

Practical Application
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
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Psa 51:1 – 2 (BHS)

Psa 51:0 (NASB)

לְמַנְצֵחַ
מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
בָּבֹא־אֵלָיו נָתַן הַנָּבִיא
כְּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא אֶל-בַּת-שֶׁבַע:

For the choir director.
A Psalm of David,
when Nathan the prophet came to him,
after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Note the repetition of “**come in**” to describe David’s sin and the prophet’s response. Pretty straightforward Hebrew, right? This is called a notation of historical circumstance. English Bibles deny them a verse number and put them in small print before the psalm starts, even though in Hebrew they are numbered. King James skips them completely.

They seem disconnected with their psalm. For example, click here and read [Psalm 30 in King James](#) (so you won’t be influenced by the notation). Try to summarize what it is about in a sentence.

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What do you think? It has no mention at all about the Temple, does it? It isn’t even a corporate psalm. The notation says that it is a psalm of David for the dedication of the Temple. What? David didn’t dedicate the Temple! If you preach this psalm being guided by the notation, you would not preach it *authentically*.

Click here for [psalm 3](#). Read carefully.

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This psalm concerns *speech*. Words afflicted the psalmist (v2). Note the chiasm in v7 – 8, centering on the request for God to strike them in the mouth—for that was the source of his distress.

A Save me!
B My God
C Strike
D All my enemies
E On the jaw
E' The teeth
D' of the wicked
C' Break
B' Yahweh
A' is salvation!

So an authentic sermon would focus on bearing up under false accusation. But the notation says that

it is about David fleeing from Absalom! I had to sit through a sermon that forced it to be about that. True, Absalom's main weapon was his mouth. But the notation doesn't say that, so the preacher completely missed the main point of the psalm. Ugh.

[Psalm 34](#) is the same. Nothing in it reads like its notation—which even misidentifies the king (1 Sam 21:10).

And this brings us to [Psalm 51](#). The notation claims it's about David and Bathsheba. But that's not an authentic read! Consider:

1. The phrase “walls of Jerusalem” (v18) only occurs elsewhere in Jeremiah and Nehemiah, in reference to the destruction brought about by Babylon. This seems postexilic.
2. David's sin was NOT only against God (v4). Sin which is only against God sounds like a cultic failure, again reminiscent of the Restoration.
3. Does it mention Bathsheba? Uriah? Joab? David? Adultery?
4. In v8, what broken bones? See Jer 50:17. Again, postexilic.
5. The psalmist was born already under judgment. He confesses general offences (v5) connected with corporate guilt (v13). This is very different than David's sin.
6. The psalm climaxes with a cultic reference alien to the notation (v19).

The only possible connection with David and Bathsheba is “bloods” (v14).

Its meaning is perhaps best seen in light of Isaiah 1:12 – 18. Because of injustice and exploitation, Yahweh refused to accept cultic sacrifices:

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. **Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean.** Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. (Isa 1:15 – 16, NIV)

Here, “blood” (plural) signifies the perversion of justice. In their hearts—and in their courts—they did not honor God, even though they were outwardly religious. This sounds like the message of Psalm 51 to me. The psalmist was born into a community that needed inner purity (v13); after that, pleasing sacrifices could be offered (v. 16 – 19). He personally identified with the cleansing everyone needed. This is the main point of the psalm, which doesn’t track well with David and Bathsheba.

What then should we do with the historical notations? I think we should read them as pointers to practical application. The psalms are not tied to specific circumstances—but the notations suggest how they could be. This is similar to how the NT applies the psalms to Jesus, without worrying whether the application fits the overall psalm.

Why don’t you try to add your own notations of historical circumstance to the psalms? First read each psalm as being about Jesus. Then, read them as being about you, in him. The laments are about Jesus, and about you. The praises are about him, and about your joy. And so on.

Let the tenuous notations guide you in seeing Jesus there, and in seeing yourself there.

Knock yourself out!