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# RESTORATION AND ITS BLESSINGS: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PSALMS 51 AND 32

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*Psalms 51 and 32 arose out of the same historical circumstances but reflect a different time of composition. Both psalms, however, are highly structured; this is indicated by various features such as parallelism and chiasm, repetition of key terminology, and important structural markers. These point to a twofold division in each psalm. The second division of each psalm contains the main thrust in the flow of thought, so that renewal and praise (Psalm 51) and teaching sinners God's ways (Psalm 32) are the prominent ideas.*

*This essay uses structural analysis as a tool for contextual analysis of the two psalms. John Callow's A Semantic Structure Analysis of Second Thessalonians<sup>1</sup> serves as the model for the work undertaken here. The advantage of structural analysis is its assumption that human thought is organized; thus, an analysis of the structure of biblical texts should prove very helpful as a tool for biblical theology (see appendix).*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

### *Methodology*

THE task of combining exegesis and theology is one of the most difficult but also one of the most fruitful challenges in biblical studies. It requires the interpreter to make the detailed observations resulting from exegesis yield theological conclusions, while avoiding the proof-texting method typical of some systematic theologies. I have therefore endeavored in this study to avoid details which would distract from the goal of contributing to a biblical theology of sin and

<sup>1</sup>Ed. by Michael F. Kopeseck (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1982).

man, while elaborating on those details which support my reconstruction of the flow of thought in the psalms.

In order to avoid unnecessary detail, a method of contextual analysis as developed by associates of Wycliffe Bible Translators will be used.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the structure of the psalms is analyzed first. The results of this analysis are presented in an *overview chart* which indicates the relationships between the various constituents (that is, divisions, subdivisions, etc.) of the psalms.

After the structural analysis, the flow of thought of the psalms is surveyed in order to arrive at an understanding of the meaning. However, since it exceeds the boundaries of this study to delineate all the evidence for a proper understanding of the psalms, only evidence relevant to the biblical theological argument will be adduced. The results of this analysis of meaning are synthesized in a *thematic outline*. This outline contains constituent titles, which identify the number of verses concerned, the type of unit these verses represent (division, section, paragraph cluster, paragraph, etc.; these units do not necessarily conform to the more technical use in Callow's *Second Thessalonians*, but rather serve here as convenient labels for the hierarchy of constituents), and the role this constituent plays in the flow of thought of the psalms, indicated by the term "role." The outline also describes the contents of each constituent, the "constituent theme." These themes differ from common phrase outlines in that they represent both in form and wording the content of the verses; that is, the themes will consist of full sentences of a grammatical structure analogous to the verses represented. This will in turn provide the appropriate basis for a theological analysis of the psalms.

### *Background of Psalms 51 and 32*

These psalms have traditionally been identified as two of the seven penitential psalms.<sup>3</sup> The others are Psalms 6, 38, 102, 130, and 143. Of these, Psalm 51 is perhaps one of the finest examples of a penitential psalm, while Psalm 32, although more didactic, still fits the same mold.

Psalm 51, as shown by vv 1-2,<sup>4</sup> concerns David's sin with Bathsheba which is described in 2 Samuel 11 and for which David was rebuked by the prophet Nathan in the 12th chapter. Although these titles may not be original with the composition of the psalms, they at least represent an early tradition. Assuming an early date for the

<sup>2</sup>See Callow, *Second Thessalonians*, 1-15.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Snaith, *The Seven Psalms* (London: Epworth, 1964) 9.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout, the Hebrew verse enumeration will be followed. Thus, the title will include vv 1-2, while the psalm itself starts with v 3 and runs through v 21.

psalm and Davidic authorship, there is no problem accepting the accuracy of the title.

Psalm 32 is also Davidic, but the title does not include information about the setting as does the title of Psalm 51. Most commentators associate this psalm with the same series of events relating to David's sin. But there is a clear difference of style and mood between the two psalms. It seems that Psalm 51 represents the immediate outcry of David after Nathan's rebuke, while Psalm 32 was composed later after more reflection on these experiences.

This connection can be substantiated internally. In Ps 51:15, David vows to teach sinners God's ways upon being granted the restoration of the joy of his salvation. In Ps 32:8 David fulfills this vow by giving instruction in the way people should walk.<sup>5</sup> Other observations also suggest this. Psalm 32 is more didactic, with its well thought-out contrasts, while Psalm 51 seems more emotional. This would indicate that Psalm 32 was written after some reflection upon the event, while Psalm 51 mirrors David's turmoil in guilt. It is therefore reasonable to believe that Psalm 51 is the earlier of the two compositions.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the emotional flavor of Psalm 51 does not imply a lack of reflection. Dalglish, in his monumental work on this psalm, has pointed out many parallels with other ancient Near Eastern literature, Egyptian as well as Sumero-Akkadian.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it may well be that Psalm 51 belongs in a category of highly structured literature apparently common throughout the ancient Near East; this kind of composition used certain traditional expressions to indicate submission to a superior and repentance on the part of a subordinate.

But if "the Hebrew psalms of lamentation are indebted to the Sumero-Accadian, they have in turn contributed their own most definitive creativity in their formulation."<sup>7</sup> Thus, none of the theological biases of the ancient Mesopotamian religions need have influenced Hebrew common Psalmody. In addition, even if Psalm 51 follows a traditional pattern, that does not diminish the emotional value of the poem. Rather, it heightens the genius of the poet who was able to use certain set forms to convey such deep emotional struggles.

In this study, ancient Near Eastern parallels will not be considered, not because they may not be valuable, but because they are not germane to our topic.

<sup>5</sup>See F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. F. Bolton, in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 398.

<sup>6</sup>Edward R. Dalglish, *Psalm Fifty-One in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 277.

## PSALM 51

*Structural Analysis: Divisions of the Psalm*

Many expositors of Psalm 51 (as well as of many other passages in Scripture) fail to account for the structure simply because they do not recognize it. For instance, Harrison<sup>8</sup> states that rigid analysis of the psalm is difficult because of the emotional upheaval. "David intermingled and repeated the petitions which clamored for utterance." It is quite true that Psalm 51 is strongly emotional, but this does not imply that the psalm was "blurted out" as it came to David's mind.

Dalglish takes another approach. Analyzing the literary features of Psalm 51 in the light of ancient Near Eastern parallels, he develops a strophic structure based on observations about meter, and on this builds an outline to describe the logical flow of thought in the psalm.<sup>9</sup> Although this approach has a certain validity, a more careful analysis can be done on the basis of the internal coherence of the text. First, to build an outline on strophic structure is somewhat hazardous because of the uncertainties about meter and strophes in Hebrew poetry. Instead, an analysis of the parallelisms in the psalm is likely to yield more accurate results. Second, word repetition within the psalm is not accounted for in Dalglish's method. But repetition of key terms, coupled with the use of structural markers such as "therefore," "since," "and," and so on, is one of the more obvious tools available to the poet.

There is little doubt that there are three main divisions in the psalm. Vv 1–2 are recognized as the title and setting, while vv 20–21 are generally seen as material extraneous to the psalm proper. Some even go so far as to state that the last two verses are a later liturgical addition;<sup>10</sup> even if this is not true, it must be acknowledged that vv 20–21 manifest a shift in thought from the body of the psalm, vv 3–19.

The main body of the psalm rather easily falls into two sections. The shift of terminology from one section to the other is the clearest distinguishing feature of the two sections. Vv 3–9 are primarily concerned with sin, purity, and cleansing, while vv 12–19 are more concerned with restoration and renewal of heart and spirit, as the following list based on Auffret's analysis shows:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>E. F. Harrison, "A Study of Psalm 51," *BSac* 92 (1935) 29.

<sup>9</sup>Dalglish, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 77–81.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>11</sup>Auffret, "Note sur la Structure Littéraire de PS LI 1–19," *VT* 26 (1976) 145.

## vv 3–9

פֶּשַׁע	– 3, 5
עוֹן	– 4, 7
חַטָּא	– 4, 5, 6, 7, 9
רַע	– 6
כִּבְס	– 4, 9
טָהַר	– 4, 9
מַחָה	– 3

## vv 12–19

לֵב	– 12, 19
רוּחַ	– 12, 13, 14, 19
בָּרָא	– 12
חֲדָשׁ	– 12
שׁוּב	– 14, 15

In addition to these differences in terminology, note that vv 12–19 contain another theme (not elaborated by Auffret). שֶׁשׁוֹן (vv 10, 14) and שִׂמְחָה (v 10) speak of joy and gladness; לִמְדָה (v 15) and רִנָּה (v 16) expand the theme by turning joy into testimony; שִׁפְחָה and תְּהִלָּה (v 17) further the idea by turning to praise; and חֲפִיץ and רָצָה (v 18) with the negation of בּוֹזֵה (v 19) show how these things are desired by God.

This survey of terminology shows that the movement of the psalm is from pardon of sin in vv 3–9 to the restoration of the heart in vv 12–19.<sup>12</sup> But the latter section also describes in considerable detail man's reactions to God's restoration. The theme, then, may be more appropriately identified as praise resulting from God's restoration of the soul.

So far, vv 10–11 have not been considered. These verses seem out of place, because v 10 already is concerned with joy, the theme of vv 12–19, while v 11 still cries out for forgiveness, the theme of vv 3–9. V 11 uses חַטָּא and עוֹן, as in vv 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and the term מַחָה, also found in v 3; v 10 has שֶׁשׁוֹן and זִכָּה, found in vv 14 and 19 respectively.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore reasonable to identify vv 10–11 as the hinge of the psalm. The main sections of the central division are therefore 3–9, 11 and 10, 12–19.

Auffret has pointed out that the unity of the first section is maintained by parallelisms between 3–4 and 8–9 on the one hand, and 5–6a and 6b–7 on the other. The relationship between vv 4 and 9 is shown by the use of the same words—כִּבְס, חַטָּא and טָהַר. The relationship between vv 3 and 8 is through similar terms, חֲסֵד of v 3 corresponding with אֱמֶת in v 8, and רַחֲמִים in v 3 corresponding with חֲכָמָה in v 8.<sup>14</sup> Thus the structure is parallel in an a-b-a-b pattern.

The internal structure of vv 5–7, however, is not parallel, but chiasmic. In vv 5 and 7 the first person singular is prominent in both independent pronouns and verbal forms, while in 6a–6b, the second person singular is more prominent (although one verb is still in first

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 145–46.<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 142.

## Constituent Organization

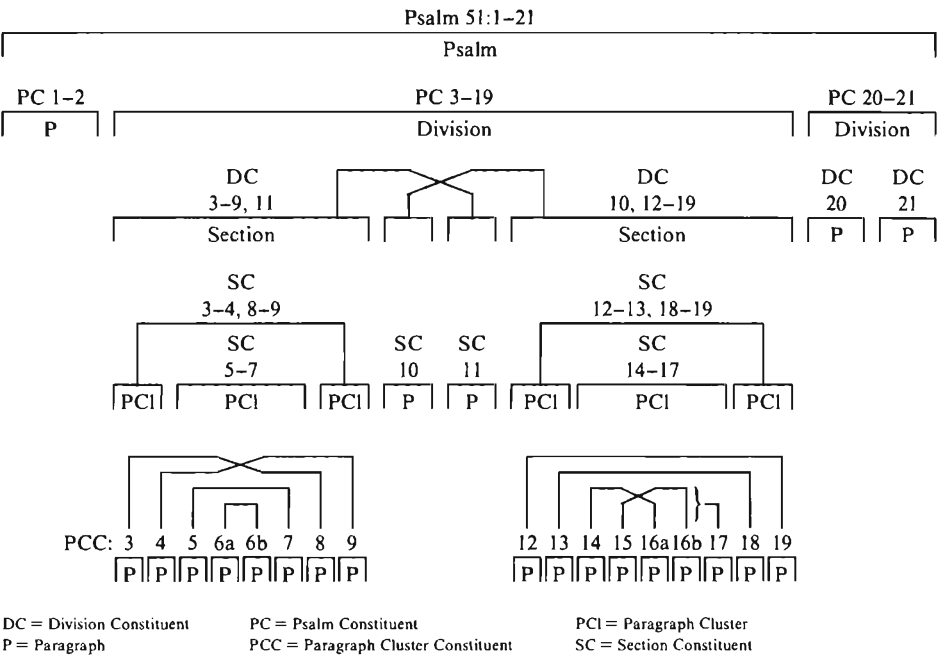


CHART I: Overview of Psalm 51

person by way of transition).<sup>15</sup> The structure here is chiasmic in an a-b-b-a pattern. A key to distinguishing the transition from vv 3-4 to vv 5ff. is the use of כִּי, which is often an indicator of the transition from introduction to body. Here כִּי answers the question “Why?”—that is, why the forgiveness is necessary.<sup>16</sup>

The basis of unity in the second section is similar. Vv 12 and 19 have רוּחַ and לֵב in common, while רוּחַ reoccurs in v 13, and v 18 introduces זִבְחָה, which also occurs in v 19. Thus, vv 12-13, 18-19 form a unit and are arranged chiasmically (a-b-b-a).

Vv 14 and 16a share יָשַׁע, while v 15, with פָּשַׁע and חַטָּא, uses antonyms of צַדִּיק found in 16b, thus showing a parallel arrangement (a-b-b-a).<sup>17</sup>

These structures with their parallel and chiasmic patterns are shown in Chart I.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>16</sup>Dalglish, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 104.

<sup>17</sup>Auffret, “Note,” 143-44.

It is interesting to note the many synonymous parallelisms in Psalm 51, especially since this feature is different from Psalm 32, where most terminological relationships are contrastive. This survey has also shown that the psalm is highly structured, and consequently that there is no basis for the idea that because the psalm is emotional, it is unstructured. The task at hand is to show how the meaning is packaged within this structure.

### *Reconstruction of the Meaning: The Unity of the Psalm*

The main purpose of this part of the study is to determine how the two main sections of the psalm (vv 3–9, 11 and 10, 12–19) relate to each other. But first the content of the sections needs to be analyzed.

#### The content of the two sections

The first section consists of three paragraph clusters (vv 3–4, 5–7, and 8–9). As is evident from the previous analysis paragraph clusters 3–4 and 8–9 are parallel to each other. In order to establish the head (that is, main thought) of these verses, we need to discuss the relationship between 5–7 and 3–4, 8–9.

V 5 begins with כִּי, which indicates major transition, as already noted. It makes a logical progression from the statement of vv 3–4 to what follows and seems to give the reason for the plea for forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> Thus, vv 3–4, 8–9 seem to be the logical consequence of vv 5–7. The best way to reconstruct the flow of thought is that vv 3–4 introduce the thesis statement, after which support for the statement is given in vv 5–7. Vv 8–9 close with a recapitulation, or rather amplification, of the thesis statement, implementing some of the concepts of vv 5–7. Therefore, the head of 3–9, 11 is vv 3–4.

This is further substantiated by considering v 11, the verse which together with v 10 forms the hinge of the argument in the psalm. V 11 repeats the main theme of vv 3–9 as shown in the structural analysis. This theme consists of a plea for forgiveness. Since v 11 is a transition verse, it may be thought of as a brief summary of the main theme of vv 3–9 before the thought of the psalm progresses. Now, if v 11 puts forth a plea for forgiveness as the main theme, then the key to vv 3–9 must be a statement or plea of the same content. Thus, it becomes clear that either the opening statement of vv 3–4 or its recapitulation in vv 8–9 contains the thesis of this section. This is why the outline below contains as the theme of the section vv 3–9, 11 the words "Cleanse me from my sin," and also includes in parentheses the reason for this plea, namely "for against you only I have sinned."

<sup>18</sup>Dalglisch, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 104; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2. 135.



The second section also consists of three paragraph clusters (vv 12–13, 14–17, and 18–19) with the introductory paragraph of v 10. As in the first section, if v 10 is a transition verse, we may expect an important clue from its content to the main emphasis of this section. This verse consists of a plea to God to cause the petitioner to be glad and rejoice. Consequently, we should find in vv 12–19 a statement dealing with the concept of joy and gladness.

The statement about joy is found in v 14 and again in vv 16b and 17. Thus, it would appear that vv 14–17 constitute the main paragraph cluster within this section. This is especially revealing in light of the fact that most often v 12, “create in me a clean heart,” is lifted out as the most central thought of the psalm, while our analysis here shows that somehow this verse is subordinate to the concepts in vv 14–17.

This analysis is also supported by another occurrence of י, this time in v 18. Again it seems to introduce a reason for the thesis statement just given, thereby subordinating vv 18–19 to vv 14–17. And since vv 18–19 are parallel with vv 12–13, it follows that the latter verses are essentially subordinate to vv 14–17 as well. Hence, the outline places the paragraph cluster of vv 14–17 as head of the section vv 10, 12–19.

The content of vv 14–17, however, needs to be analyzed more closely. As already indicated, vv 14 and 16a seem to be related to each other. The same holds for vv 15 and 16b. However, v 17 remains to be discussed.

The progression of thought from vv 14 to 15, repeated in vv 16a to 16b, seems to be that God’s restoration (or forgiveness) results in a human witness (or song). V 17, however, does not seem to have this movement from divine action to human response; instead, it ascribes both activities to God’s working. God has to open the mouth (through restoration and forgiveness) so that he may be praised. It emphasizes to a greater degree the sovereignty of God. This in turn prepares the way for the theme of conformity to God’s desires as presented in vv 18–19 and also vv 20–21. This implies then, that v 17 is the key portion of vv 14–17, and thereby also of the whole section vv 10, 12–19. So, the outline contains as the theme for this section the words “cause me to declare your praise” and adds in parentheses the concepts of vv 12–13 and 18–19, interpreted as means, “by creating in me a clean heart.”

The contents of these two main sections may be summarized as follows. A prayer for pardon, begun in vv 3–4 and finished in vv 8–9, encloses the reason for the need for pardon, namely, great sinfulness as confessed by David.<sup>19</sup> From pardon, the psalm moves toward

restoration. A prayer for restoration, begun in vv 12–13 and reformulated in vv 18–19, forms the basis of (or even the means of) a divinely originated desire to praise God.<sup>20</sup>

### The relationship between the two sections

In order to identify the main thrust of the psalm, it is necessary to establish the relationship between the two sections. Auffret indicates some of these relationships as follows. In section one, we find the request for purification (vv 3–4, 8–9) but in section two a plea for restoration (vv 12–13): here the confession of sin (vv 5–6a, cf. v 7), there the witness to convert sinners (v 15); here a just sentence (v 6b), there a just salvation (v 16, cf. v 14a).<sup>21</sup> Thus, Auffret concludes that the first section is only a prelude to the second.<sup>22</sup>

But the relation needs to be more clearly specified. V 12, with the request for restoration, is intimately bound up with the first section. The latter's emphasis on man's sinfulness from conception contrasted with God's desire for truth in the inner parts not only implies but certainly demands a request for inner restoration. In a sense, v 12 is the natural outgrowth of vv 3–9. However, on the basis of that restoration, the psalmist can vow to testify of God's grace. He knows that if God restores, he will be able to praise him. The relationship between v 12 and v 17, then, seems to one of condition and consequence, v 12 being the condition of v 17. This understanding is supported by the ׀ which begins in v 18, because it shows that the request for being made to praise God has its origin in one's spiritual condition. From a human standpoint one's spiritual condition is the logical condition for being able to praise God, while from the divine standpoint, this represents the means whereby God generates praise unto himself. Either way, the emphasis is on the praise generated for God.

In summary, the relationship between the two sections is that the request for pardon is the condition of (or possibly otherwise subordinate to) the request to be caused to praise God. Therefore, the theme of the outline for the division encompassing vv 3–19 is this idea: "You cause me to declare your praise."

### A note about vv 20–21

A few brief comments about vv 20–21 need to be made. Several commentators, especially those who date this psalm around the period of the exile, regard these last verses as later, liturgical additions. The reason seems obvious, because the statement that God delights in

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

### Thematic Outline of Psalm 51\*

Psalm 51:1–21 (Psalm) [If you cleanse me from my sin (for against you only I have sinned)], [then by creating in me a clean heart] you cause me to declare your praise.

**Psalm Constituent 1–2** (Paragraph) (Role: setting of 3–19) At the time when Nathan convicted David of his sin with Bathsheba.

**Psalm Constituent 3–19** (Division) (Role: Body of the Psalm) [If you cleanse me from my sin (for against you only I have sinned)], [then by creating in me a clean heart] you cause me to declare your praise.

**Division Constituent 3–9, 11** (Section) (Role: condition of 10, 12–19) Cleanse me from my sin [for against you only I have sinned].

**Section Constituent 3–4** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: Head of 3–9, 11) Cleanse me from my sin.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 3** (Paragraph) (Role: topic orienter of 3–4) God, be gracious to me in accordance with your lovingkindness.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 4** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 3–4) Cleanse me from my sin.

**Section Constituent 5–7** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: reason for 3–4, 8–9) Against God only I have sinned.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 5** (Paragraph) (Role: specific of 6a) My sin is always on my mind.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 6a** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 5–7) Against God only I have sinned.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 6b** (Paragraph) (Role: equivalent of 6a) Your judgment is just.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 7** (Paragraph) (Role: amplification of 5) I was sinful already at my very origin.

**Section Constituent 8–9** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: amplification of 3–4) Forgive me that I may be clean.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 8** (Paragraph) (Role: grounds of 9) You want truth in my innermost being.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 9** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 8–9) Forgive me that I may be clean.

**Section Constituent 11** (Paragraph) (Role: equivalent of 3–4) Forgive me all my sin.

**Division Constituent 10, 12–19** (Section) (Roles: consequence of 3–9, 11; Head of the Body) [By creating in me a clean heart] cause me to declare your praise.

**Section Constituent 10** (Paragraph) (Role: preview of 12–19) Cause me to rejoice.

\*See Callow, *Second Thessalonians*, p. 7. His helpful “Chart of Relations Involving Communication Units” explains some of the terminology in this outline.

**Section Constituent 12–13** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: means of 14–17) Create in me a clean heart.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 12** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 12–13) Create in me a clean heart.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 13** (Paragraph) (Role: contrast of 12) Do not separate me from your presence.

**Section Constituent 14–17** (Paragraph Cluster) (Roles: result of 12–13; head of 10, 12–19) Cause me to declare your praise.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 14** (Paragraph) (Role: condition of 15, 16b) Restore to me the joy of your salvation.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 15** (Paragraph) (Role: equivalent of 16b) I will teach sinners your ways.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 16a** (Paragraph) (Role: manner of 12) Deliver me from guilt.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 16b** (Paragraph) (Role: consequence of 14) I will praise your righteousness.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 17** (Paragraph) (Roles: summary of 14–16; head of 14–17) Cause me to declare your praise.

**Section Constituent 18–19** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: amplification of 12–13) You desire a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 18** (Paragraph) (Role: contrast of 19) You do not delight in sacrifice.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 19** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 18–19) You desire a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

**Psalms Constituent 20–21** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: closing of 3–19) If you do good to Zion according to your grace, then you will delight in righteous sacrifices.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 20** (Paragraph) (Role: condition of 21) Do good to Zion according to your grace.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 21** (Paragraph) (Role: consequence of 20) Delight in righteous sacrifices.

sacrifices seems to contradict directly v 18, which says that God does not delight in sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

However, v 21 adds an important qualifier to “sacrifice,” namely “righteous,” implying that these are not empty rituals; they are performed with the right spiritual attitude. Note also that v 20 is an appeal to God’s sovereign grace to show favor to his covenant people. The movement of thought is remarkably similar to the body of the psalm. There we saw an appeal to God’s sovereign grace for pardon,

<sup>23</sup>DalGLISH, *Psalms Fifty-One*, 77, 194.

on which basis human praise could be offered to God. In vv 20–21 we see the same appeal on the basis of which (note the twice repeated  $\tau\kappa$  in v 21) God may delight in the praises of men offered in the form of sacrifices.

The main difference between vv 20–21 and the body of Psalm 51 is that they are spoken within a national context rather than a personal one. The relationship can be best understood in light of the ancient Near Eastern concept of kingship.<sup>24</sup> The king, as a divinely appointed representative, was responsible not only for his own conduct and well-being, but also for that of the whole nation. The concepts of covenant and solidarity play an important role. Thus, after having settled his personal relationship with God, it would be natural for the king to turn his concerns to his nation. In fact, when this concept is properly applied, it will be seen that the presence of vv 20–21 may point to Davidic (because kingly) authorship, rather than late, possibly exilic editing of the psalm: priests or scribes concerned with liturgy would have little interest in adding a postscript with royal implications.

#### *Theological Analysis: The Contents of the Psalm*

One of the major ideas in the psalm is the dependence of man on God who forgives and restores. This stands in stark contrast to the greatness of sin (vv 5–7).

#### The greatness of sin

The movement of thought in vv 5–7 begins with the observation that man has sinned and that he is aware of it. Then the sin is put in proper perspective: it is primarily directed against God. Turning his attention to God, the writer states that God's judgment is just, while in contrast his own origins are in sin. Considering the contribution of each paragraph to the development of the thought is helpful.

V 5: The verse opens with the acknowledgment that David knew his sin; thus, he exposes his guilty conscience.<sup>25</sup> It follows that this was a living awareness of sin.<sup>26</sup> The second half of the verse makes this clear: "before me" here has the connotation of "opposite me, against me," that is, confrontation.<sup>27</sup> The mention of "always" emphasizes that sin is not temporary, but continual.<sup>28</sup> Thus, David characterizes himself as a person who sins and, by extension, all of humanity could be characterized that way.

<sup>24</sup>See J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT 2nd Series, 32; Naperville, IL: Allenson, n.d.) esp. 72, 187.

<sup>25</sup>Dalglisch, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 104.

<sup>26</sup>Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2. 135.

<sup>27</sup>Snaith, *The Seven Psalms*, 52.

<sup>28</sup>Dalglisch, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 105.

V 6a: The prominence of "against you and you only" highlights the fact that all sin is directed against God. This may seem somewhat strange since David's sin with Bathsheba also involved the death of her husband Uriah; nevertheless, this statement is the "only adequate doctrine of the final bearing of sin."<sup>29</sup> All sin is against God.

V 6b: The word למען, which usually means "in order that"<sup>30</sup> indicating aim or purpose is a problem here. Dalglish adds that the concern here is not that David must acknowledge his sin so that God might remain righteous, as in a theodicy; instead he sees the phrase as elliptical, implying that when God judges, then he will be just. But the argument in either case is that sin, after it is identified as directed against God, now is contrasted with the nature of God.

V 7: This reflection upon God's nature turns the psalmist to consider his own nature; so he states that he was even conceived in sin. J. K. Zink enumerates five different interpretations of this verse, but at least "the corporate solidarity and its propensity toward sin is clearly recognized."<sup>31</sup> The sinful origin of humanity after Adam is in view as the psalmist's statements transcend his personal realm. Somehow, "natural generation inevitably produces corrupt human nature."<sup>32</sup> God's just nature and man's sinful origin are set in contrast. We have moved from man's and God's reaction to sin in vv 5 and 6a to the underlying reason: God hates sin because he is just, and man sins because he is a sinner.

Thus, the key to an acknowledgment of sin is first, the admission that sin is directed primarily against God, and second, that this enmity has its foundation in the opposite natures of God and man, which are just and sinful respectively.

### Human impotence

In the first section of the psalm the need for forgiveness is shown by the exhibition of the greatness of man's sin. Thus, man is dependent on God for forgiveness as well as the subsequent restoration of relationships. This restoration deals first with the heart, both with regard to cleansing it (vv 12-13) and with regard to directing it toward God's desires, and second, with the praise that is due to God; having cleansed the heart, the soul can offer up praise to God.

Vv 3-4, 8-9: The plea for forgiveness is based both on the recognition of man's sin (vv 5-7) and on the fact that God desires truth in

<sup>29</sup>Harrison, "A Study of Psalm 51," 32.

<sup>30</sup>BDB, 775.

<sup>31</sup>J. K. Zink, "Uncleanness and Sin: A Study of Job XIV and Psalm LI 7," *VT* 17 (1967) 361.

<sup>32</sup>John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959) 91.

man (v 8). The plea for forgiveness is so urgent that it is repeated in v 11. The terminology used, such as cleansing with hyssop (v 9), has ritual overtones, but the main thrust of these verses is ethical. The key observation for our purposes is that the writer constantly appeals to God's grace. In v 3, the preposition  $\text{לְ}$  is twice repeated in chiasmic structure so that the focus is on divine grace.<sup>33</sup> And it is according to his grace that forgiveness can be expected or requested. In other words, although the need for forgiveness is based on man's sinfulness, the granting of forgiveness is dependent on God's grace, not on how much man needs it. Thus God's sovereignty is emphasized in the way he grants forgiveness.

Vv 12–13, 18–19: The plea for a clean heart, contrasted with a request not to be separated from God, again shows the need for action on God's part. The heart is one's innermost being. The verb  $\text{בָּרָא}$ , of which only God is agent,<sup>34</sup> shows the necessity of divine action. Says Calvin:

He does not merely assert that his heart and spirit were weak, requiring divine assistance, but that they must remain destitute of all purity and rectitude till these be communicated from above.<sup>35</sup>

It may appear that v 19, with its emphasis on a broken and contrite heart, shows the possibility for human initiative. But note that 'contrite' is translated from the same root as 'broken' in v 10; the concept is one of being bruised or crushed.<sup>36</sup> Thus, both  $\text{נִשְׁבַּר}$  ('broken') and  $\text{נִרְכָּה}$  ('contrite') describe one suffering an action rather than acting; both are semantically passive concepts. Thus, being broken and being bruised is not a result of human initiative, but depends on divine action; it is God's task. David leaves no doubt that only by divine initiative can we possess a clean spirit.

Vv 14–17: As argued earlier, the request for a clean spirit forms the basis for the request to have one's mouth opened to praise God. One must recognize that the restoration of the soul is not the final goal. It is absolutely necessary, but the final goal of restoration is to restore to God the praise that is his due. Thus, a request for forgiveness and restoration must, according to biblical example, be followed by a request to have a tongue, lips, and mouth (vv 16b–17) to praise God. It is not human initiative that accomplishes God's praise; it is God who must open our mouths if we are to praise him.

<sup>33</sup>Dalglish, *Psalms Fifty-One*, 84.

<sup>34</sup>Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. by V. D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 116, citing Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 40–41.

<sup>35</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. J. Anderson (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 2. 299.

<sup>36</sup>Harrison, "A Study of Psalm 51," 36.

In summary, the whole process of dealing with sin, from forgiveness through restoration to praise to God, is ultimately and utterly dependent on God. Man is completely impotent, or at least passive, in making any step toward restoring the relationship with God.

### Effects of Sin on Man

The three different words for sin vv 3–4, פשע, עון, and חטא, usually have different nuances, but here in parallel they indicate the totality of sin in which man is involved. Similarly, the three different words used for forgiveness indicate the complete forgiveness requested. Both observations show that sin is not a superficial characteristic of man but rather goes to the core.

It is worth repeating that sin soils one's conscience (v 5) and that it stains man from his very beginnings (v 7). Although v 10 does not necessarily imply physical effects of sin,<sup>37</sup> it clearly shows that one's emotional state suffers from it.<sup>38</sup> Even so, the psychomatic effects of sin should not be ruled out. V 13 highlights how sin may affect one's relationship with God. Though never losing one's salvation,<sup>39</sup> the fellowship could be severed. God restores to us not only the cleanness of heart but also the praises that are his due. This implies that sin has dishonored God in taking away praise from him.<sup>40</sup> In fact, David's sin with Bathsheba had caused others to blaspheme God (2 Sam 12:14). The sacrifices had apparently degenerated into empty ritual, which is why God would not be pleased with them. Still, they soothed many a conscience, thinking that this deed corrected one's standing before God.

### PSALM 32

As with Psalm 51, varying purposes have been proposed for Psalm 32. Drijvers holds that it is a psalm of "thanksgiving for a cure from illness."<sup>41</sup> McConnell believes that David's purpose was "to demonstrate the importance of confession/forgiveness in one's relationship with Yahweh."<sup>42</sup> Craigie suggests various translations of the term משכיל: "to teach; meditation; psalm of understanding; or skillful

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Dalglisch, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 145.

<sup>38</sup>See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, reprinted 1981) 485.

<sup>39</sup>Harrison, "A Study of Psalm 51," 35.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>Pius Drijvers, *The Psalms: Their Structure and Meaning* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 146.

<sup>42</sup>Oren G. McConnell, "An Exegetical Study of Psalm 32," unpublished Th. M. thesis (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974) 17.



psalm."<sup>43</sup> He recognizes the presence of elements of thanksgiving as well as wisdom motifs, so he identifies it as a psalm of thanksgiving with literary adaptations to wisdom.<sup>44</sup> Yet almost all suggestions lack enough information to be sure of the purpose of the psalm. Let us consider first the divisions of the psalm and then its unity.

### *Structural Analysis: Divisions of the Psalm*

Psalm 32, like Psalm 51, divides into two sections. Notice the differences in terminology: vv 1–5 contain words like פשע, עון, חטא, and concepts like groaning, confessions, and misery; vv 6–11, on the other hand, deal with concepts like teaching, counseling, trust, rejoicing, and praying.

In addition, v 6 starts with the strong logical construct על-זאת "on this account."<sup>45</sup> This certainly indicates major transition between two divisions, vv 1–5 and vv 6–11.

However, v 7 seems to upset this pattern. V 6 starts out clearly with the idea of exhortation in mind, but v 7 returns to the sphere of a relationship with God. In vv 1–5, the dialogue is carried on between the psalmist and God, and the same is true for v 7. But in vv 6–11, with the exception of v 7, the dialogue is not with God but rather with the reader. Thus it appears that v 7 belongs with vv 1–5 instead of with vv 6–11. Now we have the following divisions: vv 1–5, 7 and vv 6, 8–11, a situation similar to Psalm 51. Vv 6 and 7 may thus be transitional, although the presence of the strong conjunction in v 6 suggests that the verses may be more than just a transition.

The unity of the divisions can also be demonstrated internally by the literary feature of inclusion. Both vv 1 and 5 contain פשע, חטא, עון, and כסה.<sup>46</sup> Vv 6 and 10 both contain the words חסד and רבים.<sup>47</sup> V 7 is a transitional verse and contains the word סבב, which recurs in v 10, although the general form of v 7 corresponds closer to vv 1–5.

Within the first division the movement of thought is as follows. Vv 1–2 represent an exclamation of blessing in the third person singular. This marks them off from vv 3f. which are written in the first person singular. In addition, vv 3 and 4 start with the conjunction כי, which indicates a transition. The כי of v 3 may be interpreted as a time indicator, "when,"<sup>48</sup> rather than an expression of cause or result. But the recurrence of the conjunction at the beginning of v 4 shows

<sup>43</sup>P. C. Craigie, *Psalm 1–50* (Word Biblical Commentary, 19; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 269.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 265.

<sup>45</sup>BDB, 262.

<sup>46</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 285.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>BDB, 473.

that the relationship also has logical components. Thus, vv 1–2 appear to stand at the head of the first division.

The rest of the division, vv 3–5, 7, can be subdivided into two sections. This is mainly done on the semantic level. There is a clear contrast between vv 3–4 and vv 5 and 7. Vv 3–4 mention concepts like silence, judgment, and misery, while vv 5 and 7 contain the opposite concepts, those of confession, forgiveness, and deliverance. Thus, the first division is made up of three sections: vv 1–2, 3–4, and 5 and 7.

The second division is structured differently. V 6 mentions the theme of deliverance and includes an exhortation to pray. Vv 8–11 also contain an exhortation to turn to God and mention the benefits thereof. V 6, then, is the introduction to vv 8–11.

V 8 starts with the declaration that David will teach sinners about the mercies of God. The rest of this section appears to be the content of the teaching. V 9 metaphorically warns those who do not turn to God; v 10 uses the format of a proverb to state the basic principle on which the exhortations are based; and v 11 repeats the principles of v 9 in a positive manner. Thus, this second division is structured around David's desire to teach others about God's forgiveness.

Psalm 32, then, much like Psalm 51, turns out to be highly structured. However, there is a marked difference in the prominence of the contrast in Psalm 32, namely between vv 3–4 and 5 and 7, and between vv 9 and 11. Such prominent contrasts are absent from Psalm 51 as a major feature of the structure (which is not to say that the psalm contains no contrasts). This analysis is presented in Chart II.

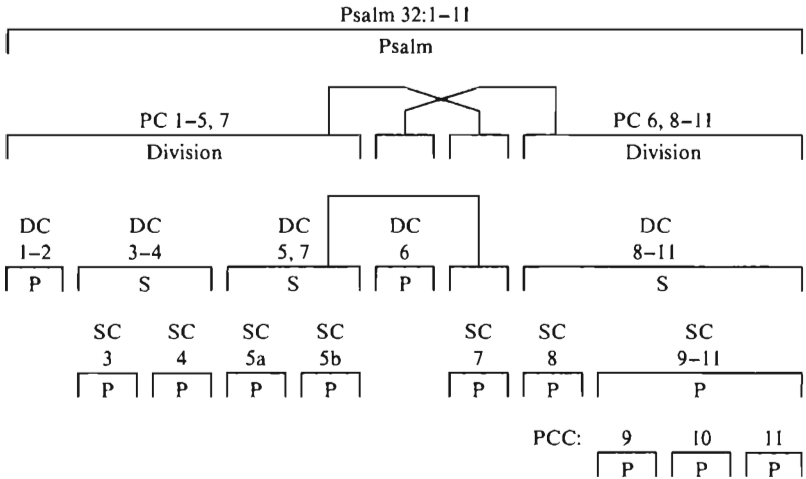
### *Reconstruction of the Meaning: The Unity of the Psalm*

The theme or thesis statement of the first division is found in vv 1–2. As previously mentioned, vv 3ff. are linked with the first two verses by a logical connective, which at its first occurrence takes on a temporal meaning. The reasoning seems to be that vv 3ff. explain the grounds of the statement of vv 1–2. Given the contrast between vv 3–4 and vv 5 and 7, this suggests that the grounds are considered in a twofold manner, negatively and positively. Hence, the theme for this division reads "happy is the man whose sin is forgiven."

The theme of the second division is found in v 11. As stated, v 6 embodies the introduction to this division, while v 8 gives the division its major structural feature. But though v 8 structures the division, it is not the key statement; the content of what David desires to teach takes precedence over the desire.

Vv 9 and 11 stand in contrast to each other, with v 10 supplying the basis for the exhortation of vv 9 and 11. V 10 almost functions

Constituent Organization



DC = Division Constituent  
 P = Paragraph  
 PC = Psalm Constituent  
 PCC = Paragraph Cluster Constituent  
 PCl = Paragraph Cluster  
 S = Section  
 SC = Section Constituent

CHART II: Overview of Psalm 32

like a summary and for that reason may appear to be the most prominent. But in this case, v 10 functions more like a transition from the negative exhortation (warning) to the positive exhortation. Since the declared intent of these verses is to teach and since the teaching focuses on action more than knowledge (“the way which you should go,” v 8), the final positive exhortation is best identified as the thesis statement of this division. Hence, the phrasing of the theme of the division is “rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones,” with its contrast added in parentheses.

The general flow of thought in the psalm moves from the original statement “happy is the man whose sin is forgiven” to the exhortation for the righteous to rejoice in the Lord. It is remarkable that the man who needs forgiveness in vv 1-2 is identified with the righteous and upright one in v 11. How does this transition take place?

Two factors determine the relationship between the divisions. The most obvious one is the strong conjunction על־דאחז beginning v 6. This indicates that a logical conclusion is being drawn from what precedes. The relationship is one of grounds on which a conclusion is

based. The conclusion is then the prominent part and functions as the head of the body.

Second, an exhortation usually has more force than the experience on which the exhortation is based. Now, vv 3–5, 7 mainly relate David's experience before and after his confession, so this is not the primary focus of the psalm. Rather, the declaration of the intent to teach dominates the psalm and focuses the attention on v 11. This line of evidence also supports the prominence of the second division.

Thus, the first and second divisions are related to each other as grounds and conclusion, experience and exhortation. The experience is only mentioned as support for the exhortation, so that the goal of the psalm is the teaching of sinners about the way they should go—to rejoice in the Lord.

### *Theological Analysis: The Contents of the Psalm*

The main thrust of the psalm consists of its teaching on the need for confession. But two other areas are significant elements.

#### The need for confession

The psalm describes life as a path to walk, as the way in which we should go (v 8). In this path there are two contrasting options. The use of contrast shows the pedagogical genius of the psalmist, because the options are either to remain in one's sin, separate from God, or to confess one's sin and have fellowship with God. The choice is either/or; no other option is given. The purpose is, of course, "to point out the path of true happiness to sinners."<sup>49</sup>

Option 1 is to remain silent about one's sin and not to acknowledge it to God. This results in a "roaring" all day long (v 3). This is soon recognized as judgment from God, and again the sorrow is described, but this time more vividly. The vitality of the sinner is compared to the earth, cracking under the heat of the summer. Thus, Option 1 is clearly understood as undesirable because it incurs God's judgment.

But in the exhortation, this is still elaborated. Here the sinner is compared with the stubborn horse and mule. The sinner's silence is not due to ignorance, but to rebellion. On the other hand, these beasts are also animals which have no understanding. So although the sinner may be in rebellion against God, he also has to cope with unclear thinking (cf. Eph 4:17–19). However, the horse and the mule

<sup>49</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 268.

### Thematic Outline of Psalm 32

**Psalm 32:1–11** (Psalm) [Happy is the man whose sin is forgiven. Therefore,] [do not be stubborn, but] rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones.

**Psalm Constituent 1–5, 7** (Division) (Role: grounds of 6, 8–11) Happy is the man whose sin is forgiven.

**Division Constituent 1–2** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 1–5, 7) Happy is the man whose sin is forgiven.

**Division Constituent 3–4** (Section) (Role: grounds [neg.] for 1–2) I was silent so [because of judgment] I was in misery.

**Section Constituent 3** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of 3–4) I was silent, so I was in misery.

**Section Constituent 4** (Paragraph) (Role: grounds of 3) [Because of my silence] God judged me, so that I was in misery.

**Division Constituent 5, 7** (Section) (Role: grounds [pos.] for 1–2) God forgave my sins [because of confession]. [As a result, God is my Deliverer.]

**Section Constituent 5a** (Paragraph) (Role: grounds of 5b) I confessed my sin.

**Section Constituent 5b** (Paragraph) (Roles: Head of 5, 7; condition for 7) God forgave my sins [because of confession].

**Section Constituent 7** (Paragraph) (Role: consequence of 5b) [As a consequence] God is my Deliverer.

**Psalm Constituent 6, 8–11** (Paragraph) (Role: Head of the Body) [Do not be stubborn, but] rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones.

**Division Constituent 6** (Paragraph) (Role: introduction to 8–11) Pray to God and be safe.

**Division Constituent 8–11** (Section) (Role: Head of 6, 8–11) [Do not be stubborn, but] rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones.

**Section Constituent 8** (Paragraph) (Role: orienter to 9–11) I will teach you what to do.

**Section Constituent 9–11** (Paragraph Cluster) (Role: Head of 8–11) [Do not be stubborn but] rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 9** (Paragraph) (Role: Head<sub>1</sub> [neg.] of 9–11) Do not be stubborn.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 10** (Paragraph) (Role: summary of 9, 11) He who trusts God receives his lovingkindness.

**Paragraph Cluster Constituent 11** (Paragraph) (Role: Head<sub>2</sub> [pos.] of 9–11) Rejoice in the Lord you righteous ones.

can be brought near by bit and bridle—if this is the right interpretation of v 9c.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, God can use sorrows, which are the lot of the wicked (v 10), to draw the sinner to himself.

Option 2 is to acknowledge one's sin and confess it before God. The concept is repeated three times in v 5. This shows that it is not a formal rehearsal of a list of sins, but a thorough exposure of one's sin before God. God responds with forgiveness, and thus deliverance is experienced (v 7).

In the exhortation, this too is expanded. Here, confession is identified with trust in the Lord, highlighting the importance of a right heart attitude in confession. As a result, the sinner is now called a righteous and upright person who may delight in the mercies of the Lord (v 11). Option 2 is the desirable one because it is the proper response to God's דָסח.

### Universality of sin

In presenting the options, the psalmist does not leave the reader with any choice but to be silent or to confess. The fact that each reader has sin about which to be silent or vocal is assumed. All need confession.

Just as in Psalm 51, the three most frequent words for sin here are, פִשע, עֲוֹן and, חטא (vv 1–2; 5). In vv 1–2 these words indicate that man's life is involved in all kinds of sin, and that sin stains all of his life. In v 5 these words show that all kinds of sin are subject to God's forgiveness; there is no sin which cannot be forgiven. Sin may be universal, but there is always hope in God's all comprehensive forgiveness.

### Human responsibility

The exhortation in this psalm is a plea for human action: one must turn to God. Thus, man's responsibility is emphasized, in contrast to Psalm 51, where God's sovereign grace was emphasized. But God's sovereignty is not left out of the picture here. The fact that a forgiven person can be counted blessed (vv 1–2) implies that God has been at work in that person; judgment in v 5 testifies to God's sovereignty. Similarly, the following concepts indicate aspects of God's sovereign grace: God is a hiding place (v 7); he surrounds the psalmist with songs of deliverance (v 7); he surrounds those who trust him with lovingkindness (v 10); trusting in the Lord implies that he is sovereign (v 10); and God sovereignly uses misery to lead people to himself (vv 3a, 4a, 9). So human responsibility is set in the context of

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 40.

divine sovereign grace. Therefore, this responsibility is not autonomous, but must be exercised in dependence upon God, submitting to him and acknowledging that his judgments are just. This is a responsibility of faith, not of works.

#### CONCLUSION

Four propositions summarize the main theological points drawn from these two psalms: (1) Man is utterly, always, from conception, and in every aspect of his relationship to God, sinful. (2) Man is wholly dependent on God for forgiveness and restoration before he can enjoy an undisturbed relationship with God. (3) Man's responsibility is humbly and in faith to confess his sins to God and to acknowledge that his judgments are just. (4) Man, once forgiven and restored, is to be happy about what the Lord has done for him, and to extol his virtues.

#### APPENDIX A

##### THE NEED FOR STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Human thought is structured; the human mind cannot function in utter chaos or at random—although admittedly it is not always flawlessly organized. It follows that human writings will usually evidence a certain structure, which will vary according to the language and culture of the writer. The exegete should consider such structure in his interpretation of the Bible.

Part of this task can be accomplished by grammatical and syntactical observation. But since writings consist of more than a random series of grammatical or syntactical phrases, there is a wider field of analysis. This wider field may be called "paragraph" or "section," depending on the size, but if a whole document is analyzed it is convenient to speak about a discourse (a more technical title for a larger unit of communication, not for the common concept of dialogue). Analyzing the structure of such a discourse may be called "structural analysis." Thus structural analysis accomplishes on a broader level what grammatical and syntactical analysis accomplishes on a more detailed level.

The concerns of this method are to reconstruct the flow of the argument by an objective methodology which recognizes structural devices such as chiasm, repetition of key terms, and important structural markers. Unfortunately, the importance of discourse structure

for the understanding of the Bible has not been as fully understood and used by exegetes as it might be. Thus, help on the structure of a passage is rarely available in the standard exegetical and critical commentaries,<sup>51</sup> though the value of the method is being increasingly recognized.

This method can be very useful. It gives the exegete a more objective tool to help him understand the flow of thought in a particular document. Such an objective tool in my judgment, is sorely needed since the task of contextual analysis is often approached rather intuitively. And even though our intuitions may sometimes be right, a more objective method is needed to bridge the linguistic, cultural, and religious chasm between the ancient world and our own, and to make certain that our reconstruction of the meaning is *extracted* from the text, not *imposed* upon it.

<sup>51</sup>Callow, *Second Thessalonians*, 15.