vain. He acknowledges that only the Spirit of God can effect the inner transformation, the new heart, the steadfast spirit that is needed to live a life dedicated to Yahweh. When God works in him through his holy Spirit, when the Spirit of God dwells in him, he is enabled to live a holy life that is "such an intensive community of life with the holy God that sin becomes impossible" (Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:21). The Spirit purifies and encourages man to obey and fulfil Yahweh's will, thus becoming the guarantee for a relationship and community with Yahweh (Van der Westhuizen 1997:51).

With this prayer the author of the psalm may have had Saul's experience in mind. Saul was rejected by God because of his sin and God's Spirit departed from him; David (if he is the author) fears that a similar fate could happen to him. The loss of the Spirit and the ensuing results accompanying the Spirit's departure from Saul were unacceptable to David, because he realised that he was dependant on Yahweh and his Spirit for everything in his life (cf. 1 Sam. 14:14ff., cf. Hildebrandt 1995:82, 127; Leupold 1969:405).

In 1 Samuel 16:13 when David was anointed as king, the coming of the Spirit on him implies a permanent possession and not merely a sporadic occurrence. The anointing is indicative of the special relationship between Yahweh and the anointed one. Anointing bestows authority to act, conveys power and the ability to perform the function for which one was being anointed (cf. Cargal 2000:66), and is closely linked to the endowment of the רוח. It is a symbol of Yahweh's provision through the gift of the Spirit (Ryken, Wilhoit & Longman 1998:33). The anointing with oil can be considered the sacramental sign and seal of the coming of the רוח. The רוח was transmitted by the anointing (Kraus 1992:09). The internal reality of the Spirit's filling is symbolised by the external flowing oil (cf. Hildebrandt 1995:124).

The phrase "the Spirit came upon David from that day onward" (ותצלה רוח-יהוה) (אל-דוד היום ההוא ומעלה) implies a "perpetual attribute" and not just a sporadic occurrence (cf. Hildebrandt 1995:126). The Spirit's possession of David is portrayed as permanent (cf. Campbell 2003:164).

After his sin with Bathsheba, David feared the loss of the רוח resulting in his plea that God should not take his holy Spirit from him. In my opinion, 1 Samuel 16:13 read in combination with Psalm 51:13 indicates the possibility of the Spirit indwelling someone in the Old Testament, and not only sporadically coming over him. The prayer not to take away the Spirit implies a continuous presence of the Spirit in the life of the poet. The prayer is an appeal for a "continuing experience of the creative, life-giving and empowering presence of God himself. One cannot experience the presence of God when his holy spirit is taken away" (Tate

1990:23-24). The indwelling presence of the Spirit enables the creation of a new heart and a steadfast spirit, culminating in the provision of a willing spirit (Van der Westhuizen 1997:50-51).

The pure heart and steadfast spirit for which the poet prays is a sign of a new creative beginning, namely to teach God's ways, to rejoice in his righteousness and to proclaim his praise. The steadfastness and willingness of the psalmist's spirit to be able to do this is closely linked to the presence of God and the influence of God's Spirit (cf. Van Uchelen 1977:87-88).

The indwelling of the Spirit results in the unspeakable joy that salvation brings. "God's salvation becomes not only interiorized but also exteriorized" (Terrien 2003:407). The prayer for a "willing spirit" is, according to Terrien (2003:407), an expression of his desire to be reconciled not only with Yahweh, but also with the human race.

Tate (1990:31) argues that the three references to רוח in verses 12-14 refer to God's Spirit. Although I do not agree with this viewpoint, I agree with his statement: "No sharp division should be drawn between the qualities ascribed to the spirit and the qualities effected by the spirit in human beings" (:31). It is the work of the Spirit of God that results in the creation of a steadfast and willing spirit in the worshipper.

The fact that the poet has been reconciled with God, and that he has become a new creation through the indwelling reality of the Spirit results in a commitment to share with others the ways of the Lord, resulting in sinners turning to Yahweh (verse 15). The phrase הַצִּילֵנִי מִדַּמַּיִם (verse 16) is difficult to explain. Perhaps at this point the memory of his own sinful deeds resurfaces and he cries out for deliverance from blood-guiltiness, perhaps indicating that he was still afraid of divine justice (cf. Terrien 2003:408). Davidson (1998:170) argues that the psalmist may feel that his actions were so heinous that he deserves the death penalty. He thus throws himself at the mercy and grace of Yahweh, the only one who can set him free from the death penalty.

Goldingay (1978:388-390) offers another explanation when he argues that the phrase should be understood in light of two similar passages in Ezekiel (3:17-19; 33:7-9) in which the prophet refers to his appointment as watchman over the house of Israel. By fulfilling his obligation of warning the sinner to turn from his wicked ways, the blood of the sinner will not be on his hands, and he will be saved. Deliverance from blood-guilt in Ezekiel thus refers to the calling of the prophet to proclaim God's salvation. Goldingay maintains that the context of Psalm 51 is similar to that in Ezekiel (:389). The poet's restoration would testify to the fact that God still forgives and would then serve as an invitation to other sinners to return to Yahweh. The opening of his lips (verse 17) would result in him giving praise to God for his salvation. Consequently, sinners would be warned

and he would be delivered from blood-guiltiness. Thus he prays to “be kept from becoming answerable for the death of other sinners by failing to challenge and invite them to return to God” (:390; cf. also Tate 1990:26).

The psalm continues with a vow of praise (verse 17), emphasising the fact that the poet has offered himself to God. He also realises that sacrifices will be to no avail, if they are offered only as an external ritual (verse 18). God desires a broken spirit and a contrite heart (verse 19). This should not be understood as a complete rejection of sacrifices, but as an indication that sacrifices as an empty ritual are worthless. They must be accompanied by the inner reality of a life transformed by God and effected by the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit. The intention of the psalmist is to show “what sacrifice is really about and what gives true efficacy to the outward ritual acts ... it is the inward reality that is effective, not the symbolic outward signs” (Wilson 2002:777). This will “prepare the sinner to enter into the most intimate communion with the Lord of tender mercies” (Terrien 2003:409). It is only when the self has been subjected to God’s mercy, when the self has been dismantled, when the self has yielded to God that new life is possible and new worship can flow from a broken heart which has been renewed by the indwelling Spirit.

As mentioned, verses 20-21 were probably added to the psalm at a later stage, and deal with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Mays (1994:203) argues that the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem corresponds to the petition that God create a clean heart and renew a steadfast spirit. The restoration of the city completes the renewal of God’s people. It is certainly possible that a post-exilic editor, re-interpreting the psalm for his/her own time, attested that the rebuilding of the walls confirmed that their hearts have been renewed and their relationship with Yahweh restored.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article analysed Psalm 51 to challenge the assumption held by Pentecostals that the Spirit of God only sporadically came over people in the Old Testament period, and to ascertain the role of God’s Spirit in the life of the worshipper of the Psalm.

It was argued that a reading of 1 Samuel 16:13 in combination with Psalm 51:13 implies the possibility of the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God in someone in the Old Testament, and not only sporadically coming over him. When David was anointed to become king, the Spirit came over him from that day onward. The coming of the Spirit implies a “perpetual attribute” and not just a sporadic occurrence. After his sin with Bathsheba, David feared the loss of the *רוח* resulting in his plea that God should not take his holy Spirit from him

(Ps. 51:13). This indicates that the presence of God's Spirit was a continuous reality in the life of David.

It was also argued that the author of the psalm may have had Saul's experience in mind as Saul's sin led to the loss of the Spirit in his life. After his sin with Bathsheba, David probably feared the same consequence. Sin aggrieves God's Spirit and violates man's relationship with him. In my opinion, the poet's remorse for his sin can therefore be attributed to the Spirit of God working in him to reconcile him with God.

Thirdly, the Spirit created a pure heart and a steadfast spirit in the psalmist; this led to a new relationship with Yahweh. Without the presence of the Spirit the relationship with God is not possible. The Spirit effects renewal and inner transformation, thus enabling man to live a life of obedience to God.

Fourthly, the analysis has shown that the result of the indwelling presence of the Spirit is joy as a consequence of man being reconciled with God and his fellow man.

Fifthly, the transforming work of God's Spirit results in a renewed commitment to share the ways of the Lord with others. By warning other sinners to turn from their wicked ways, the blood of the sinner will not be on the hands of the poet, and he will be saved. The poet's return to God testifies to God's forgiveness and is an invitation to other sinners to return to Yahweh.

Lastly, new worship results from a broken and contrite heart that has been renewed by God's grace and mercy through the work of the Spirit. The vow of praise emphasises that the poet has offered himself to Yahweh. The new worship being offered to God also consists of sacrifices, not as an external ritual, but accompanied by the inner reality of a life transformed by God and effected by the indwelling presence of God's Spirit.

A final comment is essential. Although Psalm 51 indicates that the presence of the Spirit of God was a continuous reality in Old Testament times, further research should and will be undertaken to test this hypothesis. Other Old Testament texts, in which the Spirit of God features prominently, need to be analysed in order to ascertain whether they support the conclusions drawn in this article.

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