

"WHY IS AN ATHEIST A FOOL? THE CONCEPT OF WISDOM IN PSALM 14"

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Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen.

To begin, let me put forth three simple questions:

1. *Do you know the first line of the Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart: There is no God"?*
2. *Have you ever met in your life at least one atheist?*
3. *Do you feel offended if somebody calls you "a fool"?*

If you answered "yes" to all these questions, than the topic of this lecture should be quite interesting for you.

In 2010, at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem, I defended my doctorate entitled "The foolish atheist. Study of the Psalms 14 e 53". As you know, to write a doctorate usually means to spend thousands of hours on topics that are interesting for only a few. However, from the sea of topics related to these two psalms, we can fish some important and crucial insights. One of them is the relationship between wisdom and rejection of God.

To make this lecture clear, my research findings have been divided into five questions with five corresponding answers. But first of all, let us read Psalm 14:

¹ The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.

² The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

³ All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

⁴ Do all these evildoers know nothing?

They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD.

⁵ But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.

⁶ You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.

⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!

When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!¹

¹ The New International Version (2011).

1. The first question: “Why Psalm 14?”

I don't know what is easier: to understand Psalm 14 or to understand my English. Despite a very complex issue called “Psalm 14”, there are some arguments that focus on this difficult passage in the Bible that speak about wisdom and rejection of God.

Firstly, we can find in the Bible a lot of expressions that represent hostility towards God but the expression “there is no God” occurs only twice.

We read in the Book of Psalms that the enemies “rebelled” against God (Psa 5:10), “forget” God (Psa 9:18), “tested God in their hearts“ (Psa 78,18), “have made an alliance” against God (Psa 83:6), reject the power of God (Psa 12:5); “do not fear God” (Psa 55:20); or “hate the LORD” (Psa 81:16), but the enemy dares to deny God and to say ”there is no God” only in Psalm 10 (v. 4) and in Psalm 14 (v.1). In Psalm 10 it is a wicked (רָשָׁע) who renounces God. In Psalm 14 God is denied by a fool (נָבֵל).

Secondly, even if it is not clear that Psalm 14 is a wisdom psalm, surely it shares some features with the Wisdom traditions of the Old Testament. Usually scholars prefer to speak about “mixed form” of the Psalm 14. I quote R. A. Bennet:

For all of the mixture of forms found in Ps 14=53 (meditative observation as opening; prophetic critique as lament body; and hymnic prayer and assurance as conclusion), there is a unity of thought, a unity resulting from the strong wisdom orientation of the psalm².

Bennet, in his article “Wisdom Motifs in Psalm 14=53,” focuses his attention on the concept of “fool” (נָבֵל, v. 1) and “counsel” (עֲצָה, v. 6). Agreeing generally with Bennet, I would add the concept of wise (מְשֻׁבֵּל, v. 2) as an important wisdom motif in Psalm 14.

Thirdly, Psalm 14 - as some scholars think - belongs to the collection of Psalms from Psalm 8 to Psalm 14. Some scholars call this group of psalms “a little anthropology of the Book of Psalms”. If we take into consideration that Psalm 8 is full of admiration for God (“O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name throughout the earth”, Psa 8:2) and for the human being who is “a little lower than God” (Psa 8:5), and if we notice that in Psalm 14 a human being has no admiration for God and he is called “fool” (Psa 14:1), we can suppose that there is some logic in the relationship between God and human beings. The quality of human beings depends on their relationship with God.

Lastly, Psalm 14 is nearly the same as Psalm 53 and this is only one example of the two identical psalms in the Psalter. Despite the difficulties concerning the origin of these

² “Wisdom Motifs in Psalm 14=53”, *BASOR* 220 (1975) 20.

poems and the small differences between them, it is striking that the composer of the Psalter left both versions of the same poem. Were the poems so important to him/to them? It probably was.

For this lecture's purpose, please note that when I say "Psalm 14", I am just making my speech simpler. When I say Psalm 14, I am speaking about both identical psalms.

Let us recapitulate:

Our first question was: "Why Psalm 14?"

Our first answer is: Because Psalm 14 speaks clearly about the rejection of God, contains wisdom motifs, forms, with other psalms, a group of psalms about human beings, and was so important to the final redactor of the Book of Psalms that it has two versions in the Psalter.

2. The second question: "Why is a fool atheist?"

"A fool says in his heart: There is no God" (Psa 14:1), but he doesn't say what his motivation is for this statement.

First of all, we have to eliminate the idea that there is no reason for his statement. The expression "to say in heart" in Hebrew means not only "to think" but also "to deliberate or to reflect". The statement of the fool wasn't a mindless slogan but the fruit of reflection³. Taking this into consideration, we propose at least three ways to find out the reasons for such strong rejection of God.

First, a fool is an atheist because of his unpunished crime. A fool saw people committing several crimes without being punished. If God existed, he would not allow evil to exist. Similar logic can be found in Psalm 10, when the Psalmist is asking God:

Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, "You will not call us to account"? (Psa 10:13).

Second, a fool is atheist because of the corruption of the fools. The fools see that God doesn't punish them for their sins, so they continue to walk on the way of evil. After the statement "there is no God", the Psalmist speaks about the description of their conduct:

"They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. (Psa 14:1)".

Both the first and the second explanation suit the *Targum of Psalms* that paraphrases our passage: "There is no *rule of God on the earth*".

³ Cf. L.C. FILLION, *Le livre des Psaumes*, 48; D. SCHNEIDER, *Das Buch der Psalmen*, I, 108.

Third, a fool is atheist because of wrong theology. Why does the fool reject God? Because he has the wrong idea about God. The theology preceded the atheism. What theology such atheism. The fool saw the incompatibility of the notion of God and reality. If he didn't know God as the Supreme Judge, he would not reject him on grounds that God does not punish the evil. If he didn't know that God takes care of the poor, he would not reject him seeing the poor devoured by the enemies. (por. Psa 14,4). It's really interesting that the fool sees the incompatibility of the notion of God and reality and doesn't reject the way of thinking about God. Instead, the fool prefers to reject God than to change his theology.

Using the word "atheist," I don't want to debate about theoretical and practical atheism according to the modern definition because in the ancient world, there was no such distinction. I try to base this on the Greek etymology of the word. In the Greek word *a-theos* the first letter is so called "privative a" or "privative alpha" and expresses negation or absence, hence "atheist" is somebody who negates God, somebody for whom God is absent.

Let us recapitulate:

Our second question was: "Why is a fool atheist?"

Our second answer is: Because in the test of theology, he prefers to reject the God he knows, than to search for the unknown God.

3. The third question: "Why is an atheist a fool?"

Let us follow the logic of the two initial verses. First we receive the piece of information about the conduct of the fools. They think there is no God; they are corrupt and they do abominable deeds. Then we read about God's reaction:

The Lord looked down from heaven at the children of Adam to see if a single one is wise, a single one seeks God. (Psa 14,2)

We translate "looked down" when the text in Hebrew says הִשְׁקִיף. The verb שָׁקַף occurs 23 times in TM and means "look down" or "look out". In many cases, this verb describes when people look out of the window. Some examples:

When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelek king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. (Gen 26,8)

Michal daughter of Saul was watching from the window and when she saw King David leaping and whirling round before Yahweh, the sight of him filled her with contempt. (2Sa 6,16)

Jehu looked up to the window and said, 'Who is on my side? Who?' And two or three officials looked down at him. (2Ki 9,32)

The verb *רָקַע* is used in Psalm 14 in qatal in first position. What does it mean? It suggests that God has changed his position from not looking out of the window of heaven to looking out of that same window, as though looking down on mankind. If he wasn't looking down, he was invisible to mankind. If God looks down, it means it was a time he wasn't looking down that the fool looked. When the fool looked up to heaven, he didn't see God and he said: "there is no God".

Is this logic correct? Let us read the whole verse:

God looks down on mankind to see if a single one is wise, a single one seeks God. (Psa 14,2).

Who is wise? Wise is the one who seeks God. Wise is not the one who says: "there is God" but the one who seeks him. Why? Because to say "there is God" in the time of his absence is not wisdom. God is not looking in the time of troubles for the one who would repeat "God exists! God exists!" God is looking for a wise man who would know that if God is absent, God must be sought and not denied.

The idea of God's absence in the Bible is quite common. Let's read two verses from Psalm 13:

How long, Yahweh, will you forget me? For ever? How long will you turn away your face from me? Look down, answer me, Yahweh my God! Give light to my eyes or I shall fall into the sleep of death. (Psa 13:1.3)

Taking in consideration all these details, we can say that the foolishness of the man in Ps 14 doesn't lie in saying "there is no God" but in not seeking God.

Maybe we can understand this logic better if we think about playing hide-and-seek, in which a number of players conceal themselves in an environment, to be found by one or more seekers. The rule of the seeker is to count to a number that was designated before the game's start and to begin searching for the players who have hidden. Can you imagine a seeker who instead of searching for players, starts crying and saying: "There is nobody here... I am alone.... Why have you left me alone?"

Even though the life we live is not a game, God is asking us to play a sort of hide and seek game with him and find him hiding under the troubles of our life. To be more precise, God is not playing with us, he is just asking for cooperation. Hidden, he wants to motivate and encourage the permanent development of human being.

In the Book of Amos we read:

Thus said the LORD to the House of Israel: Seek Me, and you will live. (Amo 5:4)

Or in the Book of Isaiah:

“Seek the LORD while He can be found, Call to Him while He is near. (Isa 55:6)”

Why is an atheist a fool?

Of course, the atheist of Psalm 14 doesn't think himself to be a fool, but the perspective of the Psalmist is striking.

The fool denies God who is present 7 times in the Psalm 14: God is in heaven (v. 2), God can be south (v. 2) and invoked (v. 4), God is present in the company of the righteous (v. 5), God is the refuge of the poor (v. 6) and God restores his people (v. 7).

The fool expresses his opinion only from the perspective of his heart. God's view extends from heaven to earth.

The fool rejects God as judge and ruler. In v. 5 God begins the punishment of the wicked. In v. 7 the deliverance of Israel is only a matter of time and there is only one Savior - Lord.

Let us recapitulate:

Our third question was: “Why is an atheist a fool?”

Our third answer is: Because he says “there is no God” about God who is present seven times in Psalm 14. Because he doesn't seek who can be found. Because he narrows his perspective only to the present time and only to his heart.

4. The fourth question: “Why does Psalm 14 link wisdom with faith?”

The connection between wisdom and faith and foolishness and atheism in Psalm 14 is quite remarkable. The fool who rejects God is presented as the opposite of the wise man who seeks God. The atheists are corrupt to a degree that “there is no one who does good” (Psa 14,1). This behavior is the opposite of God who is “good and upright” (Psa 25,8)⁴. In v. 4, where we find the central question of the psalm, the lack of knowledge is related to the lack of prayer. In the last verse of the psalm, where everyone hopes for God's sovereignty, there is no place for the wicked.

The connection between wisdom and faith is found throughout the Bible and is widely recognized. The most famous passage comes from the book of Wisdom:

Foolish by nature were all who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing the one who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan; (Wis 13,1)

⁴ Cf. Gen 1:31; 1Sam 3:18; 25:30; 2Sam 10:12; 1Re 8:66; Sal 106:1; 119:65).

If we ask “Why does Psalm 14 and the Bible connect wisdom with faith?,” we give away our ignorance of the Scriptures and the strong affiliation to modern thinking. The modern statement “you can be wise and you do not believe” or even “atheists are more intelligent than believers” is unthinkable in the Bible where the genuinely wise unbeliever is not to be found. Why? Because it is God who endows with intelligence and knowledge (cf. Ex 31:3; 1 Ki 5:9), “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD” (Psa 111,10), God “is both guide to wisdom and director of sages” (Wis 7,15), he teaches the wisdom (cf. Psa 51:6), and “his wisdom is beyond reckoning” (Psa 147,5).

Let us recapitulate:

Our fourth question was: “Why does the Psalm 14 link wisdom with faith?”

Our fourth answer is: Since God is wisdom; whoever rejects him cannot be wise.

5. The last question: “Can we or must we call the modern atheists fools?”

In the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* we read:

“Catholic exegetes must never forget that what they are interpreting is the word of God. Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today”.

We find this quotation also in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*. Let me repeat the last sentence:

“They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today”.

Taking this into consideration, we can ask the following questions: Is Psalm 14, with its statement about foolishness and unbelievers, still relevant today? Can the Pope, during the *Angelus*, say to the modern atheists: ‘you are a fool’? Can we say or must we say the same to friends who don’t believe in God?

Trying to answer these questions, we have to keep in mind the following premises:

1) Some biblical statements have only historical and literary relevance. The History of the Church discusses a lot of issues which were really discussed in the past as evolution or the mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. What was quite certain 100 years ago, today is no longer. I think the Psalm 14 is still relevant in discussion with modern atheism.

2) We need to define at least three terms we use.

The first is the meaning of the word “atheist”. The atheists in Psalms 14 are the people who don’t seek God in the time God seems to be hidden. They are the people who destroy others convinced that there is no justice on the earth.

The second term is foolishness. In Psalm 14, “a fool” is a human being who does not use all his abilities. The fool could seek and invoke God, but he prefers rejection of God instead of searching for him. To put it simply, the fool in Psalm 14 is one who says: “there is no bread in the city” without looking for it.

The third term is God. What do we mean when we say “God”? Are we sure that saying “God, Dio, Dieux, Gott, Isten, Bóg” we speak about the same reality?

Taking this into consideration, we realize that there are many real atheists in the church and there are many real seekers among the modern atheists. Or, using the term of Psalm 14, there are a lot of fools among so called believers and a lot of wise men among those who reject God. It’s possible the people who say “we don’t believe in God” reject not God, but the notion of God which has nothing to do with God alone. Maybe the people who say “There is no God” make a bigger step towards God than the people who say even in public “I believe in God”.

Let us recapitulate:

Our last question was: “Can we or must we call the modern atheists fools?”

Our last answer is: “It depends”.

Conclusion

To conclude, I’d only like to emphasize that Psalm 14 is still God’s word for today. It is God’s word especially for the people who reject the logic of the unceasing search of the truth. In light of Jesus’ words “search, and you will find” (Mat 7:7) any kind of stagnation is a foolishness.