

CHAP. 2:

"A PSALM AGAINST DAVID"

Explorations in Interdisciplinary Reading

Theological, Exegetical, and
Reception-Historical Perspectives

EDITED BY

Robbie F. Castleman,

Darian R. Lockett,

AND

Stephen O. Presley

2017

©PICKWICK Publications • Eugene, Oregon

2

A Psalm against David?

A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David's Inadequate Repentance in 2 Samuel 12¹

J. RICHARD MIDDLETON

OUT OF 150 PSALMS in the Masoretic Text (MT), seventy-three are connected to David in some way through their superscriptions. Although in the majority of these cases the connection is limited to the cryptic expression לְדָוִד ("of David") or מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד ("a psalm of David"),² thirteen of these seventy-three psalms make an explicit link to some event in David's life by the use of a long heading or narrative ascription. The most famous is Psalm 51, which references the liaison with Bathsheba and the subsequent confrontation with the prophet Nathan (found in 2 Samuel 11–12). A surface reading of the superscription suggests that the psalm is David's prayer of confession when confronted with his sin.

This paper intends to explore the connection between Psalm 51 and the incident narrated in 2 Samuel 11–12. As a preliminary, I will explore the possible meanings of לְדָוִד, as well as the textual connection of psalms

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Chris Williams for his helpful feedback on an early draft of this paper. Special thanks are also due to Robbie Castleman, Darian Lockett, Greg MaGee, Susan Bubbers, and Stephen Presley (participants in the Biblical Theology, Hermeneutics, and the Theological Disciplines research group of the Institute for Biblical Research), for their encouragement and insightful suggestions on the latest draft.

2. This accounts for sixty-two of the cases (thirty-four and twenty-eight, respectively). The remaining eleven superscriptions have some other noun before לְדָוִד, such as שְׁנֵיזוֹן, מְשִׁיבִי, תְּפִלָּה, מִקְרָאם

superscriptions to the body of the psalms, taking into account the divergent testimony of the MT, the Septuagint (LXX), and the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). Next, I will examine specific language in the body of Psalm 51 that alludes to or resonates with the narrative of 2 Samuel 11–12, and which plausibly leads the reader to envision some sort of connection between the two texts. Yet, in counterpoint to such an expectation, I will highlight language in the psalm that problematizes the connection with the Bathsheba/Uriah incident by generating dissonance with aspects of the story. Taking as my cue the complex relationships with the David narrative evoked by the language of the psalm, I want to explore the possibility of an intertextual reading of Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11–12, where the psalm might function to call into question aspects of David's response recounted in the prose narrative.

The Ambiguity of the Davidic Psalms Superscriptions

Let me start with the issue of "Davidic" psalm superscriptions. There is at best an ambiguous connection between these superscriptions and either the historical David or the David of the biblical narratives. First of all, the preposition לְ in לְדָוִד is not the standard way to designate authorship in Hebrew;³ on the contrary, its most common meanings are *to*, *for* or *belonging to*.⁴ Given the semantic range of the preposition לְ, the following interpretive possibilities have been proposed for לְדָוִד: 1) addressed to or offered to David; 2) belonging to David; 3) for the use of David; 4) on behalf of David; 5) about David; or, possibly, 6) authored by David (the so-called *lamed auctoris*).⁵

One of the problems in deciding which sense of the preposition ought to be favored in any particular instance is that the psalms superscriptions tend to be in the form of brief notes and thus we have very little semantic context to go by. The ambiguity of the preposition לְ is well illustrated in the superscription to Psalm 88, where it is used in what are probably three

3. The LXX translates almost every case of לְדָוִד in the psalms superscriptions by the dative τῷ Δαυὶδ and only rarely by the genitive. Outside the psalm superscriptions, the only probable use of the so-called *lamed auctoris* in the MT is in Hab 3:1.

4. Bill Arnold and John Choi (*A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 110–14) give no less than fourteen possible uses of the preposition לְ. However, not all these possibilities are relevant to the meaning of לְדָוִד.

5. For these proposals, see Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 33–34; and Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 27. Mark S. Smith (*The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, 146) translates the Akkadian cognate to לְ similarly in the superscription to the Baal cycle of myths: "about (literally 'to') Baal," or perhaps more technically speaking, "belonging to (the series of tablets called) Baal (*lb^l*, in *KTU* 1.6 I 1)."

different senses: 1) a psalm לְ the sons of Korah; 2) לְ the leader [or chief musician]; 3) a *Maskil* לְ Heman the Ezrahite. In Psalm 51, likewise, we have: 1) לְ the leader; 2) a psalm לְ David. But which specific sense goes with which phrase in either superscription? To further complicate matters, while “David” in דָּוִד לְ can designate the second king of Israel, the name can also stand for any king in the Davidic line or even, in its messianic use, for a hoped for ruler like David.⁶

But the ambiguity of how psalm superscriptions are connected to David is evident not just from the possible meanings of the preposition לְ. We must also take into account the textual variations found between the MT, the LXX, and the DSS as to *which* psalms are Davidic (whatever “Davidic” signifies).⁷

The following chart (“Davidic” Psalms in the MT Compared with the LXX and DSS”) is a schematic guide to these variations.⁸

“Davidic” Psalms in the MT Compared with the LXX and DSS*

MT	LXX	MT	LXX	MT	LXX
	Book I		Book II		Book V
3	3	(43)	42	108	107
4	4	51	50	109	108
5	5	52	51	110	109
6	6	53	52		
7	7	54	53	122	121
8	8	55	54	(123)	(122)
9	9 [MT 9-10]	56	55	124	123
(10)		57	56		
11	10	58	57	131	130
12	11	59	58		
13	12	60	59	133	132
14	13	61	60		
15	14	62	61	(137)	136
16	15	63	62	138	137
17	16	64	63	139	138
18	17	65	64	140	139
19	18			141	140
20	19	68	67	142	141
21	20	69	68	143	142
22	21	70	69	144	143
23	22	(71)	70	145	144
24	23				
25	24		Book III		
26	25	86	85		
27	26				
28	27		Book IV		
29	28	(91)	90		
30	29				
31	30	(93)	92		
32	31	(94)	93		
(33)	32	(95)	94		
34	33	(96)	95		
35	34	(97)	96		
36	35	(98)	97		
37	36	(99)	98		
38	37				
39	38	101	100		
40	39				
41	40	103	102		
		(104)	103		

* Psalms with superscriptions connecting them to David in either the MT or LXX are highlighted in bold in the relevant column. Psalms in bold with grayscale highlighting have long superscriptions connecting them to an event in David's life. Psalms in *(italics with parentheses)* are missing superscriptions connecting them to David in the relevant column (MT or LXX). The two psalms in the MT column in *(italics with parentheses)* that also have grayscale highlighting have long superscriptions connecting them to David in the DSS, but not in the MT. Psalms without Davidic superscriptions in the MT, LXX, and DSS are not listed in the chart.

6. In the body of the psalms, “David” is used in connection primarily with the Davidic covenant and the Davidic line (Pss 18, 78, 89, 122, 132, 144).

7. These variants will be enough to show the complexity of the issue, but the picture becomes even more complex when other versions (such as the Syriac) are canvassed.

8. The numbering of most of the psalms is different in the MT and LXX, since Ps 10 is attached to Ps 9 in the LXX, which results in MT Ps 11 becoming Ps 10 in the LXX. The numbering harmonizes again by Ps 146 since MT Ps 147 is split into two psalms in the LXX.

Whereas the MT connects seventy-three psalms to David (in both long and short superscriptions), the DSS connect two more psalms from the Masoretic Psalter to David.⁹ The LXX, however, links no less than eighty-five psalms found in the Masoretic Psalter with David.¹⁰ It also adds Psalm

9. We should note that twenty-four psalms from the MT are not represented in the DSS; although these psalms were likely included, they are now missing due to manuscript deterioration. Of these twenty-four, fourteen have “Davidic” superscriptions in the MT (one with a long heading).

10. Note that the numbers given here (and below, concerning long headings) are based on Albert Pietersma's judgments in his translation of LXX Psalms (*A New English*

151 (which seems to be related to two separate psalms in the DSS), linking it to David with a long heading.¹¹ But the DSS take the cake (specifically, the great Psalms scroll from Cave 11) in claiming that David authored 3,600 psalms, plus other songs, totaling 4,050 (some of which seem to be tragically missing from our collections)!

What of the textual evidence for the long headings that link various psalms to events in David's life? Here we also find variations between the MT, LXX, and DSS. Whereas thirteen psalm superscriptions in the MT make an explicit connection to events in the David story, the DSS connect two extra psalms from the Masoretic Psalter, while the LXX adds three others (and these are different from the two in the DSS).

This admittedly brief survey of "Davidic" superscriptions in the MT, LXX, and DSS suggests that psalms superscriptions were still in a state of flux even into the early first century of the Common Era (when the Qumran Psalms scroll from Cave 11 is dated). This would indicate that the superscriptions are later than the psalms themselves, and cannot be taken as definitive historical evidence for Davidic authorship (or for any original connection to David, even beyond the question of authorship).¹² This is so despite the fact that both MT and LXX superscriptions participate in the verse-numbering scheme of the psalms, since verse numbering only entered the manuscript tradition at a later stage.

How then are we to interpret the long headings, especially those that link particular psalms (like Psalm 51) to events in David's life? Although they are likely later scribal additions, these superscriptions are now part of the canonical text and may be read as clues as to how some later biblical interpreters understood these psalms. John Goldingay proposes that we view the long superscriptions like contemporary lectionary suggestions. The linking of two or more lectionary texts does not necessarily indicate any original

Translation of the Septuagint), which diverges in some cases from the older edition of Alfred Ralfs (this reflects different scholarly opinions about which phrases in psalms superscriptions are original to the LXX).

11. Contrary to prevailing opinion that LXX Ps 151 is derived from the two DSS psalms (11Q5 Ps 151A & B), Tyler Williams ("Psalm 151") makes a persuasive case for the original integrity of LXX Ps 151, the entirety of which is based on 1 Samuel 16–17 (David as shepherd and harpist, followed by his subsequent victory over Goliath), while 11Q5 Ps 151A & B is expansionistic, adding details not found in 1 Samuel 16–17.

12. This does not mean that a superscription couldn't preserve a genuine historical connection to David (on this possibility, see Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 35). My point is simply that the presence of a superscription cannot, by itself, be taken as definitive evidence of this.

relationship between them; rather, what we have are scribal or editorial suggestions that it might be fruitful to read particular texts together.¹³

So, let us take up the challenge of a responsible intertextual, canonical reading and see what sort of fruit is borne in the case of Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11–12.¹⁴

Resonances of Psalm 51 with the Narrative of 2 Samuel 11–12

The first thing to say is that the scribes or editors who linked Psalm 51 with 2 Samuel 11–12 were not engaging in wild flights of fantasy.¹⁵ There are, indeed, at least six sets of verbal and thematic links between the two texts.

1. The Acknowledgment of Sin

The most obvious, and most important, is found in verse 4 (MT verse 6).¹⁶ The first couplet of this verse reads: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, / and what is evil in your eyes I have done." The first line of this couplet ("Against you, you alone, have I sinned") vividly evokes David's confession

13. Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 29. Along the same lines, James Luther Mays (*Psalms*, 53) describes the psalms superscriptions as "inner-biblical exegesis." For a fuller discussion of the issue, see Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis."

14. There are many types of intertextual readings, not all attentive to context. Indeed, the origins of the term "intertextuality" (Kristeva, *Desire in Language*) suggest that the meaning of a text is a production of the reader with little by way of external controls. Although I acknowledge the legitimacy of exploring such wild intertextuality in certain contexts (see Middleton, "From the Clenched Fist to the Open Hand"), this essay intends to work with a much more limited notion of intertextuality, comparing and contrasting Ps 51 with the narrative of 2 Sam 12. For another example of intertextual reading (in this case between two psalms), see Middleton, "Role of Human Beings."

15. One commentator who attempts to link Ps 51 with an originally Davidic context is Michael Goulder (see *The Prayers of David*, 51–69). Although Goulder's hypothesis is a fascinating critical proposal, and is intended to make sense of parts of the psalm he thinks are often misunderstood by others, just about every point in his interpretation could be challenged. This shows the difficulty of reconstructing a plausible original connection of the psalm to David (indeed, of any psalm to an original historical context). In deference to this difficulty, I hold in abeyance the historical question of whether some author or editor intended Ps 51 as a critique of David. Instead, I will focus on textual effects of the psalm, when read as part of the biblical canon.

16. All verse references to Ps 51 in this essay will use the English numbering, which is two lower than the MT numbering scheme. The difference is because the superscription, which is counted as verses 1–2 in the MT, is unnumbered in English translations.

in 2 Sam 12:13, "I have sinned against YHWH." Both texts, the psalm and the narrative, utilize the verb *אָטָה* with the preposition *לְ*.

2. The Phrase "Evil in [Someone's] Eyes"

This evocation is intensified by the next line of the couplet ("and what is evil in your eyes I have done"), which echoes the three-fold use of the phrase "evil in [someone's] eyes," found in both chapters 11 and 12 of 2 Samuel. Whereas in 2 Sam 11:25 David tells Joab (through a messenger) that he should not let Uriah's death "seem evil in your eyes," two verses later the narrator tells us "it was evil in YHWH's eyes" (2 Sam 11:27), thus putting into sharp contrast the moral perspectives of God and the king of Israel. Then, in the following chapter, Nathan explicitly accuses David of despising YHWH "by doing what is evil in his eyes" (2 Sam 12:9).

So the first couplet in Ps 51:4 has clear and powerful resonances with important language in 2 Samuel 11–12, giving the impression that this is, indeed, David's confession after Nathan's accusation.

3. God's Righteous Judgment

The second couplet in verse 4 cements the impression that this is David's confession by calling our attention to God's just verdict of guilt (though in the narrative this *preceded* the confession). When the psalmist *follows* his confession of sin in verse 4 by immediately telling YHWH that he is therefore "righteous in [his] speaking / and blameless in [his] judgment," this evokes the guilty verdict and sentence that Nathan delivered from YHWH in 2 Sam 12:7–12 (and perhaps 12:14).¹⁷

4. The Plea for God's to Be Gracious

But there are other resonances too. The psalmist's opening plea, "Be gracious to me, O God" (51:1), calls to mind David's explanation in 2 Sam 12:22 for why he fasted prior to his son's death: "for I said, 'Who knows, YHWH may be gracious to me and the child will live'" Both texts use the same verb *חָנַן* for being gracious.

17. These lines from the psalm also echo the language of Deut 17:9, which uses the phrase "the word of judgment" for the verdict given by priests.

5. The Emphasis on Interiority

Then there is the emphasis in Ps 51:6 on God's desire for *אֱמֶת* (truth or faithfulness) and *חָכְמָה* (wisdom) in the inner or secret parts, a motif continued in the psalmist's petition in verse 10 for a clean heart and a steadfast or firm spirit.¹⁸ This emphasis on positive interiority is the flip side of Nathan's assertion in 2 Sam 12:12 that David had committed his sin in secret (in contrast to the judgment, which would be public).¹⁹ Although the words for interiority are not the same in the psalm and the narrative, this thematic link between them suggests that in the psalm David has come to a realization of the need for core personal integrity, a consistent inner disposition toward what is right.²⁰

6. Deliverance from Bloodshed (דָּמִים)

One more line in the psalm might suggest a further link with the Samuel narrative. In verse 14 the psalmist pleads, "Deliver me from bloodshed, O God," which could be taken as an allusion to the murder of Uriah (in 2 Samuel 11). Although the murder is not mentioned in the superscription to the psalm (only the adultery with Bathsheba), David is explicitly described in 2 Sam 16:8 as "a man of bloodshed," using the same word (דָּמִים) found in our psalm.²¹

However, "Deliver me from דָּמִים" is not likely a request for forgiveness, since דָּמִים (despite the translation "bloodguilt" in the NIV; "bloodguiltiness" in the KJV and ESV) does not typically refer to the *guilt* that accrues

18. The emphasis on interiority is also suggested by verse 3, where the psalmist says he is constantly aware of his sin.

19. Indeed, whereas David's judgment will be "before all Israel and before the sun" (2 Sam 12:12), the psalmist confesses (in Ps 51:3): "my sin is continually before me" (using the same word *נֶגַד* for "before").

20. There are other elements of the psalm that might suggest it is Davidic, though these do not necessarily connect to the episode in 2 Samuel 11–12. Included among these would be the psalmist's appeal for God's holy Spirit not to be taken from him (51:11), since this would fit with 2 Sam 16:13, where the Spirit of YHWH came on David at this anointing. Also relevant is the psalmist's plea for a "willing," "generous" or "noble" (*גְּדִיבָה*) spirit (51:12). While this translation is derived from the use of the adjective *גְּדִיב* in places like Exod 35:5 and 22 (where it is used to describe the people's generous *heart*), as well as 1 Chr 28:21, 2 Chr 29:31 and Isa 32:5, the noun *גְּדִיב* can also mean "prince" or "noble," as in Job 2:28, Prov 25:7, and Song 7:2, thus suggesting the possibility of a literal meaning of "princely" or "royal" for the adjective in our psalm (see Goulder, *Prayers of David*, 60).

21. In 1 Chr 22:8 David is said to have shed "much blood," using both the singular and the plural.

from the act of killing or shedding blood, but rather to the act itself or to death as the consequence of the guilt (that is, punishment for the act). So the psalmist's plea in verse 14 would be for deliverance not from guilt taken on its own and certainly not from the subjective feeling of guilt. Nor could he be pleading for deliverance from committing the crime—that has already happened. Rather, the psalmist is most likely asking for deliverance from his own death (that is, the punishment that comes with guilt, the consequence for having shed blood). This certainly fits with 2 Sam 12:13, where David's death is mentioned as the punishment for his sin.

Dissonance between Psalm 51 and the Bathsheba/Uriah Incident

But not everything in the psalm fits the narrative. Having examined ways in which Psalm 51 resonates with the narrative of 2 Samuel 11–12, it is now time to note some divergences, beginning with some that suggest the psalm was not written with the narrative in mind. Although I will begin with four preliminary elements of dissonance between the psalm and the narrative, my focus will be on the most significant disjunction (which arises from the psalm's emphasis on the need for moral reformation after sin). Not only might this disjunction between Psalm 51 and the narrative of 2 Samuel cause us to question the adequacy of David's repentance, it raises important considerations about the nature of repentance in the moral life of the church today.

1. David's Death Is Averted yet the Psalmist Pleads for Deliverance from Death

If the psalmist is, indeed, pleading for deliverance from death in verse 16 (as the word *דָּמַיִם* suggests), this introduces an element of dissonance between the psalm and the narrative of 2 Samuel, since Nathan tells David that his death has been averted through God's forgiveness (he has, in other words, already *been* delivered from *דָּמַיִם*). Why then would David (in the psalm) plead for deliverance from his own impending death? Wouldn't this imply his lack of trust in the prophetic announcement that God had spared his life?

2. David Is Immediately Forgiven yet the Psalmist Pleads Continually for Forgiveness

Another area of dissonance arises from the psalmist's pleas for forgiveness. Whereas the psalmist pleads with God at some length for forgiveness, via the metaphor of cleansing (in verses 1–2, 7 and 9), David is immediately granted forgiveness in 2 Sam 12:13 after his two-word confession of sin: *אָשָׁאֵת לַיהוָה* (I-have-sinned) *לְיְהוָה* (against-YHWH). So unless the psalm is viewed as an expansion of David's two-word confession, the lengthy pleading for forgiveness in the psalm would suggest that he did not entirely believe Nathan's pronouncement of God's forgiveness (or at least found it difficult to accept). Like the plea for deliverance from death, the extended plea for forgiveness, if attributed to David, might show a certain lack of trust on his part.²²

Rescuing David—Ritual Cleansing and Not Forgiveness?

One way to perhaps rescue David from this charge would be to view the psalmist as pleading not for forgiveness per se, but for some sort of ritual cleansing that accompanies, or follows upon, forgiveness;²³ the *hyssop* of verse 7 might be meant literally.²⁴ But even if the hyssop is metaphorical, the idea might be that, having already received forgiveness, the psalmist is now seeking to be publicly restored to the community (by having the stain of sin liturgically removed).

In support of this emphasis on ritual it might be noted that the three words for sin (*פָּשַׁע*; *עֲוֹן*; *חַטָּאת*) mentioned in Ps 51:1–2 are also found in the Day of Atonement ritual (Lev 16:21). While I do not believe we need to conclude that the psalm was explicitly composed for this ritual,²⁵ the singular and plural forms of the varied nouns for sin scattered throughout the psalm seem to indicate a broader situation than David's predicament in 2 Samuel

22. It might be suggested that this extended plea for forgiveness might represent the depth of David's awareness of his sin. Yet besides being quite different in tone from the his two-word confession in the narrative, an extended plea of this sort *after forgiveness has been offered* suggests a wallowing in guilt that is not healthy in the process of repentance and healing.

23. The idea that the psalmist might be appealing for ritual cleansing and *not* forgiveness is an extrapolation from the view of some commentators that the psalmist is seeking ritual cleansing either *along with* or as a *means to* forgiveness (inner cleansing); for the emphasis on ritual cleansing, see Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 122–40; Goulder, *Prayers of David*, 51–69.

24. Goulder suggests that the hyssop refers to a purgative drink David was to take as part of the ritual of atonement for his sin (Goulder, *Prayers of David*, 56–57).

25. Contra Mays, *Psalms*, 199.

11–12. Yet the psalm is certainly amenable to ritual or liturgical use, since its expansive language for sin would be applicable to all supplicants (no matter what their particular wrongdoing).²⁶

But what are we to make of the proposal of some sort of ritual cleansing? Could this help overcome the divergence between the psalmist's insistent pleas for cleansing and the forgiveness immediately offered to David?

If the cleansing in the psalm were, indeed, a reference to a public or communal ritual, we could raise the question of whether David is ever portrayed as engaging in any such ritual; he is not. We could also ask whether he seems to be restored to the community after 2 Samuel 12; he seems in some significant ways alienated in the chapters that follow (more on that later).

The Psalm's Focus on Interiority Suggests Forgiveness Is the Issue

Alternatively, we could challenge the idea that the psalmist is seeking ritual cleansing. Given the strong focus on interiority in the psalm (including the interiorization of sacrifice in verse 17), it is more likely that language of cleansing is being used figuratively—to designate forgiveness, the removal of a stain on the conscience.

Another indication, beyond the thematic focus on interiority, that forgiveness is the issue in the psalm, rather than ritual cleansing, is language in verses 1–2 that echoes Exod 34:6–7, the revelation of God's character to Moses in connection with the forgiveness of Israel's sin of idolatry (the golden calf). The same three words for wrongdoing (עָוֹן; פְּשָׁע; חַטָּאת) that first appear in verses 1–2 of the psalm, and recur throughout (in both nominal and verbal forms), are found also in Exod 34:7, where they describe the sort of evil that God forgives (without any mention of ritual). But whereas these three words for sin occur in both Exodus 34 and the Day of Atonement ritual, the Exodus text has further resonances with the psalm.

It is significant that Ps 51:1 alludes to the description of YHWH's core character in Exod 34:6. Thus the opening plea for God to "be gracious to me" (חַנּוּן) "according to your love" (פְּדוּתְךָ) and to blot out sins according to the excess of "your compassions" (רַחֲמֶיךָ) echoes God's self-revelation to Moses as "gracious" (חַנּוּן), "compassionate" (רַחוּם) and abounding in "love" (חַסֵּד).

These allusions to Exodus 34 make it plausible that the psalmist's pledge in verse 13 to teach transgressors "your ways" is also an allusion to

26. Indeed, we might say that the psalm's expansive terminology covers (or, better, uncovers/exposes) a multitude of sins.

the golden calf narrative. The psalmist's pledge may harken back to Moses' request to God in Exod 33:13 to "show me your ways" (which, in context, are ways of mercy) or it may possibly echo Exod 32:8, where YHWH tells Moses that in constructing the calf the people "have turned aside from the way which I commanded them" (referring to the moral path they should have taken).²⁷

When these multiple allusions to the golden calf episode are taken together, they cumulatively suggest that the psalmist is appealing to this paradigmatic example of YHWH's forgiveness in the past as the basis for being forgiven in the present. He is asking God to act in accordance with the divine character as revealed to Moses and forgive an individual's sin as he did the sin of the community.

And if forgiveness is, indeed, the issue in the psalm, and we read it as David's prayer, then David is portrayed as pleading for forgiveness despite the fact that forgiveness was immediately announced as soon as he confessed his sin in the Samuel narrative. The psalm could thus serve to question David's trust in God's word.

3. David's Only Petition is for the Life of His Son

A related area of dissonance between the psalm and the narrative is that while the psalm is dominated by petition (first for forgiveness or cleansing in verses 1–2, 7, and 9, and then for restoration in verses 6b, 8, 10–12 and 18), David's sole petition in the narrative is that his son's life be spared (2 Sam 12:16, echoed in verse 22).²⁸ Indeed, David engages in a public ritual of mourning over his son's impending death, in connection with his petition, but there is no comparable mourning concerning his own sin or its consequences for Bathsheba or Uriah (and certainly no ritual for restoration to the community).

27. Beyond the specific linguistic resonances between Ps 51 and the golden calf episode, there is the significant similarity in content between both, where the focus is on the forgiveness of serious sin (idolatry in the Exodus text, unspecified sin in Ps 51), for which there is no sacrifice possible. And the death of David's son, which occurs despite the forgiveness of his sin (2 Sam 12:18), might reflect Exod 34:7, which combines forgiveness with "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children."

28. The prominence of petitions (twenty-one in all) in Ps 51 is evident when we analyze the psalm for the typical elements of an individual lament: Petition (1–2, 6b–12, 14a, 15a, 18); Complaint (3–5); Confession of Trust (6a, 16–17); Vow of Praise (13–15). Thus Mays comments: "Petitions are in control of the structure throughout; the prayer begins, continues, and concludes in the asking mode" (Mays, *Psalms*, 198).

4. Was David's Sin against YHWH Alone?

This leads to what is perhaps the most egregious line in the psalm, when read against the background of 2 Samuel 11–12. In verse 4 the psalmist claims that his sin was solely against God: אָלֹהִים (against you), לְבַדְּךָ (you alone), אֲשַׁחֲטֶנָּה (I have sinned); whereas David's sin was patently also against Bathsheba and Uriah.

In defense of David (if he were the author of the psalm), it is understandable that he would concentrate on his sin against God, since no less than three times in 2 Samuel 12 he is told (in no uncertain terms) that he has despised or scorned YHWH or YHWH's word (verses 9, 10, and 14); and David himself confesses that he sinned against YHWH (verse 13).²⁹

But while this theological focus is understandable, the narrowing down of the scope of the sin in Psalm 51 to exclude the sociological would nevertheless be inappropriate if this were David's prayer.³⁰ Indeed, we could imagine that if David had said in 2 Samuel 12, "Against YHWH, YHWH alone, have I sinned," this might well have been followed by Nathan's rebuke for his moral shortsightedness!³¹

How Psalm 51 Might Call into Question the Adequacy of David's Response to God

But of all the areas of dissonance between the psalm and the Samuel narrative, the most instructive is generated by the psalmist's request in verse 10

29. One way to explain the exclusive theological focus of this statement would be to take it in the same vein as the psalmist's claim in verse 5 that his sinning began before birth, even at conception. The psalmist is so overwhelmed by his sense of guilt before God that this generates hyperbolic assertions. This leads the NET Bible to moderate the psalmist's extreme statement in verse 4 by translating "you alone" as "you above all."

30. In one sense this narrowing down might well fit the David of 2 Sam 12, since he becomes more and more inwardly focused as the narrative progresses, the climax of this interiority being verses 17–23. Here we see David isolated in his prayers. His refusal to "rise from the ground" at the urging of the elders may certainly communicate the burden of his grief, but it also creates a disconnection between those around him that still care about the hurting king. This isolation is evident in the servants' unwillingness to share with David the news of the child's death, to the point where David has to learn the news through eavesdropping. Finally, the accumulation of first-person singular verbs and pronouns in verses 22–23 emphasizes the individualized focus that David has (we only hear a hint of Bathsheba's grief in verse 24). Yet while this excluding of the social/interpersonal aspect of sin in Ps 51 might fit the David of the narrative, it would not be *ethically* appropriate, if it was, indeed, David's prayer. (A special thanks to Chris Williams for bringing this point to my attention.)

31. A point made also by Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 128.

for a pure heart (לֵב טָהוֹר) and a steadfast spirit (רוּחַ נָכוֹן) and in verse 12 for a willing spirit (רוּחַ נְדִיבָה)—a request that is related to God's desire for faithfulness in the inner person (which was articulated in verse 6).

The Need for Moral Reformation after Confession of Sin

Not only is this request never voiced by the David of the Samuel narrative, it is (more importantly) never fulfilled in David's life. While the David of the narrative certainly has the broken spirit (רוּחַ נִשְׁבְּרָה) and broken and crushed³² heart (רוּחַ נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְכָה) that the psalmist says is a true, godly sacrifice in verse 17, he does not get beyond this to the moral reformation of character presupposed in the psalm.

As Mark Boda suggests in his comprehensive study of repentance in the Old Testament, biblical repentance typically involves more than "oral declarations expressing penitential desire whether in prayer or speech, including admission of sin and culpability"; such oral confession of sin certainly characterizes the David of the 2 Samuel narrative. But this is not enough. Full biblical repentance involves also *affective* change ("full engagement of internal orientation, all one's heart") and *behavioral* manifestations ("actual change in lifestyle and patterns of living").³³

Boda cites a number of psalms to show that "the admission of sin is considered a prelude to a fundamental change in affection and behavior."³⁴ Among his parade examples are Pss 143:8, 10; 119 (*passim*); 40:6–8 [MT 7–9]; 86:11; 25:14; 32:8–9; 51:10, 13 [MT 12, 15].³⁵ His climactic example is none other than Psalm 51, noting "there is a clear shift in the psalm beginning with verse 10 as the psalmist cries out for a fundamental transformation in his inner character with the creation of a clean heart, the renewal of a steadfast spirit and the sustenance of a willing spirit."³⁶ But there is no evidence that the David of the Samuel narrative experienced any significant moral transformation after his confession (and immediate absolution by Nathan).³⁷

32. Although the traditional translation of "crushed" in verse 17 is "contrite," the same verbal root for "crushed" (דכה) is used for the bones the psalmist says God has "broken" (דָּכִיתָ) in verse 8.

33. Boda, "Return to Me," 31.

34. *Ibid.*, 117.

35. *Ibid.*, 117–8.

36. *Ibid.*, 118.

37. It might be objected that this is an argument from silence. However, we need to realize that the narrator's characterization of David in 2 Sam 12 is a highly nuanced (and intentional) portrayal; so we are warranted in attending to both what is *said* and what

David's Post-Confession Diminution/Passivity

Indeed, David is a much diminished person after 2 Samuel 12, as if the confrontation with his own sin took all the wind (רוּחַ) out of him. This diminution is evident in his passivity towards the rape of his daughter Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. Although David is angry (2 Sam 13:21), he does nothing either to comfort his daughter or to confront the rapist. Indeed, his passivity allows Absalom to stew in the juices of revenge and then serve it up cold to Amnon two years later (2 Sam 13:23–37).

But even after Absalom's murder of Amnon, David does nothing for three years, even though the text reports his strong emotions concerning both sons (2 Sam 13:38–39). Even with Absalom living in Jerusalem (through Joab's initiative) and yearning to see his father, which finally does happen after two years (2 Sam 14:28–33), David's inaction leads to such alienation from his son that this generates Absalom's revolt and takeover attempt on the kingdom (2 Sam 15:1–13).

And during the civil war with Absalom, David is a pathetic, maudlin figure (2 Sam 15:30, 18:3–5); indeed, after Absalom's death Joab has to reprimand David to pull himself together, to prevent the desertion of the troops (2 Sam 19:1–7). And there are other examples of the diminution of David's character that could be given from 2 Samuel.³⁸ But suffice it to say that David never recovers morally in the narrative.³⁹

The contrast is significant: while the psalmist is broken and crushed in spirit *prior* to receiving forgiveness, and so pleads desperately for cleansing and restoration, the David of 2 Samuel is broken and crushed in spirit *after* receiving forgiveness and remains an ambivalent character for the rest of the Samuel narrative.

is *not said*. We have no access behind the biblical text to some pre-narrative "David."

38. Two examples would be David's initial passivity in concluding the war with the Ammonites right after Nathan's reprimand (2 Sam 12:26–28) and his fatalistic response to Shimei's cursing when he and his entourage are fleeing Jerusalem to escape Absalom's army (2 Sam 16:5–13).

39. David M. Gunn discerns a strange invigorating of David's character during his flight from Absalom despite his ensuing passivity; see Gunn, *The Story of King David*, 101–2. However, this is not the same as moral recovery. The lack of moral reformation on David's part is evident in his change of mind regarding his oath to Shimei that he would not be killed (2 Sam 19:18–23). On his deathbed David instructs his son Solomon to kill Shimei, self-servingly construing his earlier oath to mean only that he himself would not personally do the killing (1 Kgs 2:8–9). This invigoration on David's part (if we may so name it) could be viewed as an (unethical) overreaction to his prior passivity. It is certainly not the same as moral recovery.

A Virtue Ethics Understanding of Sin and Moral Reformation

It is certainly commendable that David immediately confessed his sin (2 Sam 12:13) once convicted by Nathan's parable (2 Sam 12:1–4), in conjunction with the prophetic word (2 Sam 12:7b–12). Indeed, this parable, which was not technically part of the prophetic word ("Thus says YHWH" only begins in 7b), was an insightful strategy on the prophet's part to get the king to realize the enormity of his sin. Nathan was probably wise to begin with this self-involving parable, given the fact that David had only rarely ever been corrected by anyone during his rise to power and his consolidation of the kingdom.⁴⁰ This was not a man used to having his will be opposed.

With this in mind, the narrative of Samuel does not portray the transgression of boundaries depicted in the Bathsheba/Uriah incident as an isolated episode that comes out of the blue, with no warning. Rather, the preceding narrative portrays David as a rising leader who does not let anyone get in his way; and while he may not do outright evil during his rise to power, he seems to be a full-steam-ahead sort of person, who figures out what he wants and goes for it. And he gets away with everything he does.

In the narrative of David's rise to power, he conquers Goliath, single-handedly slays a hundred Philistines, marries Saul's daughter, receives an oath of fealty from Saul's son (and heir), escapes from Saul on multiple occasions, and receives the benefit of Joab's elimination of potential opposition (so that his hands are technically clean; yet he doesn't dismiss Joab from being his general).

A possible analogy for David's rise is that of a very fast (and skilled) race car driver, who just barely survives going off the road time and again as he takes hair-raising curves and overtakes other drivers. He gets used to surviving by the skin of his teeth. But one day he goes too far and spins out of control. The Bathsheba/Uriah incident is David's major crash.

A Christian understanding of virtue ethics suggests that good and evil actions are not isolated events in a person's life. Rather, character (whether good or evil) is built up bit by bit as we engage in habitual actions over time,

40. Among the few times when David is brought up short by external agency are the following (all in 2 Samuel 6–7). First, there is his initial failed attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem, where the death of one of those carrying the ark leads David to postpone trying again for three months (2 Sam 6:1–11). Second, there is Michal's critique of his half-naked dancing in the presence of serving girls when he finally brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:20), and it is more likely that her consequent barrenness (2 Sam 6:23) was the result of her denying David the marriage bed than the typical (patriarchal) assumption either that David denied her or that God punished her. Third, we have YHWH's clear refusal of David's plan to build a temple in Jerusalem as YHWH's domicile (2 Sam 7:5–7), after Nathan had given him the go-ahead (2 Sam 7:1–3).

and this character is likewise evidenced in the actions or behavior that we engage in. So David's pattern of behavior (and thus his character) has been building up to the crash in 2 Samuel 11–12.

Virtue ethics applies not just to David's pre-crash actions, but also to what is needed post-crash. As he staggers away from the wreck, immediate blanket absolution (which Nathan gives) is a quick fix, like putting a Band-Aid on a serious wound. But this is clearly not enough. David needs to reform his driving habits (read: moral character).⁴¹

Questioning the Adequacy of Nathan's Bare Offer of Forgiveness

This leads me to wonder about the adequacy of Nathan's immediate absolution, without setting in place any process for moral reformation and renewal, especially since the major point of disjunction between Psalm 51 and the Samuel narrative is that the psalm focuses on forgiveness followed by restoration of the broken sinner, whereas David in the narrative simply confesses and is summarily forgiven by Nathan.⁴²

Here it is perhaps not irrelevant to remember that Nathan had previously misrepresented God's will in 2 Samuel 7. Having immediately affirmed David's desire to build a temple for YHWH (2 Sam 7:3), he had to be corrected that same night by YHWH that this was *not* in fact the divine will (2 Sam 7:4–16).⁴³ So Nathan may have the instincts of a pleaser or a yes-man, as far as David is concerned.⁴⁴ At any rate, the result of Nathan's immediate offer of forgiveness (with no follow-up) in 2 Samuel 12 is that David's life and family continue in shambles, without recovery in the rest of 2 Samuel.⁴⁵

41. This goes beyond the fact that David is brought up short and loses his sense of bravado. What he now needs is not a simple restoration of self-confidence, but a re-building of moral fiber, which is a more difficult process.

42. For further insightful analysis of the integral place of moral reformation in genuine repentance in both the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, see Wilson, *Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage*, 206–27 (chap. 11: "Entering His Gates: On Repentance and Prayer"). Wilson's account is similar to Boda's emphasis on what we might call the relationship of *faith* (turning to God) and *good works* (the moral change attendant upon faith).

43. Without putting too fine a point on it, we may say that Nathan here functions as a false prophet.

44. Special thanks to my student Bryan Picciotto for emphasizing the inadequacy of Nathan's offer of forgiveness in a paper entitled "Nathan's Parabolic and Prophetic Rhetoric."

45. The fact that so many interpreters have read the narrative of 2 Sam 12 without raising suspicions about the "cheap grace" that Nathan offers is testimony to the dominance of a truncated Protestant/pietist understanding of repentance. Yet even Billy

Communal/External Dimensions of Repentance in Psalm 51

While an emphasis on the interior transformation of the individual has already been made clear from the psalm (culminating in verse 17), it is significant that the psalm moves beyond the individual and the interior in two ways, neither of which finds a parallel in the David of 2 Samuel.

First, we have the vow in verses 13–15, consisting in the psalmist's promise to praise God and teach sinners God's ways. The vow is a typical element of individual laments (of which Psalm 51 is an example), where the psalmist pledges an appropriate response to God's anticipated answer to his prayer.⁴⁶ Yet nowhere in the Samuel narrative after God's forgiveness does David proclaim God's praise or teach transgressors God's ways (either God's moral standards or God's gracious forgiveness—drawing on the two meanings of God's *ways* in the golden calf episode).⁴⁷

The second way in which the psalm moves beyond an interior focus is its concluding prayer for the building (or rebuilding) of Jerusalem and the public offering of righteous sacrifices once again (verses 18–19). These verses are sometimes taken as a post-exilic addition to an earlier psalm, supplementing the original's single-minded emphasis on inner sacrifice with a "correction" regarding the validity of public, communal sacrifices; this is entirely plausible as a historical guess.

However, it is also possible that the entire psalm is pre-exilic and verses 18–19 refer to the need to complete the building of the city walls that David started in 2 Sam 5:10 (the walls were, indeed, completed by Solomon; 1 Kgs 9:15 and 11:27). The completion of the walls would then be a sign of God's restorative grace to the forgiven king.

Or the entire psalm could be exilic or post-exilic, with the psalm's emphasis on interiority and grace reflecting a similar emphasis found in exilic texts like Jer 31:31–34, 32:38–40; and Ezek 36:26–27. In that case, the final

Graham evangelistic crusades were not content with a "decision" for Christ, but required new converts to engage in some minimal "follow-up," which included personal faith sharing and a process of integration into a community of believers.

46. Claus Westermann has suggested that psalms of individual lament may contain any combination of three types of laments or complaints: Thou-laments (which address God as the source of the problem), they-laments (which cite human enemies), and I-laments (where the psalmist acknowledges his own guilt); the complaints in Ps 51 consist entirely of I-laments. See Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 66–67.

47. Indeed, the David of the Samuel narrative is not typically portrayed as a pious YHWH worshiper (with the exception of his dancing before the ark in 2 Samuel 6, a text that mixes political and religious motives); and he is certainly not portrayed as following the injunctions of Deut 17:18–20 concerning regular reading of the Torah that he might diligently observe God's laws.

verses of the psalm might suggest that after the broken/crushing experience of exile, Jerusalem would once more be restored (as Jer 31:38 anticipates), just as the psalmist anticipates he will be.

Whether these verses are integral to the original psalm or a post-exilic addition, the concluding emphasis on communal, visible, external (re) building hints at the very sort of restoration David needed to undergo.⁴⁸

A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David's "Repentance"

The contrast between the psalmist's desire for a pure heart and a steadfast and willing spirit (in verses 10 and 12) and the *lack* of such steadfastness in the case of David after 2 Samuel 12 is suggestive of a canonical reading that highlights the need to go beyond confession and forgiveness of sin to moral reformation, the disciplined reshaping of character after sin. Confession and forgiveness, while necessary for repentance, are not enough. Since it is the cumulative deformation of character over time that leads to egregious sins like adultery and murder, the requisite moral reformation would involve both an *inner* steadfastness (of heart/spirit) and visible, *outer* actions to match—neither of which David attained to after his forgiveness in 2 Samuel 12. Such is the result of taking the superscription of Psalm 51 seriously as a guide to reading intertextually.⁴⁹

It is not the purpose of this paper to claim that Psalm 51 was written explicitly as a critique of David. However, taking my cue from the content of the psalm when read in connection with the David narrative, and also from the use of the preposition לְ in the body of psalm (לְךָ; "against you" in verse 4) and in 2 Sam 12:13 (לְיְהוָה; "against YHWH"), might we be justified in taking מְזַמֵּר לְדָוִד in the superscription to Psalm 51 as a psalm *against* David?

Bibliography

Arnold, Bill T., and John H. Choi. *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

48. The fact that these are all guesses (we simply do not know the historical origins of the psalm) does not prevent us from mining the text for its possible connection to the David of the Samuel narrative.

49. It is an open question whether reading other "Davidic" psalms together with relevant narratives in 1 or 2 Samuel would bear significant interpretive fruit. That would be an interesting topic for further research.

- Boda, Mark J. "Return to Me": *A Biblical Theology of Repentance*. New Studies in Biblical Theology. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.
- Childs, Brevard S. "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis." *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971) 137–50.
- Craigie, Peter C. *Psalms 1–50*. Word Biblical Commentary 19. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983.
- Goldingay, John. *Psalms*, vol. 1: *Psalms 1–41*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.
- . *Psalms*, vol. 2: *Psalms 42–89*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.
- Goulder, Michael. *The Prayers of David (Psalms 51–72): Studies in the Psalter, II*. London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004.
- Gunn, David M. *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*. JSOTSup 6. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1978.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Mays, James Luther. *Psalms*. Interpretation. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994.
- Middleton, J. Richard. "From the Clenched Fist to the Open Hand: A Postmodern Reading of the Twenty-Third Psalm." In *The Strategic Smorgasbord of Postmodernity: Literature and the Christian Critic*, edited by Deborah C. Bowen, 307–25. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.
- . "The Role of Human Beings in the Cosmic Temple: The Intersection of Worldviews in Psalms 8 and 104." *Canadian Theological Review* 2.1 (2013) 44–58.
- Piccio, Bryan. "Nathan's Parabolic and Prophetic Rhetoric: Examining the Communication in 2 Sam 12:1–15a." Unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association annual meeting, Kitchener-Waterloo, ON, May 27, 2012.
- Pietersma, Albert, and Benjamin G. Wright, eds. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Smith, Mark S. *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- Westermann, Claus. *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. Translated by Richard N. Soulen. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981.
- Williams, Tyler F. "Psalm 151: An Orphan in the Greek Psalter." Unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies annual meeting, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, May 26, 2009.
- Wilson, Marvin R. *Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage: A Christian Theology of Roots and Renewal*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.