

SUMMARY

In 2010, at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem, I defended my doctoral dissertation entitled “The foolish atheist. Study of Psalms 14 & 53”. This book is a version of my thesis with some minor modifications.

The arguments that led me to choose these two psalms as the subject of my study are presented in the introduction. The fact that nobody has written a monograph of Psalm 14 and 53, the interest in issues of denial of God, and in a negative aspect of anthropology - both present in these poems - were the key points to pursue this kind of research.

There are two main actions (perspectives) related to each text: 1) the text speaks, wants to send some message, and 2) the text is spoken, the people want to say something about what is written. These two perspectives have become the basis of two chapters of my thesis: "The text speaks" (Chapter II) and "The text is spoken" (Chapter III). However, at the beginning we have to determine which text is meant when we say “Psalm 14” and “Psalm 53”. Thus was born the first chapter: “The existing text”.

The first chapter of the thesis was intended to examine the different versions of Ps 14 and 53, not for determining the ideal text, as it usually proceeds in *critica textus*. Rather we tried to see a relatively broad view of the texts in the original Hebrew and in the different translations to discover changes among the versions called “The fool says in his heart”. Moreover, analyzing the various texts, including the modern translations, I wanted to enhance the status of some versions that were or are very common, on which theology and spirituality of the readers has grown. The approach to a biblical text presented in the first chapter of the thesis was called textual situation (*status textus*), to distinguish it from traditional textual criticism (*critica textus*).

First, Hebrew manuscripts were analyzed (§ 1.1.1), starting from the oldest MS of Psa 53 (second century BC) until the last, born after the invention of printing. The study of nearly 500 Hebrew MSS has revealed that generally the text was transmitted faithfully. But on the other hand, it showed the presence of some variations due to scribal errors or conscious interventions. The fact that the most significant variations relate to the inscription of the Psalms, and to passages in which the two Psalms differ among themselves, has led to the hypothesis that the variations are late.

The analysis of the Hebrew text found in printed editions (§ 1.1.2) has allowed me to notice that the majority of variants passed down through the MSS is no longer present in print editions. In the last two centuries, the printed text of Ps 14 and 53 has practically remained the same, with only one exception (הַבְּשִׁטָּה or הַבְּיִשְׁתָּה in Psa 53:6).

The examination of the text provided by the ancient versions (§ 1.2) revealed that the Greek, Latin, Syrian, Ethiopic, and Arabic translations attest to the diversity of readings of the text of Psalm 14 and 53, greater than that seen in the Hebrew texts. There are some significant variations (possibly due to the tendency to explain the Hebrew text), but primarily evident is the presence of long addition to Ps 14:3, seen in a majority of ancient versions and passed

down through the centuries. This raises several questions, including the most relevant: what is the biblical text?

Even looking at modern translations (§ 1.3) revealed that no one can speak only of the text of the two parallel psalms. Various studies that have wanted to reconstruct the original text (= unique and ideal) of Ps 14 and 53 (§1.4) ended in offering choices that were never accepted in the scientific world nor in the ecclesial communities.

The examination of the textual situation of Ps 14 and 53 led us to different ideas about the nature of the biblical text. We have come to the hypothesis that the biblical text can be distinguished in terms of its variability and invariability. The unchanging text (static) is the part of the biblical text that has been faithfully transmitted into both the original language and in translation. Instead, the variable text (dynamic) is the part of the text that has undergone changes. I was then offered another way of looking at the diversity of the biblical texts. One can speak of four dimensions (types) of biblical text: the original text, inherited, reconstructed, and used (§ 1.5.2).

The overall outcome of the research on the issues of the text of Psalm 14 and 53 is clear. The text of Psalm 14 and 53 is not only the text printed in BHS or read in the most common translations. Psalm 14 and 53 are actually made from the variety of texts that, taken together, can be called “the existing text,” the text we have inherited and can hold in hand from the first known manuscript to the modern translations. Even if we leave aside the variations due to scribal errors, both in the original language and in translations, we would still have several readings, which simply cannot be ignored. Since this has never existed in history, and to this day there is no one version of Psalm 14 and 53, it is better to accept the diversity of texts, rather than proposing new conjectures or to set aside readings that were considered biblical and sacred along the centuries. This diversity should also be present in the critical editions of Psalm 14 and 53, and some suggestions, at least for the edition of the Hebrew text, have been proposed in § 1.5.3.

Chapter II, the largest and most important of the thesis, aimed to answer the question: what does the text of Psalm 14 and 53 say? Given the complexity of the textual problem of the two psalms, we had to choose between two possible paths: to examine in detail the various texts of the two parallel psalms or to choose one text, called the basic text for the exegetical study. The second approach was chosen and the arguments for this have been already presented at the end of Chapter I.

The complexity exists not only at the level of the variety of the texts. Even if we choose a basic text for the study, it is observed that each text not only speaks, but does so in different ways. In order to study more broadly what Psalm 14 and 53 say, we have chosen various exegetical operations, divided into six groups: grammatical analysis (§ 2.1), structural, (§ 2.2), semantic (§ 2.3), literary context (§ 2.4), *Sitz im Leben* (§ 2.5) and literary genre (§2.6).

The results of the six major operations in chapter II of the thesis are different. In the field of grammatical analysis, the examination of the lexicon showed *inter alia* that the Psalm 53, using several different verb forms and pronominal suffixes, creates the impression of being more dynamic than Psalm 14. It was also noted in both psalms (but especially in

Psalm 53) that the use of words אֱלֹהִים and אֵין is much more frequent than the average for the rest of the Psalter. It could be lexical-statistical evidence that in the two psalms there is much talk of God and of non-existence.

Morphological analysis (§2.1.2) has revealed that only two cases may present some ambiguity: הַנֶּגֶד and הַבְּשִׁתָּה (Psa 53:6).

The examination of accents (§2.1.3) has shown some phenomena related to the work of the Masoretes. It was explained that the emphasis in the word דִּרְשׁ (Psa 14:2) is not a Geresh – a prose accent - but rather a defective form of writing Rebia Mugrash. It also explained the irregular use of Mahpak in פְּעִלֵי אֵין (Psa 53:5). Also observed was irregularity in the position of Silluq in יִשְׂרָאֵל: (Psa 14:7). Put on the penultimate syllable, it is probably a scribal error in the code B19A. In Psa 53:7, this occurs in the regular form: יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The syntactic analysis (§2.1.4) focused on the division of the text into sentences, the examination of some constructions and syntactical problems, and ending with the examination of the verbs used in Psalm 14 and 53. On the one hand, it is concluded that the constructions used in the psalms are common; on the other hand, we have noticed some problems and ambiguities of syntactic constructions. For example, it is possible to see in Psa 14:1 (= Psa 53:2) two different negative protagonists, three possibilities of where to place the question mark in Psa 14:4 (= 53:5), and a possible new interpretation of אֱלֹהִים בְּדוֹר צְדִיק ("God is right in the generation", Psa 14:5). Moreover, the study of verbal forms (§2.1.4.4) has allowed us to distinguish two time axes found in Psalm 14 and 53: the axis of the past (Psa 14:1-6, 53:1-6) and the axis of the future (Psa 14:7; 53:7). Consequently, the verb forms are sometimes translated differently from common translations (eg. “confondevate il piano del povero” in Psa 14:6).

The analysis of the structure of Psalm 14 and 53 (§2.2) showed the difficulty of finding a clear structure shared by the majority of the authors. An even more radical conclusion was expressed in relation to the meter of the poem. Nonetheless, a tripartite division of these psalms was proposed (Psa 14,1-3.4-6.7; 53,2-4.5-6.7). At the end of this part of the thesis (§2.2.2) we have analyzed figures of speech. The analysis has revealed many stylistic figures: alliteration, assonance, climax, repetition, ellipses, ballast variant, asyndeton, figura etymologica, word-pairs, keywords, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, hendiadys, allusion, irony, and rhetorical question.

The semantic analysis (§2.3) not only occupied the largest space of the thesis, but first discussed the various semantic problems. Among many details, it was noticed that in Psalm 14 and 53 the foolishness of the atheist does not consist in thinking “There is no God,” but in the absence of the search for God. Highlighted was the close connection between the lack of search for God and the corruption of men, and between the rejection of God and the rejection of the others: "a-theists" in Ps 14 and 53 are presented as “anti-men”. The denial of God is presented as a phenomenon that leads to the negation of others and of themselves. The investigations conducted in the field of semantic analysis unfortunately did not allow us to decipher what kinds of enemies are present in the two psalms. Rather, it shows that Ps 14 and 53 have been composed in such a way that both the general interpretation and that concerning some details are open to a plurality of meanings.

The next two stages in the research have been devoted to the analysis of the context: the literary and historical. The analysis of Psalm 14 and 53 in the context of the Book of Psalms (§2.4) does not allow to put forward the hypothesis that the place they occupied in the Psalter is special. On the one hand, the textual differences between Psalm 14 and 53 cannot be linked to the context in which the two psalms were placed; on the other hand, the common vocabulary of Psalm 14 and 53 is not characteristic of any part of the Psalter. However, we can say: if the text of Psalm 14 and 53 were revised for editorial reasons, the reworking has involved only the title and the use of divine names and was especially reworked in Psalm 53. It was also noted that Psalm 14 seems to be more integrated in its context than Psalm 53. Moreover, the canonical reading, especially reading the two psalms in the immediate context, has uncovered some new dimensions of interpretation.

The search for the *Sitz im Leben* (§2.5), the possible place of origin of the scenario in Psalms 14 and 53, has shown a variety of possible interpretations together with some arguments. Despite the breadth of the period of time when two psalms could be written (VIII-V century BC), and despite the impossibility of establishing an unique historical context for the origin of one or both psalms, it was suggested that the social crisis at the time of Micah as the primitive *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 14, while the invasion of the Assyrians as a *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 53. Whether the two have been written immediately after these events, or later, it is impossible to decide. The only thing certain is that both the psalms have the same starting point: the situation of the people is still difficult, therefore the salvation from God is expected. Also, the fact that the two parallel psalms were inserted in two different collections (I and II Davidic collection) has been explained in two ways: a) the editor of the Psalter, knowing the traditions of both psalms, wanted to put Psalm 14 and 53 in different collections as not to exclude either of them and to make them a bridge between the different collections or b) the present location of the two psalms in the Psalter is due to their previous presence in various collections. Psalm 14 was better known in the environment where the first Davidic collection was written, while Psalm 53 was known in the environment that gave rise to the Psalter *eloistico*. Despite the uncertainties, it has been viewed that Psalm 53 is a modification of Psalm 14 and not the opposite.

At the end of Chapter II, we propose some observations about the literary genre of Ps 14 and 53. In both cases, we have seen in the text a kind of lament that depicts the world contrary to God in a wise and prophetic way.

After analyzing the different aspects of the text speaks, the examination proposed in chapter III was to find out what has been said about Psalms 14 and 53. The search was limited to the question: what is the reception history of the text of Psalm 14 and 53?

First, the use of Ps 14 in Rom 3:10-12 (§ 3.1) has been studied - the only mention of the two psalms in the NT. The use of Psalm 14 in the context of the discussion of general corruption of humanity was seen as one of the possible interpretations of the poem, even plausible in the psalm.

Then, various commentaries have been examined about Psalm 14 and 53 both from Jewish tradition (the Targum, the Midrash, Rashi, Kimchi, Hirsch et al.) and from Christian tradition (Eusebius, Hilary of Poitiers, Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Augustine of Hippo, Theodoret of Cyrus, Cassiodoro et al.). The different readings of Ps 14 and 53, proposed by both the Jewish tradition (§ 3.2.1) and the ancient Christians (§3.2.2)

despite being limited to antiquity and the Middle Ages, confirm the results of previous exegetical operations: the text of two psalms leaves the door open to various interpretations, and therefore the plurality of exegetical readings is not surprising. The practical application of the text of the Psalms made by some interpreters - those ancient and medieval in particular - shows that Psalm 14 and 53 worked as a model for understanding the past, but perhaps even more for understanding the present and the future. The only difference between the Christian and Jewish commentators is that Christians have often interpreted the Psalm in a Christological way: it is Christ who will bring salvation to come in the two psalms. However, it is also significant that some Christian writers have at times seen in the Jews the enemies described in Ps 14 and 53, while the Jewish tradition does not directly mention the Christians as their oppressors.

Despite the objective of the study and the different exegetical operations undertaken, it is observed that in the work some areas were left out that could complete the research on Ps 14 and 53:

a) only 2 of the Cairo Geniza of Mss has been examined. It is true that only 2 have been published but it would be better to do a survey of unpublished texts. Nearly 50 of the MSS Geniza of Cairo are available at The Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem. The introductory survey did not bring revelations of great value. Few variants affect the consonants and the majority of them are simple cases of *scriptio plena* / *scriptio defectiva*. However, the examination of vowels, especially those of traditional masoretica Babylonian and Palestinian, could provide some interesting data.

b) the issue of denial of God was not considered in the extra-biblical literature contemporary to these two psalms. The same concerns other issues present in Ps 14 and 53.

c) the field of *Wirkungsgeschichte* has not studied the use of Ps 14 and 53 in other disciplines such as philosophy, modern literature, music, anti-religious polemics, collections of proverbs, discussions on various internet forum etc.

d) the possibility of using Psalm 14 and 53 in contemporary theological discussion about atheism has not been examined. This analysis should be entitled: "The text we can speak". It is a fundamental question: in what sense, and to what extent, can we use the text of Psalm 14 and 53 in the discussion with non-believers and with the oppressors.

"The foolish atheist. Study of Psalms 14 and 53" is work neither complete nor perfect. However I hope that despite all the failures, conscious and unconscious, it allows us to perceive the multidimensional richness of the biblical text.