An Intertextual Discourse on Sin and Salvation: John Donne's Sermon on Psalm 51

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Summary: *John Donne as preacher invokes the "Protestant paradigm of salvation," stressing the marring of human nature by Original Sin and the dependence upon God's grace for spiritual reatoration. This paradigm informs his participation in the intertextual discourse on sin and salvation begun by the biblical narrative of David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 11 and 12), and continued by exegetical texts. Donne's sermon on Psalm 51 reveals how he translates the biblical narrative on adultery and murder into an exhortation on the blinded state of the post-Fall Christian.*

John Donne — poet, religious polemicist and minister — was one of the most popular and influential preachers of his time (1572-1631).¹ As an Anglican preacher, he was preoccupied with a concept of sin and salvation which, as Barbara Kiefer Lewalski argues, was "firmly Protestant."² He thus particularly stressed the marring of human nature by Original Sin and the dependence upon God's grace for spiritual restoration, in what Lewalski terms the "Protestant paradigm of salvation." Within this context of sin and salvation, no biblical narrative is more inviting of attention than the story of David's adulterous liaison with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah (II Samuel 11 and 12). Both Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions depict David as a model for penitents, even expressly led by God into sin for that purpose.³ Donne himself perceives David as one of those men of a "middle nature" (in the preacher's own words), described by Jeanne Shami as "men who are fallen but are capable of regeneration, who are not perfect but not utterly degenerate."⁴ It is this distinction that transforms David's fate into a realization for Donne

and his Anglican audience of "the promise of a Christ applicable to all Christians souls."⁵

Donne's response to this biblical narrative, as registered in many of his sermons, is particularly evident in the only one he preached on Penitential Psalm 51,⁶ published as No. 15 in Vol. V of *The Sermons*.⁷ This psalm is significant because it alone (among the entire 150) is distinguished in the biblical text by a direct link to the story of David and Bathsheba. It is presented in a prefatory title as "A Psalme of David, when the Prophet Nathan came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."⁸ Psalm 51 not only underlined the canonical integrity of the Bible to which Donne subscribed,⁹ but also illustrated for the Protestants the "emotional states attendant upon conversion" from sinfulness to righteousness.¹⁰ Reading Donne's sermon as a response to the multi-textual narrative of David and Bathsheba — and with reference to Jewish and Christian exegetical texts¹¹ — can therefore illuminate the unique way in which the preacher participates in this intertextual discourse on sin and salvation, translating its lesson of adultery and murder into an exhortation on the blinded state of the post-Fall Christian.

Of primary interest for the present discussion is the type of addressee or reader encoded both in the story of David and Bathsheba and in Psalm 51, as part of an interlocking set of linguistic, rhetorical and poetic structures.¹² In particular, attention will be drawn to the biblical text's strategies of narrative and semantic gaps, as well as its evocation and use of dialogue. Such an interest is in fact invited by the concentration on addressee necessitated by the hortatory demands of the sermonic genre. These demands primarily fulfill in Donne's sermon what Stanley Fish has distinguished as a dialectical — in contrast to a rhetorical — function. In other words, this sermon on Psalm 51 does not, in Fish's formulation, seek to satisfy "the needs of its readers" but rather "requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by."¹³ Donne's sermon on Psalm 51 therefore raises a variety of fascinating questions, most prominently those about the moral issues called forth in an intertextual discourse on sin and salvation but also — and indeed for the literary critic just as prominently — about the use and transformation of biblical poetics.

The story of David's sin in II Samuel 11, to which Donne refers in his sermon, can be summarized briefly.¹⁴ It opens with David's voyeuristic sighting of Bathsheba at her bath. Sending for her, he then, in the words of the Bible, "lay with her . . . And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I *am* with child." What follows is a series of attempts by the King to

send Uriah — the frontline soldier and betrayed husband — home to lie with his wife. All such attempts fail, because of Uriah's insistence on maintaining military discipline and solidarity even behind the front lines. With no cover for Bathsheba's pregnancy, David sends a message to his commander Joab, saying "Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die." Upon receiving notice of Uriah's death in battle, Bathsheba, "mourned for her husband. And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

A passage from another of Donne's sermons will serve to present his method of biblical interpretation, as well as his perception of David's sin, and thus prepare the way for a more detailed discussion of Sermon No. 15:¹⁵

First, then, all these things [iniquities] are *literally* spoken of *David*; By *application*, of us; and by *figure*, of Christ. *Historically*, *David*; *morally*, we; *Typically*, Christ is the subject of this text. In *David's* person, we shal insist no longer upon them but onely to look upon the generall parts, the *multiplicity* of his sinne, and the *weight* and *greatnesse* thereof: And that onely in the *matter of Uriah* as the *Holy Ghost*, (without reproching the *adultery* or the murder, after *David's* repentance) vouchsafes to mollifie his manifold, and his hainous sinne. First, he did wrong to a loyall and faithfull servant; and who can hope to be well served, that does so? He corrupted that woman, who for ought appearing to the contrary, had otherwise preserved her honour, and Conscience entire . . . Him [*Uriah*] *David* betrays in his letter to *Joab*; Him *David* makes the instrument of his own death, by carrying those letters, the warrants of his own execution; And he makes *Joab*, a man of honour, his instrument for a murder to cover an adultery. Thus many sinnes, and these heavy degrees of sin, were in this one. . .

In the first lines of the passage Donne establishes the perimeters of his textual interpretation. As Anglican ecclesiastic he employed a threefold method of biblical exegesis that developed the literal meaning of the text into discourses of tropological (moral) and anagogical (spiritual) significance.¹⁶ Establishing the literal meaning involves, as William R. Mueller explains,¹⁷ a recapitulation of the biblical passage, placing it in its historical context; in this instance a series of iniquities are attributed to a historical King David. Donne's use of tropological interpretation then establishes a similitude between David and the Anglican worshippers, as when he reiterates later on in the sermon that "first then, personally in himselfe, prophetically in us, *David* laments our state, *quia peccata*, because we are under sin" (p. 101, II.220-222). Donne then

discusses the moral lesson by exhorting against an amplification of sin through incitement, warning that “our sins are our *own*; and we have a covetousnesse of more; a way, to make other mens sins ours too, by drawing them to a fellowship in our sins” (p. 101, II.242-244). In David’s case, such a confessing of sins must involve more than adultery and murder. In the present passage Donne offers a unique insight into the nature of David’s “manifold, and his hainous sinne.” The obvious acts of adultery and murder entangle David in other, less obvious sins; to the betrayal of Uriah and the onus of Bathsheba’s corruption, Donne also ingeniously adds the securing of Uriah and Joab as accomplices to murder. In this way, David is indeed “drawing them to a fellowship in our sin.”

Finally, Donne’s use of anagogical interpretation proclaims the spiritual significance of the story by relating its moral lesson to Christ, explaining further on that “if I say my sins are mine own, they are none of mine, but, by that confessing and appropriating of those sins to my selfe, they are made the sins of him, who hath suffered enough for all, my blessed Lord and Saviour, *Christ Jesus*” (p. 102, II.260-263). So in II Samuel 12:13 David confesses to the Prophet Nathan that “I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.” Rather than appropriating others’ sins to oneself, the individual — like David — must appropriate and confess his own; and like David he can be brought to repentance, as a marginal note in the Geneva Bible explains, by “the loving mercie of God, which suffreth not his to perish.”¹⁸

Such a development from sin to salvation is effectively traced out in the move from biblical story to psalm. For David’s sins in II Samuel 11 and his repentance in II Samuel 12 canonically provide the circumstance for his penitential address to God for salvation in Psalm 51:7, quoted throughout Donne’s Sermon No. 15: “Purge me with hyssope, and I shall be cleane; wash me, and I shall be whiter then snow.”¹⁹ Indeed, Donne indicates such a direction in the *divisio* of Sermon No.15, when he writes of the psalmic verse (p. 297, II. 47-51): “In the words we shall consider the Person, and the Action, who petitions, and what he asks. Both are twofold; for, the persons are two, the Physitian and the Patient, God and *David*, *Do thou purge me*, *do thou wash me*, and the Action is twofold, *Purgabis*, doe thou *purge* me, and *Lavabis*, doe thou *wash* me.” Presenting God and David as participants in a dialogue, Donne casts David as an afflicted sinner whose only “medecine” is God’s grace. In doing so, the preacher evokes the prominent Christian metaphor of sin as sickness,²⁰ further expanding the means of salvation into a twofold process in which

resides the power to effectively wipe out all traces of sin. Justifiably then, the present discussion of Donne's Sermon No. 15 will begin with Donne's response to sin (presented in Part 1 of his sermon), and will then proceed to his discussion of Christian salvation (begun in Part 1, then continued in Part 2 and the *conclusio*).²¹

Donne's primary concern in his response to the biblical story of David's sin is with the individual's blindness to one's own sinful acts. This is quite different from the traditional Jewish exegetical response summarized and developed by Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg. Employing a concept of narrative poetics that conceives of the biblical text as being a "system of gaps that must be filled in by the reader,"²² they take particular note of the suppression of narrative and semantic essentials in II Samuel 11: in the case of the former, for example, the things that Uriah and David know about each other's actions and motives; in the case of the latter, the predominant presentation of the chain of events in a neutral manner, without comment or evaluation. In this way the reader's participation in the reconstruction of events is invoked. Invoked as well is his reconstruction of the story's moral meaning, brought out explicitly in the concluding verse: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." Thus in Perry and Sternberg's reading, the interlocking of this final condemnation with the systems of narrative and semantic gaps serves to involve the reader in a powerful exposition of David's sin of adultery and murder.

Donne's own response to this story can be profitably studied by focusing on the gap relating to Bathsheba's culpability. This is particularly the result of the problematic phrasing of II Samuel 11:2: "And one evening it came to pass that David arose from his bed and walked upon the roof of the King's house and saw a woman bathing from above the roof; and the woman was very good-looking."²³ The reader of this Hebrew text is encoded in this passage by the use of two specific linguistic structures: the repetition of the word "roof" (in the Hebrew "al hagag" — "me'al hagag"), and the imprecise syntactical reference of the phrase "from above the roof" (in the Hebrew "me'al hagag"; whose roof — that of David or of Bathsheba?). In other words, the reader's attention will be drawn to these structures both because of the emphasis created by word repetition and because of the semantic ambiguity created by the problematic reference. Attending to these structures creates a gap regarding Bathsheba: is she bathing on the roof? Is she knowingly exposing herself? Is she attempting to seduce the King? This encoded reader includes traditional Rabbinical as well as modern Jewish commentators, who have long debated about this very

passage, alternately placing Bathsheba on the roof or removing her, alternately condemning or absolving her of seduction.²⁴

How is this major issue of Bathsheba's culpability reflected in Donne's sermon? Like the Jewish exegete David Kimhi,²⁵ the translators of the Authorized Version remove her from the roof.²⁶ Following these exegetical and biblical texts — and arguing against the Latin Vulgate — Donne absolves Bathsheba of temptation to deliberate sin. Yet he then goes on to say (p. 303, II.257-267):

And this may well have been *Bathsheba's* fault, That though she did not bathe with a purpose to be seene, yet she did not enough to provide against the infirmity of others. It had therefore been well if *David* had risen earlier, to attend the affaires of the State; And it had been well, if *Bathsheba* had bathed within doores, and with more caution; but yet these errors alone, we should not be apt to condemne in such persons, except by God's permitting greater sins to follow upon these, we were taught, that even such things, as seeme to us in their nature to be indifferent, have degrees of naturall and essentiall ill in them, which must be avoyded, even in the probability, nay even in the possibility that they may produce sin.

In this passage Donne does not let his audience off lightly, either syntactically or morally. Each of the two sentences is constructed of strings of dependent clauses that lead somewhat tortuously to its main purport: Bathsheba's laxness regarding the "infirmity of others" in the first, and the necessity of avoiding "natural and essentiall ill" in the second. What is more, Donne's conception of sin ultimately overturns his previous exoneration of Bathsheba, making her a partner with David in adultery. Thus while the opening dependent clause of the first sentence ostensibly defends her, the concluding main clause blames her. In a similar fashion, the two opening clauses of the second sentence suggest mild infractions of duty and convention, while the convoluted second part works its way towards the primary moral lesson. Transcending the more fundamental Jewish discussion that focuses on Bathsheba's culpability — and thus ultimately on the gravity of David's sin — Donne's moral lesson is rather about the danger of sin brought on by a seemingly harmless act. Donne's argument thus shifts the emphasis from the degree of sin to its very etiology.

This argument, moving as it does from historical to tropological interpretation — and thus from the biblical to the general situation — evokes the specter of sin for both himself and his Anglican audience, that very audience who, as Gale Carrithers observes, had been prepared by the preceding liturgy as a congregation of "unified Christian brothers, sinners, but confessing,

penitent, and reverent."²⁷ This passage can be seen, therefore, to fulfill Fish's dialectical function for such an audience in two ways: more obviously it turns them away from an easy justification of Bathsheba's (and David's) actions; on a more subtle level, it requires of them an ever-vigilant scrutiny of their own deeds.

Yet post-Fall human beings can actually be considered incapable of such vigilance, marked as they are in Protestant theology by a depravity of natural faculties, evidenced in the blinding of intellect and the bondage of will.²⁸ In consequence, as Lewalski remarks, "there can be no question. . . of a man's preparing himself through moral virtue for the reception of grace, or of performing works good and meritorious in themselves; everything that he does of himself is necessarily evil and corrupt." Within this context, Donne's remark that "such things *seeme* [my emphasis] to us in their nature to be indifferent" can be understood to signal a paradoxical situation in which a person is so blinded by the Fall that one cannot heed the warnings to discern and avoid even the smallest of errors. The complacent audience who is first told that Bathsheba and David are guilty only of error are ultimately themselves entrapped because of blindness in a world of sin, from which not even Donne's sermon can effectively release them.

This issue of blindness is apparent in Donne's response to the Prophet Nathan's Parable of the Ewe Lamb (II Samuel 12).²⁹ This "narrative within a narrative" comprises the dramatic and emotional climax to the story of adultery and murder. It opens with a revelation to the reader of the intent of the prophet's mission to David: "And the Lord sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor." The parable continues by describing how the rich man "spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd," and took instead the poor man's one precious "ewe lamb" to feed a visitor. In response to Nathan's words, "David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this *thing* shall surely die. . . And Nathan said to David, Thou *art* the man."

Biblical scholars have discussed this narrative in terms of what Uriel Simon calls a "juridical parable," constituting "a realistic story about a violation of the law, related to someone who had committed a similar offense with the purpose of leading the unsuspecting hearer to pass judgment on himself."³⁰ This parable therefore encodes, in our terms, an audience (David) who can overcome his "own closeness to himself, enabling him to judge himself by the same yardstick that he applies to others." In other words, what

Frank Kermode calls a parable's "hermeneutic potential"³¹ is directed in this instance to David as the unwitting or "blinded" addressee. David's blindness continues (though his great anger may signal a deeper understanding and guilt), and revelation of the truth remains in the hands of God's prophet. Only after the King pronounces his judgment against the rich man does Nathan reveal in the dramatic statement "Thou art the man" (II Samuel 12:7), that this is actually an act of self-condemnation.

This issue of blindness appears in Donne's sermon in the following passage (p. 304, II.284-296):

Who can doubt, but that in this yeares space, in which *David* continued in his sin, but that he did ordinarily all the external acts of the religious Worship of God? who can doubt but that he performed all the Legall Sacrifices, and all the Ceremoniall Rites: Yea, we see, that even *Nathan* put *David's* case in another name, of a rich man that had taken away a poore mans onely sheepe, *David* was not onely just, but he was vehement in his execution of Justice; *Hee* was, saies the text, *exceeding wroth, and said, As the Lord liveth, that man shall dye;* But yet, for all this external Religion, for all this Civill justice in matter of government, no mention of any repentance in all this time. How little a thing then is it, nay how great a thing, that is, how great an aggravating of thy sin, if thou thinke to bribe God with a Sabbath, or with an almes. . .

Donne attempts first to fill the narrative gap in the biblical story. He does so by noting the passage of time and the activities that the text, in its sparse style, leaves out. Moreover, as reader Donne attends to the fact of David's anger, whose mention in the biblical text stands in contrast to the predominantly laconic, non-emotional style of narration in the preceding chapter. In contrast to the biblical narration, which moves swiftly forward to reach the dramatic and moral climax of David's condemnation, Donne chooses to focus instead on the King's hypocrisy in being a judge. For despite his sins, David has been fulfilling the functions of his office in the interim between Uriah's murder and the prophet's appearance at court. This is assumed exactly because of the masking of Nathan's condemnation as a juridical case in need of the King's judgment.

For Donne, David's blindness therefore lies in his lack of understanding of the parable's true application, and more in his inability to understand the futility of performing external acts of religious worship in the absence of true repentance. Donne once again uses a tropological interpretation of the biblical text, moving from David's compounding of his sin to the more general situation of the Anglican audience. To effect this, the preacher builds up a

dramatic tension by posing two rhetorical questions about David's religious and juridical functions, then providing the answer in the proof of David's seemingly justified anger as judge. The final sentence provides a gradual accumulation of the weight and gravity of the sin, ending with the direct address to the Anglican audience. Donne's couching of this warning in the second person raises an important point regarding the use of dialogue in his sermons. As Paul Harland has astutely remarked, "one of the chief effects upon the auditor of the frequent use of the second person, often employed in an implied dialogue, in that the form itself may act as a model of growth. The auditor realizes that the rhythmic give and take of dialogue (whether it be with humans or God) is a necessary process in an evolving relationship with God."³² In the present instance, such a use places Donne in a direct dialogic relationship with his congregation, casting him in the role of Nathan as it casts the listener in the role of the sinful King. As such, the preacher implicates this audience, along with David, in the blindness of the post-Fall Christian who seeks to "bribe God."

As a consequence of human blindness, salvation, as Donne declares in the sermon's *conclusio*, must be "wrought in the will, by conforming this will of man to the will of God, not by extinguishing the will it selfe, by any force or constraint that God imprints in it by his Grace" (p. 317, II.769-771). Nathan's parable can therefore be seen as God's initiation of a dialogue with David — as an imprinting of the very desire for Grace — in order to effect the King's repentance. Psalmic verse 51:7 would then be read canonically as David's continuation of this dialogue: "Purge me with hyssope, and I shall be cleane; wash me, and I shall be whiter then snow." In this verse the biblical language of ritual purification (healing leprosy, for instance, by sprinkling water or blood with a hyssop plant)³³ is employed to express the application for a spiritual cleansing from sin. Such an application to God can be profitably understood in terms of Harold Fisch's comment that the "Psalms are not monologues, but insistently and at all times dialogue-poems, poems of the self but of the self in the mutuality of relationship with the other."³⁴ This mutuality is expressed by the apostrophic quality of the biblical verse that constitutes God as what Jonathan Culler calls a "potentially responsive force," at the same time as it constitutes David as that "certain type of you" to whom God can indeed respond.³⁵ This is further strengthened by the couching of David's appeal to God in the imperative (carried through from Hebrew into Latin and English), that can be seen as predicated and intimacy of relationship between the human and the divine.

Donne gives expression to this dialogue in the conclusion to Part I of his sermon, in which he turns to a consideration of these “personall applications” made by David to God (p. 305, II.334-357):

For first, when we heare *David* in an anhelation and panting after the mercy of God, cry out, *Domine Tu*, Lord doe thou that that is to be done, doe Thou purge, do Thou wash, and may have heard God, (thereby to excite us to the use of his meanes) say *Purget natura, purget lex*, I have infused into thee a light and a law of nature, and exalted that light and that law, by a more particular law and a clearer light then that. . . let the light of nature, or of the law purge thee, and rectifie thy selfe by that. . . we may heare *David* reply, *Domine Tu*, Lord put me not over to the catechizing of Nature, nor to the Pedagogie of the Law, but take me into thine owne hands, do Thou, Thou, that is to be done upon me. When we heare God say *Purget Ecclesia*, I have established a Church, settled constant Ordinances, for the purging and washing of souls there; *Purget Ecclesia*, Let the Church purge thee, we may hear *David* reply. . . *Domine Tu*, Lord, except the power of thy Spirit make thine Ordinance effectuell upon me, even this thy Jordan will leave me in my leprosie, and exalt my leprosie, even this Sermon, this Sacrament will aggravate my sin.

In this passage Donne realizes the full dialogic potential of the psalm by constructing a dialogue between David and God. His use of direct discourse is enhanced not only by its twofold formulation in ecclesiastical Latin and vernacular English, but also by the constant repetition of verbs indicating speech (“cry out” / “say” / “reply”). Donne first reiterates the psalmic request for purging and washing, and then fills in the semantic gap evoked by the opening of such a dialogue. He answers the Bible’s apostrophic appeal to God with the divine injunction affording a purging that begins with the “light of nature, or of the law” and culminates with the ordinances of the Church. By doing so, the preacher as reader of the biblical text interprets the act of ritual purification analogically, appealing to God’s eternal law not as being simply inherent in man’s natural inclination to good as a rational individual, but rather as necessarily being ordered and regulated by the Church.³⁶ Such a means for salvation thus confirms David as that man of a “middle nature,” who must be called through a dialogue with God to his salvation.

Yet in the present passage, the conditional aspect of this dialogue is evidenced by the phrase “[we] may have heard God/David.” The use of the first person plural reaffirms Donne’s participation in the fate of his congregation, set out previously in the response to Bathsheba’s culpability. In this instance,

as preacher and congregation together "overhear" the dialogue between David and God, they take on a role fulfilled by the reader of Nathan's parable in II Samuel 12. For the juxtaposition of the explicit moral condemnation ending II Samuel 11 with the statement of Nathan's mission to David in II Samuel 12:1 encodes a reader who, unlike the King, attends to Nathan's words as God's message from the very beginning. This functional similarity underlines, however, a marked difference between the reader of the biblical text and the Anglican audience. It can be argued that the gap between the biblical reader's understanding and that of David creates an ironic effect; immediately recognizing that Nathan's juridical case is not what it seems, the reader judges the King's self-blinded process of jurisprudence, and finds him wanting. In possession as he is of superior knowledge, the "overhearer" of this biblical dialogue can therefore construct the story's moral meaning.

In contrast, the "overhearing" audience of Donne's constructed dialogue partakes themselves of David's blindness. The conditional aspect of Donne's sermon reminds the Anglican congregation of their post-Fall state, characterized by that depravity of natural faculties. Indeed, God's speech evokes the imagery of light that stands in contrast to the deafness and blindness of such a state — in which the dialogue between David and God may well never be heard, and in which the preacher's sermon and the Church's sacraments may have no effective power to stir repentance. Spiritual restoration can therefore only be the result of God's responsive acting upon the individual, granting (as he did to David) the Grace of the divine purging and cleaning.

Donne's deep concern with salvation can be seen in the following passage, taken from Part 2 of the sermon (pp. 313-314, II.625-658):

The purging with Hyssope, which we spoke of before, which is the benefit which we have by being bred in a true Church, delivers us from that rednesse, which is in the earth of which wee are made, from that guiltinesse, which is by our naturall derivation from our Parents imprinted in us. . . And this which is petitioned here, is a washing of such perfection, as cleanses us *Ab omni inquinamento*, from all filthinesse of flesh and spirit. . . Some Grammarians have noted, the word *Washing* here, to be derived from a word, that signifies a Lambe; we must be washed in the blood of the Lambe, and we must be brought to the whitenesse, the candor, the simplicity of the Lambe; no man is pure, that thinks no man pure but himselfe. And this whitenesse, which is Sanctification in our selves, and charitable interpretation of other men, is exalted here to that Superlative, *Super Nivem, Wash me, and I shall be whiter then Snow*.

This passage presents Donne's development of the psalmic verse's logic, evoked by the parallel structure so typical of the Bible. It has been argued that what seems in the Bible to be a rather needless repetition of syntactic and semantic correspondences exhibits instead "a semantic continuation, a progression of thought,"³⁷ whose "very reassertion is kind of strengthening and reinforcing."³⁸ Within the interwoven Jewish exegetical tradition (where exact sources are often difficult to locate), it is therefore explained that "purge me" means to "remove my sins as one removes uncleanness with this hyssop, and I will be pure of the uncleanness of sin." Furthermore, "wash me" means to "forgive me so that no trace of sin will remain and I will be whiter than snow without trace of any sin."³⁹ The distinction of these two phrases of release from sin (purification and forgiveness) can be viewed as the filling in of a semantic gap, spurred on by that seemingly needless lexical repetition.

Donne as biblical reader also responds to this gap, distinguishing a similar progression of thought. Not surprisingly, however, he employs an anagogical interpretation to Christianize the two phrases remarked upon by the Jewish exegetes. For the Protestant Donne, purification from sin is a benefit of the true Church, a deliverance from the "rednesse" and "guiltinesse" imprinted in the individual. Similarly, forgiveness entails a total removal of any trace of sin — that "filthinesse of flesh and spirit" — that becomes for Donne the Protestant stage of "sanctification" which "involves the actual but gradual repairing of the defaced image of God in the soul."⁴⁰

Such a Christianization of the Hebrew Bible is reinforced in Donne's reference to the "Grammarians" — as the Jewish exegetes were called⁴¹ — and to their connection to the words "washing" and "lamb." This somewhat vague reference to the Jewish exegetes makes necessary a return to an ultimate source, the *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, a collection of homiletic stories on biblical passages from the sixth century.⁴² The Rabbis here respond to the description of the burnt offering of "two lambs" in Numbers 28:3. They artificially create a semantic gap, feeling it necessary to explicate each biblical word in the passage. In this instance, they justify the particular choice of lambs by basing it on a phonetic similarity between the two Hebrew words for "lambs" and "clean clothes" — both of which in transliteration are "kevosim." Their resolution of this gap turns on a lexical-semantic ambiguity; extrapolating the phonetic similarity into a semantic one, the Rabbis go on to say that the lambs therefore "clean up the sins of Israel."

Donne naturally interprets the Jewish sacrificial lamb as the crucified Christ, and the act of cleansing as ablution in his blood. Indeed, this fits in quite

well with his explanation of the final act of cleansing as corresponding to the stage of Protestant sanctification. What is also significant in this passage is Donne's inclusion of himself as part of the audience of "unified Christian brothers" delineated previously, tainted by Original Sin but with the promise of salvation held out through the agency of the Church. The grammatical marking of this action, in the use of the first person plural, proclaims the preacher's participation in the fate of his audience, as he reiterates that the Church "delivers us from that rednesse" and that "we must be washed in the blood of the Lambe."

This promise of salvation closes the sermon, presented in a dialogic situation that recapitulated Donne's interpretation of Psalm 51:7 (pp. 315-316, II.700-733):

For our conclusion of this Prayer in this Psalme, we have reserved a *Gloria Patria* too, This consideration for the glory of God, that though in the first Part, the Persons, the persons were varied, God and man, yet in our second Part, where we consider the worke, the whole worke is put into God hand, and received from Gods hand. Let God be true, and every man a liar; Let God be strong and every man infirme; Let God give, and man but receive. . . To a child rightly disposes in the wombe, God does give a soul; To a naturall man rightly disposed in his naturall faculties, God does give Grace; But that soule was not due to that child, nor that grace to that man.

Donne expands on the ritual of the Anglican service, by joining its words *Gloria Patria* (Glory be to the Father)⁴³ to his interpretation of the psalmic verse. This is complemented by his use of the first person plural, which unites preacher and congregation in praise of God's "whole worke" of purification and sanctification. He then brings the ritual of praise to a rhetorical climax in the tripartite (second) sentence, by employing a structure of syntactical repetition and semantic reassertion that is strikingly reminiscent of the biblical verse's parallelism.⁴⁴ Donne uses this structure, on the one hand, to simultaneously glorify God and denigrate man. On the other hand, he establishes a "progression of thought" that expresses a causal relationship between the situation presented in the first two phrases, and that in the third. In fact, then, Donne claims that it is God's truth and strength, as well as man's falsehood and infirmity, that together necessitate the granting of divine Grace.

The nature of this Grace comprises the subject of the third sentence. Once again employing parallelism, Donne designates two phases of human spiritual development: the unborn child receiving a soul; and the "natural man," rationally inclined to good, receiving Grace. Yet with a quickening of his rhetorical rhythm, he then qualifies such development. Moving from the

relatively longer pair of parallel phrases to the final, shorter one, Donne reminds his audience of their total dependence on God for Grace and salvation. If in the first pair he has highlighted the correspondence between physical and spiritual birth, to bestow a special status on human nature, in the second he delimits the very potential of this nature. For the “progression of thought” from the first declaration of God’s act to the final conditional statement removes the responsibility for man’s fate from his own determination, and places it completely and solely within divine providence. Donne’s sermon again fulfills a dialectical function for his Anglican congregation, taxing their understanding of their own selves as it taxes their faith in God.

In such manner Donne forges his participation in the intertextual discourse on sin and salvation begun by the biblical story of David and Bathsheba, and continued by biblical and exegetical texts. These focus primarily on the severity of the sinful deeds, on the sinner’s act of self-judgment, and on salvation as an instance of dialogue between God and man. Donne gives new shape to this discourse, invoking that Protestant paradigm of salvation which stresses the irrevocable need for God’s intervention to achieve Grace. In doing so, he diverges uniquely in his reading of the David and Bathsheba story, concentrating on the dangers of sin for the unwary, on the futility of a sinner’s hypocritical observance of ritual, and on the problematic nature of salvation for the post-Fall Christian who may never be allowed to participate in a dialogue with God. Donne illuminates heretofore unnoticed recesses in the biblical text, providing new interpretations that not only revitalize the Bible but the ensuing discourse on sin and salvation as well.⁴⁵

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Notes

1. For a general introduction to Donne’s sermons, see: William R. Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Joan Webber, “The Model of the Whole,” in *Contrary Music: The Prose of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 143-182; and John. S. Chamberlin, *Increase and Multiplicity: Arts-of-Discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).
2. This concept of sin and salvation is discussed by Lewalski in “The Protestant Paradigm of Salvation,” in *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 13-27.
3. Regarding the Christian tradition, see for example the comments by Augustine (354-430) on Psalm 51, in *Expositions on the Books of Psalms*, trans. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand

Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 189-196. Regarding the Jewish tradition, see the commentary by Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhak 1040-1105) in the Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 4b-5a. Augustine's strong influence on Donne's sermons is discussed in Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, "Chapter II: Donne's Sources," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. X, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 345-358. There is a twofold reason for the use of Jewish commentators. On the one hand, the Jewish exegetical tradition had direct input into the various translations of the Bible from the original Hebrew into Latin and English versions which Donne read. For a discussion of this influence consult: David Daiches, *The King James Version of the English Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), and G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983). On the other hand, there is evidence from Donne's sermons that he himself read several of the Jewish exegetical commentators, such as the French Rashi and the Spanish David Kimhi (1160-1235). For more information consult: Don Cameron Allen, "Dean Donne Sets his Text," *English Literary History* 10 (1943), pp. 208-229; and Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, "Chapter I: Donne's Sources," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. X, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 306-307.

4. Jeanne M. Shami, "Donne on Discretion," *English Literary History*, 47 (1980), p. 54.
5. Dennis Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," *Journal of English and German Philology*, 6 (1962), pp. 327-328.
6. The seven Penitential Psalms in Christian tradition are: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. In a discussion with Reverend Colin Morton of St. Andrews Church in Jerusalem, he noted that this was originally a Roman Catholic tradition, most probably corresponding to the Seven Deadly Sins (pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, sloth, envy and anger). As Simpson notes, in the 16 years of his calling as preacher (1615-1631), no book was more beloved of Donne than these canonically accepted songs of David, and out of the 160 of Donne's sermons that are extant, 34 were preached on Psalms. See Evelyn M. Simpson, "Introduction," in *John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 4.
7. John Donne, "Number 15: Preached upon the Penitential Psalms," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. V, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 296-317. All quotations from this sermon will be noted hereafter in the body of the paper by page and line numbers. In their introduction to Volume V, Potter and Simpson have suggested that this undated sermon could have been preached before 1623. It was first published as sermon No. 64 in Donne's *LXXX Sermons* (1640).
8. This prefatory title is numbered in the Hebrew Bible as verses 1 and 2 of the Psalm, and is thus perhaps somewhat less emphasized. The version cited here is taken from the Geneva Bible (1557), following Donne in his sermon. Throughout his sermon Donne quotes from the Geneva Bible, the Authorized [King James] Version (1611) and from the Latin Vulgate. He also refers (both explicitly and implicitly) to the Hebrew Bible. My authorities for Donne's knowledge and use of the Bible in these versions are Allen 1943, and Simpson and Potter, "Chapter I," pp. 306-328.

9. See C. A. Briggs's comments about the prevailing acceptance of David as the author of the Psalms until well into the eighteenth century: "Introduction," in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, The International Critical Commentary, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), pp. liv-lvii; Chamberlin (p. 137) explains that Donne upheld the authenticity of the titles in the Psalms, following the views of the Roman Catholic Church, rather than those of the Calvinist commentators on the Bible. Also read, for example, Donne's statement in Sermon No. 15, p. 304, II. 304-306: "for, before he [David] pleads for mercy in the body of the Psalme, in the title of the Psalme, which is as Canonically Scripture, as the Psalme it selfe, hee confesses himselfe plainly, 'A Psalme of David, when the prophet Nathan came unto him, after, he had gone in to Bathsheba.'"
10. Lewalski, p. 27. It is interesting to note that Psalm 51 comprises part of the service for the "Commination of Sins," in *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Ebury Press, 1992), pp. 349-350.
11. I would like to thank my colleagues Ms. Tamar Lammfromm, Rabbi Gail Shuster-Bouskila, and Dr. Meir Gruber for their fruitful discussions with me about the Jewish exegetical tradition.
12. The present discussion of the encoded addressee and reader owes a great deal to the discussions in Christine Brooke-Rose, "The Readerhood of Man," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 120-148; and Susan R. Suleiman "Introduction," in Suleiman & Crosman, pp. 3-45.
13. Stanley E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 1.
14. This story is summarized from the Authorized Version.
15. John Donne, "Number 3: Preached at Lincolns Inne," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. II, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 97-98: II. 96-133. All quotations from this sermon will be noted hereafter in the body of the paper by page and line numbers. Potter and Simpson give a probable date of 1618 for this sermon.
16. Donne's method of biblical exegesis is discussed in Quinn, pp. 313-329, and in Simpson, "Introduction" (1963), pp. 7-8.
17. This discussion of the threefold method is based on Mueller, pp. 89-90. The threefold method of biblical interpretation was oftentimes expanded to include an allegorical meaning, explained by Mueller as one that "would note the manner in which the text went beyond its literal and particular truths and pointed to a universal truth, one which applied not only to the Scriptural situation or character under scrutiny but to all occasions and to all men" (p. 90). As Ruth Wallerstein, among others, notes, Donne was not a great allegorizer of the Bible, and this method is less relevant for the present discussion. See *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1950), pp. 72-73.
18. This is quoted from the note on II Samuel 12, in *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). These notes served not only to aid the reader of the Bible, but also to express religious, social and political opinions. As such,

they were suppressed in the Authorized Version. See Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), pp. 56-66.

19. This version is cited from the Geneva Bible, following Donne.
20. For a discussion of this metaphor, see: Lewalski, pp. 87-88; Winfried Schleiner, "Sin as Sickness," in *The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), pp. 68-85; and Troy Dale Reeves, "Sana Me Domine: Bodily Sickness as a Means of Grace in Donne's Sermons and Devotions," *American Benedictine Review* 33 (1982), pp. 270-275.
21. The chronological order of this sermon is: *exordium* or *proem*, *divisio*, part 1, part 2, and *conclusio*. For a discussion of Donne's sermon structure, consult Chamberlin, pp. 109-122, as well as Webber, pp. 143-182.
22. Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986), pp. 280-310.
23. This translation from the Hebrew is my own, and highlights the problematic syntax.
24. See Yehoshua Gutmann, "The Ewe-Lamb" (Hebrew), *Beit Miqra* 18/19 (1964), pp. 4-22; and Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Biblica* 48 (1967), pp. 207-242.
25. Daiches has commented on the translators' continual dependence on Kimhi (p. 153). See Kimhi's commentary on II Samuel 11:2, in *Miqra'ot Gedolot* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946): "... he saw her from above the roof, as she was bathing in her house."
26. The Geneva Bible and the Authorized Version are almost identical: David "walked upon the roof of the King's house [GB: palace]: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself."
27. Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., *Donne at Sermons: a Christian Existential World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972), p. 15.
28. Lewalski, p. 15.
29. This parable is summarized from the Authorized Version.
30. This discussion of the juridical parable is taken from Simon pp. 220-221. Various Jewish and Christian scholars confirm Simon's definition of this parable's uniqueness. See Gutmann, p. 9; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1961), p. 11; and Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 194.
31. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 24-25.
32. Paul W. Harland, "Dramatic Technique and Personae in Donne's Sermons," *English Literary History* 53 (1986), p. 723.
33. Arthur Weiser explains that these rites are set out in Leviticus 14:4 ff. and Numbers 19:18. See *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 406.

34. Harold Fish, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 108.
35. Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 139 and 142.
36. It seems quite evident that Donne is relying on the concepts of eternal and natural law, as discussed by Thomas Aquinas. See particularly the discussion in the *Summa Theologia*, I-II, Questions 90-108, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. II, Ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 742-781. Regarding the influence of Aquinas on Donne, consult Simpson and Potter, "Chapter II," p. 364.
37. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 90. Using her type of analysis, the syntactical pattern of this verse can be described as ABBA: Verb Phrase with Prepositional Phrase / Verb Phrase // Verb Phrase / Verb Phrase with Prepositional Phrase.
38. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 8.
39. "Metsudat David," in *Miqra'ot Gedolot*. This commentary was written in Galicia (Poland-Ukraine) by David Altschuler and his son Yehiel Hillel Altschuler, during the eighteenth century.
40. Lewalski, p. 18.
41. Daiches, pp. 153, 156 and 173.
42. *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*, Vol. I, ed. Y. Mandelbaum (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), *Pesiqta* 6, No. 4. See also the English translation: *Pesiqta deRab Kahana: An Analytical Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).
43. *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 261.
44. The influence of biblical parallelism on Donne's sermons has been previously noted by: George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, "The Literary Value of Donne's Sermons," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. I., ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 88; and Harold Fish, *Jerusalem and Albion: The Hebraic Factor in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 43.
45. I am indebted to Jeanne M. Shami for her constructive comments on this essay.