In this first chapter, we’ll explore the conceptualizations of the God-human relationship given the condition that humans have already “messed up”—that is, they find themselves in a situation of inextricable guilt. In particular, we’ll ask how God relates to the sinner as presented in the biblical texts and how “repentance” (Umkehr/Buße tun) and “redemption/healing” (Heil/Heilung) are described and prescribed.

To organize our observations in this chapter, we employ a visual of a triangle to signal the triangular relationship between God and human, and the interhuman.
R1: The Sinner Is Not Sin

Psalm 51:4 Wash me thoroughly of my wrongdoing, and purify me of my sin.

Psalm 51:5 For I acknowledge my wrongdoing, and have my sin ever in mind.

Psalm 51:9 Cleanse me with hyssop, so I can become clean; wash me, so I can become white as snow.

Isaiah 1:18 Though your sins be as red as scarlet, they shall become as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

The first three verses above are taken from the fourth Bußpsalm (i.e., Ps 51), which, according to tradition, was a song of David’s after the prophet Nathan had admonished him for his iniquity against Uriah the Hittite and his wife Bathsheba (2 Sm 11–12). A subtle but clear distinction has been made, or rather, reiterated:¹ that I, my wrongdoing (Missetat), and my sin (Sünde) are distinct entities but entangled as a result of “my doing.” That the sinner is not sin, and the criminal is not crime itself, is an essential distinction—though insufficient by itself—that makes “repentance” possible; for if a sinner/criminal is equated with sin/crime, or recognized as the embodiment of sin/evil itself, then “repentance” can have no meaning other than self-mortification, or suicide, and “reconciliation” becomes either an impossibility, or a “moving forward” that “sees no evil, condemns no evil.”

The biblical image of the sinner is not one of a “broken mirror” or “outpoured water,” that is, one whose “original perfection” is beyond repair.² Rather, as portrayed in the Bußpsalmen, the sinner is someone who is sullied by sin/misdeed, whose inherent

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¹. Needless to say, the fundamental affirmation of the value of human beings and their redeemability are among the core tenets of Jewish teachings (e.g., Gn 4:7; Ps 25:7).

². These are common Chinese metaphors used to describe broken relationships and destructive acts, signifying perhaps pessimism about (complete) reconciliation.
dignity as a being created “in the image of God” (Gn 1:27) is nevertheless not thereby destroyed. As Maimonides put it, “The one who does repentance should not think of himself being very far removed from that high rank of the pious ones because of his wrongdoings and sins; for it is not the case; rather, he is just as beloved and sought after before the face of the creator as if he had never sinned.” In a striking passage in the book of Isaiah (19:21–25), this indestructible human dignity is explicitly granted even to the traditional enemies of the Israelites: the Egyptians and the Assyrians; hence the universal applicability of the sin/sinner distinction.

Sin/misdeed can be “washed away”; the sinner can be “pardoned,” “excused,” and “purified”—but these actions, as emphasized by these verses, can only be completed by God, the injured party, the victim, not by the perpetrator himself, who must “turn to” his victim to seek purification. The promise of God to do just that (Is 1:18) is therefore the only hope left for those entangled in their own sins.

R2: The Twofold Damage of Sin

Psalm 51:6a Against you alone have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done.

This peculiar verse comes early in the fourth Bußpsalm. It is a repetition of David’s own answer to Nathan in the historical account

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4. But whether this “universal applicability” is universally accepted—that is, reciprocal—is another question. See also comparable formulations in Malachi 2:10 and Romans 3:29.

(2 Sm 12:13) and seems to answer directly the prophet’s accusatory question: “Why did you despise Yahweh by doing what displeases him?” (v. 9) The verse is peculiar because, in our secular age, the victim in this case can only be Uriah the Hittite. Why is God offended when a wrongdoing has been committed by a human against a fellow human? And why did David, as in this verse from Psalm 51, recognize God alone as the one whom he had sinned against? Regardless of the theological explication of this peculiarity,⁶ one ramification of this way of seeing victimhood (the sinned-against-ness) is that both the perpetrator and the “victim” are called to see beyond each other, to “someone/thing else” that is the common focal point, in a situation where the relationship between them has been harmed by the wrongdoing of one (or both) of them, hence summoning the basic triangular structure of relationships.

Yet this triangular way of seeing is in no way a “diversion” from one’s own guilt—which happens when the particular disappears in the general or universal. For in a biblical passage explicating this triangular relationship among God, the sinner, and the righteous, in which the human, balance-sheet-style “justice” is judged inferior to God’s justice (Ez 18:21–28; see R4), it is specifically expressed that the sinner must see (v. 28) his wrongdoing/guilt/sin⁷ so that he can turn away from it and live.⁸ Hence it is not diversion or “dilution” that will result when one adopts the biblical triangular-relational paradigm, but rather an insight into one’s own involvement—and hence guilt—in wrongdoing, for there is the extra dimension of sin. In this sense, David’s seeing his crime against Uriah the Hittite

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⁶ See also the same peculiarity in Luke 15:18, 21. One simple answer may lie right within the biblical text concerned: in 2 Samuel 12:9–10, a clear substitution has taken place in which the sword wielded by David on the family of Uriah is turned backward to his own family, and in which Yahweh substitutes Uriah as the injured party. In other words, Yahweh is presented as a god who takes offense when humans offend one another, who does not remain quiet in the face of injustice (Ps 50:21), and who will take vengeance on behalf of the victim.

⁷ The Lutherbibel (1984) uses sehen, which denotes a more general sense of seeing, whereas the Einheitsübersetzung (1980) uses einsehen, which implies understanding, realization, and conviction.

⁸ Cf. the negative formulation in Isaiah 6:10.
as a “sin against God” is not a “sidestepping” of his own guilt, or his responsibility toward the victim(s), but rather the recognition that something graver than what is purely legal or ethical has been breached—a divine order of existence has been damaged by the “evil done.”

A further collateral implication is that the healing potential of relationship, the bringing back to life of what has been devastated beyond human remedy, ultimately comes from God (or that “someone/thing else”) alone. Consequently, re-cognizing and re-turning to this “center,” which exists above and beyond the perpetrator and the victim, are hallmarks of those inspired by this spirit of repentance.

On the interhuman level, sin is also perceived as a sickness/wound-inducing and chasm-generating relational event. A sinner, or perpetrator, in this sense, is precisely one who has done that which hurts/ails particular relationships, as the perpetrators of specific massacres and genocides have wounded specific, collective relationships, not only of their own generation, but of subsequent generations as well, because of the cross-generational properties

9. In fact, as we shall see in R14, facing God cannot replace facing the human victim.

10. “Umkehr ist das Wiedererkennen der Mitte, das Sich-wieder-hinwenden.” Martin Buber, Ich und Du (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 119. It is remarkable that this formulation of repentance links tshuvah (turning) and metanoia (change of mind).

11. A question can be raised here: What about relationships that are “enhanced” because of sin? When soldiers watch each other’s back as they abuse their victims, for instance, and when father and son conceal each other’s wrongdoings, are their exclusive relationships not “improved”? Upon closer scrutiny, this “improvement” is in fact impoverishment: according to Wayne Cristaudo, instead of enjoying the full richness and abundance of human relationships, these sick dependencies close off this possibility by building upon a logic of damage, which ultimately gnaws back inward. See his Power, Love, and Evil: Contribution to a Philosophy of the Damaged (New York: Rodopi, 2008).

12. The real and significant differences between “sin” (Sünde) and “crime/wrongdoing” (Verbrechen/Missetat), and hence, “sinner” (Sünder) and “perpetrator” (Täter), are not to be understated. Sins are not necessarily crimes, and vice versa. The migration in word choice from “sinner” to “perpetrator” can thus only be justified where the wounding of relationships by the act of the sinner/perpetrator is concerned.
of sin (see R12 in the following chapter). In the Bußpsalmen, we hear specific references to the sickening effects of sin and wrongdoing in interhuman relationships, as when the psalmist/perpetrator expresses loneliness (Ps 102:8). Not only has enmity among his enemies increased (Ps 6:8–9), but his friendships, love relationships, and neighborly relationships are also negatively affected (Ps 38:12). This is attributed to the self-inflicted, sin-induced wounds in himself (Ps 38:5–6).

In the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, “guilt” and “wrongdoing” in the Bußpsalmen are often expressed by a more relationally charged word, Abtrünnigkeit, which can be translated as “unfaithfulness” or “infidelity,” and is etymologically related to Trennung, or “separation.” One practical implication of this way of conceptualizing problems of interhuman—including international—relations is that it points to realities that are beyond justice and material reparation, and indicates that there is more to adjudicating between right and wrong, settling scores or national interests. The restoration of relationship—or the healing of relational wounds, “incurable” as they may seem (Jer 15:18)—becomes the binding vision of both the repentant perpetrator and the victim, with divine promise of participation (Jer 30:12, 17).

R3: Mercy Precedes Repentance; Repentance Responds to Mercy

Psalm 51:3 Have mercy on me, O God, in your love. In your great compassion blot out my sins.

Psalm 6:3–5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, . . . rescue me for the sake of your love.

Psalm 102:14 Arise, have mercy on Zion; this is the time to show her your mercy.

13. See, for example, Psalms 51:4–5, 13; 32:2, 5.
Isaiah 65:1, 24 I let myself be sought by those who did not ask for me. I let myself be found by those who did not seek me. . . . And before they call, I answer; while they are still speaking, I hear them.

If the distinction between sin and sinner has made “repentance” possible conceptually, “mercy” (Gnade/Barmherzigkeit) makes it a real possibility. In the biblical tradition, God’s mercy is the bedrock of all repentive transformation. The message is unambiguous: it is not the sinner’s own “strength” or “merit” that enables him to achieve repentance as a self-transformative strategy, but that God has, out of his own will, mercy, and goodness, enabled the sinner to do so, to partake in the healing process. As Maimonides put it, interpreting Lamentations 3:38–41, “The healing of this sickness lies accordingly in our hands, just as we have sinned out of our free choice, so can we repent (sich bekehren) and come back (zurückkommen) from our evil actions.”

But repentance is ultimately an ability that comes from God, who can and did according to tradition in certain circumstances “withhold repentance” from sinners, who then no longer had the option to choose repentance after freely choosing sin. “God sometimes punishes man by not granting him free will with regard to repentance so that he does not repent.”

Thus Rabbeinu Yonah also stressed the necessity to pray for divine help: “Pray to God, when you do tshuvah, to always help you with it. As it’s said, ‘Turn me back, and I will return. For You are God my Lord’ ” (Jer 31:18).

But if he chooses to exercise this given ability to repent, the sinner will not be rejected. A core biblical message reverberates in the Bußpsalmen: if a sinner confesses to God, he will be heard (we’ll come back to the central demand of confession later, in R5). For instance, when the sinner calls to his God to show him the way of repentance—“Show me the way I should walk, for to you I lift up

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16. Ibid., 67–69. The chief example given by Maimonides is the “hardening” of the Pharaoh’s and his servants’ hearts (Ex 10:1). See also Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 471–73.
17. Yonah, Gates of Repentance, 61.
my soul” (Ps 143:8)—he has already been assured—“I will teach you, I will show you the way to turn to; I will guide you with my gaze” (Ps 32:8). Indeed, the only direct response from God in the otherwise monological Bußpsalmen is this positive reassurance of guidance. We see the corresponding unswerving trust in the repentant sinner’s self-reassurance: “The Lord has heard my cry. The Lord has heard my plea. The Lord will grant all that I pray for” (Ps 6:9–10). He is so sure of this that it doesn’t even seem inappropriate to him that he should ask God to “hurry up” (e.g., Ps 143:8; 79:8).

Mercy, however, as encapsulated in the Bußpsalmen, is not “forgive and forget,” but a promise to “show the way” and to “keep an eye” on the sinner (rather than to discard and close the file, so to speak). The “gaze” is not one of a distrustful, watchful eye, but one of accompaniment and forewarning, what Maimonides called “the forerunner of repentance”18—before the sinner wanders too far on the misguided path again and before the damage is too great. The mistrusting gaze is characterized by the preoccupation to protect the self (against the perpetual sinner); the latter has the well-being of the other (i.e., the former sinner) as the point of departure; that is why the enduring love of God for the sinner is recalled and resorted to throughout the Bußpsalmen, and is reinforced elsewhere in the Bible: “For whom the Lord loves he reprimands, like a father does the son he’s pleased with” (Prv 3:12). Hence admonishment in the form of “pangs of conscience” is also mercy—a warning before catastrophe. We are brought to feel this in the Bußpsalmen, for instance, with the descriptions of “burned bones,”19 “frightened and weakened bones,”20 and “bones left without flesh.”21 These “sensations” are first associated with the sinner’s own sins (“There is nothing wholesome in my bones because of my sins”22) but also

20. Psalms 32:3 and 6:3.
attributed to their divine origin and intention (“Let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones you have crushed rejoice”\textsuperscript{23}).

But just as mercy is granted out of free will, repentance, according to the biblical tradition, can also only be exercised freely—it cannot be forced. It can only be a response, not a reaction. In the Bußpsalmen, there is a peculiar verse pointing to the undesirability of “forced or reactive turning”:

Psalm 32:9 Do not be like the horse or the mule—without understanding and led by bit and bridle.

The juxtaposition of “instructing, showing, and watching over/leading” (Ps 32:8) to being “led by bit and bridle” clearly conveys the message that, when forced, it is not repentance, which does not belong to the “action-reaction” logic of nature. Even pangs of conscience can be overcome and “mastered.” But the repentant sinner responds to mercy. “Just as man becomes sinner through his own free will, so must he do repentance with full consciousness and out of free will.”\textsuperscript{24}

The idea that mercy precedes repentance, or presents a proactive call to repentance, is ubiquitous in the biblical tradition. See, for example, the story of Elisha the prophet and Naaman the Aramean general (2 Kgs 5), in which the national enemy who was also a leper asked for healing from Israel, and Elisha granted him just that without asking for anything in return—except turning him to Yahweh (see also the similar “instruction” of the Aramean soldiers with power and mercy; 2 Kgs 6:8–23).\textsuperscript{25}

Overflowing with gratefulness from inside out, the repentant one is not mindful of his vulnerability—this inevitably exposes him to the risks of abuse (e.g., by those who contrive to benefit from their claimed “victimhood,” and by those mockers and cynics; see

\begin{footnotes}
\item[23.] Psalm 51:10. See also the promise of rebirth from “dry bones” in Ezekiel 37:1–14.
\item[24.] Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 469.
\item[25.] See also Romans 2:4.
\end{footnotes}
Ps 1:1). As Maimonides advised, “The repentant ones are used to being humble and utterly modest; if the fools reproach them for their former actions and say: ‘You have acted in such and such a way, and said so and so,’ they do not have to care about that, but listen to these with serenity, as they know this is also beneficial to them, for the shame of their earlier sins and the blush before these increase their merit, and obtain for them an even higher place.”

Furthermore, Yahweh is the one who will deal with these scorners, impostors, and profiteers. We will come back to this important point when we look at another character in the story of Naaman: Gehazi the servant (see R11).

R4: Recognizing Punishment as Just

Psalm 51:6b You are right when you pass sentence and blameless in your judgment.

Psalm 130:3 If you, O Lord, should mark our evil, O Lord, who could stand?

Psalm 143:2 Do not bring your servant to judgment, for no mortal is just in your sight.

Psalm 6:2 O Lord, in your anger do not reprove me; nor punish me in your fury.

Daniel 9:18 Incline your ear, my God, and listen . . . for we do not rely on our justice, but your mercy.

Mercy, however, does not preclude just punishment or catastrophe. Biblical scholars concur that acts of repentance, as recorded and represented in the Bible, are not always “successful” as a

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27. As Rabbi Yaakov Feldman explains, referring to Yonah’s interpretation of Psalm 51:6, the roots of “just” and “charitable” in Hebrew are the same, hence the double meaning. See Yonah, Gates of Repentance, 63–64.
strategy to avert these.\textsuperscript{28} A prime example of this, in our context, would be David himself—he sinned and repented, and was also “forgiven” (his sins being “taken away”) by Yahweh, so that he would not die, but his first child with Uriah’s wife was to die (2 Sm 12:15), and no amount of fasting and weeping could avert that. A “collective” example of this can be found in 2 Kings 22–23, when even after Josiah’s religious reforms, neither the anger of Yahweh nor the punishment of Judah was averted (2 Kgs 23:25–27).\textsuperscript{29}

It is even questionable whether the “avoidance of punishment” is a legitimate motivation for genuine repentance. In the conclusion of his \textit{ Doctrine of Repentance}, Maimonides stressed that love for God (as expressed in the Song of Songs) rather than fear of divine punishment should be the ultimate motivation of all those who turn to God.\textsuperscript{30} Likewise, even as Rabbeinu Yonah called repentance an “escape hatch,” repentance was for him ultimately not about getting away from punishment, but coming back to God: “And the greater the degree of your \textit{tshuvah}, the closer to God you get.”\textsuperscript{31}

In the Christian tradition, the distinction between “attrition” and “contrition”—that is, merely fearing punishment and genuinely recognizing the wrongfulness of sin—is also a noted example of this concern. In the Bußpsalmen themselves, we hear expressions of recognition, on the part of the sinner, that God’s judgment (and punishment) is just, so much so that if God is to be true to his own words, as expressly recognized by the repentant sinner, he can’t help but mete out just punishments to all (e.g., Ps 51:6; 130:3; 143:2).

But then how are we to understand the seemingly contradictory entreaty to God to refrain from punishment (as in Ps 6:2)? When the centrality of mercy is recalled, it seems that the sinner’s


\textsuperscript{29} It would be instructive, though, to compare Josiah’s case with Ezra’s in Nehemiah 8–10 and see the contrast between the two in terms of the common people’s relative passivity and proactiveness.


\textsuperscript{31} Yonah, \textit{Gates of Repentance}, 12.
recognition of God’s right to justice does not exclude him from beseeching his God to exercise his freedom of mercy instead. In fact, in the biblical tradition, as reflected in the Bußpsalmen, the two often, if not always, go together. The “rod against wrong-doings” and the “strikes against sins” do not preclude love for sinners, or their faithfulness (Ps 89:31–34). What appears to counter this biblical spirit of repentance, though, is the reversal of values: when mercy becomes a requirement, and the right to justice is not recognized.

To move from an individual example to a collective one, the most striking instance of the recognition of God’s judgment/punishment as just, or of catastrophe as a possible manifestation of such, may very well be the prophetic interpretation of the historical trauma of Israel—the Babylonian captivity. In a way that is inconceivable to our modern, nationalistic mind, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel unambiguously attributed the foreign invasion and the subsequent exile to the sinfulness of Jerusalem and Judah (Ez 12:13; 17:19–20; Jer 19:15; 20:4). It was Yahweh who delivered Jerusalem to the Babylonians, according to these prophets. Consequently, it was not to the Babylonians that Israel had to turn with remembrance of hatred and revenge, but it was Yahweh alone that they must face and return to. The evildoers of the invasion and captivity would have to face Yahweh in their time (Jer 30:16; Is 10:12). As in the case of the individual sinner, the community of sinners was promised restoration if they repented.

According to this biblical conception of repentance, then, one may safely conclude, the concern of the repentant sinner is not directed primarily to punishment/catastrophe or the fear of such, but to the promised restoration of relationship. Repentance in this

32. Rather, one finds “peculiar” places in the Bible where the “good memory” of Babylonians is preserved (e.g., 2 Kgs 25:27–30).
33. See the idea of the “nonmutual cancellation of guilt” in R11.
34. Linguistically, the Hebrew terms for “repentance,” “turning” and “returning,” and “restoration,” all bear the same root, sub, thus pointing to their symbolic and essential oneness. See Mark Boda, “Renewal in Heart, Word, and Deed: Repentance in the Torah,” in Boda and Smith, Repentance in Christian Theology, 11–12.
conception is not a mechanical, causal device—that is, “with this and this input, and the outcome will be that.” Nothing concerning the consequences of sin is “guaranteed” in advance—only the restoration of relationship made possible through mercy and repentance. When this is in focus, whether something is “punishment” or “atonement” is a moot point, for that which is conducive to the healing of wounded relationships is welcomed, or even sought after, by the repentant sinner. That is why punishment is no substitute for repentance—for without turning, it is only suffering without meaning.

Yet, as the Bußgebet, or prayer of repentance, in Daniel reminds, human justice is not what the repentant sinner ultimately relies on and hence attempts to “satisfy,” for God’s justice is not human justice (Ez 18:25; see R6). The acceptance of punishment as just is hence not without qualifications—the justifiability and limits of human justice (whether it be the victors’ or the victims’) are always subject to the light of the triangular relationship with God.

R5: Confession as the Only Acceptable Sacrifice

Psalm 51:19 The sacrifices that please God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, O God, will not despise.

Psalm 32:5 Then I made known to you my sin and no longer concealed my guilt. I said: “To the Lord I will now confess my trespasses.” And you forgave my sin, you removed my guilt.

Psalm 130:6 My soul waits for the Lord, more than the watchmen for the dawn; more than the watchmen for the dawn.

35. Freud pointed to the sickening side of what he called Strafbedürfnis, or the “need for punishment.” Luther, on the other hand, proclaimed that “sincere contrition (aufrichtige Reue) desires and loves penalty” (the 40th of his 95 Theses). There is indeed only a thin line between recognizing punishment as just (or the healing effect of atonement) and yearning for punishment as such. See Sigmund Freud, Unbehagen in der Kultur (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930), 99.

36. Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 411. It is granted, though, that repentance, especially where cross-generational guilt (R12) is concerned, acts as “armor (Panzer) against God’s punishment” (469).
Jeremiah 31:6, 9, 13 There shall be a day when watchmen will call out: “Come, let us go to Zion, to Yahweh our God!” . . . They will come weeping, but I will accompany them, comforting them, . . . I will turn their mourning into joy.

That the repentant sinner should confess his sins to God should strike one as odd: why the need to tell someone something he already knows? But in the Bible it is not uncommon to see such paradoxical “communications,” as in the book of Genesis where God is presented as asking Adam after he had eaten the forbidden fruit: “Where are you?” (3:9). Does he not know the whereabouts of his creatures? Or is he giving Adam a chance to acknowledge (both to get to know and to make known) his “lostness,” or his having wandered away from God? Without such knowledge and acknowledgment, how could the lost one begin to turn back?

If we follow this line of interpretive argument, then the act of confession, as exists between human and God, is first of all an act of open self-dialogue: it is not to say what the other wants to hear, but to listen to what oneself needs to hear. When a person confesses, he identifies his sins—that is, he does not, in effect, identify his self with Sin. He is of course through his confession inviting demands for penalties and indemnification, but he is no longer the Sin that needs to be exterminated. He is simultaneously walking away from Sin and owning up to the consequences of his sins.

In the Bußpsalmen, confession, acting as a severance between the sinner and his sins and wrongdoing (Ps 32:5), is clearly conceived as a relief for the sinner, for keeping silent about one’s sins and misdeeds saps one’s strength (Ps 32:3). Confession is thus a process of overcoming the impulse to conceal, an act of “letting light pass through” oneself, so that what was hidden, including the

37. Maimonides warned, though, that one should only confess publicly sins against fellow humans (especially when it comes to deceased victims who could no longer be asked for forgiveness), not those against God (“Lehre von der Buße,” 421–23, 427–29). This caveat calls for reflection on some demands for “public apology” that neglect the nature of the wrongdoings and the question of who is truly entitled to receive the apology.
tendency to hide, is now in “broad daylight”—hence the image of “dawning” (Ps 130:6). But this “dawning,” if it is to be valuable as a sacrifice, cannot be coerced (as when someone “confesses” only because the facts are against him) but longed for—more than the “watchmen” for the dawn. This curious character of the “watchman,” which is repeated in Psalm 130:6 twice, deserves closer attention.

In the prophetic books, the watchman is frequently used to symbolize the community’s conscience, “posted there” by God to give warnings to the community (Ez 3:17, 33:7; Is 21:6), but sometimes the watchmen became “blind,” “dumb,” and “asleep” (Is 56:10), and other times their warnings were not heeded (Jer 6:17)—hence the downfall of the community. Therefore, the reform and restoration of conscience, which will now see and tell what it sees and will be listened to, are hallmarks of the confessing sinner. In Jeremiah 31:6–13, we have an image of a sinner or a community of sinners heeding their restored conscience—the “watchmen,” turning and returning to God weeping, who then turned their mourning into joy.

This brings us to another important function of confession: to provide an occasion for “curative mourning.” It is not the case that only the repentant sinner weeps for his wrongdoing and his guilt (Ps 6:7; 102:10); God also weeps for the damages and consequences of sin (Jer 14:17, 48:31–32; Is 22:4, 16:9, 15:5). Hence in a later section (R14), when we explore interhuman relationships, we’ll see how confession is linked to curative mourning—which is itself a difficult “turning” for the victim—in which the turning from mourning to joy becomes apparent.

In the Bußpsalmen, finally, confession is further construed as an act of sacrifice: through confessing, the sinner offers his “broken

38. See also Psalm 127:1.

39. The victim can, of course, choose not to make this turning—turning to the sinner, to his confession—by turning away from him, by refusing to listen, because to listen to a confession, while curative, is to allow access to a wound that still hurts.
spirit and contrite heart,” which is the only sacrifice by a sinner acceptable to God (Ps 51:18–19). In return, God promises to renew both the heart and the spirit, so that the sinner can live and the broken relationship can be restored (Ez 36:28).

R6: Repentance as Inner Death and Rebirth

Psalm 51:12 Create in me, O God, a pure heart; give me a new and steadfast spirit.

Ezekiel 36:26–27 I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I shall remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws.

Ezekiel 18:32 I do not want the death of anyone, word of Yahweh, but that you repent and live.

Repeatedly, the biblical conception of repentance revolves around one’s heart and spirit, as is also reflected in this central verse of the fourth Bußpsalm. In the Torah, for example, we hear exhortations to the “circumcision of the heart” (Dt 10:16, 30:6), which are repeated in the Prophets (Jer 4:4) and the Epistles. The images of changing or circumcising the heart should point one to the apprehension of coming to—or through—death, for how else could one accomplish something like that? In this conception, however, one kind of death is required, and another not. And for the right kind of death to be achieved, the essential asymmetric mutuality between God and human is stressed.40

40. It is of no small significance that Rabbeinu Yonah begins his Gates of Repentance with an enigmatic line: “[Tšuvah is] among the favors God has done with us, His creations.” This “with” is noted by the translator and commentator of the work, Rabbi Yaakov Feldman, as pointing to the conception that “tšchuvah is a means of solidifying and deepening our and God’s mutual love.” Yonah, Gates of Repentance, 4 (emphasis added).
At the very least, the circumcision should call to mind the voluntary “cutting off” of oneself, which is extremely painful, as it is so deep within one’s innermost being, as symbolized by the heart. In fact, inner callousness, or the inability to feel pain, is suggested by the “heart of stone,” which needs to be replaced by a “heart of flesh,” one that can and does feel pain (Ez 36:26–27). But to feel pain for what? Or for whom? The immediate images of “bloodshed” and “cannibalism” in Ezekiel (36:13, 18) suggest insensitivity to the suffering of fellow human beings, and hence to the suffering of God. In other words, the “heart of flesh” can mean a vulnerable heart that feels for others, whose suffering is made invisible time and again by hard-heartedness and misleading spirits, that is, “justifications” such as national interests, racial superiority, class struggle, religious identity, and so on. These utmost “frames of mind,” as we now call them, or orientations that have been taken to one’s heart—that is, held sacrosanct as part of the “self-identity”—are part and parcel of what needs to be put to death.

But when the repentant sinner is able (and only he is able) to put his innermost self in mind and spirit—which led him to sin in the first place—to death, and to feel again the pain of the victims of his wrongdoings or negligence, chief among them God himself (see R2), he is also by this act of inner self-mortification exposing himself to the danger of despair—outright despair (“Nothing is possible for me anymore”). This is in fact what happens when people are unable to bear the magnitude of their guilt, as they begin to see

41. It is Heschel’s thesis that prophecy is the communication of the divine pathos—including jealousy, disappointment, and frustration—to the people, in order to bring about the needed sympathy as a human response. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, Die Prophetie (Kraków: Verlag der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1936). The extended English version of this work by Heschel appears as The Prophets, Perennial Classics (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

42. Becoming vulnerable is a central theme of repentance. See Yonah, Gates of Repentance, 6, 12.

43. Even here, however, there is divine assistance (Hos 6:5).
the enormity of their misdeeds—they commit suicide. Hence in the Bußpsalmen and the Torah in general, the creative/redemptive power of God is stressed: to create and to give a pure heart and a new spirit (Ps 51:12); not only is one called to participate in the circumcision of the heart (“[You shall] circumcise your hearts . . .”; Dt 10:16), but God has promised to participate in it too (“Yahweh, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants”; Dt 30:6). It is within this relational reality that repentance, as inner death and rebirth, as can be gleaned from the biblical tradition, is understood and accomplished. It is not, and cannot be, achieved by the sinner alone.

The sinner is not called to repent through death, bodily death, but to repent so that he may have life (Ez 18:32). Nor is he asked to cover his shame by changing his face or his name as a way of hiding. The idea that the right way to achieve repentance is by killing oneself or being killed is nowhere to be found in the biblical tradition. “There is no sin that cannot be atoned for by repentance,” Maimonides unequivocally asserts. “Everyone must strive to do repentance . . . so he may die as a repentant [i.e., when the hour of death comes, he has already done repentance, like the “godless sinner” Ezekiel had spoken of in 18:21], and in this way gain entry to life in the world to come.”

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44. See Paul’s differentiation between “Godly” and “worldly sorrow” in 2 Corinthians 7:10.

45. Stressing this prerogative of God’s, Luther commented on this verse: “A clean hand . . . is easy to do and within human power; but a pure heart . . . is the work of the creator and of divine power.” See his “Auslegung der sieben Bußpsalmen,” in Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften, vol. 4, Auslegung des Alten Testaments: Auslegung über die Psalmen, ed. Johann Georg Walch (Groß-Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung Heinrich Harms, 1987).

46. To be sure, name changing can also be a sign of the repentant, but never as an attempt to hide or evade responsibility. It is rather a signal that “he has become another being, no longer the same as the one who had committed the bad deeds.” See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 421.

47. See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 445, 479. According to Yonah, however, there is a sin of which only “death” absolves the sinner: the profanation of God’s name (Gates of Repentance, 300). But even here, Rabbeinu Yonah, in disagreement with the masters he was quoting, granted an “escape hatch”: using one’s whole life for the sanctification of God’s name (310). Likewise, when
idea that “only through death can one’s honor and the honor of one’s family name be saved” is not uncommon. There is the Chinese idea of “using death to apologize” (yisi xiezui 以死謝罪), for instance, and that of seppuku or harakiri in the Japanese tradition. It may seem a moot point to argue about whether death is meted out as punishment or considered a requirement of repentance, when the sinner will die all the same, but it is in fact a fine and important difference when death, especially suicide, is seen as an ideal of repentance or as a consequence of sin. The first precludes the life-saving power of repentance; the latter does not: just as God is justified in demanding death from the sinner, but can and does choose to exercise his freedom of mercy, so too can those created in his image. Indeed, it has been a repeated call of the prophets that God desires mercy, not sacrifice (Hos 6:6), and this is repeated by Jesus (Mt 9:13). There is no injunction against the “year of mercy” (Lv 25:10; Lk 4:19). The story of Jonah illustrates succinctly that even a prophet of Israel cannot withhold repentance, as a life- and

Maimonides indicated that such a sin is atoned for “only through death,” he was not being self-contradictory. For the biblical passage (Is 22:14) that he cited in its support sheds light on why this is the case: the people have mocked the call to life through repentance, and chose death instead; hence it is only a logical conclusion that death becomes the only outcome when the option for life, that is, repentance, is rejected. The same is true in Amos 9:10, where repentance is not seen as a necessity for life; when the severity of sin’s consequences is not recognized by a dumb optimism, death results for sinners. See Maimonides, “Lehre von der Buße,” 415–16.

48. See, for example, the passages in the Bible where the death penalty is sanctioned (Ex 21; Lv 24:10–23). One may argue that these penal laws were actually meant to increase leniency—that is, to limit the penal violence to the wrongdoer himself in proportion to the crime he had committed—or that the death penalty is used to highlight the sanctity of life (i.e., “Murder is a serious crime!”). Historically true as these arguments may be, no attempt is made in this book to justify or gloss over these biblical passages that seem to run counter to the “spirit of repentance” I’m trying to outline here. It is readily conceded, rather, that a living tradition is far from “consistent,” and that intratraditional tensions are the rule rather than the exception. The questions for the present generation seem to be the following: Where do we stand? Which voice do we choose to listen to, and why? Rabbeinu Yonah, for example, asserted that even the biblically “sanctioned” capital punishments can be averted through teshuvah, Yom Kippur, and tribulations (Gates of Repentance, 308).
relationship-saving device, when it is granted by God himself to human beings, even to pagans. But to avail oneself of this device, besides the courage to circumcise one’s heart, patience is required. When the sinner’s will to return is “like the morning mist and the early dew,” which disappears almost as soon as it appears, the “divine operation” can be of but little help to him (Hos 6:1–4). The repenting sinner, as depicted in the Bußpsalmen, is a soul that waits (Ps 130:5).

The “reborn” sinner—that is, in the sense of one with a renewed heart and spirit—is certainly no saint, nor is this rebirth guarantee of any “proof” against future relapse. This is a recognized fact in the biblical tradition, as when we hear that even circumcised hearts at times need to be “humbled again” (Lv 26:40–42). Martin Buber’s well-chosen biblical example (Jer 34:15, 16, 22) of repentance-as-return also illustrates the multifarious kinds of “return”—the return to God, the return to one’s former evil ways, and the return of enmity among human beings.49 Even dogs and fools do “turning”—but only to their own vomit and folly (Prv 26:11). Hence, as Rabbeinu Yonah insisted, before Luther, repentance should be a “lifelong” exercise.50

R7: “Helping Others Repent” as the New Task of the Repentant

Psalm 51:15–17 I will teach the wrongdoers your ways and sinners will return to you. . . . Of your justice I shall speak aloud. O Lord, open my lips, and I will proclaim your glory.

Jeremiah 15:19 If you repent, word of Yahweh, . . . you can stand before me again . . . and you will be as my own mouth again.

49. See Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture and Translation, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35.

Psalm 130:12–13 For you have turned my wailing into dancing, removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so I praise you and will not remain silent.

The last of Rabbeinu Yonah’s “principles of *tshuvah*” is a curious one: “Turning Others Away From Sin as Much as You Can.”

Indeed, in contrast to some other traditions where a sinner appears no longer good for anything (even with repentance), and the “less-than-immaculate” has no right to teach others, in Judaism and Christianity the repentant sinner is valued precisely for his repentance. In the words of Maimonides, “[The repentant one’s] reward is even greater [than that of the pious], for he has already tasted sin, but nonetheless renounced it and subdued his evil inclination. The sages said: The place the repentant ones occupy is not allowed even the most pious ones, which is to say, their place is higher than that of those who have never sinned, because they have more cravings to rein in than these.”

What the repentant one has learned is of such high value that he is even required to proactively teach others the way to repent, as exemplified by the verse above from Psalm 51. Aside from David, the ascribed author of this psalm, Paul also serves as such a paradigmatic figure: having been blinded by his own murderous fanaticism, after returning to sight he preached against others’ blindness (see Acts 9:8–9, 13:9–11).

So important is this duty to warn others—which is not reserved to the repentant—that Maimonides considered it one of the more significant sins if one omitted to fulfill it. “To this category belongs also the one who has the power to turn his neighbors aside from the sin but does not do it; this is relevant to the single individual as well as to an entire community, if he lets it fall prey to the sin.”

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51. Ibid., 70. He in fact derived this principle from Psalm 51:15 as well as from Leviticus 19:17: “Criticize your neighbor diligently, and do not bear sin on his account.”


53. Ibid., 447.
This renewed spirit to speak out, however, is characterized not by a sense of “pride” of having accomplished repentance, nor by a sense of victimhood (“Why should I be singled out to repent but not them?”), but by gratitude and joy about having been “turned around” by God. Psalm 51 again exemplifies this characteristic by emphasizing the link between this “new speech” and the “new spirit”: in the space of a few verses (vv. 12–17) the word “spirit” is mentioned three times (“a new and steadfast spirit,” “your holy spirit,” and “a willing spirit”), and three manners of speaking out have been proposed (“teaching . . . your ways,” “speaking aloud of . . . your justice,” and “proclaiming . . . your glory”). Divine ways, divine justice, and divine glory are the central themes of the new speech; the (past) sinfulness of the repentant sinner/speaker and the (present) sinfulness of the audience are pointed out only in relation to these themes.

The tradition of “confession literature” in the West, starting with Augustine, exemplifies this spirit. And the Hebrew Bible, if read historiographically, is also astonishing in this self-critique: not only of the kings and the “elite,” but of the people, the “masses” themselves. It is as if only from that height of a new self, through “the change of heart and spirit,” that one can bear to look back and recount that old self, which is no longer alive (i.e., effective in the sense of determining one’s thinking and action), but neither is it disowned. Duty bound, the repentant sinner has to criticize his neighbor diligently so as not to suffer the consequences of his sin (Lv 19:17). Yet, being the last tshuvah principle according to Rabbeinu Yonah, this duty can be understood as the consummating act

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54. The connection between “spirit” and “speech” is of course more apparent and natural if we recall the biblical synonyms of “spirit” and “breath” in Ezekiel 37.


56. A prime manifestation of this spirit is Ezra’s prayer in Nehemiah 9:6–37.

57. Rabbeinu Yonah’s interpretation of Psalm 51:5 is that the repentant sinner should always remember his sins and his self having sinned, while not necessarily repeating the same confession (Gates of Repentance, 313).
of a long and arduous process of repentant efforts, rather than the beginning of these. Indeed, as we have already seen in the previous sections (especially R4), speaking of the guilt of others is highly suspicious as an act of impenitence. It is therefore a hard-won duty, a thankless task, and a narrow path between self-righteousness and paralyzing “humility.”

**R8: Repentant Disagreement**

Psalm 51:5 For I acknowledge my wrongdoing, and have my sin ever in mind.

Isaiah 43:16, 18–19, 25 Thus says Yahweh . . . “Do not dwell on the past, or remember the things of old. Look, I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth. Do you not see? I it is, I am He who blots out your offenses for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”

Psalm 51:7 See, I have been guilt-ridden from birth, a sinner from my mother’s womb.

Ezekiel 18:4, 20 All lives are my possession, the life of the father and the life of the son are mine. Only the one who sins shall die. . . . The son shall not bear the guilt of his father nor the father the guilt of his son.

In this “mutual-turning” of repentance, turning to each other, one remarkable feature is that both sides often disagree. As the first example quoted above shows, whereas the repentant sinner insists on always remembering his past sins, God speaks of not dwelling on the misdeeds and sins of the past, but invites the sinner to see the “new” coming into being instead of wallowing in disbelief. Indeed, one can even argue that whereas confessing one’s past sins, atoning for them, and remembering one’s “capability to sin” are characteristic of the biblical spirit of repentance, “dwelling on the past” as an end in itself is not. For the emphasis of this spirit is always and only on the present: there is a sickened/wounded relationship that needs healing; and there is a choice to be made to
“return” and be a conduit of healing power, or not.\textsuperscript{58} In this light, the “new” (heart/spirit and the relationship between the reborn and his God) is not at all a “compromised old at best,” a “broken mirror” that is scarred forever even after repair, but something altogether better than it has ever been. All the “going back to the past,” “remembering,” and “apologies” lose their meaning the moment one loses sight of the sole reality of relationships and their healing potential at present. These efforts become “futile,” for “the past cannot be undone.”\textsuperscript{59}

Another instance of “repentant disagreement” that we will look at here concerns “generational guilt.” Whereas David or the psalmist accepts the link between God’s judgment on him and the sins of his former generations, and assumes personal responsibility for them,\textsuperscript{60} God speaks of “everyone for his own sins,” that sons and fathers should not be made to bear each other’s guilt.\textsuperscript{61} While we must explore the inherent ambiguities more deeply (e.g., couldn’t “generational sin” also be a way to evade responsibility,\

\textsuperscript{58} Buber, \textit{Ich und Du}, 63.\textsuperscript{59} This is in fact a popular criticism of present-day efforts at reconciliation—at times betraying the underlying defensiveness of the critic, at times bespeaking a sense of despair of those attempting “repair” without any affirmation of possible success.\textsuperscript{60} See also Jeremiah 14:20.\textsuperscript{61} There seems to be a “divine disagreement” here as well: for wasn’t it also the same God who said: “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the wrongdoing of the fathers to the third and fourth generation, \textit{who hate me}” (Ex 20:5). Once again, the relational context and the respective audience may shed light on the seeming discrepancy. In Exodus, the cited text appears in the pronouncement of the Decalogue—in particular, the prohibition against idol worship; thus the principal relationship in question is between God and his chosen people. The thrust of the text is clearly toward warning the listener (i.e., the present generation) of the dire consequences of sin (especially idol worship), which may lead to a cross-generational rebellion against or hatred toward God, which then necessitates a “turning around” by punishment. In Ezekiel, the cited text appears in the comparison between divine justice and human ways of judging (see Ez 18:2, 25). The thrust of this text is then toward limiting indiscriminate interhuman punishment, which is based on fallible human judgment. In fact, the possibility of repentance by later generations with regard to idol worship is explicitly recognized in this text (Ez 18:15), thus bearing out the interpretation of the Exodus text above.
and if one is “born into sin,” how can one be held accountable for something one had no choice about to begin with?), which we will do in a subsequent section dealing entirely with generational guilt (R12); suffice it to say here concerning “repentant disagreement” that the unreconciled ones often in fact fundamentally agree with each other, whereas the “mutual-turning” ones (i.e., those inspired by this biblical spirit of repentance) often “disagree.” 62 On the assignment of guilt, for instance, these often “contradict” each other in content (if one sees their responses only in the dimension of argument with premises and categories, etc.), while the essential emphasis—if one is able to see theirs as relational gestures and responses—is always each other. Establishing logical consistency in terms of rules and ideas is never their primary concern, but the reestablishment of their relationship. 63 It is as if through, and only through, going further than what is required/right in the “objective” sense in opposite directions that “mutual-turning” is accomplished, and healing ensues.

R9: Even God Repents

Genesis 6:6 The Lord regretted having created men on earth, and it pained his heart.

Genesis 8:21 And the Lord said to himself: “Never again will I curse the earth because of man, even though his thoughts are evil from youth. Never again will I exterminate all those that live like I have done.”

Exodus 32:12–14 Turn away from your burning anger, and let yourself regret the evil that you are thinking of doing to your people. . . . Then the Lord lets himself regret the evil He had threatened his people.

62. Perhaps this is why those who avoid “confrontation” at all costs often fail to achieve reconciliation. For in avoiding disagreements, they also miss those that are necessary for healing.

63. Yet this tentatively termed “relationism” must be differentiated from relativism: at the very least, the first is grounded in the asserted reality of relationships (in the triad of God and human beings) and proceeds from a particular understanding of how these relationships are wounded and healed; the latter is not.
Hosea 11:8 How could I give you up, Ephraim? And deliver you, Israel? . . . My heart turns against me, all my compassion is ablaze.

An element of repentance is not spoken of in the Buspsalmen, and it is only right that this is so. For it entails a “turning” on the part of God that is beyond the turning in terms of mercy (R3) and of participation in the renewal of the sinner (R6). It refers to the “regret” (Reue) of God when faced with the sinfulness of men. Had the repentant sinner voiced this aspect of turning, as if he could now demand the repentance of God—that God should look into his own guilt in the sinfulness of his creature—it would have nullified every other expression of repentance on his part. For then the sinner would be in effect blaming God for his sin, like Adam, rather than owning up to it himself.

Yet elsewhere in the Bible, references to the turning of God himself in this distinct aspect are readily found right from the very beginning. The quoted verses above and their related passages portray a God who is not only concerned about justice and mercy, but is also self-blaming and willing to change himself in response to the sinfulness of men. If not, the flood and extermination would have been perceived as “justice served” rather than something “never to be done again”—even without any prior guarantee from man that his heart and his world would never be filled with that much evil again (Gn 6:5; likewise in Hos 11:1–9). If not, the threats of punishment would have been counted as “merciful reminders” rather than as something to regret (reuen). If not, furthermore, human wickedness should have aroused only divine anger and disappointment, not regret and pain. This regret thus arises from the consciousness of both the guilt of one’s constitutive part in the sin committed against oneself, and the consequence of being caused by the human evil done to think and/or to do evil as a reaction.

64. The King James Version (1611/1769) uses “repentings” here, whereas the German versions use “Mitleid” and “Barmherzigkeit.”

65. When asked by God whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam shifted the blame back to God via Eve: “The woman you put with me gave me the fruit from the tree” (Gn 3:12).

66. See also similar references in 2 Samuel 24:16 and Jonah 3:10.
In translating Amos 7:3 into English, Abraham Heschel adopted the verb “repent”: “The Lord repented concerning this; / It shall not be, said the Lord.”67 God’s repentance, of course, as emphasized by Heschel, is not indicative of his “wrongdoing” or wrong judgment, but rather of his mercy as “perpetual possibility” against the iron law of cause and effect. An illustrative biblical example of this chain reaction—and the divine regret that breaks it—can be found in Exodus, where the idolatry of the “molten calf” almost brought about the extermination of the people of Israel (Ex 32). When the people corrupted themselves and “turned away” from the way of God, this effected divine anger and their imminent destruction (Ex 32:7–9). And as in the case of Jeremiah (7:16), Moses was commanded by God not to stand in the way of this outpouring of fury. But Moses disobeyed and rejected the temptation to become “a great nation” (vv. 10–11). He asked God to turn away from his anger, and to let himself regret (reuen) the evil or disaster he had in mind for his people (v. 12).68 He even “threatened” God by daring him to “blot me out of your book” if forgiveness was not to be granted (v. 32).69 The Lord let himself regret the evil that he had conceived for his people (v. 14).70


68. See also Psalm 106:23.

69. This is in sharp contrast to Aaron, who tried to assign the guilt solely to the people while saving himself by claiming passivity (Ex 32:22–24). On the representativeness of prophetic repentance, see R10.

70. To be sure, the people of Israel did not escape punishment altogether, a plague (Ex. 32:35) and a self-initiated violent purge (vv. 27–29) did follow. But as we have seen in R4, punishment is not the same as the termination of relationship, which, even when “punishment-free,” is perceived to be worse than the worst punishment. The Israelites’ refusal to go away “freely” without their God points to this understanding (Ex 33:4).