Translation

3. Have mercy on me, O God, in accordance with your faithfulness. According to the abundance of your mercies, eradicate my crimes.
4. Cleanse me thoroughly from my iniquity, and purify me from my sin.
5. For I know my crimes, and my sin is always in front of me.
6. Toward you alone have I sinned and done what is bad in your eyes, so you are fair in your sentence, innocent in your judgment.
7. Look, I was born in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.
8. Furthermore, you desire truth within a person. Make me know wisdom within my breast.
9. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
10. Make me hear joy and happiness. The bones you have crushed will rejoice!
11. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
12. Create for me a clean heart, O God, and a new, firm spirit within me.
13. Do not throw me out of your presence or take your holy spirit from me.
14. Return to me the joy of your salvation, and support me with your noble spirit.
15. I shall teach criminals your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Text

תָּמַךְ בַּעֲרָבִי וְתֹּמַךְ אָשֶׁר-בָּא אֲלֵ-בִית-שָׁבִית;
2 בְּבוֹא-אָלָלוּ נַפְתָּה נַעְבָּד בָּא אֲלֵ-בִית-שָׁבִית;
3 חֲפֵרֵי אֲלָלִים כָּפַסְדוּ כְּרֵב-רְחְמֵנָי בִּמְחָתָם;
4 הֶרְבֵּה [הֶרְבּ] בְּכֶסֶם מְשֻׁנָּי וּמְשַׁמְּאֶדְיָי.
Observations

This is a lament of guilt whereby the psalmist acknowledges that his present wretched state derives from his sins against God alone (51:4). (Sins against the neighbor in biblical thought could only be forgiven by the neighbor offended.) The psalmist's confidence in God's forgiveness, however, makes him bold to ask that God have mercy on him because of God's faithfulness to the holy covenant (Hebrew ḥesed, often mistranslated "loving-kindness," 51:1). Verses 19-20 were added during the Babylonian Exile (586-539 BC) and are not typical of laments.

The psalm for Christians is one of the seven traditional penitential psalms, with the others being Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143. Strikingly, only one other of them, Psalm 130, is employed in Cycle A for Lent. The whole notion of a penitential psalm, however, is a later imposition on the Psalter. As we shall see, this psalm, like other laments, is a complaint, not an abject humiliation of a sinner before God.¹

Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 206, correctly sees that Psalm 51 is not a psalm of repentance and that such a literary form does not exist in the Psalter. Instead, we find the first experiments with prayers of repentance in Ezra 9 and Daniel 9. Psalm 51 is a lament that

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¹ The time is past for the theological extremes such as we find in Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (1962), 401, in which Weiser tells us that Psalm 51 “demonstrates the essence of true penitence.”
has as its object the removal of the psalmist’s suffering, not the alleviation of the psalmist’s conscience.

Gerstenberger (1:214) points out that the petitions in 9-14 do not ask for health, wealth, and safety as do many of the other laments. Rather, the psalm asks for forgiveness, a clean heart, a firm spirit, and the like. He points out too that the “spiritual” nature of these requests have suggested a post-exilic date to some commentators. Although Gerstenberger is correct in his characterization of the content of the petitions, he may be missing their intent. As we shall see, the restoration of the psalmist to the cult by the removal of sin and the uncleanness of sin will save him from the “just” sentence of God against him and the physical consequences of it.

Notes on the Text

3. כּוּגְג (BDB 562a) This double-weak verb means something like “eradicate” or “obliterate.” It has special use in regard to written texts where it means “erase.” The verse, therefore, points to the idea that there is a book in the heavenly world that contains the record of all our deeds. The request is that God erase any and all memory of my “crimes.” (See the note on רֶשֶׁף in the previous lesson.) It may be easy enough to guess at the meaning of the verb and suffix שֶׁפֶנֶּן, but this might be a good opportunity to look at the “double ayin” verbs again and remind yourself how you append object suffixes on them (Weingreen, 231-234; G-K, Table G).

3. Have mercy on me, O God,
in accordance with your faithfulness.
According to the abundance of your mercies,
eradicate my crimes.

4. כּוּב (BDB 915a) This is a Qere/Ketib. The vowel points suggest the reading כּוּב, while the consonants suggest כּוּב. Both are possible forms of the hifil ms imperative of כּוּב, but the form כּוּב is also the infinitive absolute of the same verb. This infinitive absolute can have adverbial meaning, something like “very much” or “thoroughly,” and the note in the Stuttgart Bible prefers this reading:

4 a mlת Mss ut Q; l c K כּוּב cf Vers.

In case your Latin abbreviations are not up to speed, the note reads:

Many Masoretic manuscripts read like the Qere.
Read with the Ketib כּוּב. See the versions (translations).

כּוּב (BDB 460a) The verb shows up again in vs. 9b. The evidence from Ugarit suggests that the meaning of the word is more like “to full” rather than simply “to wash” (K-B 459a). Whether we should really see here a metaphor from the preparation of cloth (especially wool) or a
mundane reference to the washing of clothes, is a matter for the interpreter. The English versions (KJV, RSV, NRSV) all read “wash me thoroughly.” The parallel verb in the next stich (BDB 372ab) has the connotation of purifying something ritually, making it “clean” as opposed to “unclean.” The list of faults in this Psalm, iniquity, crime, and sin, are familiar to us from our last lesson.

4. Cleanse me thoroughly from my iniquity, and purify me from my sin.

5. From the verb יָדַע. (You knew that, right?) The question here might be what force to give the imperfect. The word order suggests that the emphasis is upon “my crimes” (בשעיף), but the pleonastic יָדַע strengthens the subject of the verb. “For I know my crimes,” might work if one lays emphasis on the “I.” Dahood 2:3 does not agree with this and finds both the word order and the pleonasm unacceptable. He proposes that we should read here יָדַע, “those who meet me face-to-face.” This seems entirely too facile to me. G-K par 142 does recognize this as a possible word order, and the pronoun is the most reasonable understanding of an יָדַע right before יָדַע.

God does not have to convict the psalmist of the psalmists wrongs. That means that the afflictions the psalmist is about to mention are really unnecessary because they cannot lead to enlightenment. The parallel second stich reinforces the psalmist’s knowledge:

5. For I know my crimes, and my sin is always in front of me.

6. K-B 614b regard this as a shortened version of לַמְעַרְאַתִּי, but the formulation with לַמְעַרְאַתִּי and the imperfect has become the usual way of expressing “such that” or “in order that” in Hebrew. The present instance is a result clause: “so that you are just.” Since the offense was against God alone (בֹּזְכֵנִי תַּעֲשֵׂה), it is fair and just for God to issue a word of judgment that resulted in the events that led the psalmist to lament. The other clear implication is that the psalmist does not have to seek out some other victim of his crimes to compensate before turning to God. God is the injured party, God alone. The juridical meaning of here is confirmed by the infinitive construct בַּשֵּׁמֶשׁ. The verb יָדַע (BDB 269a also K-B 269a!) suggests both legal vindication and purity, connotations well suited to this psalm that recognizes the connection between sin and ritual uncleanness.

Verse 6 consists of two distichs as follows:

6. Toward you alone have I sinned and done what is bad in your eyes, so you are fair in your sentence, innocent in your judgment.
7. Watke and O’Conner use Wolfgang Schneider’s term “macrosyntactic” to describe the function of this word. Its function derives from the spoken language that requires markers to block out the principal divisions of oral text. So something like the modern American expression “look” or “now” is usually suitable. Other such markers are וְאֵתָה, וְאֵתָה, וְאֵתָה and וַתִּהְיֶה. At times the particle וַיִּהְיֶה corresponds to English “if,” but not in this context.

(וְאֵתָה) This is a polal (equivalent of a pual). If this formation of עֵינִי verbs has escaped your attention, you might review it in Weingreen, 201-202. These verb roots cannot have the middle consonant strengthened because there is no middle consonant. So Hebrew reduplicates the next root consonant. The polel is the equivalent of the piel, and the polal is the equivalent of the pual. It probably will not surprise you that there is also a hitpolel. Don’t confuse this formation with the qal active participle. You will waste a great deal of time chasing phantoms if you do.

(וְאֵתָה) It is difficult to know how far to push a lexical meaning. In the other places this verb occurs it refers to the “breeding heat” of animals (to borrow BDB’s description). See Genesis 30:38-41. Gerstenberger 1:214 calls this statement of sin “liturgical” and by that very nature “exaggerated.” It is not, he tells us, a dogmatic claim. He reacts very strongly against the idea that הוא reflects an idea of sex as sinful. Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms, 99, believes that the statements in this verse are “clinical” in nature. The psalmist can remember no time without the burden of sin. Quoting the 1928 Prayer Book, he takes this to be equivalent to the claim “there is no health in us.” Both of these approaches fail to do justice to the psalmist’s claim. Even if we are not to import any moral wrong into the word הוא, the psalm claims that from the instant of his birth, nay from the moment of his conception, the psalmist was involved in iniquity and sin. This is not the confession of original sin, a doctrine unknown to the Hebrew Bible, but a specific claim about the psalmist’s circumstances. Furthermore, it is in a sense exculpatory. The psalmist is not confessing his awful sinful state but explaining that he lived within an environment of iniquity and sin since before birth. The twice-repeated macrosyntactic וַיִּהְיֶה makes it clear that the psalmist is pleading a case: “Now look, ...” God may be perfectly justified in punishing the psalmist, but God would also be perfectly justified in giving pardon and release. God in the divine mercy could understand that the psalmist’s sins were part of a family and/or social reality that existed even before the psalmist took the first breath.

7. Look, I was born in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

8. בַּשְׁחָתָה (BDB 376ab, KB 373b-374a) BDB derives this noun from בַּשָּׂחָת meaning to smear

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or cover over something. The Hebrew word is roughly equivalent to the name of the Egyptian
god Thoth (E. R. Dalglish, Psalm 51 [1962]), and K-B find additional evidence for the
importance of this interpretation in the other occurrence of this word in Job 38:26:

מִכִּשְׁתָּת בְּשֶׁיָּהּ הָכְנָה אִאֶמִּיתוֹ לַשְּׁכָרִי בֶּןֶה:

The word מִכִּשְׁתָּת does not otherwise occur in the Bible, but in later Hebrew it means a cock or
rooster (K-B 1327a). Is this a reference to divination? K-B 374a consider it a reference to the
ibis, the bird sacred to Thoth.

The context in Job, however, leads in a different direction. The LORD inquires of Job in vss.
34-38 whether Job has the ability to control the phenomena of clouds, rain, and lightning and
personifies these entities by suggesting that lightning could actually announce their presence to
the LORD (vs. 35). The question of vs. 36 is who has enabled the clouds and rain and lightning
with the wisdom and understanding to do their Lord’s bidding. Whatever the meaning of מִכִּשְׁתָּת here, it must fit the general meaning of the passage. One suspects an idiom, but it is impossible
to confirm this with the present evidence.

This analysis confirms the impression that Psalm 51:8 refers to the same cognitive illumination
that would consist of truth in a person’s most hidden places and wisdom in the יִתְנָה (BDB
711a, chest?).

This is all part of an argument. This verse too begins with ו and is the second element of the
argument to convince the LORD that the psalmist ought to receive relief from suffering. The
psalmist’s birth, even his conception, was within a social and familial context of sin. Further,
since God desires truth and wisdom within a human being, it is manifest that the psalmist never
received either. Taken together, these form an argument for the amelioration of the psalmist’s
suffering. If God should desire the psalmist to have the requisite knowledge, God must put instill
it: “Make me know wisdom within my breast.”

8. Furthermore, you desire truth within a person.
Make me know wisdom within my breast.

9. The fact that the piel verb has an object pronoun and a instrumentality (“by hyssop”) means that it refers to ritual cleansing,
not forgiveness of sins per se. The reference is clearly to a cultic act in the temple that relieves
the psalmist of the uncleanness incurred through sin. The result will be that the psalmist is free of
the disqualifying uncleanness that prevents him from approaching God. The result of the
affusion is יִתְנָה (BDB 372a), always used of freedom from ritual uncleanness.

The parallelism of the second stich is to say just how
clean the psalmist will be: ומשלח אלביני “and I shall be whiter than snow.” Remember that the מ-comparative does not require an adjective per se. The hifil of לבנ belongs to that not inconsiderable number of places in which the hifil functions almost like a nifal to show a quality.

Although a priest or other cultic functionary may carry out the washing, it is God who cleanses the psalmist. The discussion with God then continues by claiming not only that God would have to establish truth and wisdom within the psalmist but although that God would have to cleanse the psalmist from the unclean effects of the psalmist’s sin.

9. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean.
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

10. Make me hear joy and happiness.
The bones you have crushed will rejoice!

11. Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

12. The heart is the seat of cognition and will. If it is to be “pure,” God will need to create such a thing within the psalmist’s סתר so that the psalmist avoids sin in the future. The new heart is untainted, clean, a cultic metaphor for a cognitive and volitional condition. Likewise, if the psalmist’s זר is to be “right,” God will have to make it so by putting such a new, right or “firm” spirit within the singer. The spirit is the living component that animates the human being. The psalmist’s spirit came into being in sin. Now God must create that spirit anew.

12. Create for me a clean heart, O God,
and a new, firm spirit within me.

13. (BDB 1021a, K-B 1529a) The English expression “throw out” comes close to the
meaning of this hifil (passive, hofal), carrying with it at times the idea of getting rid of garbage as well as the idea of simply throwing something. Often it finds use in reference to dead bodies as in Joshua 8:29 and 10:27, Amos 8:3, etc. The reader might want to review the + jussive (Weingreen 77, 114-115). Since there is a shortened form of this jussive, the longer form here makes an absolute request: “never.”

The request that God never cast the psalmist away from the divine presence, *i.e.* the cultic presence of the LORD in the temple, is matched in the second stich with the request that God not remove God’s “holy spirit” from the psalmist. This is, we must stress, not the Holy Spirit of Christian doctrine, but, as in the verse above, the living reality of God. If God were to cast the psalmist from the temple, then the psalmist would be deprived of the joy of being in the presence of God and God’s holy spirit.

13. Do not throw me out of your presence
or take your holy spirit from me.

14. Return to me the joy of your salvation,
and support me with your noble spirit.

There may not be much here that requires philological discussion.

15. I shall teach criminals your ways,
and sinners will return to you.