

“...all in common, as with one voice and one heart,
offer up the Psalm of Confession to the Lord,
each one making his own the words of repentance.”

—St. Basil the Great,
Letter to the Clergy of Neo-Cæsarea
(Nº 207), 375 A.D.

Ο ΤΗΣ ΕΞΟΜΟΛΟΓΗΣΕΩΣ ΨΑΛΜΟΣ
THE PSALM OF CONFESSION
Psalm 50—Greek of the Seventy Interpreters^a

³ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy.^b According to your abounding compassions^c wipe out^d my affront.^e

⁴ Over and over again^f wash me of my offense, and from my sin purify [or cleanse] me. ⁵ For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is ever before me:

⁶ «Against you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil before you.»^g So may you be vindicated in your sentence, and prevail when you judge.^h

⁷ In fact, I was conceived in offenses, and in sins my mother bore me. ⁸ And yet, you love truth and tell me secrets and mysteries of your wisdom.ⁱ

⁹ Take hyssop^j and sprinkle^k me: I shall be purified [or cleansed]. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. ¹⁰ Fill my ears with sounds^l of joy and feasting, and these bones brought low^m will rejoice. ¹¹ Turn your face from my sins, and wipe out all my offenses.

¹² Createⁿ in me a pure [or clean] heart,^o O God, and in my belly^p renew a constant spirit. ¹³ Do not cast me out of your presence, and do not deprive me of your holy spirit.^q ¹⁴ Give me back the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with a sovereign spirit:^r ¹⁵ I will teach offenders your paths, and the wicked will return to you.^s

¹⁶ Deliver me from Death,^t O God, God of my salvation, and my tongue will rejoice in your righteousness. ¹⁷ Lord, open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise. ¹⁸ For were it sacrifice you wanted, I would offer one; but in holocausts you will take no delight:

¹⁹ «Sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit:
A heart contrite^u and humbled^v
God will not despise.»^w

[From the banks of the rivers of Babylon, the Exile appends a like prayer for Jerusalem then razed to the ground:]

²⁰ Lord, in your goodwill be kind to Sion, and let the walls of Jerusalem rise again. ²¹ Then will you delight in righteous sacrifice, oblation and holocausts. Then will they lay calves upon your altar.

THE PSALM OF CONFESSION—NOTES

a. The Law and the Prophets, the Psalms and other Scriptures come down to us in Hebrew and in Greek. Neither is the original strictly speaking, yet together they constitute the authoritative, normative written record of God's self-revelation to man and, when we think of Psalms and Scriptural odes, of man's inspired response. The Hebrew, with no liturgical or exegetical tradition of its own among us—in contrast to the Syriac and Latin traditions—has been a bodiless power, while LXX Greek has been tied to the plough. Fact is, the Greek according to the Seventy Interpreters is the Scriptures of the New Testament—of the Apostles—and the Church.

Today's Hebrew, called the Masorah or Masoretic Text (Hebrew *massōret* means tradition), is sole survivor among several ancient local traditions of Hebrew text. (Some scholars have suggested MT may represent the Babylonian tradition of text.) MT prevails within the Synagogue in the II century of the Christian era—the same time other textual traditions either disappear or are suppressed—and reaches its modern form in the IX century. It should be appreciated that MT represents a double tradition: that of the ancient consonantal text (Hebrew, like Syriac, having been written without vowels) and that of the less ancient (beginning VII century A.D.) yet traditional “vocalization” or “pointing” that refers to the agglomeration of vowel and diacritical markings added to the text. [To illustrate with Latin letters: *bnd* could be vocalized *band, bend, bind, bond, bund, boned, abound...*, use in context being the important factor in determining meaning.]

The Greek according to the Seventy Interpreters was produced at Alexandria, Egypt, in the three centuries before Christ, when Aramaic and Greek replaced Hebrew in the daily speech of Jews. (Legend has it that seventy-two translators did their work in as many days, hence the name, rounded off.) Behind the Greek stand authoritative (the high priest sent them), high-quality (the evidence from Qum-

ran) Hebrew manuscripts from Jerusalem—manuscripts since lost, older and thus closer in time to the originals. Through it the God of the Hebrews courted the contemporary world in vernacular, if Hebraized, Greek. Commonly called the Septuagint (Gk. *i evdomikonda*) and LXX (O'), it hands down a number of books not in MT Hebrew, and enjoyed great prestige from the start. The Synagogue ultimately abandons it, perhaps because its heightened (B.C. Palestinian?) messianism too well served the Christian proclamation of messianic hopes fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Septuagint is the Church's book, and few, if any, will disagree.

Lately the Septuagint—which has had two encounters with differing traditions of the Hebrew text and many editors—has been taking it on the chin for reasons we cannot go into here. (The Book of Jeremiah, for instance, is not a hapless paraphrase; MT Hebrew is expanded.) And practical considerations have pushed Orthodox Catholic Christians zealous for English to make use of available versions (invariably from Hebrew, made by partisans of Latin taste and point of view—the Our Father being a good illustration). Attachments have been formed, infallible statements pronounced, in a local Church wherein every housewife loves her own stuffed cabbage.

Here we set out LXX Psalm 50 (=MT 51) to say in English what we have been saying in Greek—and daughter versions—for two millennia. Differences between the Greek and Hebrew are subtle, and fewer than the many English versions suggest. At the same time, we believe working from the Greek insulates us from the excesses of modern bible translation and, oddly enough, gives not so much the better version as the better prayer. Should some disagree, there are alternatives to baying at the moon; we give two versions from Hebrew: New Skete's Psalter, riding as it does on the outstretched wings of Fr. Mitchell Dahood (*The Anchor Bible, Psalms I–III*) and NewRSV, that snappy gelding trotted out in 1990 by the National Council of Churches to trample phalocrats. (St. Vladimir's Seminary

and its circle will doubtless continue to favor RSV Psalm 51 with its token—and curious—emendations to the opening cola appearing in OCA Department of Religious Education publications.)

b. *great mercy*: to *méga éleos* in Greek, *velikaja milost'* in Slavonic, *mare mila* in Romanian. God's great mercy (odd but scrutable departure from the literal translation that characterizes LXX Psalms by rendering a plural noun collectively) is his *hesed* in Hebrew (in a construct plural form) which becomes *steadfast love* in RSV and NewRSV, *true love* in NEB, *faithful love* in NJB and REB, *goodness* in JB and NAB, and *kindness* in Chicago, AB and the New Skete Psalter. Clearly, *hesed* is one of those forceful and nuanced Scriptural expressions that sets translators on tiptoe.

Rudolph Bultmann, writing in Kittel, has this to say: "In religious usage God's *hesed* always means his faithful and merciful help, and this one-sided understanding is expressed in the use of [Greek] *éleos*. We must always remember, however, that it is the *hesed* which God has promised, so that, although one cannot claim it, one may certainly expect it. In other words, the thought of *hesed* and the thought of the covenant belong together. Yet to the degree that man is unfaithful, the *hesed* for which he hopes takes on the character of pardoning grace. God keeps to the covenant and promises in spite of man's unfaithfulness, and from his *hesed* there is finally expected definitive redemption from every need. *Hesed* thus becomes an eschatological term in salvation history. And it must be emphasized that *hesed* primarily denotes, *not a disposition* [emphasis ours], but the act or demonstration of assisting faithfulness." (TWNT, vol. II, pg. 480)

The notion is a favorite thread of the sacred liturgist. Take the Ékteny for example, when the deacon cries, "Have mercy on us, O God, according to your great mercy..." Here is penitential prayer alluding to Psalm 50, invoking its devotion. Knife *great mercy* in the psalm, or in the litany (as does OCA Romanian Episcopate

English), and that evocation is dead on arrival.

Another example invokes the theology and anthropology of Psalm 50. Consider the conclusions to myriad troparia and stichira which go, "...granting us/the world the great mercy"—*paréchōn ēmín/tō kósmō to méga éleos, podajá nam/mírovi véliju milost'* (Slavonic *véliju* perhaps obscuring the connection).

The link between this language and Psalm 50 is demonstrated by the ancient troparion or refrain for the psalm still given in today's books within an appendage to the psalm at Sunday Matins (which is in fact the ancient directive for singing Psalm 50 with refrain): From the tomb is Jesus risen as he himself foretold, granting us eternal life and the great mercy. "Great mercy," standing in apposition to eternal life, takes on resurrectional and eschatological significance, and we correctly look to the psalm to begin to understand its meaning.

The absence of a commonly accepted English version of Scripture notwithstanding, we believe liturgical texts in English should be endowed with the power to suggest and evoke, to bring things Scriptural to mind, and to an extent that compares favorably with our liturgy in Greek. The Psalter in Russian, published in 1917 by the Holy Synod of the Church of Russia, is the work of Prof. D. A. Hvolson. He worked from MT Hebrew with an eye to LXX and Archbishop Iriney, Eparch of Pskov's *Explanation of the Psalter* (Moscow, 1903). Within an Orthodox environment in service to the Church—the Church was inching toward the vernacular—Hvolson was persuaded to retain the Septuagint's "great mercy." And so are we.

God acts according to his mercy: Tob. 8.16; Sir. 50.22, 51.3; 1Macc. 13.46. The opposite is God's "wrath" and "judgment": Sir. 5.6, 16.11+; Wis. 6.6, 11.9, 12.22; 2Macc. 6.16, 8.5.

c. Similarly the Kiev Psalter, 1397 A.D.: *mnógim ščedrótam*, adjective + noun render a so-called Hebrew genitive; thus *your abounding compassions* for *abundance of your compassions*; similarly in v.21: *righteous sacrifice* for *sacrifice of righteousness*; yet we retain *God of my salva-*

tion in v.16 where some may prefer to read *my saving God*. If “great mercy” denotes the sum of God’s historical merciful acts, “abounding compassions” expresses his compassionate love and acts of kindness. Virtually synonymous, they are two sides of the same coin and are frequently paired in Scripture (Is. 63.7; Jer. 16.5; Hos. 2.21; Zech. 7.9; and in psalms) and liturgy.

d. *wipe out*: Like an eraser to pencil, like a trowel working plaster, so the broad edge of a scribe’s stylus extirpates the record written in a wax or clay tablet. The image is that of the heavenly Scribe noting and duly recording a person’s sins, wiping them out—destroying them—constituting an act of forgiveness. To explore the motif of the heavenly Scribe and his written record—*cf.* Col. 2.14—see, for example, Pss. 31(32).2; 55(56).8; 68(69).27,28; 78(79).8; 86(87).6; 129(130).3; 138(139).16; Ex. 32.32,33. Our supplicant wants the record of his sin expunged, and more, he wants the effect of his sin on his own future to be less than personally disastrous (*cf.* Prayer of Manasseh, v.13).

e. *affront*: Gk. *anómēma*. As the Slavonic and Romanian show, this word is synonymous with *anomía*, *offense* in the next sentence. We could say *offense* here too, but we give the synonym *affront*—imitating the similarity and dissimilarity of sounds in the Greek—to broaden the scope of sin talk in English, faithful to the Scriptural *phronēma* or mind-set.

f. *Over and over again*: Gk. *epí pleíon*, Slav. *najipáče*, Rom. *mai mult*; like a piece of clothing being washed by hand, the repetitious action evoking God’s many mercies while matching the repetitions of sin. The picture-perfect wording is New Skete’s improvement upon Dahood (who would eventually move the target in a subsequent revision).

g. *before you*: Gk. *enópion sou*, Slav. *pred tobóju*: the Heb. *bé’énékā* is perhaps more graphic: *in your eyes*, meaning *with you looking on*. Sin is open defiance; sin is behavior insolent and unafraid. In God’s very presence the sinner does not hesitate to rebel, to please himself,

to do what he knows to be wrong. Thus, sin renounces allegiance to the covenant which binds Lord and Father to his own. (This being the essence of sin does not mean to say sin may not also represent injustice to one’s neighbor.) The specific evil, here called “affront,” “offense,” and “sin,” is not disclosed; this contributes to the universal appeal Psalm 50 has enjoyed through the centuries—from Antiquity Ps. 50 is at the heart of the Church’s daily Matins or Morning Prayer (*Órthros, Útrenja*). The use of quotes around the moment of confession follows Fr. Roland E. Murphy, *q.v.*

h. When his neighbors see his punishment they will also see—theoretically—that it is just. Actually those who are not secretly pleased, Ps. 40(41).6, will be touched with sadness and moved to compassion.

i. Two crucial facts of biblical—religious—man’s self-experience are here contrasted: on one hand, his sinfulness is deep-seated and from the start, Gen 8.21; Job 14.4; Jn. 9.2; Rom 7.14; on the other, oddly enough, he feels himself drawn within to knowledge from insight into things unseen, Ps. 8, and to communion with the source of this knowledge, whom he knows reverently to address as “you,” and before whom he is utterly transparent, Ps. 138(139); this is the terrain of so much Wisdom literature in Scripture. In reading v.8 we should always lay stress on the word “me” as we trapeze to the closing phrase, in order to lock in the sense of irony... and wonder.

j. *Take hyssop*: Today we use twigs of sweet basil (Gk. *vasilískos*, Slav. *vasilísk*), but the idea is the same, a natural sprinkler. Hyssop is one of the smaller plants of biblical botany. Dahood (*The Anchor Bible, Psalms II*, pg. 1) prunes the hyssop from this psalm by reconfiguring the Hebrew to give the reading one finds there and in New Skete’s Psalter. There is no denying Fr. Mitchell Dahood is loaded for bear (*The Anchor Bible*, vols. 16, 17, 17A, Doubleday), but one is hard pressed to catch a glimpse of his brilliant

text-critical finds and bold hypotheses gaining acceptance among Scripture editors who themselves are wrestling with the task of establishing the text and textual variants to be translated.

k. *sprinkle me*: not with the blood of Lev. 14.4+ but with the purifying water of Num. 19.18. The image betokens healing, lifting a ban, and reconciliation.

l. Reconciliation has a sound track, so to speak, not to mention a waiting table. (“Joy” and “feasting” here clearly are sounds to be heard; cf. a Ukrainian slant on *vesélije* which echoes the Slavonic: *vesillja*, wedding feast.) The Lord Jesus includes these details in his parable of the prodigal son, Lk. 15.25, where *symphonías kai chorōn* evokes the euphony of flutes and voices singing and stamping feet. They tell out the younger man’s return and reconciliation, and instantly evangelize and alienate his brother.

m. *brought low*: Our supplicant is overwhelmed with remorse. In MT Hebrew one finds active voice; God brings the supplicant down (cf. Ps. 37(38).1+). But in LXX Greek the voice is passive; if our supplicant is sick, it is with grief for sin. The anguish spilling over into his fragile frame, v.12, is in origin spiritual and moral.

n. *create*: The prophets are confident that God will bring about a change in men’s hearts, a new nature in accord with God’s purposes. As we see here of the Hebrew word *bārā’* shows, God’s unique power to create is invoked. If man is an inveterate sinner as the prophets teach, his deliverance from the inertia of his sinful nature and its consequences will depend on the Father’s gracious intervention; 2Cor. 5.17: If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come; cf. Tit. 3.4+.

o. *pure heart*: a focussed mind, entertaining no apostasy, rebellion, or unbelief; one that serves the Lord alone and bows down to no empty idol. The Lord Jesus, Mt. 5.8, teaches that such a heart is destined for big things: “Blest are the

pure of heart, for they shall see God.” Heart = mind; cf. Manasseh, note n.

p. *in my belly*, Gk. *en tois enkátois mou*, Slav. *vo utróbě mojéj*: Heb. *b^eqir^ebbi* can mean simply *within me*, as we find in many English versions, but the LXX translator goes for the gut (*qereb*) and thus fills out the picture of our supplicant’s distress. His enteric nervous system reaches from esophagus to colon and plays a major rôle in his misery just now, and will in future, in any well-being he yearns for. Some neurogastroenterologists are calling it the brain in the gut. It is mirroring his state of mind and urging this change of heart, leading to resolution of his plight. He could be feeling tightness in his throat. Heartburn perhaps. Butterflies. Abdominal pain. Maybe indigestion is inflicting nightmares. More likely though, talk here is of a churning stomach and that loose feeling in the canal end. Peristalsis now and again; he is chained to the loo. And why? He is awash in visceral fear. (The gut can upset the mind just as the mind can upset the gut. Remember that white-coated technician in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? the mother ship lands, and we spy him hurrying to the portajohn?) Our supplicant is afraid for his life; will it slip from him?—Deadly sin is called deadly precisely because the Law would extract death, with no remedial sacrifice provided for.—Brought low, apprehensive and repentant, he insightfully sues for relief, for restoration of that even, constant good feeling in his gut, that sense of well-being he had before his moral fall, something that flows from friendship with the Source of his life, a purging he cannot bestow upon himself, Prov. 20.9. He presses his case in v.16. Compare all this with similar sentiments in the Prayer of Manasseh.

q. *holy spirit*: God’s action in man which saves him and keeps him faithful, as Fr. Roland E. Murphy explains (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*), looking at holy spirit within an Old Testament context.—The holy spirit of the Lord is found active throughout biblical history. Before

creation it rests on the abyss, Gen. 1.1, and to it all creatures owe life, Ps. 103(104).29,30; Ps. 32(33).6; Gen. 2.7. It inspires the Judges, Jgs. 3.10; 6.34; 11.29, and Saul, 1Sam. 11.6. It gives craftsmen their skill, Ex. 31.3,4; 36.1, judges their discretion, Num. 11.17, Joseph his wisdom, Gen. 41.38. But especially it inspires the prophets, Num. 11.17 (Moses), 25,26; 24.2; 1Sam. 10.6,10; 19.20; 2Sam. 23.2 (David); 4Kings 2.9 (Elijah); Mic. 3.8; Is. 48.16; 61.1; Zec. 7.12; 2Chron. 15.1; 20.14; 24.20, whereas false prophets follow their own spirit, Ezek. 13.3. Is. 11.2 teaches that this spirit of the prophets will be bestowed on the Messiah; Joel 3.1,2 [=2.28,29] later foretells that in the messianic era it will be poured out on all men, cf. Acts 2.16,17 [JB. Is.11b]—For the Orthodox Catholic Christian here and now under Grace there is thus a fuller meaning because the doctrine of the Holy Spirit achieves its perfect expression in the Gospel, Jn. 1.33+, 14.16+,26+; Acts 1.8+, 2.1+; Rom. 5.5+; Tit. 3.6.

r. *sovereign spirit*, Gk. *pnévmati ēgemonikō*, Slav. *dúchom vladýčnim*: quality of will capable of ruling the forces within (self-control), governing life (prudence), and both inspiring and sustaining the high courage (perseverance) needed to guide others along paths that lead to God.

s. On one hand, public avowal is a fruit of inner renewal; on the other, success of personal witness depends on genuine religious experience.

t. *Death*: Heb. *dāmīm*, Gk. *aimátōn*, Slav. *krověj*, literally *blood(s)*, makes no sense here (as happens from time to time in these ancient texts). The context here—staying alive to praise God (cf. Ps. 6.5)—as well as the Prayer of Manasseh, extra-Scriptural psalm suffused with the devotion of Psalm 50, suggest emendation to “death” (v.13); Dahood argues in this direction from the Hebrew consonantal text (*dammīm*, q.v., *Psalms II*, pg. 8); cf. New Skete’s Psalter and NAB. So does Artur Weiser (*The Psalms*, Westminster Press, pg. 408). “Bloodguiltiness” in RSV (following Chicago) and “bloodshed” in NewRSV, REB and NJB should be rejected as

unsupported, in Dahood’s opinion. See psalm references above in Prayer of Manasseh, note o.

u. *contrite*: aching with a sense of alienation from God, which is the fruit of sin, while looking to God for relief (something Judas failed to do). Cf. pg. 135, first gloss.

v. *humbled*: brought low by pangs of conscience. We are responsible and accountable for doing wrong.

w. The import of this verse: *I must become the sacrifice*. Ps. 39(40).6,7: You gave me to understand [*scil.* through the prophets] that sacrifice and offerings are not what you desire.... Then I said: Here I am! As it is written in the scroll [*scil.* of prophetic writings], to do what pleases you is my desire, for your law is written in my heart.... Mk. 12.33,34: “Yes, to love [God] with all our heart, with all our thoughts and with all our strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, is worth more than any holocaust or sacrifice.” Jesus approved the insight of this answer and told him, “You are not far from the reign of God.” Theodore of Mopsuestia can therefore write, “Prayer does not consist so much in words but in good works, love and zeal for duty.... If you care for prayer, know that it is not performed by words but by the choice of a virtuous life and by the love of God and diligence in one’s duty...,” *Catechetical Homilies*, 11. [His point of departure is Origen, *On Prayer*, XII,2: That man “prays without ceasing” (virtuous deeds or commandments fulfilled being included as part of prayer) who combines with the prayer the needful deeds and the prayer with the fitting actions. For thus alone can we accept “pray without ceasing” as a practicable saying, if we speak of the whole life of the saint as one great unbroken prayer: of which prayer that which is commonly called prayer is a part.] The Lord Jesus in his sacrificial life is the perfect fulfillment of all the inspired prophetic teaching in this vein (see the commentary on Ps. 39.6–8 LXX in Heb. 10.1+); and I follow him in the Way (as does Bartimæus in Mk. 10.52)—I pursue discipleship—by striving to do likewise.

I must become the sacrifice. The vertical pronoun is ineluctable: Make praise your sacrifice to God and fulfill your vows to the Most High.... As for him who offers me a sacrifice of praise—for him I will give a feast, for he prepares a way for me to show him the saving power of God, Ps. 49 (50).14,23. (Let each of us keep in mind, then, what Holy Scripture would teach us concerning the pivotal notion of sacrifice: sacrifice—so natural to man—is *not meant to appease* a testy Deity; no, sacrifice *brings communion* with God who loves us.)

While v.19 is not a direct quote of any prophet, our use of quotes is meant to show that this epitome crystalizes the sense of so much Scripture: for example, 1Sam. 15.22; Prov. 15.8; 21.3; Is. 1.11–17; Jer. 7.21–23; Hos. 3.4; 6.6 Am. 5.21–2, Mic. 6.6+ speak of obedience, sincerity

of heart, and conformity to the *hesed* or mercy of God. And as St. Athanasius teaches (*On the Interpretation of Psalms*, 5), “The pronouncements of the prophets are declared in every psalm.” [The disciple becoming the sacrifice is what the sacred liturgist wants to highlight by appointing Psalm 140 to be sung every evening at Vespers and Psalm 50 every morning at Matins—evening and morning being the times of sacrifice in Holy Scripture. Penitence represents a daily attitude and struggle—penitence understood in terms of the sacrifice of self God really wants (*cf.* Joel 2.13)—and is the springboard for the notion of *trópos metanías*, *óbráz pokajánija*, the *disposition of repentance* touched on below and elsewhere in this work, a notion of tremendous pastoral value inasmuch as it sums up the Gospel life.]

—*Confesion with Examination of Conscience
and Common Prayers*,
Holy Trinity Church, Reston, VA,
pages 70,71,184–190.

