CHAPTER XIII

CONFESSION OF SIN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND IN THE EARLY JEWISH TRADITION

There are a number of phrases of a confessional nature in the Hebrew Bible and in extra-biblical documents whose similarity is such as to justify further inquiry. Two main types of penitential passage occur: the individual confession, which appears to be freely composed in accordance with particular life situations, and the communal confession, which arises out of a particular, momentary need. Of interest here is the arrangement of the verbs, nouns and other linguistic elements, in the light of their function within their immediate and wider contexts.

In most cases, the first person form ("I, We") is used in the confession of sin. In passages containing a single verb to denote sin, the subject appears both in the singular and in the plural, while in passages with three or more verbs for sin, the subject is always in the plural. There are several cases of confession made by one person using a single verb for sin in the first person singular (Exod 9:27; 10:16; Josh 7:20; 1 Sam 15:24, 30; 26:21; 2 Sam 12:13; 24:10 [= 1 Chr 21:8], 17; cf. 1 Chr 21:17; Ps 51:6; Luke 15:18). On the other hand, there are a good many penitential confessions containing a single verb for sin in the first person plural (Deut 1:41; Judg 10:10, 15; 1 Sam 12:10; Isa 42:24; 53:6; Jer 2:35 [denial of guilt]; 3:25; 8:14; 14:20; Neh 1:6; 9:33; Bar 1:13, 17; 2:5; 3:2); as well as a passage containing two verbs for sin in the first person plural (Dan 9:15). Of particular interest, however, are certain passages in which the subject appears in the first person plural, and the sin is expressed by means of three synonymous verbs. These passages are found in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kgs 8:47 [= 2 Chr 6:37]; Ps 106:6; Dan 9:5); in some extra-biblical Hebrew documents (the Rule of the Community 1:24–26; the Damascus Document 20:28–30; the Mishnah tractate Yoma 3:8; 4:2; 6:2); and in the Greek book of Baruch (2:12). This threefold repetition of the confessional phrase is a phenomenon which provokes inquiry into its origin, into its development, and into its eventual liturgical setting.

In addition to the passages where sin is expressed via the use of one or more verbs, there are various others containing noun forms—either one noun (Prov 28:13); two nouns (Jer 14:20; Pss 32:5a; 51:5; Job 7:21; 22:5; Ezra 9:6–7; Neh 9:2); or three nouns (Exod 34:7; Lev 16:21; Ps 51:3–4; 1QS 1:23; 11:9).

The aim of this study is to establish which form of confession was appropriate to which particular occasion and to examine the setting of confessional formulae and their liturgical standardization. The passages surveyed...
in the present study may open a window onto the prehistory of confessional formulae, enabling us to trace the various stages of their development and to find independent sources for reconstructing their patterns, until we see one form fixing itself as the unmistakable standard of Jewish confession on the Day of Atonement. I shall analyze biblical and extra-biblical documents from the earlier period until the second century after Christ, but in the final discussion I shall also consider later Jewish sources.

1. The Use of a Single Verb in the Confession of Sin

In order for this enquiry to proceed in a logical fashion, those passages containing verbs expressing sin in the singular form will be examined separately from the ones in which the plural form is used.

1.1 Confession of Sin Using a Single Verb in the First Person Singular

The account of the plagues of Egypt (Exod 7:8–11:10) tells of Pharaoh’s obstinate struggle with God for lordship. It is only after the plagues have come that Pharaoh becomes increasingly doubtful about his own divine status. According to the J sections of the accounts of hail (9:8–12) and locusts (10:1–20), Pharaoh tries to act in a conciliatory manner. After the destruction caused by the hailstorm he sends for Moses, confesses his fault and asks him to intercede with God: ḥāṭāʾti happaʾam yhwh haṣṣaddiq waʾānî wēʾammi hārēšāʾīm ḥaʾīrūʾi el-yhwh ..., “I have sinned this time; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Entreat the Lord ...” (9:27–28). After the locusts have devastated Egypt, Pharaoh once again admits his sin, declaring: ḥāṭāʾti layhwh elʾōhēhem wēlākem wēʾattāh śāʾi nāʾ ḥattāʾtiʾ ak happaʾam wēhāʾtirū layhwh elʾōhēkem wēyāṣēr mēʾālay raqʾ et-hammāwet hazzeh ..., “I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, I pray you, only this once, and entreat the Lord your God only to remove this death from me ...” (10:16–17). Since Pharaoh’s remorse is short-lived, it is obvious that he has not come to submissive repentance or any real reverence for the God of Israel. It is not possible to be certain what Pharaoh thinks he means, when he admits to being in the wrong, but it is obvious that his aim is pragmatic, rather than based on any coherent dogmatic theology or morality. His confession, “I have sinned against the Lord ...,” and supplication, “Now therefore, forgive my sin ...,” is theologically and morally admissible only if accompanied by sincere repentance. As a result of his previous experience of Pharaoh, Moses feels a distrust which

1 The Samaritan Recension reads the verb in the imperative plural: šēʾā, ‘forgive you.’