

Psalm 51: Spasmodic Petition and Repentant Interiority

Scott R. A. Starbuck
Spokane, Washington

“It is said that the age of a tree can be reckoned by looking at the bark—one can also truly know a person’s age in the good by the inwardness of the repentance.”

— Søren Kierkegaard¹

Although Psalm 51 appears in the lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday as frequently as Christmas trees at Christmas, reading it with fresh eyes might help recover an embrace of repentance in postmodern contexts otherwise inoculated from it. My introduction to the salvific importance of repentance came in college readings from the Dutch theologian and pastor Hedrikus Berkhof: “Without repentance, all the notes of the Christian faith are off-key or fall silent ... repentance is not just a passing mood at the start of the road of renewal, but the abiding undertone of all the Christian life.”² As such, I learned that repentance is not only a requirement for the tragically flawed but a deep spiritual commitment for all who would dare to live before the presence of God. Moreover, if repentance is, indeed, the “abiding undertone of all the Christian life,” then repentance itself could be a powerful witness to the reality of God in our post-repentant, post-Christian culture. Yet, it seems that either the commitment has fallen out of favor or, worse, it has been misemployed, distorted, and cheapened.

This, of course, happened with biblical lament. Almost forty years have passed since the publication of Walter Brueggemann’s seminal essay, “The Costly Loss of Lament.”³ Drawing attention to the rhetorical power of the biblical lament form to confront divine neglect of justice, Brueggemann recovered the theological and psychological importance of complaint, noting its risky determination that injustice “can, must, and will be changed.”⁴ In doing so, he warned that when lament is avoided in worship, “the point of access for serious change has been forfeited.”⁵

One suspects that we have entered another ecclesial tipping point at which we might forfeit access to serious change because of a loss of commitment to repentance. We live among cultural forces that increasingly celebrate public performances of denial, deflection, and diversion while at the same time belittling the metacognitive work of repentance. Hegemonic praise and tribalistic arrogance now obscure (and therefore gaslight) the inaugural message of Jesus that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near—repent, and believe in the good news.”⁶ By the example of our most visible leaders, the cultural preference is to avoid any appearance of “flip-flopping,” remain resolute—especially when facing litigation—

and blame the victim. At the same time, we have grown familiar with public political demonstrations of realignment; standing in public condemnation of a political figure's actions only to, over time, entirely and subserviently align with the previously castigated, especially if the realignment allows for a thinly veiled transactional power grab.

I find it encouraging that this is not an entirely postmodern phenomenon. Søren Kierkegaard grounded such convoluted about-face contrition to dispositions of impatience and momentary regret rather than committed repentance: “impatience, however long it continues to rage, however darkened the mind becomes, *never becomes repentance*; its weeping, however convulsed with sobs, never becomes the weeping of repentance; its tears are as devoid of beneficent fruitfulness as clouds without rain, as a spasmodic shower ... *momentary repentance is very dubious* and is not to be hoped for at all simply because it perhaps is not the deep inwardness of concern that sets forth the guilt so vividly, but only a momentary feeling. Then regret is selfish, sensuous, sensuously powerful in the moment, inflamed in expression, impatient in the most contradictory overstatements—and for this very reason it is *not repentance*.”⁷

In our world dominated by social media, this seems eerily true today. Though commonplace, impatient regret, the desire to reverse a situation of misfortune or loss through a transactional public appeal, is not repentance. For Kierkegaard, true repentance is deeply inward, metacognitive, reflective, not reactionary, and slow to take its course.

It is important to recognize that the interiority of repentance was developmental. David Lambert has argued that many Old Testament texts traditionally read as indicative of heartfelt repentance should be understood primarily as transactional and spasmodic, narcissistic and ugly: appeals for release from punishment, redemption from disaster, expiation from disease, or restoration of social status.⁸ As such, they bear markers of impatience and regret, not the metacognition of individuals reflecting on past actions and attitudes with sorrow, insight, and resolve toward a change in future actions. Repentance, presupposing individual responsibility and agency, reflective interiority, and the capacity to will moral change, is primarily a later development attested in the New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism. Being the case, an unwitting proclamation of a “supposed” Old Testament repentance text might reinforce a mistaken view that repentance is characterized primarily by public impatience (anxiety) and regret rather than a deeper longitudinal metacognitive inwardness, thus confirming a cultural norm while obscuring an opportunity for serious personal and societal change. However sensually powerful, transactional appeals to the deity are not repentance but more likely narcissistic cries for relief as Kierkegaard suggests.

I am not the first to consider Psalm 51 a notable exception to Lambert's review of Old Testament texts. Even more, Psalm 51 is particularly relevant to the grievance culture of postmodernity. On the one hand, it meets the Kierkegaardian requirements

for true repentance. On the other hand, it voices powerful yearnings for transactional lament. Psalm 51 is a potential Kierkegaardian dialogue between spasmodic petitionary showers and thoroughgoing metacognitive repentance. Anyone who has repeated and earnestly prayed Psalm 51 in the face of the power of world-shattering de-habilitating sin knows the confluence of both.

Psalm 51 contains twenty petitions (some would say erratic demands) of the deity: “have mercy on me,” “blot out my transgressions,” “wash me thoroughly,” “cleanse me,” “teach me,” “purge me,” “wash me,” “let me hear joy,” “let the bones ... rejoice,” “hide your face,” “blot out,” “create in me,” “put a new and right spirit,” “do not cast me away,” “do not take your holy spirit,” “restore to me,” “sustain in me,” “deliver me,” “open my lips,” and “do good.” Although Lambert does not comprehensively treat the psalm, all of these fit his understanding of performative appeals for divine help rather than interior repentance. The force of these imperatives in the lyrical structure of the psalm evokes an impression of personal distress, pastorally identifiable as sensuously powerful in the moment, inflamed by poetic expression. The psalmist is miserable, panicked, deeply anxious, and somatically suffering.

Similar urgent petitions are found in areas outside ancient Israel, such as among Mesopotamia’s Akkadian prayers. Consider these requests: “release and remove the iniquities,” “drive it out,” “may my guilt be distant,” “disregard my transgressions,” “receive my prayers,” “turn my sins into virtues,” “avert the anger,” “command my health,” “remove from me the evil,” “lengthen my days,” “release my curses,” “tear out ... my evil,” and “drive away my trouble.”⁹ These imperatives, often voiced to a personal god, exploit vividness and myside biases. “Pain is unbearable.” “Be on my side, O personal god.” These petitions are desperate, neither metacognitive nor enduring. As such, the petitions in Psalm 51 and the Akkadian prayers embody the universal human desire for release from pain, anguish, and misfortune and stipulate a motive for transactional appeal to whatever perceived power is approachable and potentially effective. In the prayers themselves, a communicative structure much like the Karpman Drama Triangle is formed where the petitioner assumes the position of the victim; disease, sin, or trouble is placed in the position of the persecutor; and the deity is implored to be the rescuer of the troubled victim. Dysfunctional and addictive at their core, these triangulated prayers can hardly signal deep and reflective repentance. At the same time, their voice is eerily modern, or postmodern, with the exaltation of the ego self above all else. Might such desperate prayers signal an emerging opportunity to transform speech from victim-centered into metacognitive repentance?

In Psalm 51 the answer is “yes.” Three hermeneutical openings in Psalm 51 balance the text toward the Kierkegaardian view of repentance. First, there is the unusual working of verse 6: “You desire truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” The phrase “inward being” is lexicographically

elusive. The Hebrew term *tūhōt* likely derives from an association with the Egyptian God Toth.¹⁰ The powers or mission of Toth, a moon god, a deity of cutting (dissection) and justice, may be linguistically invoked through this term to describe the neurological regions that would later be identified as the dark unconscious of the mind/soul. Likewise, the parallel term “secret heart” suggests a personal awareness of self where all one’s secrets are locked away. The hermeneutical opening seems to be this, then: what God desires, realizes the psalmist, is a true reckoning or enlightening of the unconscious self. The allusion to the qualities of Toth suggests cutting, separating, differentiation, and then weighing, taking responsibility, and seeing what is true in the light rather than locking it away in secret darkness. This is remarkable and Kierkegaardian. Even more, the non-spasmodic petition to teach the psalmist wisdom in the hidden dark place is not a plea for deliverance but an appeal for transformational partnership. It is an urgent request for soul surgery that produces moral and enlightened metacognition rather than lobotomized fealty. It is a petition to become more desirous to the deity through moral introspection and courageous differentiation rather than appeasing the deity through a transactional payment.

The second interpretive opening occurs in verses 16-17: “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise.” We are so familiar with Psalm 51 that the audacity of this verse might be blunted. That sacrifice does not delight the deity would have been shocking, though not wholly unvoiced in Israel’s prophetic traditions. Most often in the ancient Near East and Israel, restoration into the sacrificing community was the goal after healing and cleansing. It was assumed that the deity delighted in proper sacrifice, and each Israelite needed to follow ritual and symbolic purity expectations to be healed and restored for participation in the main event. But the psalmist suggests otherwise, overturning populist religious expectations. Samuel Terrien captures the poet’s transformative insight well: “Sacrifices of animals and plants are superfluous because gifts to God tend to become techniques of mercantile manipulation of divinity.”¹¹ If Psalm 51 were merely a liturgy of outward repentance with the transactional goal of restoring positional relationships within the larger Israelite community or restoring access to the priestly sanctioned system of worship and blessing, then offering burnt offerings would be the legitimating activity of choice. The socially expected route of return from divine punishment, sickness, retribution, and rejection was the sacrificial system designed to bring balance and order. “Sacrifices are necessary because humanity needs symbols, acts with which to come before God to restore right relationships.”¹² Still, the poet seems to realize how, in the end, even these symbols can become manipulative for both participants and deity. With deep (God-given?) insight, the psalmist voices desirous dissatisfaction. So much of this thinking went against the totalistic worldview of the ancient Near East. Repentance, cleansing, and sacrifice were to be practiced when alienated from the divine powers. Only through

these rituals can one be granted access to the community celebrations with proximity to the deific power.

Deconstructing this assumption, the psalmist boldly identifies that what God desires instead of burnt offerings is a “broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.” This, too, is shocking and unanticipated. Usually, a crushed spirit and a crushed heart, a disassembled spirit and mind, would be evidence of divine curses and punishment. For example, in the Akkadian pleas for deliverance, one reads: “A mighty storm has bowed my head, like a bird my pinions have been cut off, I have shed my wings and am unable to fly. Palsy has seized my arms; impotence has fallen on my knees. I moan like a dove night and day. I am inflamed, weeping bitterly.”¹³ The petitioner reports these disorders as a victim because the maladies presumably do not reflect the wholeness the gods want for their subjects. The voicing of these somatic complaints becomes the implied motive for divine healing and rescue. How worldview-reorienting would it be, then, if the sacrifice that God wants is not an unblemished animal but a shattered spirit and mind? A person with such a cognitive and emotional breakdown would likely move in opposite directions than expected by the community and appear stuck, depressed, isolated, confused, and overwhelmed. They would appear as the modern street homeless, seemingly cursed. Is this truly the sacrifice that God desires? Is this the gift of a vulnerable self in which God delights?

The third possible opening that allows for a shift towards Kierkegaardian repentance is verse 5: “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” It is not exactly clear what the poet has in mind. Three interpretations seem available to the audience. The psalmist may refer to the transfer of generational sins, such as the reference in the Akkadian texts already cited, “Release me from the iniquities of my father and mother.”¹⁴ It is also possible that the poet believes that their conception came about through sinful acts, such as adultery.¹⁵ Lambert opts for this second interpretation, suggesting “that David could be speaking in the voice of his doomed son.”¹⁶ Although poetry often stretches the logic of discrete referent, it would be quite a curious leap of poetic imagination. As such, though possibly read this way by the restoration community, it is unlikely that a psalm that was secondarily associated with King David and the Bathsheba affair could have anticipated this connection in its composition. The third option, if the poetic insight of the psalm holds recognizable modern pastoral integrity, is to accept a psalmic recognition that the bias toward sin as systemic, multigenerational, and uniquely situated in families of origin. This seems not only appropriate but necessary for a type of ongoing repentance that is deep, metacognitive, and responsive to the uncovering of cultural idols as well as the *Imago Dei*.

These three openings read together shift Psalm 51 from a mere transactional appeal for divine help to include a metacognitive assessment of self and fresh prophetic insights into the desires of God. The psalm, like the biblical texts of the literati, is mixed. It reflects, as would the emerging polyphonous scriptural cannon, a sacrificial

system that dominated ancient Israel as a totalizing force and captured the imaginations of the Second Temple community while also including prophetic counter-voices declaring that covenantal integrity was the true yearning of God: Isaiah 1:11-17, Isaiah 66:1-4, Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8, and Jeremiah 7:1-15. Importantly, Jeremiah expressed having something akin to a shattered mind and spirit (Jeremiah 20:8-9). These prophets believed the divine will was for wholeness and relational integrity over and against “amazing” transactional worship.

As a mixed text of the spasmodic petition and metacognitive repentance, the psalm rings pastorally true that wholeness and growth are hardly straightforward and without confusion, setbacks, embarrassment, and pain. The pleas of Psalm 51, in light of these openings to metacognitive repentance, can best be read as cries for help along the arduous interior path of covenantal fidelity and failure. In Psalm 51, repentance is a cooperative covenantal process based on divine and human inputs and insight. The urgency that God would provide a clean heart and place a “new and right spirit within” the psalmist becomes more than a request for simple healing. It is the sincere, even desperate, hope that psychological and emotional health, seemingly beyond the psalmist’s control and vision, will indeed be had. Although the psalmist recognizes the call to rigorous and unflinching personal truth within, the psalmist cannot imagine pursuing the hard metacognitive work of individuated repentance apart from the presence of God and the divine spirit (verse 11). The psalmist finally prays to be sustained with a willing spirit and for the restoration of joy, already sensing that metacognitive repentance is more endurance sport than sprint. It is not often joyful, though one will emerge, by faith, embodying joy. Importantly, repentance is not to be faced alone but in the presence and sustenance of God. This way, the imperative pleas for help are resituated from a transactional Karpman triangulated ask to a cooperative covenantal journey deep within. There are no victims. There are no persecutors. God is not the rescuer but the divine presence within and without.

I think this is the crucial Lenten insight. Even as Psalm 51 stands as a mixed text, the psalmist is never separated from the deity in its lyrical development. Because of this, the words of the fourth verse express a surprisingly deep intimacy in misgiving: “Against you, you alone (in differentiation) have I sinned.” Could a courageous and profoundly metacognitive commitment to repentance lead one to a realization that sin affects not only the person within and access to God within but also reveals God’s fearless and graceful presence within? If so, repentance, interiorly endured, reveals unmerited grace and may eventually become a path of redemption for others (verse 13).

Might another opening for Kierkegaardian repentance emerge by reading the psalm through the story of David? Dennis T. Olson indicates that given the superscription, “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan had come to him, just as he had gone into Bathsheba,” there are three places in the David story that the redactors of the Psalter might have had in mind.¹⁷ The first is 2 Samuel 12:13a, where David

confesses to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Psalm 51 could be read as the more fulsome poetic expression of the narrative statement. The second could be an association with Nathan’s judgment sentence against the child that is born from an adulterous relationship (2 Samuel 12:13b-14). Olson suggests a third possibility occurs after David and Bathsheba’s son dies. David enters the house of the Lord to worship (2 Samuel 12:20).¹⁸ None of these suggestions, however, are completely obvious or satisfactory. As such, the superscription stimulates its own metacognitive reflection. Just as Psalm 51 pictures a new and more rigorous way forward through covenantal intimacy and confessional integrity with the deity, perhaps the David reference—like many of the Davidic superscriptions in the Psalter—looks to David not only as a historical king but even more as the typical human; complex, sinful, courageous, hard-pressed, tragic, and repentant. The only way to access David’s interiority is through one’s own. That is the point. The openness of superscription allows each reader to make it their own.

Finally, it might be a surprising about-face that the psalmist petitions the deity to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, promising that once rebuilt, God will “delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar” (verses 18-19). How can that square with verses 16-17, where the psalmist proclaims that God does not delight in sacrifice? This curious contradiction has led some scholars to view verses 18-19 as secondary.¹⁹ Perhaps not. Insight gained through the enduring metacognitive process of repentance is seldom directly lived out without contradiction. Pastorally critical, then, is that Psalm 51 also reveals that the interiority of repentance does not necessarily lead one to disengagement with a diverse ecclesial community—quite the opposite. Kierkegaardian repentance, evident in Psalm 51, opens the possibility of the shattered and broken, the guilty and wronged, the confused and the disassembled, the spasmodic and deeply grounded, to seek a life-long Lenten pilgrimage amidst the transactional and post-repentant. Such is the power of God to meet us exactly where we are and to call us to our true selves.

No wonder Jesus said, “Repent and believe in the good news.”

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, “On the Occasion of a Confession,” in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18.

2. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 429.

3. Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11 (36): 57–71.

4. *Ibid.*, 63.

5. *Ibid.*, 64.

6. Mark 1:15 NRSV

7. “On the Occasion of a Confession,” 17, emphasis mine.

8. David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

9. In Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 340-341.
10. Mitchell Dahood S.J., *Psalms II: 51-100: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (vol. 17; Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.
11. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (The Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 408.
12. Nancy de Claissé-Walford and Beth Tanner, "Book Two of the Psalter: Psalms 42-72," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 457.
13. *Hidden Riches*, 340
14. *Ibid.*
15. Ben Witherington III, *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 135.
16. Lambert, *Repentance*, 39.
17. Olson, "Concept," 89-90.
18. *Ibid.*, 91.
19. See, among others, Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (vol. 20; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 29, Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (vol. 14; The Forms of the Old Testament Literature; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 214, and Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 101-102.