



The David of Psalm 51: Reading Psalm 51 in Light of Psalm 50

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David, according to Sirach, “sang praise with all his heart, and he loved his Maker.”

He placed singers before the altar,
to make sweet melody with their voices.
He gave beauty to the festivals,
and arranged their times throughout the year,
while they praised God’s holy name,
and the sanctuary resounded from early morning. (Sir 47:9–10)

Biblical historians will rightly have to wrestle with the several anachronisms in that passage, but the inheritors of the tradition will rightly hear its resounding witness to the connection between David and worship, David and song, David and psalms.¹

¹Sirach’s view of David’s role in Israel’s worship and psalmody is apparently derived from the Chronicler. See especially 1 Chr 16:1–43; 23:2–5, 30–32.

With clear thematic and literary connections, Ps 50 sets up Ps 51, providing the accusation and call to repentance that produce the confession of David and Israel in Ps 51. Reading Ps 51 in the light of Ps 50 enhances its meaning for us, calling us to task for our failures and our attempts to manipulate God to our advantage while announcing the steadfast love of God that promises genuine renewal.

Israel made these connections, and the church accepted them. The Psalter, in the tradition, is David's book.²

Sirach tells us more about David, however: "The Lord took away his sins, and exalted his power forever; he gave him a covenant of kingship and a glorious throne in Israel" (Sir 47:11). Importantly, God's eternal covenant with David seems predicated upon—or at least to follow immediately upon—the Lord's forgiveness of David's sins, a reference apparently to his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah.³ This connection, especially in direct juxtaposition to the description of David as singer, brings to mind not only the narrative report of David's sin but also the poetic form in Ps 51. What will this mean for David, the sinner and singer? What will it mean for us, the readers?

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA IN STORY AND SONG

The tawdry and unhappy account of David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah begins tellingly: "It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful" (2 Sam 11:2). From his rooftop, his place of privilege, David was, he thought, master of all he surveyed.⁴ The rooftop gave him access to things meant to be private, leading, perhaps inevitably, to temptation. So David simply took what he wanted. Who would see?

David's security was illusory, of course. Others do see—though not obviously. David's sense of control may be mirrored in the narrative itself, which makes no mention at all of God in its recounting of the basic story. But God does see, and "the thing that David had done displeased the LORD," as we learn at the beginning of the next chapter (2 Sam 12:1). And, of course, the all-seeing narrator sees as well, which means that so do we, the readers of the narration. More is going on here than David knows, and David's story will provide insight to others whom David cannot imagine to have a viewpoint above his own.

But for the story to have its proper effect, David must see *himself* as others see him, which is precisely the gift provided by God through the prophet Nathan. At last, in the parable of the rich man's theft of the poor man's sheep, David sees: "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die" (2 Sam 12:5)—though

²Significant recent studies of the connection between David and the Psalter include: Alan M. Cooper, "The Life and Times of King David according to the Book of Psalms," in *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, ed. Richard Elliott Friedman (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983) 117–131; James Luther Mays, "The David of the Psalms," *Interpretation* 40/2 (1986) 143–155; Marti J. Steussy, "The Power of Prayer: David in the Book of Psalms," pt. 4 of *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 129–188; Margaret Daly-Denton, "Davidic 'Authorship' of the Psalms," ch. 2 of *David in the Fourth Gospel: The Johannine Reception of the Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 59–113; James D. Nogalski, "Reading David in the Psalter: A Study in Liturgical Hermeneutics," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 23/2 (2001) 168–191.

³The same verb (עָבַר — hiphil) is used for "taking away" David's sin in 2 Sam 12:13 and Sir 47:11.

⁴For a lay Bible study interpretation of the story from a similar perspective, see Frederick J. Gaiser, *David: God's Shepherd, Warrior, and King*, Inspire Bible Study Series, Participant Book (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998) 36–40.

even then he cannot see himself as the perpetrator without the intervening prophetic revelation: “You are the man!” (v. 7). Only now does David truly see: “I have sinned against the LORD” (v. 13).

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The Bible provides us not only the narrative of David, the “sermon,” it provides also the accompanying psalm, the “sermon hymn” (Ps 51).⁵ That connection is not surprising, since it can be found throughout the narrative materials of the Old Testament: a unity of story and song that suggests an essential interrelatedness of history and worship at the heart of Israel’s faith.⁶ Within this tradition, the David story is something of a special case. Whereas in other narratives the songs are inserted directly into an appropriate place in the story itself (e.g., the songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Hezekiah, etc.), the “David” songs are so many and finally so important that they get their own “hymn book” (the Psalter), their superscripts inviting us to sing and pray these at the proper places in the David narrative.⁷

Modern commentators are certainly correct in observing that the psalms so designated could scarcely have been written by David himself.⁸ Most such writers, in fact, interpret these psalms as freestanding texts (or solely in the context of the Psalter), quite apart from the Davidic connection (other than, perhaps, a brief comment on the superscript). While much of value can come from such interpretations, the relation to the David story is hardly accidental or hardly insignificant for the Bible in its present form. As Hans Joachim Stoebe noted:

It would now be completely wrong to simply discard such titles as fictional inventions and later accretions to the text. On the contrary, they carry considerable weight with us, for they are living proof of how the community heard and understood; they are, so to say, illustrations and, as such, evidence both of faith and of first interpretation.⁹

In this regard, Ps 51 deserves particular attention. Unlike all the other psalms specifi-

⁵Nogalski, “Reading David in the Psalter,” argues for a deliberate liturgical connection between the stories of David and the psalms that, in their superscripts, relate to his life. The presence of such psalms, he says, “suggest a worship setting of some type where David’s story is told in a way that highlights David’s piety and the role of YHWH in ways that the narratives alone do not” (190).

⁶For a development of this thesis, see Frederick J. Gaiser, “Songs in the Story” (Dr. theol. diss., University of Heidelberg, 1984).

⁷The superscripts of Psalms 3, 7, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142 identify a particular occasion in the life of David.

⁸For a brief account of both the linguistic connections and narrative tensions that relate and divide Ps 51 and 2 Sam 11-12, see Nogalski, “Reading David in the Psalter,” 175-178.

⁹Hans Joachim Stoebe, “‘Gott sei mir Sünder gnädig’: Eine Auslegung des 51. Psalms,” *Biblische Studien* 20 (1958) 17; cited in Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 501.

cally related to the David story, Ps 51 alone contains no mention of the enemies or evildoers who seek the psalmist's (or David's) harm. Indeed, among the psalms of lament, Ps 51 stands out because both the typical accusation of the enemy and the accusation of God are conspicuously absent.¹⁰ Something different is afoot here in the psalm's fervent insistence that "I" alone am to blame for the present crisis: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps 51:3). What is the place of this insight of faith for David and for Israel?

THE MESSAGE OF PSALM 51

According to the narrative in 2 Sam, David came to self-understanding only through the imposition of a word from outside himself, Nathan's parable and its sharp application. Ps 51, in its superscript, agrees: "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." The role of the prophet will be crucial in our understanding the psalm and the biblical tradition to which it bears witness. Sirach still knows its significance, introducing his praise of David only after bringing Nathan on stage, if ever so briefly, to keep him honest in his exuberance over David (Sir 47:1). Indeed, Nathan's foreshadowing presence (v. 1) and Yahweh's forgiveness of David's sins (v. 11) stand as a literary inclusio around Sirach's paean to David, and only with them in place is it possible to proceed to the "covenant of kingship" that God gives to David (v. 12). In reflecting on David, postexilic Israel has learned something that will not go away.

Alongside the many valuable readings of Ps 51, the following structural pattern might prove informative:

Stanza 1 (vv. 1–9) (a pattern based on repeated vocabulary)¹¹

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| A v. 1 blot out | (common vocabulary with A' — מחה) ¹² |
| B 2a wash | (common vocabulary with B' — כבס) |
| C 2b cleanse | (common vocabulary with C' — טהר) |
| D 3 I know | (common vocabulary with D' — ידע) |
| E 4a I sinned | (common vocabulary with E' — חטא) |
| F 4b you are justified | (center: justification of God) |
| E' 5 I...a sinner | (חטא) |
| D' 6 teach me (i. e., make me know) | (ידע - hiphil) |
| C' 7a clean | (טהר) |
| B' 7b wash | (כבס) |
| A' 9 blot out | (מחה) |

¹⁰The only hint of a complaint against God is found in v. 8 ("let the bones that you have crushed rejoice"), though in Ps 51 this is no "accusation," since the psalmist makes clear, regarding God, that "you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment" (v. 4).

¹¹This pattern is identical to but derived independently from that now published by Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 402–403. My pattern for stanza 2 is similar but not identical to that proposed by Terrien.

¹²Despite the reference to Hebrew vocabulary here, I continue to use English versification and, unless otherwise noted, the NRSV translation (as I do throughout this essay).

Stanza 2 (vv. 10–17) (a pattern based on repeated or similar vocabulary)

| | | | |
|----|-------|---|--|
| A | 10a | clean heart, O God ¹³ | (common vocabulary with A' — אלהים / לב) |
| B | 10b | spirit | (common vocabulary with B' — ריח) |
| C | 11–12 | spirit...spirit | (amplification of plea for “spirit” in 10b) |
| D | 13 | I will teach | |
| E | 14 | O God, my saving God ¹⁴ | (center: my saving God) |
| D' | 15 | my tongue will sing | |
| C' | 16 | sacrifice...offering | (amplification of confession regarding “sacrifice” in 17a) |
| B' | 17a | my sacrifice, ¹⁵ O God...a broken spirit | (ריח) |
| A' | 17b | contrite heart, O God | (אלהים / לב) |

Additionally, there is also a grammatical/rhetorical pattern in stanza 2 that is then repeated in stanza 3:

| | | | |
|------|-------|------------------------|--|
| X | 10–12 | Imperatives/precatives | (create...put...do not cast...do not take...restore...sustain) |
| Y | 13 | Indicative result | (then I will teach...sinners will return) |
| X' | 14a | Imperative | (deliver me) |
| Y' | 14b | Indicative result | (and my tongue will sing) |
| X'' | 15a | Imperative | (open my lips) |
| Y'' | 15b | Indicative result | (and my mouth will declare) |
| Y''' | 16–17 | Indicative basis | (for you have no delight in sacrifice, etc.) |

Stanza 3 vv. 18–19

| | | | |
|-------|----|--------------------|---|
| X'''' | 18 | Imperatives | (do good to Zion...rebuild) |
| Y'''' | 19 | Indicative results | (then you will delight in right sacrifices...bulls will be offered) |

These patterns suggest several things:

1. Of foremost importance: the primary patterns in both of the first two stanzas center on God. Because of the nature of the psalm, the psalmist is deeply concerned with self—with guilt and stain, with self-recrimination and self-reproach, with the fervent wish for life and renewal, cleansing and recreation. But all such concern finally turns him not further inward but outward, not to self but to God. The deep consciousness of sin in stanza one leads the pray-er (let us say David) to a judgment doxology that justifies God, rec-

¹³Note the repetitions of “God” in vv. 1, 10, 14, 17. A structural pattern will want to make sense of those in some way, as this proposal tries to do (and as Terrien’s does not). The call (“O God”) in v. 1 introduces the poem, calling attention to God’s abundant mercy; the recurrences in vv.10-17 surround and provide the center for the second, theologically rich stanza. (The “O Lord” in v. 15 is not the divine name.)

¹⁴“My saving God” is preferable here to “O God of my salvation.”

¹⁵Here I prefer the NRSV margin (“My sacrifice, O God...”).

ognizing that the present crisis is not the result of divine caprice or lack of compassion, but of personal fault. God remains righteous (צדק — v. 4). More, the plea in stanza two for a clean heart and a new spirit centers on the certainty that Yahweh is “my saving God” (v. 14).

2. Unlike some lament psalms, there is in Ps 51 no clear statement of a certainty of hearing, no final turn to post-deliverance praise. There is, however, the firm confession of trust at the end of stanza two: “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17). David’s hope is based not in his evaluation of self, but in his evaluation of God. Because God remains faithful, hope is possible even in the face of justifiable death. This confession at the end of v. 17 hearkens back to (and forms an *inclusio* with) the one with which the psalm begins, appealing to God’s “steadfast love” and “abundant mercy” (v. 1). Thus, while each stanza centers in God, the main body of the poem (stanzas one and two together) begins and ends with a confession of God’s fundamental goodness. This alone allows the many petitions that characterize the psalm.

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3. A similar point is made by the alternate pattern for stanza two, comparing the Y members of the parallelism. Might the hearer not conclude that the nature of God and of true sacrifice, confessed in Y''' (v. 17), marks the content of the teaching and praise promised by a hopefully restored David in the previous three Y terms (vv. 13, 14b, 15b)? Here David becomes the “prophetic” speaker to Israel and to us.
4. While stanza three, long regarded as an addition by critics who see the difficulty in positing broken down walls of Jerusalem (v. 18) in a supposed time of David, does indeed seem to lie outside the main structural patterns of the psalm, it deliberately models itself after the grammatical structure of stanza two (imperative/indicative). At some point, the authors or editors see this next step as the (theo)logical consequence of the renewal of David: that God would renew Jerusalem, the city of David, as well.

THE MESSAGE OF PSALM 50 AND PSALM 51 TOGETHER

Recent scholarship has convincingly demonstrated the deliberate juxtaposition of certain “psalm pairs”—that some back-to-back pairs of psalms mutually enforce, play off of, and interpret one another. Such might well be the case with Psalms 50 and 51. The initial supposition comes from the critique of sacrifice common to both psalms (cf. Pss 50:9–15 and 51:16–17), a fact noted by many commen-

tators, but the relation between the two proves much deeper and much broader than that.¹⁶

The primary arguments of the two psalms seem, in fact, to be mirror images of one another:

- A Right sacrifice is a sign of the covenant (“my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice” — 50:5)
- B Therefore the breach is not about sacrifice (“Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you” — 50:8); it is about transgressing the commandments (“What right have you to recite my statutes...?” — 50:16)
- C So, repent! (“Mark this, then...” — 50:22)
- C’ The transgression is admitted (“I know my transgressions” — 51:3–5)
- B’ But the renewal is not about sacrifice (“you have no delight in sacrifice” — 51:16); it is about “a broken and contrite heart” (51:17)
- A’ And then, right sacrifice will be a part of God’s renewal of the covenant (“then you will delight in right sacrifices” — 51:19)

Or, in more inclusive units, there is a concentric pattern to the themes of the two psalms:

Concentric Structure of Psalms 50-51 (based on thematic units)

- A 50:1–6 On Zion and sacrifice
- B 50:7–15 On sacrifice and deliverance
- C 50:16–21 The rebuke
- D 50:22–23 Call to repentance/divine wrath
- E 51:superscript Nathan oracle
- D’ 51:1–2 Turn to God/divine grace
- C’ 51:3–9 Confession
- B’ 51:10–17 On deliverance and sacrifice
- A’ 51:18–19 On Zion and sacrifice

Within the overall thematic pattern, several direct verbal links emphasize the concentric structure:

Concentric Structure of Psalms 50-51 (based on verbal links)

- A 50:2, 5 Out of **ZION**...a covenant with me by **SACRIFICE**¹⁷ (צִיּוֹן/זִבְחָה)
- B 50:8 your **BURNT OFFERINGS** are continually before me (עוֹלָה)
- C 50:9 I will not accept a bull from your house
- D 50:15 call on me...I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me¹⁸
- E 50:18–20 recitation of Decalogue

¹⁶I recently assigned a Luther Seminary class the task of comparing Psalms 50 and 51, and their papers have enhanced my own reading. I gratefully acknowledge particularly the insights of Justin Boeding, Zebulon Highben, Colleen Leary, Elizabeth Morgenstern, and Carol Sinykin.

¹⁷Words in bold capital letters indicate common Hebrew vocabulary.

¹⁸The Hebrew terms for “deliver” are not the same at D and D’, but the structure of the thought is identical.

| | | | |
|----|-----------------|--|-------------|
| F | 50:20 | You slander your own MOTHER'S child | (אם) |
| G | 50:22 | call to repentance: you who forget GOD | (אלהים) |
| H | 51: superscript | Nathan's oracle (the turning point) | |
| G' | 51:1 | prayer of repentance: have mercy on me, O GOD | (אלהים) |
| F' | 51:5 | a sinner when my MOTHER conceived me | (אם) |
| E' | 51:6 | teach me wisdom | |
| D' | 51:14 | deliver me from bloodshed...and my tongue will sing aloud | |
| C' | 51:16 | you have no delight in sacrifice | |
| B' | 51:16 | if I were to give a BURNT OFFERING | (עולה) |
| A' | 51:18, 19 | Do good to ZION...then you will delight in right SACRIFICE | (צירוף/זבח) |

Reading Psalms 50 and 51 together adds several dimensions to our understanding:

1. The inclusion of “Zion” and acceptable “sacrifice” (A and A') not only ties together the two psalms, but also requires keeping vv. 18 and 19 attached to Ps 51. If these connections are valid, as they seem to be, then the addition of vv. 18–19 to Ps 51 (if indeed the psalm ever existed without them) took place in connection with the postexilic redaction that related it to Ps 50, reflecting the growing “idealization” of David of that period.
2. The emphasis on Zion pushes the concern of Ps 51 away from a mere one-time personal event in the life of a particular king toward the matter of the survival or rebirth of the nation following the sin that led to Zion's destruction and the exile of its people. In Psalm 48 (the immediately previous occurrence of “Zion” in the Psalter) verses praising Zion and Zion's God surround a central section describing the panic of the threatening nations. Psalms 50 and 51 echo that structure, except here the central threat, surrounded by the praise of, or petition for, Zion, is even more serious: the danger from within, the self-destructive apostasy that brings death to the nation.¹⁹ Can Israel be restored? The jury may still be out as the psalms are redacted—note the as yet unfulfilled hope regarding Zion at the end of Ps 51 and the petition for restoration at the end of Ps 53 (the next occurrence of Zion). Still, genuine hope is possible because of the character of God known to the psalmists.
3. The focus on the national sin rather than merely the personal sin of David may help explain the sometimes disturbing absence of the victims (Bathsheba and Uriah) in David's prayer. David's outburst (“Against you, you alone, have I sinned”) has been explained with the common observations that all sin is finally against God or that it is only against Yahweh that David has truly rebelled; but reading Ps 51 in response to Ps 50 makes the matter even clearer: the sharp accusation that closes that psalm (50:16–23) comes directly from God. Thus, the one convicted by those words naturally refers in his confession to the of-

¹⁹Steussy, *David*, 162–163, marshals further evidence for reading Ps 51 as referring to the national sin, including the many images and themes here that resonate with words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

fense against God (51:3–5), even while the accusation itself, as a form of the Decalogue, refers to sins against persons. The David narrative, Ps 50, and the reader of both song and story know there are real Bathshebas and real Uriahs out there, flesh-and-blood victims of the arrogant sins of the people of God.²⁰ Every pray-er of the psalm in every age is left to (and must) fill in the blanks.

4. As implied in point 3, we see now how Ps 50 sets up Ps 51. In 51 David becomes the wicked one of 50:16, the one who “hate[s] discipline” and “keep[s] company with adulterers,” the one who “forget[s] God” and of whom God says, “I will tear you apart.” At the same time, Ps 51 becomes the proper prayer not just of David but of all the “wicked,” all who recognize themselves as the violators of the commandments ticked off by God in Ps 50. All can now respond with David’s confession and petition for renewal (as, of course, they have through the ages). This possibility of multiple readings (it’s about David; it’s about Israel; it’s about me) empowers and enriches the understanding and use of these psalms. The present reader is invited in without forcing out the historical particularities that gave rise to the psalm in the first place.²¹
5. Attention to the named characters in the two psalms will be useful: Asaph (50:superscript), Nathan (51:superscript), and David. Since Ps 50 is the first Asaph psalm in the Psalter and, indeed, the only one outside the Asaph collection (73–83) and the only one prior to the announcement at the end of Book II that “the prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (Ps 72:20), it seems appropriate to take its location and its title seriously. This psalm seems deliberately placed to introduce the David collection (51–71), which in turn seems to be programmatically introduced by Ps 51 as a “first among equals” in this group of psalms specifically attributed to David.²² Asaph, of course, was none other than the “chief” of the Levites appointed by David (according to the Chronicler) as “ministers before the ark of the Lord” and singers of psalms (1 Chr 16:4–7). Since in Chronicles Asaph immediately then leads a composite psalm, put together for particular liturgical and kerygmatic purpose (1 Chr 16:8–36),²³ readers should, no doubt, also take seriously the purpose behind Ps 50, now attributed to Asaph. Intriguingly, here (reading Ps 50 as prelude to

²⁰Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 25–27, has pointed out that the character of Bathsheba is “purposely subordinated” in the narrative of David’s adultery as well. She is merely an “agent” to facilitate the adultery that is essential to the plot.

²¹Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 521, argues that “[t]he psalms are transmitted as the sacred psalms of David, but they testify to all the common troubles and joys of ordinary life in which all persons participate”; but in the opinion of Roland E. Murphy, “Reflections on Contextual Interpretation of the Psalms,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 27, Childs “allows the figure of David to evaporate and in David’s stead emerges Everyman.” The psalms can, indeed, become the prayers of every person, but they will only lead Everyman and Everywoman into the particular faith of the Bible if they remain also the prayers of David and the community of Israel.

²²These matters of redactional placement are noted also by Erich Zenger, “Psalm 51,” in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51-100* (Freiburg: Herder, 2000) 56–57.

²³Gaiser, “Songs in the Story,” 286–291.

51) the royal appointee, the staff priest, challenges the king himself, just as Nathan, the court-appointed prophet, does in the narrative (2 Sam 12) and in the superscript to Ps 51. In these psalms, the three major offices appear (prophet, priest, king), and both priestly Torah (the abbreviated Decalogue in Ps 50:16–21) and prophetic word (the oracle of Nathan) rightly challenge the abuse of power by the king (or the royal nation). Just as in the narrative, Nathan's role remains crucial. God's word through prophetic intervention stands at the center of the concentric structure of the two psalms, marking the turning point from sin and accusation to confession and renewal. David, as well as Israel and we ourselves, will not come to ourselves on our own. The provocation and the promise come from outside, from God through God's word. The role of Asaph, the singing priest,²⁴ no doubt grew in importance as prophecy declined in the postexilic period, and these psalms remind us that priests, too, bear the responsibility to challenge power and empire, in whatever form. There is always power in privilege, and the priests (then and now) are called to speak and sing to it from God's revealed word. Liturgy and song, too, have a prophetic role to play in God's economy.

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6. Psalms 50 and 51 together provide more than just another brief critique of improper sacrifice limited to a few verses in each; they present a complex argument regarding the role of prophet, priest, and king in determining and establishing “right sacrifices” (51:19). Never is sacrifice per se denounced in these psalms. In Ps 50 sacrifice provided the proper basis, from Israel's side, for the establishment of the covenant with God (v. 5). As such, it retains a proper place (vv. 8–9) and remains the proper response of the penitent believer (v. 23). God, however, will not be controlled by manipulative sacrifice (vv. 9–15), and ritual sacrifice will not easily cover ongoing transgression (vv. 16–22). Sacrifice will lead to salvation only by way of remembrance and repentance (v. 22). But Ps 51 sees even more clearly the terrible possibility of arrogant sin that leads to exclusion from God's people and thus from life itself. For such, David realizes, no traditional sacrifice can atone (Num 15:30–31). And what if all Israel is guilty of such sin, so that all are cut off? What then remains? “As the LORD lives, the man [or the people] who has done this deserves to die” (2 Sam 12:5). Now, in the psalm, David and Israel come to the realization that only a new act of creation will restore life in the face of such

²⁴In the postexilic period, all temple singers could be called simply “Asaphites” (Ezra 2:41).

transgression, only the gift of a new “spirit,” a new “breath” of life itself (Gen 2:7)—that is, only by God’s act rather than David’s or Israel’s or ours can there be a future in which restored “right sacrifices” make sense and have a place. For now, they cannot provide what is needed. David’s only hope is in the “abundant mercy” and “steadfast love” of God, which means the sacrifice of the arrogant self that saw itself as lord and master.

7. To the degree that we rightly read Ps 51 as referring also to Israel’s national sin, we can properly speak, with Donald Gowan, of the destruction of Jerusalem and the return from exile as “the death and resurrection of Israel.”²⁵ In the words of Jacob Neusner, “[T]o be Israel in a genealogical sense is to have gone into exile and returned to Zion.”²⁶ Now that prophetic insight has been given to David through Nathan and brought into Israel’s liturgical life through the ministry of Asaph, Nathan, and David in concert. It comes down to Israel and to us in David’s prayer with the imprimatur of God’s messianic king. The path to return goes through exile, and only God can effect the alignment of the nations of the world; the path to life goes through death, and only God can effect rebirth of peoples and of individuals.

DAVID AND US

Given its profundity, it is no surprise that Ps 51, designated by the early church as one of the “seven penitential psalms” (along with Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143), has found extensive use in the liturgies of the church, from its required daily use in the Rule of St. Francis “for the failings and negligence of the brothers”²⁷ to its every Sunday use as an offertory response in English Lutheran liturgies since the Common Service of 1888,²⁸ where the focus on “Create in me a clean heart, O God” properly understands the total offering of self implied in the liturgical offering.²⁹ Ps 51 works for us today as much as it did in its own time. As Luther promised, “[Y]ou will find in it also yourself.”³⁰

Margaret Daly-Denton has argued that in the psalms “David, the anointed king, becomes paradigmatic Israelite.”³¹ But David remains David, the one who

²⁵Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

²⁶Jacob Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1987) 41; cited by Gowan, *Theology*, 196.

²⁷See William L. Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 178.

²⁸See Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 154.

²⁹Along with other Christians, Lutherans have, of course, also regularly used Ps 51 in the confession of sin (see, e.g., *Lutheran Book of Worship* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978] 193) and especially on Ash Wednesday (*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978] 129), but the use of the psalm as an offertory response is apparently peculiar to Lutherans and, in some ways, closer to the heart of the psalm itself.

³⁰Martin Luther, “Preface to the Psalter” (1545; 1528), in *Luther’s Works* (hereafter *LW*), vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 257.

³¹Daly-Denton, *David*, 90.

was “shepherd king *par excellence*, the anointed royal ‘Son of God,’ but also, and especially, the king who, through his filial communion with God, maintained his serenity in the face of the apparently definitive loss of his sovereignty. In this he was a prophet of Jesus.”³² Daly-Denton refers here primarily to the rebellion of Absalom and Ahitophel, including David’s prayer on the Mount of Olives (2 Sam 15:30–31), but this understanding of David as prophet of Jesus is fed also by his profound confession of sin in Ps 51. As we have seen, this prayer is given special place among the Davidic psalms, showing the “death and resurrection” of David and foreshadowing Israel’s same experience in the exile. Through the eyes of Paul, we can read this, too, as a prayer of Jesus: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Not surprisingly, Luther found in Ps 51 strong warrant for his doctrine of justification.³³ Interestingly, a lecture on Ps 51 is one of those places where Luther counseled people to hold firmly to the promised mercy of God, warning that the God we believe in is the God we get: “[I]f you believe that God is wrathful, you will certainly have Him wrathful and hostile to you.”³⁴ Getting God right is a matter of life and death, so David’s prayer and David’s trust in a God of steadfast love come to us as a gift that can set us free:

The thought of God’s wrath is false even of itself, because God promises mercy; yet this false thought becomes true because you believe it to be true. However, the other thought, that God is gracious to sinners who feel their sins, is simply true and remains so. You should not suppose that it will be this way because you believe this way. Rather be assured that a thing which is sure and true of itself becomes more sure and true when you believe it.³⁵

Here, as clearly as anywhere, we hear from Luther the important affirmation that justification is based finally not on some quid-pro-quo payment for sins—a calculus of sacrifice that Ps 51 specifically rejects—but only and entirely in the gracious and unexpected goodness of God, something that can be grasped only by faith.

Reading Ps 51 in conjunction with Ps 50 enhances its meaning for us. We hear now the dreaded accusation of Ps 50 that leads to the fervent confession of Ps 51. The latter psalm is grounded not in some vague Northern European or Lutheran or Augustinian or Pauline (or even Hebrew) *Angst*, but in our very real and very everyday failures to meet the clear requirements of the Decalogue (50:16–22) and in our attempts to manipulate God to our advantage (50:9–13)—all of which

³²Ibid., 112.

³³For amplification, see Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 506–507. A further investigation of this theme—a topic for another essay—would require perhaps that we take more seriously than the Reformation tradition has sometimes done the notion of sin as stain, and renewal as purification. That will bring a new dimension to a merely forensic doctrine of justification. On this, see Hartmut Gese, “The Atonement,” in *Essays on Biblical Theology*, trans. Keith Crim (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1981) 93–116.

³⁴Martin Luther, “Psalm 51,” in *LW*, 12:322.

³⁵Ibid.

we share with David of old. For him and us, hearing this prophetic and priestly word gives rise to a surrender of an unhealthy self that tries to enhance itself at the expense of others in the firm hope of receiving from an ultimately compassionate God a new self, strong enough to give itself for others (51:13–14). For Christians, that journey of death and resurrection will place us squarely in the embrace of Christ—the true giver of self for us and the true giver of self to us. ⊕

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