

THE EXPERIENCE OF SIN IN THE PSALMS

The concept of sin is 'existential.' Its essence is brought much nearer to us in the humble confession of the sinner than in the definition of the theologian. Actually, every theologian is himself a sinner, and even more so for being a theologian, for as such he should have a deeper knowledge of God; and the more profound our experience of the sovereignty and love of God the clearer should be the consciousness of our insufficiency.

Anyone who is interested in knowing more about the Hebrew concept of sin therefore, can do no better than to have recourse to the Psalms. The writers of these pious prayers cover every stage of Israel's history, with its constantly recurring motifs of sin, repentance and reconciliation, from the early monarchy to Hellenistic times. A study of the Psalms will therefore not only reveal to us the experience of sin in those who had attained to the purest notions about God, but also, as far as these canticles can be dated, the development of this experience as part of the general religious evolution of the Jewish people.

The very terminology used by the psalmists whenever they speak of sin is of the utmost importance in helping us to understand the various standpoints from which Hebrew man viewed sin. There is no comprehensive word which corresponds to our theological notion of sin in Hebrew, or at least no such word existed when the negative attitude towards Yahweh began to be regarded as wrong. So different words were borrowed from the varied experiences of everyday life to describe particular aspects of sin. Hence, an examination of the words which are most frequently used in the Psalms will reveal different nuances of meaning which are theologically important. Thus *ḥaṭā'*, which is the word most commonly used for sin originally means to miss the mark, to err; *'awon* denotes crookedness as opposed to straightness of ways; *riš'ā* emphasises the element of heinousness in crime, while in *peša'* the stress lies on revolt. The falsehood of sin is brought out in the word *šeqer* which literally means a lie. To denote a material sin, or one in which the guilt is attenuated, *šagag* (or *šagā*) is used.

The psalmists consider sin under three different aspects, the theological, the juridical and the psychological, depending upon whether they relate sin to God, to the law or to the sinner himself. This seems natural and unoriginal to anyone who has been brought up in the Christian or Mohammedan tradition. But if we consider that to the

Chinese sin in our sense can only mean at the most an illogicality in the world-order,¹ or if we compare these three aspects to the idea of sin prevalent among the polytheistic nations surrounding Israel where sin was but a breach of a give-and-take contract, we shall soon discover the loftiness of the Jewish idea.

Considered in its juridical aspect, the Hebrew notion of sin does not differ much from that of its neighbours. It was the transgression of a precept of the Deity. In our case the precepts are those of the Torah, especially in later periods²; of the prophetic injunctions; and of the broader precepts of morality such as 'Depart from evil, and do good'³ which was felt as coming from God. In later times the Law assumed such an importance that the ideal of the pious Israelite was to 'delight in the law of the Lord, and on his law to meditate day and night.'⁴ This was taken so seriously by the Qumran community that the general members were obliged 'to keep awake for a third of all the nights of the year reading the Book, studying the Law and worshipping together.'⁵ It follows that the more perfect the knowledge of the law, the stricter should be its observance: 'What right have you to recite my statutes, or to take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you?'⁶

The strength of the Jewish concept of sin however lies in its theological implications. Sin is much more than the violation of an impersonal world-order, a violation of state laws or an irritation of the animistic forces of nature. It is primarily a rebellion against the supreme authority of a personal God.⁷ This Sovereign Lord is a living God anthropomorphically endowed with all the sentiments of an Oriental. He has helped and loved both Israel and the Israelites in the past, and therefore disobedience to Him is a hindrance to the I-Thou relationship: it is a lack of gratitude and love. This is nowhere expressed more clearly than in Ps. 78 where the history of divine favour and human disregard is set out from the prophetic standpoint. The indignation of the prophets against sin is not inspired by the fear of losing a mercenary retribution. It is the uncompromising affirmation of the absolute rights of God.⁸ The very use of anthropomorphic language to describe the God-man relationship is an indication that we are here dealing with ideas that soar high above the merely juridical level.

The psychological aspect of sin is also well developed in the Psalms. Sin, pride and foolishness are often used in parallelism to denote the same entity. This parallelism is poetical, but it is of value to us because

¹ cf. L. Abegg, *The Mind of East Asia*, London 1952

² The whole of Psalm 119. Quotations and verse divisions follow the RSV

³ 34:14

⁴ 1:2

⁵ *Manual of Discipline*, vi:8

⁶ 50:16f.

⁷ 107:11; 22

⁸ 119:136; 139:19-22

it reveals certain nuances of meaning. This is especially so when the idea of *hybris* is especially stressed: 'In the pride of his countenance the wicked does not seek Him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God! . . . I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not meet with adversity."' ¹ The *hybris* which does away with God Himself is shown likewise in the despising of fellow-men: 'Let the lying lips be dumb, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt,' ² and this in spite of the fact that both 'men of low estate are but a breath, men of high estate are a delusion; in the balance they go up, they are together lighter than a breath.' ³ Sinners are called 'dull,' 'stupid' and 'foolish.' ⁴ These adjectives in Hebrew do not denote merely a mental deficiency but also a certain perversity of will. Thus 'wisdom' or 'foolishness' are not measured by our standard of education or intellectual development as in Greek thought, but by our practical attitude towards a purely theocentric philosophy of life.

If we put all these elements together we shall obtain a provisional definition of sin as a proud and foolish transgression of God's precepts, by which God is grieved, particularly because of man's rebellious and ungrateful attitude.

We stress the word 'attitude' because this is even more important than the transgression itself. Material and involuntary transgressions are often called sins in the Psalms, ⁵ but it is the heart of man that God regards: 'God knows the very thoughts of man' ⁶ and sets 'our secret thoughts in the light of his countenance.' ⁷ Man being made to the image and likeness of God, we offend God even when we sin against our neighbour, ⁸ especially against the king, ⁹ Israel ¹⁰ or the Messiah. ¹¹ Moreover, it is not only individuals who are capable of sinning. Society itself is guilty of sin and recites penitential psalms in the public liturgy. ¹² The sense of collective sin and hereditary punishment was particularly strong in pre-exilic times, so much so that Ezechiel felt obliged to correct a false idea of fatalism and to stress the individual responsibility of each and every member of the community. ¹³

Not all sins are of the same gravity. The pious man prays that the sins of his youth, denoting the folly of the young, should be forgiven him, as also the multitude of 'errors' and 'hidden faults' that escape even the single-minded. These are contrasted in Ps. 19:13 with 'presumptuous sins' from which the psalmist prays to be kept free. Not that the other sins are to be despised, for the pious man strives to be 'blameless, innocent, and acceptable in God's sight' ¹⁴ and offers

¹ 10:4-6² 31:18³ 62:9⁴ 92:6; 53:1⁵ 19:12⁶ 94:11⁷ 90:8⁸ 10; 15; 31⁹ 21¹⁰ 83:4¹¹ 2; 22; 110¹² 106:6¹³ Ez. 18:1-20¹⁴ 19:13f.

sacrifice even for the sins committed in ignorance ; but the gravity of a sin is measured according to the degree of pride which leads to it.

Is there any mention of Original Sin in the Psalms ? ' Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.'¹ Augustine² and Origen³ find in this verse a direct reference to Original Sin. Others however see merely a prefiguration of the doctrine which becomes clear in the light of Romans 5:12ff., for the quotation only stresses the proclivity of man to sin, because he is born of a sinful race.⁴ O. Procksch puts it very neatly when he says that in this verse the Fall is referred to directly not as a doctrine but as an experience.⁵

The sins which merit disapproval in the Psalms are a mischievous tongue and persecution of the innocent ; cursing God ; deceit ; oppressing the poor⁶ ; perjury ; calumny⁷ ; injustice to widows and orphans⁸ ; usury and acceptance of gifts to commit injustice⁹ ; idolatry¹⁰ ; treachery¹¹ ; lying¹² ; ingratitude¹³ ; adultery and theft¹⁴ ; and rebellion against God's Anointed.¹⁵ All these are what one might call social sins, committed especially against that section of the population that is unable to defend itself : the poor, widows and orphans. Sincerity and honesty are stressed repeatedly. This lofty ideal is to be found in every chapter of the Prophets, and as the Psalms were used in the temple liturgy it was quite impossible that they did not help to mould the ideal of piety in the heart of every believer.

The ' cursing psalms,' especially Ps. 109, are often cited as an example of low moral standards in Israel. The objection, however, is not so obvious as it seems if we consider the many places in the Old Testament where forgiveness of injuries is praised and revenge disapproved of. Moreover, if we consider the ' cursing psalms' as impersonal prayers recited in the liturgy they assume the character of ' threatening psalms' in the sense of the curses in Deut. 27:15-26, rather than outbursts of hate against a personal enemy, and were meant to impress the wicked rather than satisfy the thirst for revenge in the oppressed.

The fact that God threatens sinners and calls them to repentance makes it clear that the only cause of sin is man himself. It is true that ' transgression speaks to the wicked, deep in his heart to tempt him'¹⁶ that man is weak and no-one is just in God's sight,¹⁷ that man is

¹ 51:5² PL 36, 591³ PG II, 1093⁴ P. Heinisch, *Theologie des A. T.*, Bonn 1940, III, III, p. 220⁵ O. Procksch, *Theologie des A. T.*, Gütersloh 1950, p. 640⁶ 10 ; 15 ; 31 ; 58 ; 59 ; and *passim*⁷ 15 ; 57 ; 144⁸ 94:6⁹ 15:88¹⁰ 16:4¹¹ 25:3¹² 31:18¹³ 38:20¹⁴ 50:18¹⁵ 2:2¹⁶ 36:1¹⁷ 143:2

oppressed by a multitude of sins¹ and born of sinful parents,² but his wickedness finds no excuse, especially when he blinds himself to the fact that God is watching over all our actions, believing that 'the Lord does not see, the God of Jacob does not perceive'³ or says outright: 'There is no God'⁴ until his 'heart becomes gross like fat.'⁵

This is all the more deplorable because God is ready to sustain our weakness if we but relinquish the attitude of 'a horse or a mule without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle.'⁶ God gives light,⁷ which in the Old Testament has a connotation of power; He aids the pious to overcome the greed of the eyes, avarice and pride,⁸ sins of the heart and tongue,⁹ and to observe the law.¹⁰

However, the way God deals with man depends very much on how man himself is disposed towards God: 'With the pure thou dost show thyself pure, with the crooked thou dost show thyself perverse.'¹¹ This verse receives light from Sir. 4:17-22: 'For at first she (Wisdom) will walk with him by crooked ways, and bring fear and dread upon him . . . but if he go wrong, she will forsake him and give him over to his own ruin,' i.e. God will no longer reveal His ways and permits the sinner to fall into desolation. Wisdom (like light, denoting power) is a delicate gift. If well received it helps men to walk in the ways of God, but if it meets with insincerity it slowly withdraws leaving man a prey to his enemies.

The consequences of sin are manifold. First come the incurring of guilt and the establishment of a state of estrangement between the sinner and God—for God hates evildoers.¹² As a consequence the sinner is 'cursed' and 'cut off' by God.¹³ If God despises sinners¹⁴ it is not because He is harmed by them, for He just ridicules them,¹⁵ but because He is righteous and only the righteous can have communion with Him.¹⁶

On the part of man the first consequence of sin is an evil conscience. The hand of the Lord weighs heavily on the sinner, and consequently he is unhappy, joy only being found in the observance of the Law.¹⁷ However, the unhappiness of an uneasy conscience is only a pointer to repentance,¹⁸ as are all the temporal evils that God sends and the good example of the upright.¹⁹ On the other hand, those who are so foolish as to suppress the voice of their conscience 'like the deaf adder that stops its ear so that it does not hear the voice of the charmers'²⁰ rush into deeper moral and psychological evils. They become inconstant

¹ 130:3

⁵ 119:70

⁹ 141:3f

¹³ 37:22

¹⁷ 1:1; 119:1

² 51:5

⁶ 32:9

¹⁰ 119:108

¹⁴ 119:118

¹⁸ 32:4f.

³ 94:7

⁷ 119:135

¹¹ 18:26

¹⁵ 2:4

¹⁹ 119:78f.

⁴ 10:4

⁸ 37; 119:37

¹² 5:6

¹⁶ 11:7

²⁰ 58:4f.

'like chaff which the wind drives away' unlike the just who flourish 'like a tree planted by streams of water.'¹ They lose the sense of God and fall into a practical atheism which is the very essence of foolishness.²

In spite of all these threats to sinners it was evident to all that not seldom the wicked prospered and the just suffered in this life. But Ps. 10, 37, 53, 56, 58, 75, 91, 97 stress the fact that in spite of the apparent contradiction of this position there is a God above all who will not permit the wicked to have their own way in the long run. Some psalms speak of a certain judgment to be made by God in the face of which the wicked will not survive,³ because 'evil may not sojourn with God.'⁴ This judgment will not only be on individuals but also on the different nations.⁵

All this is said to confirm the righteous in their trust in God. Ps. 37 is an excellent example of consolation and of exhortation to patience.

But what will really happen to the wicked? 'The very net which they hid will ensnare them,'⁶ 'evil itself shall slay the wicked and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.'⁷ So the ultimate punishment for the wicked will be death. Even the good die, but here there is a distinction: 'Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol: Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.'⁸ The just look further beyond the grave: 'Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory,'⁹ and in Ps. 17:15: 'As for me I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form.' The Professors of the Biblical Institute interpret these words as referring to the awakening from the dead. This goes to show that the death with which the sinner is threatened is not merely physical death just as the life that is the reward of the just is an eschatological life.

The only hope for the sinner, therefore, is God's mercy and his own repentance. That God has the power and the right to punish every misdeed is indisputable, but He very often does not exercise this right: 'He does not deal with us according to our sins' for 'He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.'¹⁰ The only condition is the sinner's repentance while there is still time, for God will never despise a broken and contrite heart.¹¹ The sinner must not believe, however, that he is doing God a favour by turning to Him, for after all it is God Himself who 'creates in me a clean heart and

¹ 1:4, 3

⁵ 7:6ff.

⁹ 73:24

² 14:1

⁶ 35:8

¹⁰ 103:10, 14

³ 1, 5; 21; 31; 52

⁷ 34:21

¹¹ 51:17

⁴ 5:4

⁸ 49:14f.

puts a new and right spirit within me.'¹ The penitential psalm *par excellence*, Ps. 51 stresses the need for sincerity of heart, humility, confession to God, faith and supplication. Hence conversion and forgiveness involve a real ethical change and are not merely juridical. The verse 'blessed is he whose sin is covered'² sounds very Lutheran, but several other sayings make it clear that 'as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.'³

The Psalms, therefore, teach us a complete doctrine of sin as we find it in the New Testament and as we learn it today inside the Church. The only new revelation that we have—and this is essential—is that God's mercy has taken bodily form in the Person of Jesus Christ and all forgiveness comes through Him.

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THE FORMATION OF THE GOSPELS

Contemporary biblical scholarship has achieved surprising results in many fields of its large acreage, and one of its most rewarding successes has been to trace the growth of the Gospels, isolating in their development the various graftings and cross-fertilisations which finally produced such a prodigious plant. No longer are the Gospels viewed as having sprung up mushroom-like overnight. A relatively long and complicated process has been discerned before the prize fruit emerged.

It is in an attempt to trace in broad outline this process that the following pages are offered; not, presumptuously, to those who patiently labour in such fields, but to those, as it were, at the marketing end—who take their scripture from the scripturists. For purposes of convenience rather than of necessity, the growth of the Gospels will be considered as following five stages (though the unwary should be warned that such clear docketing sacrifices something of the elusive interplay of factors which made for the formation of the Gospels). In the first place we are faced with the *kerygma*, or primitive preaching which was the seed containing the traits later development would manifest. Then there is the first development in and through tradition, in the transmitting of the Christian message. This was followed by attempts at committing to writing that primitive message, and these attempts, in their turn, led to the actual formation of the Gospels. Finally, certain 'finishing touches' must be considered.

¹ 51:10

² 32:1

³ 103:12