

# WHO WAS THE FIRST JEWISH COMMENTATOR TO CONNECT PSALM 50 AND CHRISTIANITY?

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David Berger has recently drawn attention to the “stunning” interpretation of Don Isaac Abarbanel to Psalm 50, who argues in his *Ma'ynei Ha-Yeshuah* that the chapter is a Biblical prediction wherein an early, prophetic author foresaw and then criticized central beliefs in the Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup> It is shocking and surprising that a Jewish commentator would interpret an entire chapter of Psalms as being written solely with the intention to respond to a later, foreign faith. For Berger, this “stunning” or unusual and surprising decision finds its origins in the Abarbanel and the late fifteenth century. Yet, closer inspection reveals that Jews had already connected the 50<sup>th</sup> Psalm with Christianity long before Abarbanel, and the implications of this realization – still stunning and now even more widespread – are of great interest.

We will take a closer look at the fiftieth Psalm, examining why Jews might be drawn to this unusual reading, and then we will turn to look at earlier Jewish authorities who preceded Abarbanel in this explanation. As we embark on an investigation of the fiftieth Psalm, we begin by looking at its genre and its named author, Asaf, before turning to look at the content and literary flourishes of the Psalm.

## ASAF AND THE HISTORICAL PSALMS

Many Psalms are petitions and even more are praises, but the dozen or so Psalms attributed to Asaf are written in a different genre. Although the Psalms contain a blend of various themes, these particular Psalms have a large component of telling the stories of history and presenting an argument or interpretation of past events, rarely asking for anything and usually refraining from giving praises. For example, Psalm 74 narrates the history of creation. Psalm 78 the history of the exodus and Psalm 77 the song of the sea, while Psalm 76 describes the role Jerusalem plays in the Jewish religion. Psalm 80 tells the story of the destruction of Shiloh, Psalm 105 the promise and fulfillment of the covenant to Abraham,<sup>2</sup> and Psalm 83 describes a major war likely from the time of Judges. Psalm 81 also seems to describe the events of the Exodus, while Psalm 82 describes a well-functioning Jewish court.

Though it is possible to connect the historical subjects of all of the above Psalms to events that preceded the time of Asaf and David, Psalm 79 and some of the endings of the other aforementioned Asaf chapters appear to describe the destruction of the temple. Consequently, many commentators are resigned to the idea that the Psalms of Asaf refer

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to events that take place later than when David's colleague Asaf lived. Indeed, *Sanhedrin* 110b states, "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa says: This verse (Psalms 50:5) was stated only with regard to future generations." Some, more traditional commentators argue that Asaf was himself a prophet,<sup>3</sup> who foresaw future events and composed Psalms about those events. Others ascribe a later date for the composition of these Psalms;<sup>4</sup> in this latter view the Psalms of Asaf could still not refer to Christianity which became a religion only after the canonization of the book of Psalms.

Consequently, believing Jews who felt Asaf may have prophetically predicted the destruction of the temple in Psalm 79, could also believe Asaf predicted other things in Jewish history as well. It is still a significant jump to understand Psalm 50 as replying to Christianity, but it isn't impossible in the view of these authorities. Even without attributing prophetic abilities to Asaf, this Psalm can be an example of how passages in Tanakh can be uncannily relevant to different eras, as interpreted by exegetes throughout the centuries. A closer reading of the Psalm will help explain why they may have chosen to connect it to Christianity.

#### PSALM 50: CONTENT

The chapter begins with a lengthy description of God's nature, revelation, and sheer power (1-6), describing God's omniscience (10-11), and the insignificance of humanity compared to Him (12-15). The focus of the chapter, unique among the Psalms, is a lengthy admonishment of an unnamed wicked person [*rasha*], over the last seven verses. This is the only time in the Psalms, if not in the entire Bible, where God addresses an unnamed wicked person directly in the second person. The Psalm provides no real clarity who this wicked person is, and the Talmud and commentaries debate the identity of this wicked person. *Sanhedrin* 106b says it is the traitor Doeg,<sup>5</sup> *Sanhedrin* 99b says it was the wicked king Menashe, while *Chagigah* 15b says it is the later heretic, Acher. Thus, there is no unequivocal attribution for the main character of the chapter in the Jewish tradition. Of course, he can also simply be representative of evil people in general, without having a fixed particular identity.

Below we give a translation of this section of the Psalm in full, before turning to Abarbanel's reading. The translation below is designed to best match Abarbanel's reading of the chapter, while still preserving the simple meaning of the text.

*And to the wicked one God said: 'Why do you speak of my statutes? And you mention My covenant on your mouth? Yet you hated rebuke, and cast my words behind you! When you would see a thief - you ran with him, and your portion is with adulterers. You send your mouth towards evil, and you attach your tongue to deceit. You sit, you speak against your brother, in the son of your mother you place faults. You did these things, and I was silent. You imagined it should be that I shall be<sup>6</sup> like you, therefore I will rebuke you, evaluate you before your eyes.' Discern this now those that forget God, lest I tear, and*

*none shall save [them]. He that offers a thanksgiving offering<sup>7</sup> honors me; he that makes a path, I will show him the salvation of God (Ps 50:16-23).*

The text admonishes the wicked person for many evil things, some typical (joining thieves or adulterers) and some more unusual (“why do you speak of my statutes”).

Abarbanel explains this section in his *Ma 'ynei Ha-Yeshuah* 8:8.<sup>8</sup> Below is the translation of the verses in regular font, and Abarbanel’s interpretation in bold:

And to the wicked one God said:

‘Why do you speak of my statutes? And you mention My covenant on your mouth? Yet you hated rebuke, and cast my words behind you! **He rebukes Christianity – why do you study the Bible, given that you do not keep the commandments, and you throw the words of Torah behind your back?**<sup>9</sup>

‘When you would see a thief - you ran with him, and your portion is with adulterers. You send your mouth towards evil, and you attach your tongue to deceit.

You sit, you speak against your brother, in the son of your mother you place faults. **Beyond this, you trouble Israel who is called your brother.**

‘You did these things, and I was silent. You imagined it should be that I shall be like you, therefore I will rebuke you, evaluate you before your eyes. **Beyond these crimes, there is another crime so very great, speaking against God, by relating to Him with humanity and corporeality like one of us... That it entered your mind and you spoke with your mouth that I would “be” body and flesh, entering the womb of the young woman “like you?” For this [crime], without a doubt, there would be a significant punishment greater than the other sins.**’

Discern this now those that forget God, lest I tear, and none shall save [them]. He that offers a thanksgiving offering honors me; make a path! I will show him the salvation of God. **However, the completely faithful of Israel, the nation holy to Hashem, honors Me with its words and faith, and therefore I will create a path for him for when I will show him the salvation of God.**

Abarbanel connects three details of the admonition with Christianity. The section begins with a fitting description of the way Christianity reads the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, a presumptuous way of relating to the words of the Torah, its covenant, and the statutes. Then, the Psalm turns to the trouble caused to a brother, taken to refer to the Jews who are the brothers of Esav, the symbolic or actual progenitor of Western Christendom.<sup>10</sup> It ends with a criticism of the Christian doctrine of incarnation wherein the wicked person says that the Divine God is flesh, just like he is.

Each of these elements of the Psalm could be understood differently, and indeed the classical commentators give different explanations for all three parts.<sup>11</sup> However, the three seemingly disconnected concepts which appear together in one small section reads smoothly when applied to the theology of Christianity.

## PSALM 50: UNUSUAL PHRASES

Abarbanel argues that the Psalm relates to Christianity on the basis of its *content*, but there are a number of words and phrases – almost formal elements – which are suggestive of a reading relating to Christianity. Thus, beyond the content, a number of key words and phrases might also suggest readers to relate the chapter to the Christian religion.

First of them is the phrase “son of your mother,” focusing on the mother and significantly not the biological father. This phrase appears only one other time in the Bible, Deuteronomy 13:7, a verse which describes a Jew being enticed towards idolatry, by the *son of your mother*. That verse had already been applied to Christianity long before Abarbanel’s time, applying the verse to a Jew who had a Jewish mother but claimed not to have a Jewish father.<sup>12</sup>

The Psalm begins with God’s revelation, referring to God through three names “*Keil, Elokim, the LORD*,” (Ps. 50:1). Commentaries give various explains for the three-titled description (for example, Ibn Ezra and Targum both translate the first word as an adjective for ‘powerful’ and not as a name or title of God), but the use of three consecutive words to refer to God is unusual. A similar phrase with two names of God appears later, *Elokim, Elokecha, Anochi* (Ps. 50:7). Though Jewish sources do not connect these phrases with the trinity, the connection could easily have been on the mind of a commentator, as other threefold mentions of God’s name have been in the past.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the last words of the Psalm are *in the salvation of God*, as the repentant, righteous Jew merits to see the salvation of God, in the Hebrew, “*Yesha Elokim*.” A Christian might interpret the verse as asserting the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is unclear which of these many phrases might have echoed Christianity for a Jewish reader, but any of them may have been read as suggesting that this Psalm had a response to Christianity in mind. Thus, any of these phrases may have drawn a Jewish reader to understand this Psalm as a prophetic response to Christianity.

## PSALMS 50:20 AND THE INCARNATION, BEFORE ABARBANEL

Abarbanel provides a lengthy interpretation of the chapter connecting many of its phrases with Christianity. Rabbi David Kimchi preceded him, although only in regard to one verse, the blasphemy that the wicked claim that God was like them. Radak writes: And I heard another explanation of this from the mouth of one elderly man: [God] said “For these bad things – I have given a reprieve. But for what you imagined and thought that ‘I would be’ a body ‘like you,’ for this I will rebuke you, evaluate you before your eyes” – for this is the worst of the bad deeds.

Though Christianity is not mentioned by name, the doctrine of incarnation is mentioned, and so Radak already explicitly connected the chapter with the heresies of Christianity. In no other occasion in his commentaries does Radak use such dramatic esoteric

language, attributing an interpretation to an anonymous elderly scholar. Evidently, he felt that the radical claim that the Psalm prophetically predicts and responds to Christianity must be substantiated through attribution to an earlier authority, but simultaneously, the radical nature of the claim demands that the originator of the interpretation go anonymous. Radak was well versed in Jewish-Christian polemics, indeed he composed a polemical text himself and addresses polemics elsewhere in his Bible commentary (see Ps.15:5, 119:129 et al.), and so this interpretation should be seen within the wider literary oeuvre of Radak.

Radak's interpretation demonstrates that the anti-Christian reading of the Psalm already existed, in at least some form, in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, and does not originate with Abarbanel, living 300 years later. It may even appear early in the 11<sup>th</sup> century Midrashic compilation *Lekach Tov* (also known as *Psikta Zutrata*) (to Num. 15:30) in its paraphrase of the Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 98b, with the attribution of the wicked person in the chapter to King Menashe who is said to have mocked the Torah for including irrelevant details and stories, and not Christianity. Although *Lekach Tov* quotes the Talmud almost verbatim, it ends with the verse *that I shall be like you, therefore I will rebuke you, evaluate you before your eyes* (50:21) and adds "do you think that the manner of flesh and blood is my manner?" The addition of these words "flesh and blood" to the Talmudic quote, a comparison of God to flesh and blood, may be evidence of an even earlier manifestation of the view shared by Radak and Abarbanel.<sup>14</sup>

#### TALMUDIC READINGS

The Talmud never directly connects this chapter to Christian theology, but it does quote from this chapter as part of the lengthy discussion of the death of "Yeishu" and his disciples (*Sanhedrin* 43b).<sup>15</sup> The lengthy passage has a number of challenges - halakhic, metaphysical and historical,<sup>16</sup> and its account of the death of "Yeishu" conforms somewhat but not entirely with other known accounts. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the passage clearly speaks about Christianity, whatever discrepancies or inconsistencies found in the passage.

The discussion of the death of the five disciples found there, itself unusual as it offers a different number of disciples, not twelve, is formulated as a disputation about the Bible, with Jews and Christians warring over the correct interpretation of five Biblical verses, one for each disciple, much as Jews and Christians would argue about the Bible for centuries in the future. The first of the five disciples, "Mathew" (Mattai in Aramaic) has the name of one of the most famous apostles, but the other four disciples are given pseudonyms designed to match the verses in their respective disputations. They are not given names of actual disciples; they are given names that echo key words in Biblical verses. The Talmud first chooses the texts for the Jews and the five disciples to debate, including the Messianic vision of Isaiah 11:1 and the selection of Israel as the firstborn nation in

Exodus 4:22, and then gives the disciples names to match key words in these verses – Netzer for Isaiah 11:1, and Buni for Exodus 4:22.<sup>17</sup>

The final disciple is named “Todah,” a Hebrew word normally translated as “thanksgiving offering.” About him the Talmud concludes: “They brought Todah [to be executed]. He said to them: “shall Todah be killed? but it says: *A song to Todah?* [=A song upon the thanksgiving offering] (Ps. 100:1).” They replied to him “Yes, Todah should be killed, as it says: *He that sacrifices Todah honors me* (Ps. 50:23).”

Why are these two verses cited as part of this disputation? The Christians argued about the Messianic visions and about which nation was God’s firstborn, but when did they argue about the thanksgiving offering?<sup>18</sup> At first blush, this verse lacks the polemical connection that the other disciples and their verses have, until we realize that this verse appears in Psalm 50, a Psalm with many features that relate it to the Christian context.

We can posit that the Talmud also understood that Psalm 50 was, or at least was considered by some, to be related in some manner to Christianity, probably for the same reasons later offered by Radak and Abarbanel. This is why the Talmud includes it in a polemical context. The Talmud understands that just as Christians read Isaiah 11:1 and Exodus 4:22 as referring to their deity, so too they read Psalm 50:23 as referring to their deity. They would translate: “He that offers a thanksgiving offering honors me. Make a path! I will show him that Yesha is god.” The Talmud replies that the verse should not be read that way, and instead the false god and all his disciples should be punished. Psalm 50 should refer to a rejection of Christianity, not an endorsement of that faith.

#### TRUE READING OR POLEMICAL ARGUMENT?

One of the greatest challenges in reading polemical texts is determining whether the authors actually intended the readings they provided or whether the reading is nothing more than mere argument. Did the Talmud *really* believe that Psalm 50 related to major ideas in Christianity or did it only acknowledge that Christians offered such a reading? Does Radak disguise the identity of his source with the esoteric title of “one elderly man” because he feels the reading is revolutionary but correct or does he feel the reading of the elderly man is incorrect? Within the context of Abarbanel life’s story and the nature of the messianic *Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshuah*, we can also ask if his argument is designed as a true explication of the Bible or as merely a response to the Christians. It is impossible to tell what any of these sources *truly* felt was the focus of Psalm 50. Nevertheless, it is amazing to see that there is a centuries long Jewish tradition of applying this chapter to the Christian religion, and the rejection of its central principles.

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#### NOTES

1. D. Berger “On the Image and Destiny of Gentiles in Ashkenazic Polemical Literature,” (2000) in *Persecution, Polemic and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 133.

2. Psalm 105 was also written by Asaf. See I Chronicles 16:7.
3. See Rabbeinu Channanel and Rashi to *Megillah* 14a, and I Chronicles 25:1 and II Chronicles 29:30.
4. See the discussion in U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, trans. Lenn Schramm (Albany: State University of New York, Press, 1991), 124-137.
5. *Brachot* 17b connects four students who departed from the straight path set by their teachers – Achitofel, Doeig, Geichazi, and “Yeishu” – see P. Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 30, and parallel *Sanhedrin* 103a. The four are also discussed in succession in *Sanhedrin* 106b-107b – see *Chesronot Ha-Shas* (Koenigsberg, 1860), 50. One wonders, then, whether connecting this Psalm with Doeig also indirectly connects it with the Christian Deity, as the two figures are often compared with each other in the Talmud.
6. The verb used, “*Ehe’yeh*,” is a name of God when used in noun form, see *Shavuot* 25a, explaining Exodus 3:14.
7. Radak takes this word to mean “confession” (*hitvadut*), not “thanksgiving” (*todah*). Rashi appears to take a similar view.
8. This work is published in Abarbanel, *Ketuvim*, page 348. *Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshuah* was written in 1496 and completed in early 1497. See B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982), 77-78. On the polemical nature of this work and Abarbanel’s other studies of Christianity, see Netanyahu, 209-257.
9. Abarbanel continues by saying that the Christians “throw behind” themselves the prophecies, explaining them as being about the past and not for the future, since in Christian theology the Messianic era has happened in the past and is not futured to be. This is the meaning of casting them “behind you,” namely to the past, which is behind us.
10. See Y. Jaffe, *Isaiah and Contemporaries* (Kodesh Press, 2023), 264-265.
11. What else might “*Be like you*” mean? Ibn Ezra, and Radak’s first explanation, is that the wicked person claims that that God – like humanity – does not know hidden things, while Rashi explains the claim is that God – like humanity – is accepting of the evil person’s ways. We will return to Radak’s second explanation below.
12. See D. Berger “Introduction to the Jewish Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages” (1979) in Berger, *Persecution, Polemic and Dialogue*, 84. In Deuteronomy, the individual with a Jewish mother is the wicked person, enticing the Jew, while in Psalms the individual with a Jewish mother is insulted by the wicked person, and so the parallel is not perfect. One could translate “By being ‘the son of your mother’ you have placed a fault,” to strengthen the parallel to Deuteronomy where that individual with only a mother is the one enticing Jews towards false beliefs.
13. For some examples, see Jaffe, 327-328.
14. Even within the Talmud’s reading, we note that Menashe appears in the same section of the Talmud as the other figures in note 5 and so there are soft echoes of a connection to Christianity, even if Menashe is the wicked person of the Psalm.
15. The entire discussion is missing from most early modern printings of the Talmud, although most printings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do include the section in its entirety. See *Chesronot Ha-Shas*, 44.
16. Questions of the timing of the date of his death, the time the Sanhedrin stopped judging capital cases, and his Rabbinic teachers all overlap and have led some to say that there are two different “Yeishu” figures in the Talmud. See Rabbi Yaakov Emden’s commentary to *Avodah Zara* 17a for some discussion. See also Y. D. Eisenstein *Otzar Ha-Vikuchim* (New York, 1922), 170-174, where the story is also connected to a different “Yeishu,” although from the context it is possible that this was just a polemical argument and not a genuinely held belief.
17. The second disciple is named “Naki” as he and the Rabbis debate Exodus 23:7, the prohibition to kill an innocent person. Though Exodus 23:7 was not part of a lengthy, centuries-long polemical tradition like the other two verses, it still relates to the question whether Yeshu deserved to have been killed in the first place. See Schafer, 78-81 for a discussion of the verses of the disciples.
18. Shaefer contends that this verse is cited because the Christian Deity is considered to be an “offering” or “sacrifice” upon the cross. However, if that was indeed the focus, one of numerous other verses related to sacri-

fices should have been cited, and not Psalm 50 with deals with the wrong type of sacrifice, the thanksgiving sacrifice and not a sin-offering or pascal lamb.