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Exegetical and Theological Analysis of Psalm 51:1-12

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Abstract

The Book of Psalms stands as a timeless reservoir of poetic and spiritual expressions. Among its most cherished gems is Psalm 51, which is unparalleled with regards to the subject of penitence. This paper explores key theological themes contained in Psalm 51:1-12, including sin, God's lovingkindness, David's confession and his assurance of forgiveness with the aim of contributing to contemporary scholarly discourse on the subjects of sin, repentance and divine grace, among others. This is important in the contemporary society where the issue of sin does not feature prominently in Christian preaching, and where work-based salvation theology appears attractive to some Christians. The paper used the historical-critical and exegetical approach to have a close look at the text. It examined the historical and literary context of the psalm, and sheds on the circumstances that led to its composition, particularly the events surrounding David's sin with Bathsheba. The study argues for the universality of sin, effects of sin, the need for repentance, and the need to rely on God's grace alone for salvation. In addition to contributing to Old Testament scholarship, the paper also contributes to Christian soteriology.

Keywords: *Psalm 51; David; Lovingkindness; Purification; Repentance*

Introduction

In the contemporary Christian landscape, one cannot overlook the prevailing emphasis on wealth and health. Congregations are drawn to messages promising prosperity, and there is often a noticeable lack of sermons addressing the critical notion of holiness. The stark reality is that discussions about sin have, in some instances, become infrequent in church settings. This theological shift towards a more prosperity-oriented narrative has prompted Atiemo (2016) to liken modern Ghanaian/African Christianity to gathering clouds that despite their promising appearance, yield no rain.

In various societies, one finds street evangelists whose teachings interpose human works between the sinner and Christ (Boaheng, 2021). They emphasize the need for sanctification to those who do not yet possess the ability to lead a godly life, especially because they are not yet indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, these evangelists, although well-intentioned, inadvertently drive the unbelievers further away from Christ (Boaheng, 2021). Some preachers suggest a direct connection between tithing and salvation. They argue that failing to tithe can impact one's eternal destination. This kind of message is evident in the following assertion by Adeboye (2003): "Anybody who is not paying his/her tithe is not going to heaven. Some people have taught you that if you do not pay your tithes, God will not give you blessings. This is true, but a little more serious, you do not pay your tithes, and you do not go to heaven." Some Christian denominations also impose Sabbath observance and dietary restrictions as prerequisite for salvation, thus diminishing God's grace and the efficacy of Christ's sacrificial death in delivering humanity from the grip of sin.

In such a context, there is the need to draw the church's attention to the message of sin, the need for repentance and God's ever-readiness to forgive the repentant sinner. Yet, not much scholarly attention has been paid to this issue, especially in recent times. This paper fills the literary gap by exploring Psalm 51:1-12 from both biblical and theological perspectives to draw attention to the need to rely on God's grace for salvation after truly repenting of one's sin. The paper is a literature-based research that gathered data from existing publications.

With this introductory background the study now proceeds to consider key background issues.

Historical context of Psalm 51:1-12

The English titles, "Books of Psalms" and "Psalter" come from the Septuagint *Psalmoi* and *Psalterium*, meaning songs "accompanied with the pizzicato of stringed instruments" (Waltke and Yu, 2007, p.870). According to White (2008), the Psalms grew over a long period of time starting with David and were complete by about 150 BCE. Psalms belong to the part of the Hebrew Bible referred to as *kethuvim*, "the Writings" and they are part of the poetic division of the Hebrew Writings. Choi (2019) asserts that Psalms are described as a microcosm of the Hebrew Bible because they contain almost all the significant contents of the Hebrew Scripture, including, God's creation, Abrahamic, Sinaitic and Davidic covenants, the broken covenants and the exile and the hope of restoration, based on the covenantal promise. Choi (2019) identifies the major genres in the Psalms as hymn, royal psalm, communal complaint song, individual complaint and individual song of thanksgiving, prophecy, among others. The diverse backgrounds of the individual Psalms make it virtually impossible to have common background information about the whole book of the Psalms. Contextual backgrounds can therefore only be studied effectively when restricted to the individual Psalms.

Different views have been expressed concerning the authorship of Psalm 51. Traditionally, David is considered the author of Psalm 51 based on the link that the superscription provides between this psalm and David's confession after the Uriah-Bathsheba episode (2 Sam. 11:1-12:25). Contrary to this view, some modern scholars (including Terrien, 2003 and Goldingay, 2013) argue that the final two verses (18-19), which talk about the need to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, depict a post-Davidic era because the walls of Jerusalem were intact during David's reign and only needed to be rebuilt after their destruction in 579 BCE.

One cannot deny the support that the heading gives to Davidic authorship. Also, most of the verses in this psalm fit David's situation after his encounter with Nathan as the heading suggests. Yet, the argument based on the last two verses of the psalm also seems valid. It is, therefore, safe to contend for Davidic authorship of part of the psalm and a post-Davidic-era addition (of the last two verses) to reach

its present form. David wrote his part during his reign while the final part was added later (after 597 BCE) by a redactor when the psalm became integrated into Israel's corporate worship liturgy. Nonetheless, the discussions in this study will be done based on Davidic authorship.

Some background information can be deduced from the superscription of this psalm. This psalm was documented by David after Prophet Nathan approached him after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had consequently masterminded the death of Uriah, the husband. A brief look at the Nathan-David encounter that resulted in the writing of Psalm 51 is therefore significant at this point. The story of the Ammonite-Armenian wars in 2 Samuel 10:1-10 and in 11:1 forms the historical context for the David-Bathsheba-Uriah narrative which is then followed by Nathan's visit to David. King David, is in his residence in Jerusalem, while his armies are battling the Ammonites. He observes Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (one of his military generals) bathing. The king sends for her, has sexual intercourse with her, and then engineers the murder of Uriah.

The situation prompted God to send Nathan, a prophet and a friend to David, to confront the king with the evil that he had committed. Nathan used a parable to draw the king's attention to his evil act. The sin of David and his reprimand by Nathan (2 Sam. 11-12) elicited his repentance based on which he confessed his sin (2 Sam 12:13a). Psalm 51 is therefore David's theological reflection on his sin, God's lovingkindness, his confession and his assurance of forgiveness.

Literary Context and Structure of Psalm 51:1-12

The 150 Psalms in the Old Testament are divided into five books: Book I (Psalms 1-42); Book II (Psalm 42—72); Book III (Psalms 73-89); Book IV (Psalms 90—106), and Book V (Psalms 107—150) (White, 2008; Waltke and Yu, 2007; Ho, 2016). Psalm 51 belongs to the second division of the Psalter. VanGemeren (2008) traces how Psalms 51—66 form a collection of Davidic psalms with a common theme of the experience of evil. Psalm 51 deals with David's evil that was confessed and forgiven, but Psalms 52—64 lament the evil that David experienced from others (see also Ho, 2016). Psalm 51 is one of the Penitential Psalms (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), a subdivision of the psalms of individual lament. The high emphases that Psalm 51 places on the issues of guilt, repentance, and awareness of God's punishment have earned it the description, "The Great Penitential Psalm" (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014).

After the superscription, Psalm 51 presents David's cry for mercy in the first two verses (vv. 1-2). Then comes David's confession of his sins (vv. 3-6) and his petition for cultic cleansing (vv. 7-12). Following the petition is a vow of praise and service where he enumerates some things he would do if forgiven. These are things he could not do until he was forgiven (vv. 13-17). The last two verses are a prayer, asking God to rebuild Jerusalem in order that sacrifices may again be offered to him at the Temple (vv. 18-19).

The Staircase Structure of the Text

The structure of the Psalm depicts a combination of both personal concern (vv. 1-17) and concern for the welfare of the community at large (vv.18-19). An attempt is made below to construct a structure for the text.

A. Acceptance of guilt and a plea for pardon (vv. 1-5)
  B. A flashback on his stiff-neckedness (v. 6)
    C. A desire for restoration (vv. 7-8)

A. Plea for pardon (v. 9)
C. A desire for restoration (vv. 10-12)
D. The role of the restored sinner (vv. 13-15)
E. The acceptable element of penitence (vv. 16-17)
F. Prayer for national restoration (vv. 18-19).

In addition to the above stair-case structure formulated by the authors, one may also consider the following chiastic structure (VanGemeren, 2008).

A Prayer for Individual Restoration (vv. 1-2)
B Confession and Contrition (vv. 3-6)
C Prayer for Restoration (vv. 7-12)
B´ Thanksgiving (vv. 13-17)
A´ Prayer for National Restoration (vv. 18-19)

With the above background to the text, the study moves on to read it closely.

Close reading of Psalm 51:1-12

The introductory cry (Ps. 51:1-2)

1. חָנֵּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחַסְדֶּךָ כְּרֹב רַחֲמֶיךָ מְחֵה פְשָׁעָי׃
2. הַרְבֵּה הָרֶב כַּבְּסֵנִי מֵעֲוֹנִי וּמֵחַטָּאתִי טַהֲרֵנִי׃

The Psalm is constructed in the form of a classical lament psalm, with the first two verses forming an "introductory cry," which gives the essence of the whole psalm (Ross, 2013). Here, the psalmist addresses Israel's covenant-keeping God by the generic title אֱלֹהִים, "God," and not by his personal name, YHWH, perhaps because the so-called Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42—83) demanded it (Waltke & Yu, 2004). The psalmist's petition for forgiveness is based on three divine attributes—namely, abundant mercy, steadfast love and kindness—which underline God's character as a faithful, covenant-keeping God (see Exod. 34:6), who has a deep commitment to his people (Ross, 2013; Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014; Greidanus, 2016). The voice of the persona (David), depicts someone who smells the nearness of dread and danger. Perhaps, the dreadful nature of God's judgment could be one of the attributes based on which David pleads for mercy.

The verb חָנֵּנִי *chānneni*, translated, "have mercy on me," is a *qal* imperative masculine first person common singular, signifying a recurrent prayer request (cf. Pss. 4:1; 6:2; 9:13; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:10; 31:9; 41:4,10; 56:1; 57:1 [twice] and others) to a gracious God, the same root (חנן) appearing also in the priestly blessing, "and be gracious to you" (Num. 6:25) (VanGemeren, 2008). The word for "mercy" signifies a sense of intense emotion, of deep-seated feelings, which one expresses toward a dear one. It underlines God's compassionate feeling for the helpless and dependent just as a mother's feeling for the child of her own womb. The word "mercy" and related terms like "grace" refer to undeserved or unmerited favor; therefore, the psalmist was expressing his desire for favorable and beneficent act from God (Greidanus, 2016). David's sins, namely, his adulterous act with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, could not be dealt with through the sin offering because the sin offering atoned for inadvertent sin but not for deliberate sins like David's (cf. Lev. 4:2, 22, 27; 5:15-18; 20:10; 22:14; Num. 35:31-32). David's intentional sins in this situation included lusting after another's wife; making her commit adultery; lying

to her husband who was a loyal soldier; conspiring to kill a person, and trying to cover the entire event up instead of repenting and seeking forgiveness. At the same time, David could not make restitution to either Uriah or Bathsheba. There was no way David could bring Uriah back to life or restore Bathsheba's purity. He was therefore fully aware that it was only by God's mercy that he could be pardoned.

The psalmist gives a three-fold description of his separation from God. Firstly, he describes his condition using the term *פְּשָׁעִים* ("transgressions", v. 1b) which primarily means acts of disobedience, of rebellion; hence, in the present context, it signifies a "rebellion against God" (Ross, 2013, p.181). The use of the plural form (*פְּשָׁעִים*) underscores that in the psalmist's situation, sin was compounded upon sin (Ross, 2013). The second term is *עָוֹן* ("iniquity," v. 2a) which carries the sense of guilt, fault, a thoughtful act of misconduct or deliberate, not accidental, sin. This word is linked with the verb "to go astray," and so "iniquity" refers to a departure from the communal and or cultic standards (Ross, 2013, p.181). The third word is *חַטָּאת chattat,* (translated "sin," v. 2b) which is the most general word for sin used in the Old Testament with the basic idea of going astray or missing the mark. Here, the use of *chattat,* "refers to the sin that is borne by the psalmist" and its associated self-inflicting punishment (Susanto, 2018). David had indeed crossed God's line for him by his adulterous act (that is, transgression); he had missed God's mark (that is, sin) and he had succumbed to his twisted nature (that is, iniquity) (Wiersbe, 2007). By the use of all these three, the psalmist, not only covers virtually all aspects of sin but also makes the theological point that a proper understanding of sin is the first step toward a meaningful confession.

Next, David makes a three-fold request toward spiritual renewal using three verbs. The first verb is *מְחֵה* (lit. "blot out") which means "to wipe out something" (for example, wiping a slate clean) without leaving traces, "to scrape off," "remove" or "to expunge" (Ross 2013:182). The verb "blot out," is a *qal* imperative (cf. Psa. 51:9), usually used in connection with the destruction of sinners (cf. Pss 9:5; 69:28; 109:13) from life and the book of life (cf. Exod. 32:32-33). Walton, Matthews and Chavals (2000) observe that in the ancient Near East, human efforts in dealing with sin was not meant to remove sin but to appease a deity. People became aware of their sins when they experienced calamities considered as the sentence of a deity. The goal then was to deal with the anger of the deity so that the punishment could be reversed (Walton, Matthews & Chavals, 2000). Asking for sin to be removed, therefore, meant asking the deity to overlook sin, put away anger and restore his favor. The rituals accompanying this kind of approach were meant to purify the sinner and pacify the deity (Walton, Matthews & Chavals, 2000). The ritual gave the sinner the hope that his/her sins will be absolved by the deity. The Babylonians also used this metaphor, "blotting out" sin when they spoke of tablets on which sins were recorded, and they asked that these tablets be broken, to cancel their debt or criminal charges (Walton, Matthews & Chavals, 2000). The code of Hammurabi also allows an illegal contract for the purchase of the land belonging to a soldier to be canceled by breaking the tablet on which it is documented (Walton, Matthews & Chavals, 2000).

In the present context and elsewhere in the Old Testament, "blot out," suggests the removal of a record from a tablet (cf. Exod. 32:33; Num. 5:23; Isa. 43:25). This does not mean God literally keeps written records of sins and then wipes them off when he forgives them. Rather, "blot out," is a metaphorical picture of the Old Testament concept of forensic forgiveness or "the complete removal of sin" (Ross 2013:182). This terminology can also refer to "a debt that must be paid (Psa. 130:3; Isa 43:25)" to imply that it is only God who can pay a person's debt to free him or her (Weirsbe 2007:935).

The next verb is *כַּבְּסֵנִי* ("wash me"), a *piel* imperative, which depicts sin as a stain that has to be washed out (cf. Exod. 19:10). The psalmist metaphorically compares laundering with forgiveness, presupposing that "what dirt is to the body, sin is to the inner person" (Wiersbe, 2007, p.935). Therefore, just as dirty clothes are beaten against rocks to remove the dirt out of them, so is the penitent asking God to clean him thoroughly of the dirt of sin (Ross, 2013).

Thirdly, the psalmist uses the verb טַהֲרֵנִי ("cleanse me"), a *piel* imperative often used in the cultic sense to express the idea of purification according to the Levitical tradition. By use of this term, the writer pictures sin as a defilement which renders a person ritually unclean and which must be removed in order for the person to be pronounced clean to rejoin the society (Weirsbe, 2007). Greidanus (2016, p.258) notes that the imagery employed here echoes cultic life, where one prays to be cleansed from sin as a "defiling uncleanness," which separated him/her from God and positioned him/her outside the believing community. Like leprosy which makes a person ritually unclean to go into the presence of God, the psalmist needs to be cleansed so that he can be ritually fit to come before God.

After the purification rite, which involves washing with water, followed by sanctifying with blood, one is deemed fit to be integrated into the community and to appear before God (Lev. 14:11). As such, the cleansing rite provides a person with a new beginning in life (Gen. 35:2; 41:14; 45:22; Exod. 19:10, 14). This tradition is not new to the African society, more so the Akan community of Ghana. Akan widowhood rites require widows to undergo certain rituals such as seclusion, prescribed codes of dress, walking barefooted, fasting for a specified period, among others (Asante, 2014). When the period of widowhood officially comes to an end, the widow is sent to a river for a ritual bath and cleansing. After the bath, she puts on a new cloth (usually a white cloth to symbolize her purity and newness), eats a special meal and goes around the community, greeting people and receiving gifts as a way of integrating with the society. Therefore, from both Akan and Jewish perspectives, David is asking God to give him a new beginning, and he actually made this new start (2 Sam. 12:20).

Confession of sin (Psa. 51:3-4)

3. כִּי־פְשָׁעַי אֲנִי אֵדָע וְחַטָּאתִי נֶגְדִּי תָמִיד׃
4. לְךָ לְבַדְּךָ / חָטָאתִי וְהָרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עָשִׂיתִי לְמַעַן תִּצְדַּק בְּדָבְרֶךָ תִּזְכֶּה בְשָׁפְטֶךָ׃

This section opens with the psalmist's confession of his sin to God: כִּי־פְשָׁעַי אֲנִי אֵדָע ("For I know my transgressions"). The text begins with the particle כִּי ("For") which signifies that the psalmist is about to supply the reason why he requested blotting out, washing and cleansing in the previous verse. His reason is that he knows his transgressions. Since the Hebrew word אֵדָע ("I know") is the simple (*qal*) imperfect tense and not the causative (*hiphil*) ("I make known, acknowledge"), it goes beyond head-knowledge to heart-knowledge—relational or experiential knowledge (Ross, 2013, p.185). This means that the psalmist's sins are constantly (continually) before him and he knows their nature, extent and consequences. He is saying "I am constantly conscious of or aware of" my sins (Greidanus, 2016, p.260). The psalmist's theology of confession is in line with the proverbial truth that "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (Prov. 28:13 RSV). The theological import is that true confession is rooted in one's acknowledgment of his/her sin to God, grieving for the sin committed and developing a strong determination to overcome it if it comes his/her way again.

Next, the psalmist acknowledges that his sin, which hurt other human beings, is ultimately a sin against God saying, לְךָ לְבַדְּךָ חָטָאתִי ("against you alone I have sinned" cf. Psa. 41:5; Dan. 9:8). Putting לְךָ "against you," at the beginning of the statement, followed by לְבַדְּךָ "only you" in apposition, the psalmist states categorically that sin is committed against God and God alone. The psalmist's assertion that it is God alone he has sinned against, prompts Goldingay (2013) to conclude that David did not have a proper understanding of repentance at the time of penning this psalm and he needs more teachings from God about the true meaning of sin and repentance. On the contrary, Terrien (2003) maintains that David's statement does not in any way indicate an oversight of the social harm of his sin but indicates his understanding that harming the human society through sin is ultimately contempt and blasphemy of God's holiness.

In our opinion, David is not denying that he has wronged other people such as Uriah and Bathsheba. Rather, he is making the point that, though he has sinned against others, his actions against others are sinful primarily because the actions violated God's Laws. Thus, God is the ultimate Judge and therefore the first step toward true penitence is to see sin as ultimately against God; sin is an affront against the holiness of God. This position finds support in his confession that he had "sinned against YHWH" (2 Sam. 12.13) after Nathan had asked, "Why have you despised the commandment of YHWH, to do evil in his sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife" (2 Sam. 12:9, NKJV). Nathan's comment emphasizes that David's sin against Uriah and his wife was a transgression of God's law, and this collaborates with John's definition for sin, "Whoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 Jn 3:4, KJV). Therefore, though sin may affect people, sin is ultimately against God, who created David for a purpose and called him to be king over Israel. David's assertion that it is God alone he has sinned against must therefore be understood as implying that sin is not merely a moral, social, ethical or psychological problem but more importantly a theological one and a violation of one's relationship with God.

Yet, Goldingay's view is still strong because throughout the text, one does not find David, showing remorse towards Uriah, Bathsheba, and their family etcetera. Was it the case that kings needed not to apologize to their subjects when they wronged them? Why was it that the person whose wife David could take was not an Israelite, but a Gentile? Could the king take the wives of other Israelite soldiers?

The connection between the two halves of verse 4 is exegetically challenging. The word *לְמַעַן* which connects them makes the message of the verse something like "I sinned against that you may be righteous" (Ross, 2013, p.185). It seems as if David had to sin in order to prove the righteousness of God. This however is obviously not the case. To resolve the problem, one has to take the second part of the verse (that is, v. 4b) as the psalmist's explanation of his confession rather than the reason for which he sinned. Thus, *לְמַעַן* has to be understood as stressing purpose or result. This can be indicated by inserting a transition to have: "[I say this] that you may be just . . ." (Ross, 2013, p.185). Thus, the psalmist is saying that he confessed his sin **so that** God will be seen as right and blameless in taking any decision concerning his case. By saying God's judgment is just, David has in mind 2 Samuel 12 where God announced his judgment for his defiant sinfulness.

Confession of moral impotence (Psa. 51:5-6)

5. *הֵן־בְּעָוֹן חוֹלָלְתִּי וּבְחֵטְא יֶחֱמַתְנִי אִמִּי׃*
6. *הֵן־אֱמֶת חָפַצְתָּ בַטֻּחוֹת וּבְסָתֻם חָכְמָה תוֹדִיעֵנִי׃*

According to Ross (2013, p.186), the verb *חוֹלָלְתִּי* ("I was brought forth" or "I was shaped"), basically means "'to writhe, twist as with birth pangs" while *יֶחֱמַתְנִי* ("I was conceived"), signifies "an animal in heat." A key theological issue is how this verse relates to the doctrine of original sin. Literally, the psalmist is saying, "Behold, in iniquity I was given birth, and in sin, my mother conceived me." Obviously, the psalmist is not saying that his mother sinned when she became pregnant (implying that either sexual intercourse is a sinful act or that his mother was guilty of fornication or adultery) and that at the moment of his birth he was already a sinner. To be sure, even though sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbirth rendered the persons involved ritually unclean according to the Levitical tradition (cf. Lev. 15:16-33), they were never judged to be sinful acts per se.

Scholars (like Spurgeon, Brueggemann and Bellinger) deduce the doctrine of original sin from this text. Spurgeon (2016) argues that "It is a wicked wresting of Scripture to deny that original sin and natural depravity are here taught." Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014, p.235) maintain that "Indeed the speaker concedes that all of life is permeated with alienation and recalcitrance but as is always the case in the Psalter, the only hope is to turn in need to the one to whom allegiance has already been given." For

Greidanus (2016), the text stresses that humans are born with sinful conditions inherited from their parents (Rom 5:19). Ross (2013, p.187) argues that the prepositions used in the verse signifies the situation in which he was born: *בְּחֵטְא* ("in sin") and *בְּעָוֹן* ("in iniquity") mean "in the state or condition of sin." Therefore, the psalmist makes the point that "from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not been in a sinful state—he was human after all" (Ross, 2013, p.187). Hence, though a baby should not be regarded as a wicked sinner, every person is born with a sinful nature, which when unchecked, naturally leads to acts of sin.

On the contrary, Pratte (2019) contends that Psalm 51:5 has nothing to do with original sin because: (1) there is no mention of Adam, his sin or that David inherited Adam's sin; (2) David describes the guilt of his mother in conceiving him and not his, (3) the fact that David was born in iniquity underscores the fact that he was surrounded by sin right from birth and not that he was born as a guilty person. He concludes, "So David's point is, not that he was guilty of sin from his birth, not inherited [guilt or sin], but he was born into the midst of a sinful ***environment*** and sinful ***influences***" (Pratte, 2019, p.175; emphasis original). That is to say that the proper explanation of human condition is to concede that the spread of sin from generation to generation is not due to biological inheritance and/or genetic factors.

Considering both sides of the argument, the researchers maintain that Psalm 51:5 is, first of all, intended to contrast divine perfection with human weakness (cf. Job 4:17; Psa. 130:3; Jer. 17:9). Also, the text gives a hint of the doctrine of original sin by noting that David has had a sinful nature as far back as he could think of. David makes the same point in Psalm 58:3, "The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies" (RSV). This idea of the imputation of Adam's sin to all humanity is further developed in the New Testament, especially in the teaching of Paul (cf. Rom. 5:12-14).

Verse 6, like verse 5, begins with *הֵן* ("behold"), the two verses forming a Hebrew parallelism. Here, the idea that the psalmist has always been in sin from birth (v. 5) is contrasted with the fact that God prepared him for truth (v. 6). The psalmist critically examines what God desires: *אֱמֶת* (truth or faithfulness) referring to that which is real, firm or dependable and *חָכְמָה* (wisdom), "living skillfully and successfully according to God's moral precepts" (Ross, 2013, p.188). The point is that it takes only divine wisdom to bring a solution to the sinful condition of the heart. Indeed, God prizes truth and wisdom that wells up from deep within a godly soul (Greidanus, 2016).

The terms *טֲחוֹת* ("inward parts") and *סָתֻם* ("secret part") are central to the interpretation of this text. Ross (2013, p.186) rightly points out that these words either refer figuratively to the psalmist's spirit (in which case the psalmist will be saying "God wanted faithfulness and wisdom from him, but he acted in sin") or the mother's womb (which will imply that "just as he has been in a state of sin since conception, so has he been capable of truth and wisdom, for God made him that way"). One is however, not compelled to choose one over the other because either of them shows that God has given the psalmist the capacity for better things.

Petition for cleansing (Psa. 51:7-9)

7. *תְּחַטְּאֵנִי בְאֵזוֹב וְאֶטְהָר תְּכַבְּסֵנִי וּמִשֶּׁלֶג אַלְבִּין׃*
8. *תַּשְׁמִיעֵנִי שָׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה תָּגֵלְנָה עֲצָמוֹת דִּכִּיתָ׃*
9. *תְּחַטְּאֵנִי בְאֵזוֹב וְאֶטְהָר תְּכַבְּסֵנִי וּמִשֶּׁלֶג אַלְבִּין׃*

Each of verses 7, 8 and 9 makes two requests; that of verse 7 pertains to cleansing, of 8 to rejoicing, and of 9 to forgiveness. In verse 7 the psalmist prays for forgiveness, saying "Purge me with *אֵזוֹב ezov* (hyssop)" The verb "purge" is the intensive form of the verb "to sin," and literally means "to de-sin" or "un-sin" and signifies deep cleansing that only God can do (Ross, 2013, p.189; Greidanus, 2016, p.263). The psalmist's request for cleansing reminisces the cultic ritual using hyssop (Lev. 14:1-7), the

ritual sacrifice of the red heifer (Num. 19:1-8; cf. 16-21; Heb. 9:19) and the doorframes of the Israelites during the Passover (Exod. 12:1-30, especially v. 12). The Passover serves as the key to the Jewish sacrificial system and therefore, the psalmist's allusion to it is key to understanding the Jewish perspective of sin and atonement. What the psalmist requests here, is not the literal sprinkling of blood using hyssop but a spiritual cleansing by God which can cleanse him from his sins so that he can be accepted in the sanctuary.

In his second petition, he uses the parallel verb תְּכַבְּסֵנִי ("wash me") indicating that this "washing" will make him "whiter than snow." The two images, "I shall be white" (אַלְבִּין cf. Isa. 1:18; Rev. 3:4-5; 4:4) and "snow" (שֶׁלֶג), describe the psalmist's purification which he expects to go beyond the parallel verse 7a "I shall be clean" (RSV). The colour white, symbolizes purity and holiness (in contradistinction to the scarlet of sin, as in Isa. 1:18 and dark colours, which are associated with mourning, state of impurity; see Psa. 35:13; Zech. 3:3-5) (Walton, Matthews & Chavals, 2000). The object "snow," connotes "freshness, brilliance and purity" (Ross, 2013, p.189). Therefore, the expression "whiter than the snow" is that though snow is pure, clean, and bright, after his purification, the sinner will be purer, cleaner, and brighter than snow. This signifies complete cleansing.

In verse 8, the verb תַּשְׁמִיעֵנִי ("Let me hear" or "Fill me with"), together with its object שָׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה ("joy and gladness"), produces a metonymy of effect, with the message that "if God tells him he is forgiven (the implied cause), then he will enter the sanctuary and hear the joy and gladness (the stated effect)" (Ross, 2013, p.190). The expression, "joy and gladness," probably, refers to the activities in the temple (including praises) which the psalmist yearned to join but could not join at this time due to his sin. Therefore, all that he desires from God is to pronounce him forgiven and thereby enable him to hear the sounds of joy once again in the temple. As Ross (2013, p.190) puts it, the psalmist is saying something like: "Tell me I am forgiven so that I may enter the sanctuary again where I can hear the joy and gladness." This could describe the reality of loss of spiritual joy in a believer when he/she lives with a concealed and unconfessed sin.

Verse 8b poses a challenge regarding whether the עֲצָמִים ("bones"), "which thou hast broken" (RSV), refers to physical illness or emotional distress. One can agree with Ross (2013, p.190) that "Since the psalm does not elsewhere discuss physical suffering (and in the account of David's sin, there was no physical affliction), the bones signifies his spirit, and the verb "'crushed,' is figurative (an implied comparison) for spiritual depression (as that described in Psalm 32)."

In verse 9, the psalmist repeats his request for forgiveness from 1–2. He asks God to "hide his face" from his sins, and then to blot out (as in v. 1b) his iniquities (same word as in v. 2a). Due to the strong parallelism between this verse and verses 1-2, it is most likely that the expression, "hide your face," is the same as "blot out."

Petition for renewal (Psa. 51:10-12)

10. לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חַדֵּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי׃
11. אַל־תַּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ וְרוּחַ קָדְשְׁךָ אַל־תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי׃
12. הָשִׁיבָה לִּי שְׂשׂוֹן יִשְׁעֶךָ וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִסְמְכֵנִי׃

In this section, the psalmist asks for לֵב טָהוֹר ("a pure heart") which probably refers to a heart free of impurity as a single-minded, wholehearted devotion to God's will (cf. Matt. 5.8). The term לֵב ("heart"), refers not to the organ, but the intellectual and volitional aspect of a person, or the inner person (Weirsbe, 2007; Ross, 2013). The writer's use of בָּרָא ("create"), highlights his belief that the kind of radical cleansing he needs can only come from God (see the use of בָּרָא in Gen. 1:1). In the present text, בָּרָא "create," refers to restoring or renovating the sinner's heart, as indicated by the parallel verb חַדֵּשׁ

("renew"; v. 10b) (Ross 2013:191). David is therefore not simply asking for the washing of his current heart but a more radical action, involving a complete heart transplant, a spiritual renewal, a change of heart attitude, or way of doing things—a complete regeneration (similar to what is taught in Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The word רוּחַ ("spirit"), refers not to "spirit" as opposed to the body but to attitude, will, desire. The word "right," translates נָכוֹן which means steadfast, firm, faithful, and loyal. Here, "clean heart," parallels the "spirit of a faithful person," meaning, David is saying that he wants a spirit that will be totally devoted to God so that he can be a pure and reliable person (Ross, 2013, p.92).

In verse 11, the psalmist advances his prayer with two parallel negative requests in that God would not take away his "presence" and the "Holy Spirit." His prayer is that God should not abandon him because he has sinned. "God's presence" and "his Holy Spirit" are the same. David prays that God should not take away his Spirit from him, a petition that might have been motivated by observing an unrepentant king (Saul) and his alienation from God. God's breath-spirit is the source of all human life and vitality as seen from the creation of humankind (Gen 2:7; Psa. 104:29-30). The divine breath-spirit is the source of life in a higher sense, of a meaningful life, life in fellowship with and dependency upon God, a life that is dedicated solely to him.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God came upon people for a particular assignment and departed when the assignment was done. For example, the Spirit dwelt temporarily in theocratic leaders and administrators of Israel to help them in performing their duties. David had witnessed the presence of the Spirit with King Saul and his departure from the King when he disobeyed God (1 Sam. 16). The departure of the Spirit from Saul was an indication that God had rejected him as king over Israel. David was therefore praying that he would not be rejected as Saul had been. To have God's presence removed was therefore the ultimate punishment imaginable. On a national level, it means the end of God's covenantal relationship and the total destruction of his people (Jer. 23:39; Hos. 1:9). In the post-Pentecost era (after the pouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2), the Spirit enters the lives of believers and dwells permanently in them as a seal from God (cf. Eph. 1:13). When the New Testament believer sins, the Holy Spirit is not taken away from him/her; the Spirit is quenched, even though he still remains within. Therefore, David's prayer that God should not remove him from service or communion applies to Christians in general (Ross, 2013). The prayer also betrays David's recognition of the ineffective attempt at leadership without God's empowering presence.

In verse 12 David prays for a return of that joy that comes from being saved by God. He then requests from God, a "supporting spirit of willing obedience" (cf. Jer. 24: 7; 31: 33; Ezek. 36: 25f). The word שָׂשׂוֹן ("joy"), is the direct object of the imperative and can mean joy and gladness. Here, the word יֶשַׁע ("salvation") refers to having a proper relationship with God (cf. Psa. 3:2; Ross 2013:194). Throughout the period of his guilt and depression, David had lost the joy that salvation brings, and now he is asking that this joy be restored. According to Ross (2013, p.194), "The word נְדִיבָה ("willing") in the expression "willing spirit," is "a technical religious word, used in the cultic laws for a freewill offering (Lev. 7); anyone who wanted to worship YHWH spontaneously could bring a peace offering that was called a freewill offering." Here, the word רוּחַ ("spirit") refers to the human spirit rather than God's Spirit. Such a steadfast and willing spirit has a disposition, a willingness, to obey God, and therefore to remain pure and faithful to God at all times, the result being having an excellent relationship with God.

To sum up, Psalm 51:1-12 carries the message that "even the vilest offenders among God's people can appeal to God for forgiveness from sin, for moral restitution, and for a joyful life of fellowship and service for God," if they come "in humble self-surrender and base their appeal to God's nature" of compassion and grace, "the praise that will resound to God, and the benefit of God's theocratic program"

(Ross, 2013, p.178). In other words, God, because of his steadfast love and abundant mercy, will pardon even the most heinous sins if the sinner comes to him with a broken and a contrite heart.

Theological Synthesis and Application

The *chesed* (grace, lovingkindness, mercy) of God

From the perspective of David, sin has a way of pinpointing the sinner. It leaves a mark of identity in the life of the perpetrator so that he/she remembers vividly (v. 3) and for others to discover the sinner's sin easily. Being aware of this reality, David asks God to blot out and wash away his sins (vv. 1, 2 and 9). The symbolism here, is that just as kings in ANE kept records of events on papyrus, God, has a way of keeping records of human deeds (Exod. 32:32-33; Dan. 7:10; Neh. 13:14).

The psalm also highlights the dependence of human on God who forgives and restores. This stands in stark contrast to the greatness of sin (vv. 5-7) (Barensten, 1984; 258). All human's sins are primarily against God (v. 4). This would imply that to the psalmist, sin is not only an ethical, moral, sociological and psychological problem but also a theological problem (Maré, 2008; 97). Thus, God has the judicial power to adjudicate against all sinners (vv. 4, 8, 11). However, he pleads with God to blot out his transgressions so that evidence of his sins cannot be adduced against him in judgement. Thus, sin is powerful and very pervasive but God's grace is more powerful.

The psalm further alludes to God's abundant mercy and compassion. The psalmist pleads for God's compassion and forgiveness, confident in God's willingness to pardon and cleanse those who come with a humble and contrite heart. This reflects the core Christian belief in God's grace and the availability of forgiveness to all who seek it. No matter how many times a person sins against God and it does not matter how grievous a person's sins are to God, his lovingkindness (*chesed*), is capable of accepting him/her (see Hosea v Gomer) and raising him/her up again. The repetition of the synonyms: to have mercy, unfailing love, great compassion, and to blot out, wash away and cleanse sin, which can represent the Hebrew word, ds2j2 c*hesed*, shows the contrite condition and the intense desire of David's heart for forgiveness. This follows from the fact that in the text, *chesed*, appears in the context of covenant and may be translated as "graciousness" (Cross, 2013). Even though David had done and suffered a lot for God, he did not see it necessary to rely on that to justify the need for God to show him mercy. Rather, to him, none of the good he had done could count, except when God himself showed him an unmerited favour. This is in keeping with Chanita Goodblatt's analysis of the text where he pictures David as an afflicted sinner whose only medicine is God's grace (1996; 26). Here, David shows his awareness of the gravity of his actions. He knows that his only hope is that "God should transform him by bestowing his free grace upon him" (Maré, 2008; 96). Contrary to a works-based theology that might focus on individual achievements, this passage emphasizes that sin leaves a mark on the sinner's identity. It underscores that all humans are prone to sin, regardless of their actions or works. This challenges the idea that salvation can be earned through personal righteousness.

The psalm also highlights God's holiness and justice. David acknowledges that his sin is primarily against God and His righteous standards. This theological reflection underscores the balance between God's mercy and justice, which is central to many theological discussions. Thus, God's mercy and compassion in no way reduce his standards of holiness and justice. The nature of God's judgement is such that when it confronts a sinner and his transgressions, it has an inherent compassionate element, which does not have a destructive intent, but a redemptive and transformative one (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2005; 19).

The Theology of Original/Adamic Sin

The sinful origin of humanity after Adam, is in view as the psalmist's statements transcend his personal realm (Barensten, 1984). In the past, many interpreters understood the idea of "Original Sin," to imply an inherited sinfulness of human nature (Human, 2005). Murray asserts that "natural generation inevitably produces corrupt human nature" (1959). Goodblastt (1996) avows that due to the fall of humans, they have become incapable of being vigilant, hence, David's inability to control his sexual passion at the sight of the nakedness of Bathsheba. Tate (1990, p.20), however, is of the view that David alludes to the worldview of sin in general and the "comprehensive nature of his own sin." He affirms the ubiquitous nature of sin (v. 5). He concedes that he has been sinning for a long time. Being "sinful at birth and from the time of his conception in the womb," (v. 5) is a hyperbolical way of acknowledging that sinning has been his lifestyle for many years, though, God has been revealing to him his desires and impressing upon him to embrace his moral vision. This implies that David is aware that he has acted contrary to God's dictates. As a result, he has acted foolishly. He indicates that people who follow the precepts of God are wise (37:30-31).

The effects of sin

It is clear from the exegetical study that the repercussions that sin brings upon a sinner are damning. Sin separates human from God (vv. 11); it imposes dread upon the sinner (vv. 1-2) and has a tagging effect (v. 3). Once a person commits a sin, his conscience gets stimulated and constantly reminds him/her about the sin. Thus, one would wonder why it had to take Prophet Nathan's confrontation before David would show remorse; and that also questions the genuineness of his penitential prayer. Another effect of sin is that it dents human's divine image (vv. 2, 7, 10). Also, sin mares the inner joy of the sinner (v. 12). The sinner repeatedly feels guilty and condemns him/herself. Thus, the sinner gets annoyed of him/herself and to a large extent, blames God who probably failed to hold him/her from sinning. Such a person is not able to praise God, freely pray to God, commune with God and witness about God and instruct others in the way of God (vv. 12-15). He/she loses spiritual joy and fervor. Typical of Ancient Israel was the prayer of penitence, whereby the sinner confesses the sin and injustices (Ps 106:6), shows his struggles with his conscience because of his own sin and offers a plea for forgiveness and removal of sin (Human, 2005; 119).

The damming effect of sin on individuals and the community leads to the need to deal with sin through purification. Thus, because sin makes the sinner unclean, there is the need for spiritual cleansing. This becomes clear in Psalm 51:4, where "the psalmist uses *kabbəsënî,* with the metaphorical sense of 'washing' away guilt" (Cross, 2013). The psalmist's usage of the "washing metaphor," reveals his awareness of that washing concept, as something that the LORD is capable of doing as a metaphor for atonement of sin (DiFrancisco, 2015:556). The biblical concept of repentance and or transformation describes a One-Eighty Degrees (180%) turn. The purpose and mandate of the prophets and the prophetic word and ministration, is to reproof sinners and their sin and to call men into repentance and to lead them into restoration in the glory of God. As a pattern to others, both to bring them to repentance by his example and to instruct them in their repentance about what to do and what to say. David, understands that the immediate expectation of anyone that has been forgiven by God, is to help others to receive forgiveness by preaching, teaching and instructing them about the way of God's available grace for all sinners. For David, his own life is going to be an effective testimony and teaching material for sinners he encounters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Psalm 51 provides a profound reflection on the theological aspects of human sin and God's grace. The psalmist, traditionally believed to be David, pleads for God's forgiveness and cleansing, acknowledging the pervasive nature of sin and its profound impact on the sinner's relationship with God. The key theological themes that emerge from this psalm include the concept of God's grace and lovingkindness (*chesed*). Despite the gravity of human sin, the psalmist expresses confidence in God's willingness to forgive and restore those who come with a humble and contrite heart. This underscores the foundational Christian belief in the availability of forgiveness to all who seek it, regardless of the magnitude of their sins. In addition, the psalm underlines the delicate balance between God's mercy and justice. While God's grace is readily available, sin is still viewed as an offense against God's righteous standards. The psalmist's deep awareness of this theological tension underscores the necessity of a sincere and heartfelt repentance. Furthermore, the psalm indirectly addresses the concept of original sin or the inherent sinfulness of humanity. The psalmist's acknowledgment of being "sinful at birth and from the time of conception," suggests an understanding of the fallen nature of humanity after Adam's sin, emphasizing the need for God's transformative grace. Given this understanding, the paper charges the church to pay adequate attention to the problem of sin and how God has dealt with it through Jesus Christ. Since the paper has shown that the forgiveness of sin is based on God's lovingkindness, the church needs to guard against work-based-salvation tendencies that project human efforts over God's grace.

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