

Sin, Iniquity, and Transgression: A Case for Using Psalm 51 as Prayer

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Psalm 51 is a paradigmatic penitential prayer that is uniquely fitting for prayers of repentance and spiritual reflection, especially in the context of the recent sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. I begin by giving a treatment of the tripartite concept of sin in the Old Testament that is central for the psalm through exploration of the three Hebrew root words חָטָא , עָוָן and פָּשָׁע , which are commonly translated as “sin,” “iniquity” and “transgression.” Following that, I identify five remedies for sin in the psalm and discuss them in light of other books in the Old Testament. I conclude by showing how the psalm is paradigmatic, and I offer a brief theological implication for the Catholic Church in the context of the scandal.

Psalm 51 (Psalms 51:1-17 New Revised Standard Version)

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.	10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.	11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.	12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.	13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.	14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, And my tongue will sing aloud of your deliver- ance.
6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.	15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.	16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.	17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.	

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

Text

In response to the recent sexual abuse scandals by clergy within the Catholic Church, Pope Francis wrote, “An awareness of sin helps us to acknowledge the errors, the crimes and the wounds caused in the past and allows us, in the present, to be more open and committed along a journey of renewed conversion.”¹ He then calls upon the Church to do penance and prayer. In this paper, I would like to argue that it is truly fitting to use Psalm 51 as a prayer of repentance and spiritual reflection, especially in this context. While Psalm 51 is traditionally used for penitential prayer in the liturgy, its use outside of the liturgy is very limited and not frequently used for reflection.

Using modern biblical scholarship, I argue that there are two reasons why this psalm should be used more widely for these purposes. The first reason is that it provides a powerful and expressive language to the one praying and guides the process of repentance.² In his commentary on the Book of Psalms, Richard Clifford argues that the logic of the psalms is carefully crafted to both give expression to prayer in a memorable way and persuade God to act. Furthermore, more than any other psalm, Psalm 51 is uniquely fitting because it is “paradigmatic.”³ In other words, it “covers all the bases.” The second reason is that it offers us alternative ways of understanding the concept of sin and its remedy. Gary Anderson, following Paul Ricoeur, asserts that it is impossible to avoid metaphors in attempting to understand the idea of sin.⁴ There is value, therefore, in thinking about sin through multiple metaphors. Exploring how the psalmist sees sin and remedy can offer us different lenses through which we can understand sin and remedy, thereby augmenting but not replacing contemporary perspectives. To meet the stated objectives, I perform word studies on the three different words used in Psalm 51 to refer to guilt. Afterwards, I study the remedies for

¹ Francis, Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the People of God (20 August 2018) §2, at The Holy See, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/20/180820a.html>.

² Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 253.

³ I would like to acknowledge my debt to Professor David Vanderhooft’s seminar for this way of framing the psalm.

⁴ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 3.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

sin in the psalm in a conversation with other books in the Old Testament. Finally, I conclude with reflections in light of these discussions.

Sin in Psalm 51

A central characteristic of the psalm is that it uses all three words commonly used within the Old Testament to refer to offenses against God. These are commonly translated as “sin,” “iniquity” and “transgression.” Each of them will be discussed below.

Sin – הַטָּ' (חט)

This root word is commonly translated as “sin,” and it appears most often to express the “religious disqualification of human acts.”⁵ For our purposes, we will examine how this root word appears as three different derivative words in the psalm, *hāṭā'*, *haṭṭā't* and *hēṭ'*.

The word *hāṭā'* appears in verse 4 as a verb that refers to the sinful act that the psalmist is confessing to God.

The word *haṭṭā't* appears as a noun in verses 2 and 3. It refers to the sin that is borne by the psalmist. Koch explains that this not only refers to the deed but also its corresponding consequences.⁶ In the psalmist's worldview, every sinful act, whether by commission or omission, inherently comes with a consequence that eventually requires remedy. God does not cause the consequence of the act. Instead, he would either punish by bringing to fulfillment that existing “sphere of calamity” or choose to remove the guilt.⁷ Indeed, within the context of this psalm, the psalmist is confessing that his *haṭṭā't* is always before him, and he pleads to God to cleanse it.

⁵ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 310.

⁶ Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol.IV, 312.

⁷ Botterweck, et al., *Dictionary*, Vol.IV, 312.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

The word *ḥēṭ'* also occurs twice as a noun in verses 5 and 9. It is difficult to rule out that this symmetry in terms of quantity is an intentional feature. It appears that the psalmist intends to include as many words as possible that could be used to refer to his sin. This noun occurs only 33 times in the Old Testament, and it often means a sin that eventually leads to destruction, or a sin that is borne across many individuals and across generations.⁸ It is clear that the use of this noun in verse 5 refers to a sin that he was guilty of but did not personally commit. The psalmist does not clarify if this “state of sin” is due to offenses committed by his parents or ancestors but it seems clear that he is aware of his inherited state of sin.

Iniquity – *ʿwn* (וָנָה)

This root word appears only as the noun *ʿāwōn* throughout the psalm. It occurs three times, and it is usually translated as “iniquity” or “guilt.” It is commonly used this way particularly during and after the exilic period.⁹ Like the word *ḥaṭṭā't*, this word does not only refer to the sinful act but also its consequential punishment. While God can speed up this punishment or remove it, this punishment is not assigned by God but rather comes along with the misdeed. In fact, for this word, it is even more difficult to make a distinction between the deed and the punishment. This difficulty is shown in the Cain and Abel story when Cain says “my punishment is greater than I can bear (Gen 4:13).” The word for punishment is *āwōn*. To complicate matters further, unlike *ḥaṭṭā't* but like *ḥēṭ'*, it can also carry the connotation of intergenerational guilt. The psalmist acknowledges this inherited state of sin that he bears in verse 5, as shown by the way *āwōn* and *ḥēṭ'* are paired in this psalm when the psalmist confesses his “state of sin” from birth. These comparisons show that *āwōn* seems to have a wider semantic range than each derivative word of the root *ḥṭ'* (חָטָא). Thus,

⁸ Botterweck, et al., *Dictionary*, vol.IV, 315.

⁹ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. X, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 546.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

when the psalmist uses the word *āwōn*, he confesses his deeds and, at the same time, acknowledges the guilt he bears. Moreover, this guilt may be a consequence of his act or a state that he inherited. With this one word, the psalmist expresses three concepts of sin: guilt, consequence and intergenerational guilt. Today, we do not have a word that can refer to these three at the same time. It is plausible that the psalmist uses this word in different ways to maximize the potential meaning of the word to “cover all bases” in his penitential confession.

Transgression – *ps*^ʿ (עֲשָׂה)

This root occurs three times in the psalm in two different forms. It appears as the noun *peša*^ʿ twice in verses 1 and 3. It also appears as a participle in verse 13. It is usually translated as “transgression.” While it is difficult to give a definition that fits its usage throughout the Old Testament, Horst Seebass defines its basic meaning as “an offense that causes indignation.”¹⁰ Unlike the other words previously discussed, *peša*^ʿ refers only to the act. Its semantic range does not include its consequences. Moreover, it is not merely a sin in the sense that it is a religious disqualification of the act; rather, it often means something worse, which is to break with God or to rebel.¹¹ Thus, for the psalmist, the word could be used to refer to capital sins that are truly abominable to God. Perhaps, this is why the psalmist uses the word *peša*^ʿ in verse 1 to refer to his offense. His offense is so abhorrent that his petition to wipe it away, unlike the other two root words, is preceded by three appeals. First, he appeals to God’s favor, then his steadfast love, and finally, his abundant mercy.

Now, in the preceding discussion, all the different words that are associated with sin and guilt in the psalm are discussed. At first glance, it is easy to conclude that all these words are

¹⁰ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. XII, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 141. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. XII, 141.

¹¹ Botterweck, et al., 144.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

synonymous and that the psalmist is merely using different words for the same idea to avoid constant repetition. However, this position is not able to explain why, for example, *peša* ' is used less frequently and how it is used in verse 1. When all these different words are woven together, the psalm shines as a “paradigmatic” penitential song for the forgiveness of all kinds of sin. This quality is further demonstrated as we turn to remedy in Psalm 51.

Remedy in Psalm 51

On an initial reading, the remedy for sin in Psalm 51 appears to be simply a litany of petitions by the psalmist. The preceding discussion on sin, however, demonstrated that when close attention is paid to the terms, nuances begin to be visible. To gain a deeper understanding of remedy in the psalm, we will look at how remedies in Psalm 51 echo remedies in other books of the Old Testament. It must be noted that it is impossible to be certain of the mentality of the original psalmist or the subsequent editors. Moreover, the dating of the psalm is uncertain. This discussion, therefore, is an exploration of how many remedies can be found in the psalm when its language is compared to the rest of the canonical books. I hope to show that the diverse themes of remedy in the psalm support the idea that Psalm 51 is paradigmatic. It should be stated in advance that this section is deeply indebted to Mark Boda’s work on sin and remedy because his thematic work investigates these concepts throughout the Old Testament.

The first, and clearest, remedy in the psalm is that of penitence. It is not clear whether the psalmist repents after or before punishment has fallen on him. This ambiguity is probably intentional so that the psalm can be used in both cases. If Psalm 51 is about repentance before punishments or ensuing consequences, then it calls to mind the kind of remedy seen in the Book of Kings, where the penitent, who is usually the king, confesses and divinely mitigated punishment

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

follows.¹² If this repentance is after punishment, as verse 8 may suggest, it is similar to the remedy found in Judges.¹³ Punishment has come, and Israel cries out so God may deliver it.

The second discernible remedy is an appeal to God's *hesed*, which is his steadfast love in the context of the covenant. The psalmist's reference to God's *hesed* may echo the conditional Mosaic covenant in Exodus where Yahweh is said to be "slow to anger, abounding in *hesed*...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."¹⁴

The third kind of remedy in Psalm 51 is ritual, as found in the Book of Leviticus.¹⁵ In verse 2a, the psalmist asks God to wash his iniquity, and the verb *kābas* here most often refers to the washing of garments that have become unclean, requiring cultic purification.¹⁶ The cultic theme of his appeal is intensified in verse 2b when he petitions for cleansing. The verb "to cleanse," *tāhēr*, is used most often to refer to cultic purity.¹⁷ Thus, verse 2 expresses remedy in the language of ritual. In verse 7a, the cultic language reappears with a higher pitch. The psalmist asks to be purged with hyssop, which is a plant used for purification ceremonies when ritual impurity is contracted.¹⁸ The psalmist is also aware, as shown in verse 16, that ritual without the right disposition is pointless.

The fourth remedy is evident, in verse 10, when the psalmist asks God to create a clean heart within him so that he will not sin again. This petition for a new heart calls to mind God's

¹² cf. 1 Kings 21:29; Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and its Remedy in the Old Testament*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 182-183;

¹³ cf. Judg. 3:7-15

¹⁴ In Exod. 34:7, Yahweh is also said to not clear the guilty. Given that verse 8 suggests, however, that the psalmist might have already experienced punishment, the psalm still echoes this requirement for some punishments.

¹⁵ Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 73-74.

¹⁶ Botterweck, et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. VII, 40.

¹⁷ Botterweck, et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. V, 291-295.

¹⁸ cf. Lev. 14; Num 19.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

desire to give Israel a new heart after it has sinned in the Book of Ezekiel so that it will prosper and not perish.¹⁹

The fifth and final kind of remedy is mediation. In verse 13, the psalmist vows to teach transgressors, presumably in his community, the right ways so that their sins may be remedied and they may be reconciled to God. This mediation is similar to the remedy found in Exodus and Numbers where Moses, Aaron and Phinehas act on behalf of Israel to remedy sin.²⁰ Thus, the psalmist connects the remedy for the sins of his community with the remedy for his own sins. Penitence takes on a communal dimension as one may help remedy the sins of other members of the community.

Concluding Reflections

In the preceding discussions, I have demonstrated the diverse kinds of offenses referred to in Psalm 51 through word studies on the three words used to express faults. I have also shown that five different remedies can be identified in the psalm when the language is compared to other canonical books. Condensing these diverse concepts into one psalm is a demonstration that it is paradigmatic and thus, “covers all bases,” when it comes to its usage for penitential prayer. This paradigmatic quality is most likely intentional. It is, therefore, appropriate as a penitential prayer for all kinds of offenses, including the recent sexual abuses by clergy in the Church.

Furthermore, the diverse conceptions of sin and remedy in the psalm offer us alternative ways of looking at sin that may be helpful for theological reflection. Due to the constraint of space, I will offer one example that can be explored in-depth by more qualified theologians. As discussed earlier, ancient Israel did not always make a sharp distinction between the misdeed and the

¹⁹ cf. Ezek. 18:31, 36:26-28. Florian Markter, "Psalm 51, Ezechiel 36 Und Die Erneuerung Des Menschen," in *Miserere Mei, Deus: Psalm 51 in Bibel Und Liturgie*, in *Musik Und Literatur*, ed. Dominik Helms, Franz Körndle and Franz Sedlmeier, 139-148 (Würzburg: Echter, 2015), 147.

²⁰ Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 95.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

consequences. As Gary Anderson explains, sin for ancient Israel is not just a matter of a guilty conscience but a certain “thingness” that is made on the spot and imposed on the sinner.²¹ As we saw earlier, this guilt can be borne by an entire people and across generations. When this idea is considered with the ritual, or liturgical, remedy for sin that involves ceremonial purification, a metaphor for sin as a stain across many individuals and over many generations that needs to be purged emerges. How does this metaphor help us in reflecting upon the recent abuse scandals? The pope has invited “the entire holy faithful People of God to a penitential exercise of prayer and fasting.”²² We may object to such a penitential exercise because we are not, after all, individuals guilty of those abhorrent sins. But, if we see sin as a stain on the entire Church, united in Christ, which carries with it consequences that may explode later on, we will surely want to join the rest of the Church in attempting to purge it as soon as we can. Psalm 51 is a uniquely fitting biblical prayer for this purpose.

²¹ Anderson, *Sin*, x.

²² Francis, Letter of the People of God, §2.

SUSANTO: SIN, INIQUITY, AND TRANSGRESSION

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