Psalm 51

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I. Translation with Notes

[1] For the leader of music. By David. [2] When Nathan the Prophet came to him when he went unto Bathsheba.	
[3] Be gracious to me, oh God According to you loving kindness.	According to your great compassion[1], erase my transgression.
[4]Wash[2] me from my guilt,	and from my sin / purify me.
[5] For I know my transgression.[3]	and my sin is always before me.
[6] Before you alone I sinned and performed evil in you sight.	Therefore you are righteous in your word and pure[4] in your judgment.
[7] Behold, I was born in evil[5]	and in sin my mother conceived me.
[8] Behold, you delight in truth in the inner	You teach me wisdom in the secret place.[6]

[1]"According to your *chesed* , according to your *rechemim"*. These terms often appear together but with different shades of meaning. *chesed* appears in the context of covenant and may be translated as graciousness. *rechemim* is best taken as compassion such as a mother feels for her children (*rechem* is also a word for *womb*) or as one brother would feel towards another (from the same womb). The plea for *hanan, rechremim* and *chesed* calls to mind the revelation of God's attributes on Sinai (Ex. 34:6 – cf. Jon 4:2; Ne 9:17; Num. 14:18; Ps 145:8).

[2] *kabbəsḗnî* – 'wash me'; the qal form is used to denote the action of cleaning cloths "by washing treading, kneading and beating them (HALOT)" It appears in Micah 7:19 in the context of treading iniquity under foot but not in judgment but as a fuller does in cleaning clothes. In Psalm 51:4 it is used with the metaphorical sense of washing away guilt (cf. also Jer 4:14).

[3] *p̄əšāʿay* is translated 'my transgression'. The word does not appear in Genesis and only in Exodus in reference to the community of Israel. The word is also used in reference to the rebellion (*wayyipsa*) of Mesha against king Ahab. (2 Kings 3:4-5).

[4] In Akkadian juridical texts from Ras Shamra the verb *zaku* is frequently found, with various nuances as "to be free of every obligation, exempt from service, free from claims." Mitchell J. Dahood, *Psalms*, 1st ed., 3 vols., The Anchor Bible, (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1966). 4

[5] *ʿāwôn* is usually translated "iniquity". The word describes the damage that sin does to the sinner. As a punishment, *`āwôn* may be compared to a burden the sinner carries (Gen 4:13; Isa 1:4).

[6] Dahood notes that the word, *ḇaṭṭūḥôṯ* - trans. 'inward being', is derived from the name for the Egyptian god of knowledge Thoth "the clever minded one". It is used in parallel with *ḇəsāṯūm* which Dahood translates as "secret heart". Dahood also notes that the word appears in Ezek 28:3 where it refers to 'secret lore' or 'magical arts' and

being.	
[9a] Purify me with hyssop[7] [8]	and I will be pure indeed.[9]
[9b] Wash me	and I will be whiter than snow.
[10] Cause me to hear gladness and rejoicing.	Make the bones that you have crushed to rejoice.[10]
[11] Hide your face from my sin	and erase[11] all my iniquity.
[12] Create in me a clean heart, oh God,	and renew a right spirit within me.
[13] Do not cast me from before you	and do not take your Holy Spirit[12] from me.
[14] Restore to me the joy of your salvation	and support me with a willing spirit.
[15] I will teach evil-doers[13] your ways	and sinners will return to you.
[16] Save me from bloodguilt[14], oh God, God of	My tongue will rejoice in your righteousness.

suggests that "the use of the word in our verse contrasts the 'true Wisdom' of the Israelites with the 'cleverness' of the Egyptian wizards and the secret arts of the Canaanites." Dahood, *Psalms*. 5

[7] *ʿëzôb* is traditionally translated as 'hyssop' but Dahood notes that 'hyssop' offers a poor parallel to "snow" and suggests instead that the stem be understood as *zwb* meaning "to gush, flow" (cf. Ps 78:20 – "It was he who struck the rock; water gushed forth (*yazubu*) and swept down in torrents.") Dahood suggests that the noun belongs to a class of nouns that uses a prothetic aleph, siting several examples of Phoenician place names that use a prothetic aleph. (cf. Job 33:7 *ekep*; 37:13 - *yarso* "his good pleasure"; 41:24 - *hryw* "nostrils"; Prov 22:13 - *'rsh* "slayer") Dahood argues that in this context *beh* is used in a comparative sense so that *bəʾēzôḇ* (Psa 51:9 BHT) is parallel to *miššéleḡ* (Psa 51:9 BHT). In this case, the prefixs *be* and *min* are used as comparatives. (cf Prov 24:5) Although, Dahood's translation may be possible, it is takes some linguistic magic that is wholly unnecessary. There is no rule that says that the author is bound by strict parallelism. Moreover, hyssop fits perfectly with the language of purity and washing. Certainly that is how the Septuagint and the Targums understood it.

[8] As a semi-shrub, its hairy leaves and stem made an ideal applicator for water and blood in purification rituals. "The plant also contains essential oils that may have been used for the treatment of skin diseases ("leprosy"). There are data supporting the antimicrobial action of O. syriacum against fungi." (Lytton John Musselman, *A Dictionary of Bible Plants* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). 'hyssop')

[9] Dahood argues that *wəʾeṯhār* makes us of an emphatic *waw*. cf. Exodus 15:2: "Horse and rider he *indeed* hurled into the see." Isa 48:16c - "He has sent me his very own spirit." Isa 14:23 - Truth has issued from my mouth, the word shall never return" Isa 37:26 - "from days of old indeed I planned it."

[10] *rānnû ləyaʿăqōḇ śimḥāh* (Jer 31:7; Ps 105:30)

[11] *macha* - blot out; cleaning off a mouth (Prov 30:20); wiping away tears (Isa 25:8); wiping out a dish (2 Kgs 21:13); all contexts describe the removal of all evidence of something. May also be used in reference to annihilation of someone from the face of the earth. The blotting out of someone's name from a book or tablet is a judgment (Ps 69:28; Ex 32:32). It is used in connection with the removal of sins in Isa 43:25, 44:22 and Jer 18:23. (Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy : Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament*, Siphrut (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009). 425;

[12] The only other occurrence of "Holy Spirit" in the Old Testament is in Isaiah 63:10f.

[13] rebels – cf. vs. 5

[14] Dahood connects *middāmîm* (Psa 51:16 BHT) to the root *damam* meaning 'to weep'. Heb. *dmm* "to weep" and *mawet* "death" can also denote "the place of death, namely, Sheol" so dammim may have come to signify the place of tears par excellence. cf. Matt 8:12 – (Dahood 1966, 8); This would be the only instance where the word is used with this sense. It is therefore unnecessary to make it fit an unconventional reading when the word makes perfect sense with its usual meaning 'blood guilt'. Mays interprets *dāmîm* as a comprehensive term for guilt. (cf. Isa 4:4; Ezek. 18:13; 22:1-16; Hos 12:14) James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching

my salvation.[15]	
[17] Oh Lord, open my lips	and my mouth will tell of your praise.
[18] For you do not delight in sacrifice or I would give it.	Burnt offering you do not desire.
[19] The sacrifice of God[16] is a broken spirit	and a broken and crushed heart God will not despise.
[20] Do good to Zion according to your desire.	Build the walls of Jerusalem.
[21] Then you will delight in the sacrifices of righteousness, whole burnt offerings.	Then the will bulls be offered on your altar.

and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994). It is clear from the passages cited that *damim* is a comprehensive term for guilt as it relates to a society but there is no instance where *damim* is used of an individual where it does not refer to murder.

[15] Dahood takes *təšûʿāṯî* to be a Divine appellative 'my Savior' cf. Ps 25:5 and 27:9 "the God who will save me"

[16] Dahood takes the *elohim* in *zibḥê ʾĕlōhîm* (Psa 51:19 BHT) as superlative meaning "the finest sacrifices". (cf. Ps 36:7 and 83:13 - "the very finest meadows.") It seems to this reader that the translation of *elohim* as a superlative is not compelling in any of these instances.

II. Introduction

Introduction

Psalm 51 is one of the most familiar psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. Although it is a highly structured psalm – composed strictly of doublets – it reads like a sincere confession. The intensity of the psalm is heightened in several different ways: 1) by the exclamations of the psalmist – (Behold!), 2) by the use of imperatives as a form of entreaty (ie. cleanse me, purify me, blot out my iniquities, renew a right spirit, etc.), 3) by the use of the name of God in direct speech ('oh God' and 'oh Lord'). The wrenching plea of verse 13 is used in the introduction to the penitential prayer during the Jewish Days of Awe.[17] And the whole of Psalm 51 is used in the liturgy that marks the beginning of Lent.[18]

According to the psalm's superscription, King David wrote this confession after he committed adultery with Bathsheba.[19] The historical context of the Psalm has a significant influence on how we read it so it is worth considering the superscription in more detail. In the early years of critical Biblical scholarship, superscriptions were considered to be late additions to the text and therefore of little use in establishing the historical context of the Psalm. This has changed over the intervening years. Many scholars today acknowledge that the superscriptions "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."[20] Bruce Waltke goes further, arguing that the

[17] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms : A Translation with Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).
[18] Mays, *Psalms*.
[19] H.J. Stoebbe "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" Bible Stud 20,17)
[20] Stoebbe, Bib. Stud. 20,17 quoted by Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59 : A Continental Commentary*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

superscriptions should not be considered secondary additions to the Psalm. He gives the following reasons: 1) They contain technical musical terms that were obscure in later periods but were nevertheless retained and transcribed in the LXX and in the targums, 2) none of the ancient Hebrew MSS omitted them, 3) elements in the superscriptions share similarities with superscriptions in Akkadian and Egyptian texts.[21] Waltke further notes that the superscriptions for some of the psalms (7, 30 & 60) contain historical information that cannot be found elsewhere in the historical books of the Bible or even inferred from the Psalm itself.[22] Conversely, many psalms beg to be given a historical superscription but have nothing at all. It follows that if the historical superscriptions for Psalms 7, 30 and 60 appear to be original instead of secondary additions, then the superscription for Psalm 51 may also provide the historical context for the psalm.

In additions to the superscription, there are several clues in the body of the psalm that shed light on its historical context. First of all, the consistent use of the singular in reference to the sin that the psalmist confesses suggests that a specific sin is in view and not a habitual or unknown sin. The sin may be that of murder for it speaks of the psalmist's 'bloodguilt'.[23] Furthermore, the psalmist fears that he may lose the anointing of 'the spirit of God'- an anointing that belongs to kings, priests, and prophets. Thirdly, the psalmist declares that upon being cleansed from his sin he will sacrifice bulls as burnt offerings on the altar – a type of offering that is usually reserved

[21] Bruce Waltke, "Theology of the Psalms," in *NIDOTTE*. 1100

[22] ie. Several examples may be cited (following Waltke) 1) "A Shiggaion of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning the words of Cush, a Benjaminite. (Psa 7:1 ESV)" 2) "A Psalm of David. A song at the dedication of the temple. (Psa 30:1 ESV)" In this case, the Psalms use in the dedication of the temple may be secondary. Certainly, there is no indication in the Psalm that would connect it to a temple liturgy. 3) "To the choirmaster: according to Shushan Eduth. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he strove with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt. (Psa 60:1 ESV)"

[23] See discussion above for '*dammim*' translated 'blood guilt'.

for priests or royalty.[24] Finally, the Psalmist acknowledges that he sinned (*ḥāṭāʾtî*) "to the LORD" echoing the confession of David to Nathan in 2 Sam. 12:13 in which the same verb *and preposition* appear in reference to David's transgression.[25] Admittedly, this is not a lot to go on, but what we do have fits with what we know of David's sin with Bathsheba.

A number of objections have been raised to an early date for the Psalm. For example, Robert Alter notes that "the idea of offering God a broken spirit instead of sacrifice looks as though it may have been influenced by the later prophetic literature."[26] Mays likewise notes that the prayer for a new heart and spirit connects Psalm 51 with the promise of a new heart and spirit in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[27] Finally, many commentators note that the psalmist's plea for the building up of the wall of Jerusalem fits best within the historical context of the post exilic period. These objections go beyond the scope of this paper but will be considered briefly in the discussion below.

The Psalm may be divided into three major sections (following Perowne):

1. Prayer for forgiveness (vss. 1-8)
2. Prayer for renewal (vss. 9-12)
3. Holy resolutions of one who has experienced the forgiving love and the sanctifying grace of God (vss. 13-21) [28]

We will follow these three major divisions and focus on a key question in each section.

III. Prayer for Forgiveness (1-7)

Before you alone I sinned and performed evil in you sight. (vs. 6)

[24] This is not always the case. For example, Hannah brought a bull to Shiloh when she dedicated her son, Samuel, for service to God. (1 Sam 1:24)

[25] לְךָ לְבַדְּךָ׀ חָטָאתִי (Psa 51:6 WTT); חָטָאתִי לַיהוָה (2Sa 12:13 WTT)

[26] Alter, *The Book of Psalms : A Translation with Commentary*.

[27] Mays, *Psalms*. 336

[28] J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976). 413

All sin has social consequences, and yet there are several places in the Bible where a sin against another person is viewed primarily as a sin against God. We have already discussed David's reaction to Nathan after he was confronted with his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:13, Ps. 51:6), but one may also mention Joseph's statement to Potiphar's wife when he was tempted to commit adultery, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9 ESV) Did the social consequences of the sin not matter?

John Calvin understood this statement to be an expression of the psalmist's belief that, in light of the judgment of God, all other considerations are as naught.[29] On a more philosophical level, it has been noted that apart from the Divine Lawgiver, sin is a meaningless category. [30] Both of these views express in different ways the same basic idea – the law that was broken was the Law of God. Even if the perpetrator is not brought to justice, as was the case with Uriah, God will exact justice.

As a case in point, we may compare Israelite laws concerning adultery with Mesopotamian laws. Mesopotamian law codes allowed the husband to mitigate the penalty incurred by a wife caught in adultery whereas Biblical law does not. Commenting on this fact, ABD states that, "the marriage bond is divinely sanctioned (cf. Mal. 2:14; Prov. 2:17) and the prohibition of adultery is

[29] Perowne gives a short history of interpretation of this somewhat puzzling statement. Patristic and catholic interpreters argued that the king was responsible to no earthly authority and therefore could not be tried by his subjects. Quimchi and Maldontatus suggested that perhaps the sin was known only to God. Calvin offers a different interpretation: "I think the words are equivalent to his saying, Lord, though the whole world should acquit me, yet for me it is more than enough that I feel that Thou are my Judge, that conscience summons me and drags me to Thy bar: so that men's excuses for me are of no avail, whether they spare me, or whether to flatter me they make light of my crime, or try to assuage my grief with soothing words. He intimates therefore that he has his eyes and all his sense fixed upon God, and consequently does not care what men think or say. But whoever is thus crushed, yea overwhelmed by the weight of God's judgment, needs no other accuser, because God alone is more than a thousand others." ibid. in loc.

[30] Mays writes, "It is the divine oversight of human life that makes talk about sin meaningful and necessary. When there is no reckoning with the oversight of God, the vocabulary of sin become meaningless and atrophies." (Mays 1994, 200) Perowne further notes that, "All human judges can only regard wrong actions as crimes: God alone takes cognizance of them as sins." Ibid.

of divine origin. God as well as the husband is offended by adultery (cf. Gen. 20:6; 39:8–9; Ps. 51:6), and an offense against God cannot be pardoned by man."[31] Although one would not want to press this too far, it is possible to see an analogy here to western law systems in which the perpetrator of a crime is not brought to court by the victim but by the state whose law codes were broken. It is this view of law and covenant that gave rise to deep, questioning books like Job and Habakkuk that sought to reconcile faith in a holy and sovereign God with the reality of a sinful and unjust world.[32] [33]

Behold, I was born in evel and in sin my mother conceived me. (vs. 7)

The psalmist acknowledges that his sin is not an isolated act but the product of a corrupted nature. This corrupt nature is shared by all men for, "no one living is righteous before you." (Psa 143:2 ESV)[34] Elsewhere, the psalmist pleads with God to remember that "we are but dust." (Ps. 103:14 ESV) This deeply pessimistic view of human nature is found elsewhere. Isaiah compares the good deeds of men to 'filthy rags' and their destiny to that of a leaf that dries up and is blown away by the wind. (Is. 64:5) Similarly, Israel's leaders are compared to that of their first father (Is. 43:27), implying that the sinfulness of man is persistent through the generations. Job asks whether it is possible for something clean to be taken from what is unclean (Job 14:4), and pleads with God to look away from man so that he may enjoy his days as a hired hand. (Job 14:6) According to the Flood narrative, the sinfulness of mankind became such that 'every

[31] ABD – "adultery"

[32] C.S. Lewis remarks, "If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railing we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. The thought of the "righteous Lord" – who surely must hate such doings as much as they do, who surely therefore must (but how terribly He delays!) "judge" or avenge, is always there, if only in the background." (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 1st American ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1958). 31)

[33] Since the penalty of adultery is death, how did David escape this penalty? Perhaps, since there was no sacrifice that could atone for the sin, forgiveness could only be found through confession and repentance. To what degree was the death penalty enforced?

[34] This confession stands in sharp contrast to other psalms that proclaim the innocence of the psalmist and the injustice of his persecution.

intention of the thoughts of his heart' was 'only evil continually.' (Gen 6:5 ESV) After the flood, God promises not to send another flood because "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth". (*yēṣer lēḇ hāʾāḏām raʿ minnəʿūrāyw* - Gen. 8:21)[35] Pharaoh hardened (*wayyaḵbēḏ*) his heart and God stiffened (*wayyeḥĕzaq*) his heart so that he led his army into the sea. In these contexts, the 'heart' is not the seat of the emotions but, "refers to the mind and the will, that is, the center of the self from which action and loyalty spring."[36] It is against this backdrop that we should understand the plea of the psalmist that God would grant him a 'willing spirit' (*wərûaḥ nəḏîḇāh* - Psa 51:14) and 'a right spirit' (*wərûaḥ nāḵôn* - Psa 51:12) so that his heart does not become hard and obstinate like that of Pharaoh or evil like that of the generation of the Flood.

The psalmist declares that God desires truth in the 'inner man' (*ḇaṭṭūḥôṭ*) and asks that God will teach him wisdom in the 'secret place' (*ḇəsāṭūm*). These are rare terms that appear to be interchangeable with 'heart'.[37] The psalmist desires to deal with the source of sin and not just its manifestation. But what does the psalmist mean by declaring that God desires truth in the

[35] According to Rabbinical tradition the evil impulse is an inherent and indispensable part of man's constitution… in as much as without it man would not reproduce. Thus the evil impulse is equated with natural desire. (Gen. R. IX. 7) 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart' Deut. vi. 5, received the comment: 'With two impulses – the good and the evil' (Sifre Deut. 32; 73a); "Strong is the evil impulse, since even its Creator calls it evil; as it is said, "For the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Kid. 30b) For a concise summary of views on the *yetser ra* see: A. Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud : The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books : Distributed by Pantheon Books, 1995). 88ff

[36] Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths : The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

[37] The word chosen by the psalmist for 'inner man' - ḇaṭṭūḥôṭ – is derived from the name Thoth? It only appears elsewhere in Job 38:26 where it is also related to wisdom. There are some vague similarities here with the Papyrus of Ani, "I am pure. My breast is purified by libations, and my hinder parts are made clean with the things which make clean, and my inner parts have been dipped in the Lake of Truth. There is no single member of mine which lacketh truth. (E. Wallis Budge, "Papyrus of Ani; Egyptian Book of the Dead," http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Books/Papyrus_Ani.html.)

inner being?[38] In this context, it is best to take 'truth' as parallel with 'wisdom'. To possess truth in the inner man was to have a right knowledge of God and of his Law.

IV. Prayer for Renewal (8-12)

"cleanse me with hyssop" (vs. 9)

The terminology of the Psalm is similar to that used in Num. 19:18-19 to describe the process by which an unclean person may re-enter the community. A hyssop branch dipped in water was used to sprinkle the unclean person in order to 'purge him' (*wəḥiṭṭəʾô*). Afterward, the unclean person was to "wash (*wəkibbes*) his clothes" and himself in water. In this manner, he will be clean (*wəṭāhēr*) by evening. The psalmist likewise refers to the sprinkling of water with hyssop and uses the same verbs: 'wash me' (*kabbəsēnî* - Psa 51:1); 'purify me' (*ṭahărēnî* - Psa 51:1); 'purge me' (*təḥaṭṭəʾēnî* - Psa 51:4). Outward impurity becomes a metaphor for spiritual contamination that can only be removed by God.

"Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me" (vs. 12)

The psalmist asks that God will create (*bara*) within him a clean heart (*lēḇ ṭāhôr*) and renew (*ḥaddēš*) a right spirit (*rûªḥ nāḵôn*) within him. The two verbs, create and renew, speak of regeneration as the work of God in the heart (*bara* is only used with God as the subject). The psalmist has more in mind than just not just a change of behavior. Similarities between the language in our psalm and passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel have led to the conclusion that the psalm must belong to the same time period. However, the similarities do not go beyond a general emphasis on inward change and renewal.

[38] This phrase is curiously similar to a phrase used repeatedly by Mesopotamian augurists when they asked the deity to place the truth in the heart of the sacrifice! But this is not what the psalmist envisions.

In Jeremiah the prophet speaks of placing the law (*torah*) in their hearts and writing it on their hearts. God will forgive (*ʾeslaḥ laʿăwōnām* - Jer 31:34) their iniquity and 'remember their sin no more' (*lōʾ ʾezkor-ʿôḏ* - Jer 31:34). Our psalm makes no mention of *torah*, or of writing a law on the heart. The word for forgive, *eslach*, is not used nor does it speak of forgiveness in the context of 'not remembering'. The similarity between the two passages lies solely in the emphasis placed on a change of heart.

A closer parallel is found in Ezekiel where the prophet speaks of God sprinkling the people with water. This is similar to the plea of our Psalmist for cleansing with hyssop. Ezekiel likewise speaks of a new heart and a new spirit and of the Lord putting his Spirit within the people. (Ezek 36:25-27) All of these find parallels in Psalm 51 but once again, the terminology is different. For example, Ezekiel makes specific mention of water whereas it is only implied in the psalm. Ezekiel speaks of a 'new spirit' but the psalmist speaks of a 'right spirit' and of a 'willing spirit'. The psalmist does not refer to a 'hardened' or 'stony' heart. The most significant distinction is that the psalm is a confession belonging to an individual that stands alone before God whereas Jeremiah and Ezekiel look forward to a new era when the people of Israel will return to the land and their hearts will no longer go after idols. It is safe to say that the psalm shares a similar outlook to that of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but there is no evidence of inter-textual borrowing.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (vs. 19)

This statement is similar to those found elsewhere in the psalms (Ps. 50, Ps. 40:6) and in the prophets that are critical of religious ceremony. Psalm 50 asks whether God really needs the roast meat of the sacrifice and concludes that it is better to give thanks to God and to pay ones

vows (Psalm 50:12ff; cf. Isaiah 1:11); Jeremiah asks what the point of offering sacrifices is when everyone is greedy and deals falsely (Jer. 6:13, 20); and Isaiah declares that the LORD does not "delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats" offered by people whose hands are stained with blood (Isa 1:11-14).

These pointed criticisms should not be taken as a rejection of the cult, but rather of empty ritual. Isaiah looks forward to a day when an altar will be placed in Egypt and the Egyptians will "worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them." (Isa 19:21 ESV) In the second book of Isaiah the people are even criticized for not bringing sacrifices and, in fact, doing the opposite by 'burdening' and 'wearying' God with sin (Isa 43:24). A passage in Jeremiah looks forward to a day when pure offerings will once again be offered in the temple (Jer. 17:26). It may, of course, be argued that these passages that speak of a renewal of the sacrificial system are late interpolations that look forward to a golden era. On the other hand, to equate "criticism" of the cult with "suspicion" of the cult cannot be defended from passages such as Isaiah 1:11-14 unless one is willing to accept that the prophet was "suspicious" not only of burnt offerings but also of Sabbaths and festivals.

The importance of a 'right heart' is not limited to prophets such as Isaiah and Micah. This emphasis is also found, howbeit less explicitly, in both law and narrative sections of the Pentateuch. For example, the acceptability of Cain's sacrifice is of secondary importance to the inner struggle that Cain has with sin. (Gen 4:7) Among the detailed instructions for Yom Kippur is the command that the people were to 'humble themselves' (wəʿinnîṯem ʾeṯ-napšōṯêḵem -Lev 23:27). In the context of Yom Kippur, this expression is best understood as inward contrition that is accompanied by fasting.

One final example is the rejection of King Saul from kingship (1 Samuel 15) because Saul offered to God what was under the ban. Although Saul's sacrifice is clearly criticized, the narrative suggests that real source of his downfall was the arrogance that led him to travel to Carmel to erect a monument (*yad*) for himself. When Samuel catches up with Saul at Gilgal, Saul does not refer to the LORD as 'his God' but as 'your [Samuel's] God'. Samuel admonition to Saul that, "to obey is better than sacrifice" is very much in accord with the words of Isaiah, Micah and Hosea.

It may be concluded, based on the sources surveyed so far, that the emphasis placed on inward contrition is not confined to the writing prophets but is an important part of Pentateuchal law and narrative as well as in the historical books.[39] The idea of 'a right heart' is not something the prophets invented, although the emphasis placed on inward renewal may be unique to the prophets. [40]

Then you will delight in the sacrifices of righteousness, whole burnt offerings. Then the will bulls be offered on your altar. (vs. 21)

The inclusion of this last verse in the psalm adheres to a familiar pattern in which the psalmist begins with a lament and ends with praise. [41] The psalmist desires a life characterized by joy (let the bones that you have crushed rejoice… restore unto me the joy of my salvation) and

[39] For a helpful explanation of the prophet / priest divide posited by the classical documentary hypothesis, see: Jakob Josef Petuchowski, Elizabeth Petuchowski, and Aaron M. Petuchowski, *Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer*, 1st ed., Jps Scholar of Distinction Series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998). 3ff

[40] What effect did the destruction of the temple in 586 BC and again in 70 AD have on attitudes toward sacrifice? This question goes beyond the scope of this paper but as noted above, the critique of the prophets cannot rightly be dated to the post exilic period as a response to the destruction of the sacrificial system but rather should be understood as a critique of empty ritual that existed in their day. Later, after the 70 AD destruction, Ps. 51:6 was used to explain why sacrifices were not necessary for atonement.

[41] H. Gunkel writes that, "a timidly legalistic pious person who was not able to grasp the lofty sense of the psalmist and quietly took offense at the fact that the psalmist spoke so freely of sacrifices, which after all are prescribed by God's law." [41]

service (then I will teach sinners your ways… and offer sacrifices on your altar). The goal of the confession is to be restored to the community of worshippers. [42]

V. Confession in the ANE

There are a great many confessions in the Akkadian textual corpus and most of them reflect uncertainty on the part of the confessor as to what he did wrong. For example, in a prayer that has been aptly titled, 'To Any God', the implorer is not sure what he has done wrong or which god / goddess he has offended. Nevertheless, he is a "sick man… miserable and blindfolded" and believes that he has unknowingly broken a taboo. Therefore he prays,

> *I do homage to you, my goddess,*
> *as I keep groveling before you,*
> *O god, whoever you are [turn toward me, I implore you]*
> *O goddess, [whoever you are, turn toward me, I implore you]*

The prayer concludes with,

> *Humans are slow-witted and know nothing,*
> *No matter how many names they go by, what do they know?*
> *<u>They do not know at all if they are doing good or evil!</u>*
> *O (my) lord, do not cast off your servant,*
> *He is mired in a morass, help him!*
> *Turn the sin that I perpetrated into virtue*
> *Let the wind bear away the wrong I committed!*[43]

A similar lament is found in the 'Great Prayer to Ishtar' although this one is addressed specifically to a particular god and goddess,

> *O my god, o my goddess, <u>what have I done?</u>*
> *I am dealt with as if I did not revere my god and my goddess.*
> *Disease, head pains, decline, and ruin beset me,*
> *Constraints, averted faces and anger beset me,*

[42] Perowne notes that, "in all godly sorrow there is hope. Sorrow without hope may be remorse or despair, but it is not repentance." (Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*. 413)
[43] Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses : An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005). 763

Wrath, rage and fury of gods and me.
I have experienced, o my distress, days of darkness,
Months of gloom, years of grief…
I implore you, absolve my debt!
Absolve my crime, misdeed, sin, and wrong-doing!
Forget my sin, accept my plea,
Loose my fetters, set me free![44]

The subscript to this hymn states that it is an, "Incantation of Raising of the Hand [in prayer]." Following the name are four lines of instructions for a ritual, in the course of which the text is recited three times."[45] Distress and sickness are always connected with sin but it is not always clear if the sin is conceived of as a transgression against the gods or as a curse that can be removed by ritual. For example, in a prayer to Gula, sin results in the loss of one's protective spirit, thereby opening up the person to attack from malevolent forces.

"There was a man, he made no provision for the Capable Lady,
I was th(at) [man] who did not speak to Ishtar!
She [thun]dered at him like a storm, she grew full of anger at him,
[She…] his dignity, she drove off his protective spirit.
His [god forsook him], his goddess threw him over…"[46]

Morganstern states that, among the Babylonians, "sin, evil, sickness, possession by evil spirits, witchcraft, and misfortune, are all one and the same thing… something material, that has entered the body of the afflicted man. Consequently the curing of sickness, the expulsion of evil spirits, and the expiation of sin, are identical and must so be treated."[47] A similar view of misfortune is found in the Egyptian text, 'The Instruction of Any',

Satisfy the ancestral spirit, do what he wishes…
Keep yourself clear of what he abominates,
that you may remain unscathed by his many hurts.
Beware of every sort of damage.

[44] Ibid. in loc.
[45] Ibid. in loc.
[46] Ibid. 592
[47] J. Morgenstern, *The Doctrine of Sin in the Babylonian Religion* (San Diego: Book Tree, 2002).

The cow in the field was stolen?
It is he who does the like.
As for any loss from the threshing floor in the field-
"That is the ancestral spirit!" one says.
The moment he causes strife in his house,
hearts are set against one another."[48]

These texts do not reflect an awareness of sin so much as they reflect an awareness of the suffering caused by sin. In many cases, the sin is unknown but it is nevertheless assumed because the petitioner is suffering. The Biblical writers also connect suffering with sin – indeed the prophets foretell complete destruction because of sin.[49] But there is no ambiguity about what the sin is. Moreover, as we will see in our next section, sin was not conceived of as a curse that could be removed by proper ritual, but as an affront against God that must be atoned for.

VI. Sin and the Presence of God

In Psalm 51, the psalmist views the ultimate consequence of his sin to be separation from the presence of God. As Kraus notes, "no 'outside' distress is lamented, but the only distress is sin, and the petitioner is worried about nothing else but his personal relation to God."[50] The relationship between sin and separation from the presence of God finds an interesting parallel in Chapter 125 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In this chapter, the deceased seeks entry into the Hall of Maati and into the loyal service of Osiris. The chapter is titled,

Purifying N. from all the evils he committed.
Gazing upon the face of the gods.

[48] Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). 163
[49] Only the book of Job directly challenges the direct connection between suffering and sin while retaining a faith in a sovereign God, although some narratives point in the direction of Job – ie. there is no indication that Abel was slain because of sin or that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt because of sin.
[50] Kraus, *Psalms 1-59 : A Continental Commentary*.

Chapter 125 begins with a series of negative confessions that may be divided into several categories:

1. Very general rules, such as "I have not killed," "I have committed no falsehood against anyone".
2. Specific taboos such as "I have not dammed up running water, I have not put out a burning fire"
3. Rules of correct professional behavior, especially in connection with weights and measures "I have added nothing to the weights of the hand-held scale, I have removed nothing from the weights of the standing scale."' [51]

These lists of negative confessions precede the 'weighing of the heart', famously illustrated in the 'Book of the Dead' as a set of scales upon which the heart of the deceased is weighed against the feather of Maat (goddess of truth and order). This ceremony takes place in the presence of Osiris, king of the gods, and in the presence of 42 lesser gods who make up the heavenly tribunal. If the heart is found to be pure then the deceased passes yet another critical test on his journey to a peaceful afterlife. The Egyptians went to great lengths to ensure that any sin they may have committed would not prevent them from entering into a blessed afterlife. But what were the moral obligations? Assmann notes that in the early periods, "One could never be sure of remaining blameless; no one had exact knowledge of which moral investments counted in the project of death. There was no code of written or unwritten laws to serve as the basis for the verdict in the Judgment of the Dead, laws that persons could follow during life with the hope of satisfying the judge."[52] Thus we encounter in Egypt the same ambiguity about the nature of sin that is found in Akkadian texts. Assmann goes on to state that in the New Kingdom period this was solved.

> *All possible crimes and misdemeanors that could represent a hindrance to his admission into the next world were enumerated and set down in two lists, one containing forty sins*

[51] Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt.*79
[52] Ibid. 77

and the other forty-two, with a number of overlaps between the lists. The deceased had to recite these lists and explicitly declare his innocence of each and every sin."[53]

Through the recitation of lists of negations "I did not do *x*, I did not do *y*" the deceased "cleansed himself of all burdens that represented moral pollution."[54] Assmann further notes, "This was no matter of innocence and purity. No one is innocent. What was important was whether or not someone was in a position to cleanse himself of his sins."[55] The Book of the Dead viewed sin as largely a magical problem that could be solved through magical means. This is not to say that the Egyptians believed that the negative confessions were irrelevant to daily living. But sin was not an absolute affront against God. Ani does not declare his sinfulness upon entering the hall of Maati. Nor is his sin atoned for. Rather, Ani declares before the heavenly tribunal, 'I am pure, I am pure, I am pure'.[56] The contrast with Isaiah's vision of God in Isaiah 6 could not be more complete.

VII. Conclusion

Based on the sources surveyed in this paper, it is evident that man has always felt a degree of accountability to a god or the gods for their actions but a profound awareness of sin is unique to the Hebrews. This may be attributed to any number of factors, but two in particular stand out: the Fall of Man and the Sinai Theophany.

1. The Fall of Man: Genesis 2-3 gives scope for both the innate sinfulness of man and the goodness and holiness of God. These few chapters establish the original goodness of creation, the commandment of God, human responsibility, and the intrusion of sin into the world.

[53] Ibid. 78
[54] Ibid. 78
[55] Ibid. 78
[56] Budge, "Papyrus of Ani; Egyptian Book of the Dead".

2. The Sinai Theophany: A quick survey of the Biblical books reveals a nearly complete absence of confession before the Sinai Theophany. Certainly there were many opportunities for repentance in the lives of the Patriarchs but not once is the word *shuv* (to return); *nacham* (to be sorry) or *tsaak* (to cry), used in the sense of repentance towards God.[57]

It may be concluded that without the narrative of Genesis 2-3 and without the Sinai Theophany we would not have the confession in Psalm 51.

[57] Cain expresses sorrow over the weight of his punishment. There are indirect expressions such as that of the brothers when they recalled what they did to their brother, Joseph. (Gen. 42:21) The people cry in distress and their cry came up to God but Exodus gives no indication that the people cried to God. (Ex 2:23 – cf. Deut. 26:7 where the people cry to God in their distress). After the Sinai Theophany we encounter the simple expression 'we have sinned' after the people grumbled against the LORD in the desert (Num. 21:7) and after they failed to enter into Canaan. However, as long as Moses was alive, the words were directed to Moses and not to the LORD. In the book of Judges, the people 'cry out'(זעק) to the LORD for help and likewise acknowledge that 'we have sinned'. Saul repents after offering that which was under the ban, but in this case Saul directs his words to Samuel (śāʾ nāʾ ʾeṯ-ḥaṭṭāʾṯî -1Sa 15:25). The lengthiest words of repentance belong to David after he numbered the people. David's heart 'smote him', he acknowledges that he "acted foolishly… sinned greatly" and asks that God would 'take away' (הַעֲבֶר־נָא) his iniquity. (2 Sam. 24:10) Likewise, after David sinned with Bathsheba, David acknowledges that he has 'sinned against the LORD'. Lastly, when Shimei rains stones down on his head as he flees from Absalom, he tells Abishai not to kill him because, "the LORD told him [Shimei] to do it". (2Sa 16:11) The historical books recount the confessions of kings including Ahab and Manasseh. Among the writing prophets, the most significant personal confession belongs to Isaiah. Isaiah cries, "Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips…" The books of Daniel, Jeremiah and Lamentations contain intercessory or communal confessions.

Appendix 1 – Sexual Morality in Israel

Psalm 51 is introduced in the superscription as a psalm written after David committed adultery with Bathsheba. It is worth inquiring into Biblical views toward sexual morality.

Marriage was divinely sanctioned:

> *He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9 ESV)*
>
> *…who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God; (Pro 2:17 ESV)*
>
> *But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Mal 2:14 ESV)*

The penalty for adultery was death. ABD notes, "Other ancient Near Eastern law collections also prescribe the death penalty for adulterers, but, treating adultery as an offense against the husband alone, permit the aggrieved husband to waive or mitigate the punishment (The Code of Hammurapi, 129, in: Pritchard, Texts, 171; The Middle Assyrian Laws, 14–16, in: Pritchard, Texts, 181; The Hittite Laws, 197–98, in: Pritchard, Texts, 196). Biblical law allows no such mitigation. Because the marriage bond is divinely sanctioned (cf. Mal. 2:14; Prov. 2:17) and the prohibition of adultery is of divine origin, God as well as the husband is offended by adultery (cf. Gen. 20:6; 39:8–9; Ps. 51:6), and an offense against God cannot be pardoned by man. Mesopotamian religious literature also views adultery as offensive to the gods, but, unlike the situation in Israel, this religious conception is not reflected in Mesopotamian legal literature."[58]

Sex was not a part of the cult. Legal codes consistently separate the two.

1. Moses and the people had to abstain from sexual activity for three days before the revelation at Sinai. (Exod 19:15)
2. David assured Ahimelech that he and his men could eat hallowed bread because they had been away from women for three days (1 Sam 21:4-5)
3. When the sons of Eli slept with the women who came to worship, they forfeited their family's right to be priests (1 Sam 2:22-24)
4. The priest could not marry a prostitute or a divorcee (Lev 22:7)

[58] ABD – "Adultery"

The reason sex was not a part of the cult is that sexuality belongs to the human sphere and not the divine. ABD notes that,

> *"Monotheism did not attribute sexuality in the divine sphere. God, usually envisioned as male in gender, is not phallic; God does not represent male virility, and is never imaged below the waist… God neither models nor grants sexual potency or attraction." (Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1146)*

The Bible makes reference to both male and female prostitution.

> *You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deu 23:18 ESV)*

'The wages of a dog' parallels 'the fee of a prostitute' and is therefore best understood as a reference to a male prostitute. Reforming kings, such as Asa, removed the *qedeshim* – a likely reference to male prostitutes. Likewise, Josiah "broke down the houses of the *qedeshim* in Yahweh's house, where the woman wove *battim* for Asherah." (2 Kings 23:7)

ABD notes that, "Homosexual intercourse is not labeled *tebel*, but the extreme prohibition of homosexuality by the death penalty (Lev 29:13) not inherited from other ANE laws, is best explained as a desire to keep the categories of male and female intact."

The female prostitutes are called *qedeshot.* This was also the name of an Egyptian fertility goddess clearly borrowed from the Canaanites that is consistently depicted as a naked fertility figurine. Hosea censures the people for engaging in cultic prostitution with *qedeshot* and *zonot*.

> *"Therefore your daughters play the whore (zana) and your daughters-in-law commit adultery… they [the priests] go aside with whores (zonot) and sacrifice with qedeshot; thus a people without understanding comes to ruin." Hosheah 4:13-14*

One goes aside with the *zonot* but sacrifices with the *quedeshot.*

The Theological Dictionary of the Bible nevertheless remains ambivalent to the widespread existence of cultic prostitution in Canaan.

> *Extant witnesses do not allow one to draw any unequivocal conclusions regarding cultic prostitution in Israel. Such activity is not attested in Ugarit, and the Greek witnesses for this custom are in part uncertain and perhaps locally restricted. Moreover passages such as Jer. 2:20,25: 3:2 13:27 may be intended figuratively.*[59]

[59] G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974).

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