THE PSALM "MISERERE" [1]

This psalm, through which thousands of Christians have in all ages expressed their sorrow for their sins, has ever since the last centuries before Christ been ascribed to David who, after being rebuked by the prophet Nathan, sincerely repented of his double sin of adultery and murder. Modern criticism, however, while recognising the penitential tone and the profound religious sentiments of the psalm, considers it to be a late composition by a pious Israelite who, on his sick-bed, prays God to forgive his sins and restore him to health. Thus E. J Kissane, the latest Catholic commentator of the *Psalms*, writes : "It is a prayer for pardon by one who has to endure grievous bodily suffering which he regards as the due chastisement for his sins". And further on : "If there is nothing in the main part of the poem which compels us to attribute it to David, there is no reason for maintaining that the final verses are a later addition. The whole poem may belong to the period of the exile" (*The Book of Psalms*, VOL. I, Dublin 1953, pp. 224 f.) This is also the opinion of E. Podechard, who rejects the Davidic authorship for the reason that the religious sentiments expressed by the psalmist are higher than those expressed by David when he was rebuked by Nathan (*Le Psautier*, I, Lyons 1949, 238 f). J. Steinmann, following in the steps of Podechard, thinks that the psalmist has committed some secret sin, perhaps a blasphemy, therefore not an adultery nor a murder. Consequently, he has fallen ill. Repenting of his sin he prays God to cleanse his soul and to restore him to health (*Les Psaumes*, Paris 1951 (p. 114). R. Tournay O.P. and R. Schwab carry the origin of the psalm down to post-exilic times and delete the word "from bloodshed" or "from bloodguiltiness" in *v.*16 which they consider to be a gloss added by a later copyist to make the psalm fit David (*Les Psaumes* in *La Bible de Jerusalem*, 1950).

The traditional view of the Davidic origin is still held by J. Calès S.J. (*Le Livre des Psaumes*, I, Paris 1936, pp. 518 f.), P. Boylan (*The Psalms*, I, Dublin 1936, p. 184), E. Pannier (*Les Psaumes* in Pirot-Clamer *La Sainte Bible*, 1937), implicitly by Bird (*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 1953) and by the Anglican A. F. Kirkpatrick (*The Book of Psalms*, 1914 in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*). The supporters of the Davidic origin maintain that *vv.*20 and 21 were added during the exile, or, at least, before the times of Nehemias.

The question of authorship is important not so much in itself as in its implications. Supposing the psalm to be written by David in the

[1] Ps. L in the Vulgate numbering, LI in the Hebrew.

circumstances indicated in the title, we hear in it the cry of one who is fully conscious of the gravity of his sins, openly confesses them and humbly prays for God's forgiveness. But if the psalm was written by a sick man, who regarded his sufferings as a punishment for the sins which he has, or may have, committed, the psalm becomes a prayer for deliverance from sickness, and the consciousness and confession of sin become, more or less, a literary device meant to support the suppliant's claim to regain his health. Sin, instead of being considered mainly as an offence against God, becomes an obstacle to temporal prosperity and a cause of temporal suffering. The psalmist wants to remove the cause, which is sin, in order to make the effect, which is his illness, disappear. None will deny that the high spiritual meaning that we are accustomed to give to this psalm is greatly weakened by this new interpretation, and in spite of the apparent superiority of the psalmist's confession to David's confession in II Sam. XII, XIII (Podechard *op. cit.* p. 238) the real motive for the psalmist's repentance and confession is not so much the consciousness of the gravity of sin as the fear of death. It is therefore of paramount importance to examine more closely the reasons against the Davidic origin of the psalm.

The traditional view is based upon the authority of the title. But the titles of the psalms, as everybody knows, have no infallible authority and may be rejected when there are strong reasons against them. On the other hand, the conclusion of the psalm, which is commonly regarded as a liturgical post-exilic addition, must absolutely be considered as an integral part of the psalm, unless there are solid arguments, independent of the title, against them. Therefore neither the title nor the conclusion have a decisive value in favour of or against the Davidic origin of the psalm.

The question must be decided from internal evidence. The psalm sets before us a sinner who is fully conscious of his sin which he confesses eleven times in nine verses. Sin is represented as an offence against God, not as a mere cause of temporal suffering. The effect of the removal of sin is not material prosperity, but internal joy, a clean heart, God's holy spirit and a steadfast allegiance to God. There is no allusion to sickness, except, perhaps, the mention of the "crushed bones" in *v.*10, which is taken to indicate the severe suffering of the psalmist. But the word "bones" denotes sometimes the whole of man's psychophysical organism, and "crushed bones" may be simply a metaphor for extreme affliction, moral suffering, oppression. (*Cf.* Pss. XLII.11, CII.4, etc.) The "crushed bones" may therefore denote metaphorically the state of utter despondency and desolation produced by the consciousness of having offended God. Another allusion to sickness

is said to be the psalmist's cry for deliverance from "blood" (*v.*16), which is taken to mean either "a premature death" (Kissane) or simply "death" as the climax of intense bodily suffering (Podechard, Steinmann). But the Hebrew word, *damim*, never occurs in either of these senses. The plural form *damim* means "blood" (Gen. IV.10–11 ; I Paralip. XXII.8 ; Is. IX.4 ; etc.) ; "bloodshed" mostly in active sense (II Sam. XVI.8 ; I Kings II.5 ; Hos. IV.2 ; II Sam. XXI.1 ; etc.) ; "bloodguiltiness" (Ex. XXII.1 ; Deut. XIX.10, XXII.8 ; Lev. XX.9 ; Ezech. XVIII.13). The first and second meaning are inapplicable to *v.*16 ; if the second meaning is taken in a passive sense, as in II Kings IX.7, it will practically coincide with the third, and the sense of *v.*16 would be : Deliver me from my bloodguiltiness, that is, from the death penalty which I have incurred on account of Uriah's death. In any case the meaning of death as the result of sickness seems to be excluded.

Another argument advanced against the Davidic origin of the Psalm is *v.*6 : "Against thee, thee alone, have I sinned". These words, it is said, cannot have been uttered by David, whose sin was certainly a grievous injury both to Bethsabee and to Uriah. But, it may be replied, the Hebrew word *lebhadh* "only, alone" denotes separateness of things or persons from others of the same kind. Thus in Deut. XXXII.12, "The Lord alone", i.e. with no other god with him ; Deut. XXXII.39, "I am alone, and there is no other god besides me" ; I Sam. X.19, "God alone (and no other god) has saved you" ; cp. also II Kings XIX.15–19 ; Neh. IX.6 ; Job IX.8, XIV.4, XXIII.13 ; etc. Hence the sense of *v.*6 is : "Against thee, and against no other God, have I sinned". The psalmist does not necessarily deny having sinned against man, but he simply acknowledges that his sin is an offence against his God (see W. E. Barnes, *The Psalms*, II, 1931, pp. 255 f.). Therefore no solid argument can be drawn from the word "alone" against the Davidic origin of the psalm.

E. Podechard brings forth another argument. The religious sentiment of the psalm, he writes, is much higher than that expressed by David in II Sam. XII. David's conscience remained insensible for at least a year ; he did penance for the life of his child, not to atone for his sin and obtain God's pardon (*Le Psautier*, I, pp. 238 f.). Now, it is quite true that the religious sentiment of the author of Ps. LI is much higher than that expressed by David in II Sam. XII, but it is equally true that II Sam. XII does not relate the whole story of David's repentance. It is most unlikely that David, on becoming conscious of the gravity of his sins, expressed his sorrow by the words "I have sinned against the Lord" only, without realising the need for divine mercy, the depth of misery into which he had fallen, and the loss of

internal joy and friendship with God. But those few words sum up the whole story of a repentant soul, and in their brevity are more eloquent than the most diffuse narrative of David's psychological state. Similarly it is most unfair to restrict David's prayer to the preservation of his child's life. David could very well pray God for pardon, and at the same time for the life of his child. Therefore, while one has to admit that the religious sentiments of the psalmist are represented in a different way from those of David in II Sam. XII, one has no right to infer that the situations of the psalmist and David were necessarily different.

Another argument against the Davidic authorship is drawn from the affinities of thought and language between the psalm and the Prophets, especially Deutero-Isaiah. If the psalm depends on Deutero-Isaiah, it is certainly later than the exile. This argument is very uncertain, because the affinities do not go beyond a few expressions that are common in other books of the Old Testament. Thus the "greatness of God's mercy" in *v.*3 recurs in Is. LXIII.7–15 ; Pss. V.8, LXIX.14–17, CVI.7–45 ; Neh. XIII.22 ; the "blotting out of sin" in *v.*3 and in Is. XLIII.25, XLIV.22 ; Jer. XVIII.23 ; "broken and contrite heart" recurs in Pss. XXXIV.19, LXIX.21, CXLVIII.3 ; Is. LVII.15, LXI.1 ; Jer. XXIII.9 ; Ezech. VI.9. It is therefore extremely precarious to establish a dependence of Ps. LI on Deutero-Isaiah on the ground of these parallel expressions.

But the strongest argument against the Davidic origin is the conclusion of the psalm, which points unmistakably to a time between the destruction of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the walls by Nehemias. Most Catholic interpreters find an easy solution in the hypothesis that the two last verses are a liturgical addition made during the exile or an addition meant to tone down the psalmist's rejection of sacrificial worship. This may be true ; in fact the hypothesis is permitted by the Biblical Commission decr. 1 May 1910). But in order that this hypothesis may be accepted with confidence, it must be established on solid grounds independent of the authority of the title. So long as these solid grounds are not available, we have no right to reject the final verses any more than the first verses of the psalm. Are there such grounds ? Many years ago A. F. Kirkpatrick remarked that "this anticipation of the restoration of material sacrifices in Jerusalem seems a poor ending to a psalm of such profound spirituality" (*The Book of Psalms*, p. 295). Indeed, after the psalmist's pathetic appeal to God's unbounded mercy, his insistent prayer for forgiveness, his sincere confession of sin and firm resolution of a new life, the prayer for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the renewal of the sacrificial worship comes as a jarring note which spoils all the aesthetic

effect and sublime spirituality of the psalm. If the remark is not too subjective, there is, at least, some probability that the last two verses of the psalm are a gloss.

In conclusion we may say that the arguments against the Davidic authorship of Ps. LI are not convincing. Although there is nothing in the psalm which compels us to attribute it to David, it is safer to follow a tradition which goes back to, at least, one hundred years before Christ, than to propose explanations that are the product of imagination rather than the result of sound exegesis.

P. P. SAYDON

Royal University,
Malta