

A Psalm against David? A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David's Inadequate Repentance in 2 Samuel 12

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ABSTRACT

Out of 150 psalms in the Masoretic Text, seventy-three are connected to David in some way through their superscriptions (compared with seventy-five in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and eighty-four in the Septuagint, not counting extra psalms). Although the ambiguity of the preposition *lě* in *lědavid* does not specify the exact connection (it can mean *to*, *for*, *belonging to*, *of*, etc.) thirteen psalms in the MT (eighteen in the LXX) have superscriptions that make an explicit link to some event in David's life. The most famous of these is Psalm 51, which references the liaison with Bathsheba and the subsequent confrontation with the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 11-12), suggesting that the psalm is David's prayer of confession on that occasion. Although there are, indeed, a few phrases in the body of Psalm 51 that might suggest this particular incident, there are others that actually problematize such a connection.

The major point of disjunction between the psalm and the Samuel narrative is that the psalm focuses on forgiveness followed by restoration of the broken sinner, whereas David in the narrative simply confesses and is summarily forgiven by Nathan (who had previously misrepresented God's will in 2 Sam 7:3); the result is that David's life and family continue in shambles, without moral reformation.

Taking into account the complex issue of Davidic superscriptions (including the divergent testimony of the MT, DSS, and LXX), this paper explores the possibility of an intertextual reading of Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11-12, where the psalm's more robust conception of repentance (beyond mere confession) calls into question aspects of David's inadequate response recounted in the prose narrative. In this intertextual reading, the paper will draw on wider biblical perspectives (in both Testaments) concerning the normative shape of the moral life and the need for disciplined restoration after sin.