

Shaped in Iniquity or Knit Together by God? An Inquiry into the Psalmist's Understanding of Humanity's Sinful Nature

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ABSTRACT

Several authors have employed Ps 51:5 as a foundation for teaching the doctrine of original sin, which portrays the complete depravity of human nature (cf. Ps 58:3). Nonetheless, various passages in the book of Psalms offer an alternative portrayal of the moral condition of the same human nature. These passages depict a close relationship between the worshipper and God from infancy (Pss 22:9; 71:6; 139:13). A sound hermeneutical principle necessitates that interpreters analyse both sets of passages rather than emphasising one and undermining the other. This essay endeavours to examine these passages and expound upon a comprehensive understanding of the nature of sinful humanity, as presented in the book of Psalms. Furthermore, it highlights not only the pervasiveness of sin but also the extent of YHWH's hesed, which makes such an intimate bonding with God possible even from the womb.

KEYWORDS: Original sin; YHWH's *hesed*; Sin; Sinful nature; Psalm 51; the book of Psalms.

A INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of original sin, which emphasises the total depravity of human nature due to the fall of Adam and Eve, has been heavily influenced by specific interpretation of the Psalms. Notably, Ps 51:5 is often cited as evidence for inherent human sinfulness.¹ However, a closer examination of the Psalms reveals

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¹ Elmer A. Martens posits that "Christian teaching on this subject has drawn on the Psalms." He further states that "amplification of that teaching belongs to the province of systematic/dogmatic theology." Elmer A. Martens, "Sin, Guilt," in *DOT: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 775. Berkouwer also observes that "Calvin was strongly influenced by Ps 51:5. As a matter of fact, that text could be called the quintessence of his original sin doctrine." G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 479–484. Lightner deduces the following theological statement based on this verse: "All humans are born in a state of

a more nuanced picture. Several passages depict a closer relationship between God and humanity from infancy (Pss 22:9; 71:6; 139:13). This apparent contradiction raises a crucial question: How can we reconcile these seemingly opposing views of human nature within the book of Psalms itself?

This article argues that a sound interpretation of the Psalms requires careful consideration of all relevant passages, not just those that support a predetermined view. By comprehensively analysing both sets of Psalms, we can arrive at a more complete understanding of how the Psalms portray human sinfulness. Let us start with the different interpretive readings of Ps 51:5.

B DIFFERENT INTERPRETIVE READINGS OF PS 51:5

Arguably, Ps 51:5 is “perhaps one of the most misinterpreted verses in the Psalter.”² Below are the major views on the text, along with an evaluation of the arguments that support them.³

1 Historical view

The most literal interpretation of Ps 51:5 reads the phrase “conceived in sin” as pertaining to the Psalmist’s birth resulting from an inappropriate sexual relationship. This perspective is articulated by Robert Alter, who associates it with the beliefs of early rabbis. He supports this interpretation using the following words: “David’s father, Jesse, did not have relations with his wife to fulfil a higher obligation but rather out of sheer lust. Such a reading may be encouraged because the verb attached to the mother, *yaham*, is typically associated with animals in heat.”⁴

This perspective is questionable for several reasons. Firstly, the central focus of the entire penitential prayer is on the Psalmist himself, rather than his mother. Secondly, there is no historical evidence to substantiate this viewpoint. Thirdly, the contextual meaning of the word “*yaham*” can be interpreted in various ways.

separation from God. They are spiritually dead, insensitive to the things of God. All are without God and without hope apart from the redemption provided at Calvary.” Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991), 35.

² Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 456.

³ J. K. Zink presents five different lines of interpretation before suggesting his view. These are (1) original sin, (2) human frailty, (3) collective expression, (4) sexual impurity, and (5) cultic involvement. J. K. Zink, “Uncleanness and Sin: A Study of Job XIV 4 and Psalm LI 7,” *Vetus Testamentum* 17/ 3 (1967): 355–356.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 181.

2 Imputation view

The imputation perspective uses the phrase "in iniquities I was conceived" as key biblical evidence for imputing Adam's original sin onto all of humanity. Augustine argues,

Was David born of adultery; being born of Jesse, a righteous man, and his own wife? What is it that he saith himself to have been in iniquity conceived, except that iniquity is drawn from Adam? Even the very bond of death, with iniquity itself is engrained.⁵

However, while this view continues to hold prominence, some scholars regard it as an anachronistic interpretation of the passage. This perspective largely stems from the fact that the larger body of the Old Testament does not present Adam's sin as being inherited by all of humanity. As Broyles notes, "It would also be putting too much on this single verse to read into it a doctrine of original sin. The Psalms and the OT in general speak less in terms of "being" (ontology) than in terms of experience and history (existence)."⁶

3 Metaphorical View

According to the metaphorical view, the phrase "my mother" is understood as metaphorical language that refers to Mother Israel. Briggs has proposed this interpretive reading: "The poet here alludes to the historic origin of the nation in their patriarchal ancestors, as in Is. 43:27. Their first father committed sin, and all his posterity since his day have followed him in transgression."⁷ Certainly, metaphorical language is anticipated in poetic literature, as seen in the book of Psalms. However, the context of this psalm primarily conveys an individual confession, rather than a collective expression of transgression.

4 Ritual Uncleanness View

The ritual uncleanness interpretive reading associates these verses with laws concerning uncleanness and purification following sexual intercourse (Lev

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms: Psalms 1–150* (vol. 2; A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church; London: F. and J. Rivington; John Henry Parker, 1847–1857), 374.

⁶ Craig C. Broyles, "Psalms" (NIBC 11; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 228. Brueggemann shares a similar view: "We do not need to take the statement ontologically as a 'doctrine of man.'" Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 99. See also Paul Peterson, "'Unwholly' Relationships: Unity in a Biblical Ontology" in *What Are Human Beings that You Remember Them?* *Proceedings of the Third International Bible Conference Nof Ginosar and Jerusalem June 11–21, 2012* (ed. Clinton Wahlen, 235–248).

⁷ Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1908), 2:6.

15:18). Zink observes that the Levitical laws frequently interchange the terms “sin” and “uncleanness,” suggesting that “iniquity” and “sin” in this psalm could be interpreted as ritual uncleanness. However, Tate critiques this viewpoint, deeming it excessively restrictive and asserting that it does not align with the intensified sense of personal guilt conveyed by the Psalmist in this penitential psalm.⁸ It is important to note that ceremonial uncleanness should not be equated with sinfulness. Moreover, interpreting the text in this manner might potentially provide a pretext for sin, given that ritual uncleanness is an inevitable occurrence for every individual.⁹

5 Corporate Solidarity View

According to the corporate solidarity perspective, the verse conveys the tragic notion that humanity is born into a world permeated with sin. As a result, the human experience is inherently entwined with sin and its accompanying guilt. “Due to the solidarity of the community, the individual is involved in the sin of his social group, and the society as a whole implicates each single individual (cf. Jos. 7:1; 1 Sam. 14:36–46).”¹⁰ Kraus maintains that this verse lacks didactic intent, leading to a dogmatic formulation. Rather, it alludes to the unfortunate consequence that sin imposes on the human race and the power of evil to corrupt individuals.¹¹ Terrien, Weiser and Kinder share this view.¹² Their view avoids the use of the text to prove the biological transmission of sin and the inheritance of guilt; simultaneously, it affirms the shared dismal reality of sin among humans.¹³

6 Personal Experience View

In contrast to the preceding perspective, certain scholars contend that there is no evidence to substantiate the notion that whatever the Psalmist expresses holds true for all individuals. Goldingay posits that in this context, the Psalmist presents “another personal statement about the suppliant’s particular life, and it

⁸ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word, 1990), 18–21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18–21.

¹⁰ A. A. Anderson, *Psalms* (Vol. 1; The New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Ronald E. Clements; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 396.

¹¹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 156, 157.

¹² Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 405; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (ed. Peter Ackroyd et al.; The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1998), 405. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOT 15; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 208.

¹³ Some commentators point out that this verse does not support the Augustinian concept of original sin in the sense of inherited guilt but only refers to humankind’s inherently sinful nature. See Martin G. Klingbell, *Psalms 1–75* (Seventh-Day Adventist IBC; Nampa: Pacific Press, 2022), 224.

is not clear that this personal statement is assumed to apply to everyone. Nor does the rest of the OT think of humanity as thoroughly sinful in this way."¹⁴ However, there are other personal statements by the Psalmist that are also considered applicable to others.

7 Hyperbolic Reading View

The hyperbolic reading perspective emphasises the literary technique employed by the Psalmist in the poem. Tremper Longman III elucidates this stance by highlighting the use of A as well as B parallelism in verse 5. The A colon asserts that the Psalmist's sin was evident even from the day of his birth, while the B colon extends it to the moment of conception. Thus, the Psalmist concedes his status as a sinner. However, it would be inaccurate "to use this hyperbolic poetic verse as a proof-text for the doctrine of original sin."¹⁵ I endorse the hyperbolic interpretation and its hermeneutical implication, which underscores the all-encompassing nature of sin.¹⁶ An exegetical examination of the passage supports this position, which we will now probe.

C EXEGETICAL NOTES ON PS 51:7

The literary structure of this penitential psalm is readily apparent. It commences with a supplication for forgiveness (vv. 3–4) coupled with an admission of guilt (vv. 5–7). This is followed by an entreaty for restoration (vv. 9–14) and culminates in a vow of thanksgiving (vv. 15–21). The confession part within this framework exhibits a progressively intensifying parallelism. Initially, the Psalmist embarks on a courageous endeavour of acknowledging his transgression, as he laments, "My sin is ever before me" (v. 5). This initial confession subsequently leads to the identification of the primary victim of his misdeeds: "Against you and you only have I sinned" (v. 6). The confession reaches its zenith with the Psalmist's declaration of the pervasive entanglement of sin throughout his entire existence, as eloquently articulated in verse 7:

¹⁴ John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalms 42–89* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 129, 130

¹⁵ Tremper Longman, *Psalms* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 220. Konrad Schaefer takes this view too far and considers the expression as "a poetic attempt to abase oneself to win God's mercy, almost as if to say 'I had no choice in the matter; I could not help it.'" Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Berit Olam; Colledgeville: Liturgical, 2001), 131.

¹⁶ "There is probably no doctrine of original sin in the last verse, but rather a strong expression—perhaps poetically exaggerated—of the psalmist's feeling of being entirely and totally sinful." Helmer Ringgeren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 69. See also Federico Villanueva, *Psalms 1–72: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary* (ABC; Cumbria: Langham Partnership, 2016), 256.

Behold I was brought forth with iniquity	7a	הִן־בְּעוֹן חוֹלַלְתִּי
And my mother conceived me with sin.	7b	וּבְחַטָּא יִחַמְתַּנִּי אִמִּי:

The translation of this verse poses several complexities. Firstly, the two verbs employed to depict conception and birth are not commonly used for this purpose. Moreover, the root word חיל of the verb חוֹלַלְתִּי has diverse connotations including birth, labour, fear and trembling.¹⁷ The use of the *polal* stem of this verb conveys a sense of being brought forth,¹⁸ possibly suggesting that the Psalmist utilised this term metaphorically to illustrate how sin has pervasively infiltrated all dimensions of human existence. The Psalmist’s intent may have been to intimate that even the act of ushering new life into the world is accompanied by pain, a consequence of iniquity.

The second verb in the second line, יִחַמְתַּנִּי, derived from the root יחם, presents a more intricate challenge in interpretation, as all other instances of the verb pertain to animals being hot in breeding.¹⁹ The term חרה is employed typically to denote conception in humans. The question arises: why did the Psalmist choose יחם instead of חרה? Rosenblit proposes that “in human mating, duty replaces passion,” while in animal mating, the interaction is driven solely by an intense appetite. Therefore, Rosenblit translates the latter part of the verse as “Sinful was my mother’s heated passion.”²⁰ Nevertheless, as previously argued, the overall context of the Psalm undeniably indicates that the Psalmist is assuming personal responsibility for his transgression. This translation seems to overlook that aspect. Furthermore, even though the word the Psalmist selected here pertains to animal behaviour, the nature of poetic composition permits its usage. Bauman highlights that this term signifies a very early stage in the

¹⁷ Bauman, “חיל,” *TDOT*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:345.

¹⁸ There are five occurrences of this particular form of the verb—Job 15:7; 26:5; Ps 51:7; Prov 8:24; 8:25. Only one of these refers to trembling, while the others depict coming to existence. Further, Hakham notes that the active *piel* and the passive *pual* form of the verb display similar form and it is only “the context that determines that holalti means ‘I was born,’ and not ‘I gave birth.’” Amos Hakham and Israel Berman, *Psalms 51–100* (Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary; Jerusalem: Mosad HaravKook, 2003), 405.

¹⁹ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 181.

²⁰ Barbra Ellison Rosenblit, “David, Bat Sheva, and the Fifty-First Psalm,” *Cross Currents* 4 (1995): 333.

gestation process.²¹ Hence, by juxtaposing the two parallel lines, one can discern that the Psalmist is alluding to the time of his birth and, more significantly, the earliest phases of the gestation process.

Secondly, the preposition ב holds a broad spectrum of semantic possibilities. While frequently translated as "in," indicating the manner of the action, it can also take on the meaning of "with," signifying circumstances that transpire concurrently with the action.²² Consequently, if the latter understanding of the preposition is favoured, then the Psalmist is delineating how his existence is encompassed by sin, beginning from the earliest stages of gestation that culminated in his birth.²³

Furthermore, it is imperative to adhere to the exegetical principle of avoiding a literalistic interpretation of a verse when its poetic structure suggests otherwise. Upon a more intricate analysis of Ps 51, various poetic devices come into view. One such device is hyperbole, skilfully employed by the Psalmist to amplify his confession in this stanza. For instance, his proclamation of sinning solely against God and God alone necessitates a deeper comprehension, as it is evident that David had transgressed against other individuals affected by his misdeeds. Similarly, the depiction of his conception stage as tainted by sin should not be construed literally; rather, it signifies an exaggerated confession of the sin permeating his being. Meir Weiss aptly recognises this phenomenon:

This manner of classifying a characteristic as though it were present "from womb and birth" is merely a form of superlative, that is to say, asserting the power of the characteristic in an exaggerated manner, just as Ezekiel expresses the total guilt of his generation in the words: 'Your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite' (Ezek 16:3).²⁴

Moreover, examining this verse in conjunction with other hyperbolic portrayals of the Psalmist's life journey from birth may illuminate the subject further. Let us now direct our attention to this aspect.

²¹ Bauman, "בִּלְיָ," 4:345.

²² Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106.

²³ Allen Ross also comments on the use of the preposition in this verse: "The prepositions used in the verse indicate the sphere in which he was born: 'in sin' and 'in iniquity' mean in the state or condition of sin... The verse does not mean that a little baby is a wicked sinner; but it does mean that everyone who is born is born in a state or condition of sin, and that unchecked will naturally lead to acts of sin." Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (Kregel Exegetical Library 2; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016), 187.

²⁴ Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 126.

D THE PSALMIST’S EXPERIENCE IN THE WOMB

Whilst Ps 51:5 is frequently cited to substantiate the notion that humans experience a separation from God from the time of birth, some additional psalms portray an intimate connection with God commencing in the earliest phases of life. The Hebrew word *בֶּטֶן*, which is translated as “womb,” appears ten times in the book of Psalms.²⁵ In Ps 139: 13, 14, the Psalmist relates how God knit him together in his mother’s womb:

For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother’s womb.
I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made;
Marvellous are Your works,
And *that* my soul knows very well.²⁶

Consequently, the offspring of the womb is rightfully recognised as a divine blessing in Ps 127:3. Additionally, God assumes the role of a midwife during the Psalmist’s emergence from his mother’s womb, as depicted in Pss 22:9 and 71:6. Even after departing from the womb (*רָחַם*), the Psalmist acknowledges being entrusted to God’s care in Ps 22:10. A closer examination of the corresponding parallel passages in Pss 22 and 71 will yield additional illumination into this thematic element.

Ps 22:10–11	
כִּי־אַתָּה גָּחִי מִבֶּטֶן	But You <i>are</i> He who took Me out of the womb;
מִבְּטֵיחִי עַל־שִׁדְי אִמִּי:	You made Me trust <i>while</i> on My mother’s breasts. ²⁷
עָלִידָהּ הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם	I was cast upon You from birth.
מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי אֱלֹהִי אַתָּה:	From My mother’s womb You <i>have been</i> My God.
Ps 71:6	
עָלִידָהּ נִסְמַכְתִּי מִבֶּטֶן	Upon You I have been supported from the womb;

²⁵ The two common words that depict the womb are *בֶּטֶן* (occurring nine times: 17:14; 22:10–11; 31:10; 44:26; 58:4; 71:6; 127:3; 132:11; 139:13) and *רָחַם* (occurring three times: 22:11; 58:4; 110:3).

²⁶ Millard Erickson points out that, “Here David speaks as if God had some sort of personal relationship with him when he was still in his mother’s womb.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 571.

²⁷ The noun “mother,” with the pronominal suffix of the first-person common singular, *אִמִּי*, appears seven times in the book of Psalms (Pss 22:10, 11; 27:10; 51:7; 69:9; 71:6; 139:13). Five of these instances depict the relationship between the Psalmist and his God from infancy. Interestingly, with the exception of Ps 51:7, the others portray this relationship in a positive light.

מִמְעֵי אִמִּי אֶתָּה גִּוְוִי	You took me out of my mother’s womb.
בְּךָ תְּהִלָּתִי תָמִיד:	My praise is continually of you.

It is intriguing that the Psalmist proclaims his reliance on God from the womb, “עָלֶיךָ | נִסְמְכְתִי מִבְטֵן” (Ps 71:6). The use of the *nifal* form of the Hebrew verb סמך accentuates that it was God who enabled the Psalmist to place his trust in Him. Hence, God emerges as the active agent, while the Psalmist assumes the role of the recipient of His care and support. Similarly, the portrayal in Ps 22:10—“מִבְטֵיחִי עַל־שָׁדַי אִמִּי”—further demonstrates that it was God Himself who facilitated the Psalmist’s trust from his mother’s breast. Additionally, the use of the *hifil* form of בטח specifically denotes causation, emphasizing how divine aid fostered the Psalmist’s trust in God. This emphasis is further reinforced by the repetition of the phrase “from the womb,” which occurs three times.²⁸

The Psalmist’s profound connection with God from the womb is evident in his affirmations: “You are my God since my mother bore me” (Ps 22:10) and “my praise is continually of you” (Ps 71:6). These passages from the Psalms underscore God’s dynamic involvement, not solely in the formation of the worshipper’s physical existence but also in initiating an intimate bond with them from the point of conception.²⁹

Despite the Psalmist’s positive experiences from the womb, there are also negative portrayals such as the depiction of the wicked as being estranged from birth (Ps 58:3). This, in conjunction with Ps 51:5, is often used to exemplify the dismal state of humanity’s sinful condition. However, upon a closer scrutiny of both the pessimistic and optimistic representations of the Psalmist’s early experiences from the womb, the following questions arise:

1. How can the Psalmist be conceived in iniquity, yet simultaneously intricately woven together by God in the womb?
2. How can he experience estrangement from God due to inherited sin from the womb, while concurrently nurturing a sense of trust and reliance on God from that same womb?³⁰

²⁸ See Timothy E. Saleska, *Psalms 1–50* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia, 2020), 402.

²⁹ Hossfeld points out that Ps 71:2–6 has its point of reference in Ps 22:10–11 and the midwifery role of YHWH is somewhat softened in the former passage. However, both passages “underscore the unbroken relationship between YHWH and the petitioner from the very beginning.” Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 196.

³⁰ Junia Pokrifka attempts to address these questions by proposing that “these poetic depictions are best understood as vivid illustration of the concept of transgenerational

In addressing these inquiries, it is crucial to acknowledge that the poetic language employed to portray the Psalmist’s encounters from the womb, such as “leaning on God from birth” or “speaking lies from the belly,” should not be interpreted literally. Rather, a sound hermeneutical approach should recognise the use of hyperbole as a poetic mechanism intended to underscore the all-pervasive influence of both sin and grace. This approach aligns harmoniously with the overarching theological trajectory of the Psalms concerning the intricate relationship between humans and God, a trajectory that will be further explored in the subsequent sections.

E PERVASIVENESS OF SIN IN THE PSALTER

The book of Psalms consistently asserts the pervasiveness of sin.³¹ Within the expansive semantic realm of sin-related terms, the four principal lexemes—*חַטָּאת* (sin), *רָעָה* (evil), *עוֹן* (iniquity) and *עֲשָׂוֹן* (transgression)—appear a total of 91 times in the Psalms. Remarkably, the Old Testament’s highest frequency of the term *עֲשָׂוֹן* is concentrated in the Psalter. Additionally, the Psalmists employ diverse expressions to depict the nature and experiences of the wicked. However, the predicament of sin extends beyond those explicitly designated as ungodly or sinners. Instead, the book of Psalms illustrates how the condition of sin envelops both the righteous and the wicked alike. This overarching scope of sin and human frailty serves to showcase this pervasive character of sin.

1 All-Encompassing Scope of Sin

The Psalms vividly portray the comprehensive extent of sin. In Ps 14:2–3 (cf. Ps 53:2–3), the Psalmist unequivocally proclaims:

The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
To see if there are any who understand, who seek God.
They have all turned aside,
They have together become corrupt;
There is none who does good,
No, not one.

transfer of reward or retribution or retribution found in Exodus 20:5–6; 34:6–7, which is carried forward into Psalms.” According to this interpretation, the dismal portrayal of the unborn child is a “disturbing picture of the parents’ ‘hatred’ of God, poisoning their children from the womb.” Junia Pokrifka, “Life, Imagery of,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writing* (ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 433–434. Nevertheless, this assumption is difficult to accept when considering the Psalmist of Ps 51, who is widely assumed to be David.

³¹ See Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 395–451. John Barton, “Sin in the Psalms,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28/1 (2015): 49–58.

Here, the Psalmist acknowledges that sin has permeated humanity to the extent that none is able to do good; not even one. Even the righteous Psalmist examines himself and asks rhetorically in Ps 130:3:

If You, LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

This question affirms human inability to present a perfect record before God. Consequently, the Psalmist pleads in Ps 143:2:

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant,
For in Your sight no one living is righteous.

Throughout the Old Testament, the universal nature of sin is consistently affirmed (Gen 8:21; 1 Kgs 8:46; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20; Jer 9:17; 13:23).³²

2 Human Frailty

Human frailty also serves to illustrate the pervasive nature of sin. The Psalmist eloquently captures the initial glory bestowed upon humanity by God in Ps 8:5–6:

For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all *things* under his feet.

However, this elevated position was not sustained; instead, it was forfeited due to humanity's choice to rebel (Gen 3). Thus, the Psalmist presents a bleak picture of human nature in Ps 39:5–6:

Indeed, You have made my days *as* handbreadths,
And my age *is* as nothing before You;
Certainly every man at his best state *is* but vapor.
Surely every man walks about like a shadow;
Surely they busy themselves in vain;
He heaps up *riches*,
And does not know who will gather them.

The metaphor of vapour and shadow vividly describes the weakening power of sin. Although God's original plan for humanity was to live a glorious, eternal life, the intrusion of sin thwarted that design, rendering our lives fragile and

³² Blocher makes an interesting distinction between sinfulness and creatureliness. While affirming the universal nature of sin, he points out that sin is not “‘natural’, i.e., intrinsic to created human nature; it is a matter of the will (e.g. Prov. 1:29; Is 42:24; 65:12; Matt. 23:37; Jo 3:19; 5:40).” H.A.G. Blocher, “Sin,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 786.

fleeting. This is a shared condition that all flesh experiences until sin is completely eradicated from the universe.

3 Paradox of the Psalmist's Sinfulness and Innocence

As previously noted, the Psalter does not solely present a bleak depiction of humanity. Instead, it features psalms where the Psalmist proclaims his absolute innocence³³ (Pss 17; 26; 62):

You have tested my heart;
You have visited *me* in the night;
You have tried me and have found nothing;
I have purposed that my mouth shall not transgress (Ps 17:3).

The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness;
According to the cleanness of my hands
He has recompensed me (Ps 18:20).

In addition, the Psalter illustrates the flourishing lives of the righteous and pure hearted in various psalms. Notably, the first Psalm establishes a dichotomy between the paths of the wicked and the righteous, a theme that pervades the entire book.

The apparent paradox is that, while no one is inherently righteous in God's eyes due to the pervasive nature of sin, there are passages in which the Psalmist and others are depicted as righteous and pure in heart. How can this seeming contradiction be resolved? The solution lies in a comprehensive consideration of both the all-encompassing influence of sin and the extensive reach of God's grace.³⁴ The book of Psalms paints a balanced picture of these two aspects.

F Pervasiveness of Grace in the Psalter

Humanity remains entangled in sin and its repercussions; however, God's steadfast presence has not forsaken us. He remains the creator, sustainer and owner of our existence. The twofold assertions made by the Psalmist,

³³ The claims of innocence by the Psalmist have been the subject of scholarly discussion. For further study, see the following works: Phil J. Botha, "Psalm 62: Prayer, Accusation, Declaration of Innocence, Self-Motivation, Sermon, or All of These?" *Acta Theologica* 38/2 (2018): 32–48; Davida Charney, "Maintaining Innocence before a Divine Hearer: Deliberative Rhetoric in Psalm 22, Psalm 17, and Psalm 7," *Biblical Interpretation* 21/1 (2013): 33–63; Gert Kwakkel, "*According to My Righteousness*": Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26, and 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

³⁴ Sabourin argues that the Psalms reflect "different stages of biblical thought." Hence, he suggests that "it is always necessary to study the general background of any given theme." Leopold Sabourin, S.J., *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (New York: Alba House, 1974), 105.

acknowledging God's active role in his life and the pervasiveness of God's חֶסֶד (*hesed*), his unfailing kindness, underscore this truth. Let us delve into these two assertions more deeply.

Despite the pervasive influence of sin that has left an imprint on human nature, God is ceaselessly at work, enabling us to place our trust in Him. Consequently, the Psalmist proclaims that God imparts knowledge of His ways, guides him along the path of His commandments, directs his steps through His word (119:133), offers a secure dwelling place (4:9) and designates the faithful as His chosen (4:4). God also illuminates the Psalmist's path (Ps 13:4), casts His radiance upon His servant (119:135), heeds the plea for assistance (39:13) and leads His people to His sacred domain (78:54). Furthermore, God cultivates trust within the Psalmist (22:10), causes the humble to walk in the path of justice (25:9), reveals His deliverance (98:2) and will make known the path of life (16:11). The Psalmist then boldly affirms, "You have set me in your presence forever" (41:13).

Hence, it is plausible to conclude that authentic righteousness cannot be attained without God's help. God is the source of the innocence the Psalmist claims to attain as well as the sustainer of the righteous in the Psalms.

One of the words used in the Psalter to denote God's grace is חֶסֶד (*hesed*), which is often translated into various words such as loving-kindness, loyal love, and steadfast love.³⁵ That 130 out of the 255 occurrences of the word *hesed* appear in the Psalter shows the centrality of the term in the book. deClaisse-Walford et al. aptly note that this word serves as "a theological term that describes God's essential character as well as God's characteristic ways of acting."³⁶ In Ps 25:10, the Psalmist declares, "All the paths of the LORD are mercy (חֶסֶד) and truth," and "gracious (יִחְסֵד) in all his work." (Ps 145:17). God's *hesed* is so pervasive that the earth is full of it (יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאֲרֶץ חֶסֶד, Pss 33:5; 119:64). The Psalter portrays God as abundant and great in *hesed* (רַב־חֶסֶד; Pss 86:5; 103:8; "גָּדֹל־חֶסֶד"; Ps 145:8), with the greatness of His *hesed* reaching even unto the heavens ("כִּי־גָדֹל עַד־שָׁמַיִם חֶסֶד־ךָ"; Ps 57:11).

Another significant attribute of God's *hesed* is its enduring nature. The clause "לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד־ךָ" ("His *hesed* endures forever") occurs 33 times in the Psalter. This statement stands as the most frequently repeated declaration throughout the entire book of Psalms. The Psalmist praises the *hesed* of God as precious (36:8)

³⁵ For a discussion of the connection between the Hebrew *hesed* and the Greek *charis* as grace, see James A. Montgomery, "Hebrew *Hesed* and Greek *Charis*," *Harvard Theological Review* 32 (1939): 97–102.

³⁶ deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 45.

and considers it better than life. By placing his trust in God's *hesed* (Pss 13:6; 31:17), the Psalmist pleads for forgiveness, deliverance, and salvation. Additionally, God's *hesed* is the basis of an intimate relationship between the Psalmist and his God. Thus, the Psalmist declares, "But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your *hesed*" (Ps 5:8). This same *hesed* also instills in the Psalmist the confidence to anticipate an eternal dwelling in the presence of the Lord: "Surely goodness and shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD *hesed* forever" (Ps 23:6). In sum, the Psalter portrays the pervasive nature of God's grace, which empowers individuals to transcend the pervasiveness of sin and cultivate an intimate relationship with God.

G CONCLUSION

The book of Psalms presents a multifaceted view of human nature, encompassing both its negative and positive aspects. On one hand, the Psalter paints a bleak picture of human sinfulness, highlighting the pervasive nature of sin. Conversely, it also showcases the potential for an intimate relationship with God from the earliest stages of life, leading to a blessed existence. Despite the apparent contradiction between these depictions of human nature, a deeper understanding emerges when we focus on the all-encompassing nature of God's grace.

While sin has disrupted God's original design, His grace remains all-encompassing, empowering humanity to trust divine guidance. This accurate perspective of our inherent sinfulness, coupled with the vastness of God's grace, serves as the foundation for cultivating a life of obedience. As the Psalmist openly acknowledges both his sinful state and God's redemptive work, it becomes paramount to remind ourselves consistently of these truths. This practice enables us to lean on God and live a victorious life guided by the harmonious interplay of our fallen nature and God's boundless grace.

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