

# Psalm 51:16a (English 51:14a)

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WHAT DOES the psalmist mean when he prays, *haššîlênî middâmîm* (“deliver me from blood”)? The expression could refer to the psalmist himself shedding blood,<sup>1</sup> or to his own blood being shed (that is, to his death through illness or persecution),<sup>2</sup> or to his incurring or having incurred “bloodguilt” (that is, to his being liable to divine punishment for sins that God punished by death).<sup>3</sup> Which is correct, and what is the point of the prayer in the psalm?

The answer seemed clear enough when the psalm was customarily linked with David. His life was forfeit for the sins of adultery and murder. A similar interpretation is possible if we date the psalm in the late pre-exilic period or the time of the exile itself. At the end of the seventh century, for instance, “unrequited blood . . . threatened the very life of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *NEB*?

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *JB*; *NEB* mg; *RSV* mg; H.-J. Kraus *Psalmen* I (BKAT XV/1; 3d ed; Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966) 390; A. A. Anderson *The Book of Psalms* I (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1972) 400; also the reprintings of H. Gunkel—*middumam*, “from [death’s] silence”—(*Die Psalmen* [5th ed; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1968] 221) and M. Dahood—*middamîm*, “from [death’s] tears”—(*Psalms* II [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1968] 8).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *RSV*; A. Weiser *The Psalms* (London: SCM, 1962) 408. As Weiser’s comment shows, in effect there need be little difference between this and the previous interpretation.

nation.”<sup>4</sup> But the reference is an allusive one (like that to the possibility of the psalmist shedding someone else’s blood). If the psalmist feared, for instance, that he was about to pay the ultimate penalty for sins of the past, one might expect this thought to be expressed more centrally in the psalm.<sup>5</sup> If he is only continuing his general prayer for cleansing,<sup>6</sup> one wonders why he used such a striking phrase.

The purpose of this note is to suggest that the phrase can be understood without looking outside the psalm to the historical situation of its supposed origin, and to put forward an interpretation of it that is not dependent on any particular theory as to the psalm’s origin. It rather considers the phrase in its literary and liturgical context, drawing also on its parallelism with the only other passages in the OT where “deliverance” (the verb *hiššîl*) and “blood” are closely associated. These appear in Ezekiel, where, in two virtually identical passages (3:17-19; 33:7-9) the prophet refers to his vocation as that of a watchman over Israel. By fulfilling his calling to warn the wicked man to turn from his way, he avoids the possibility of the wicked man’s *blood* being required at his (the watchman’s) hand—of being held “answerable for his death” (*NEB* 3:18; 33:8). He thus *delivers* his own life (3:19; 33:9). A concern with deliverance from bloodguilt in these passages in Ezekiel, then, is connected with fulfilling an obligation to pass on God’s call to repentance and his offer of grace. Failure to deliver this testimony may lead to the death of the sinner, and the responsibility for this death belongs to the neglectful “watchman.”

Now the context of Ps 51:16a is precisely similar to that in Ezekiel. Vv 15-17 comprise a form of the vow of praise in a lament,<sup>7</sup> in which the psalmist looks forward to returning to the temple to give testimony to God’s deliverance. It is of the essence of this testimony that it is public: Yahweh is acknowledged before his people (perhaps thought of as representing all the nations). In this particular psalm, the supplicant’s restoration—in the context of his confession of sin—will be evidence that God does forgive, as his chastisement has been evidence that God punishes. His public testimony will thus be at the same time a challenge and invitation to other sinners to return to God (v 15). To give this testimony, he needs God’s own help. His voice has been silenced by his sin and chastisement,

<sup>4</sup> E. R. Dalglish (*Psalm Fifty-One* [Leiden: Brill, 1962] 227; see more generally 223-29); also A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1910) 293.

<sup>5</sup> Weiser (*Psalms*, 408) attempts to account for the presence of this precise prayer at this particular point, but the explanation is tortuous.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Eaton (*Kingship and the Psalms* [SBT 2/32; London: SCM, 1976] 187) translates the phrase “deliver me from every stain.”

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. C. Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (London: Epworth, 1965) 59-60, 75-78.

and God must open his lips again by restoring him (v 17). Thus God will enable him to fulfill his obligation of giving praise to the one who has restored him, and thereby to be delivered from the possibility of incurring bloodguilt by not warning other sinners to turn from their evil way (v 16).

It is in this sense that he prays, "deliver me from incurring bloodguilt." He prays to be kept from becoming answerable for the death of other sinners by failing to challenge and invite them to return to God.



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