



Stylo-Textual Strategies in Psalm 51

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Abstract

Psalm 51, attributed to King David, stands as a profound expression of repentance and restoration within the biblical tradition. This paper presents a thorough examination of the stylo-textual strategies employed in Psalm 51, focusing on its linguistic, stylistic, and textual dimensions. Through meticulous analysis, the study reveals the intricate interplay between rhetorical devices, linguistic features, and textual structures in conveying the psalmist's plea for divine mercy and spiritual renewal. Stylistically, the psalm employs parallelism, imagery, repetition, metaphor, and irony to evoke emotional resonance and rhetorical impact. Textually, the psalm unfolds a coherent structure, progressing from confession to petition and affirmation, reflecting the psalmist's journey from contrition to transformation. Moreover, the psalmist's engagement with textual traditions and cultural norms enriches the text's interpretive depth and theological significance. Through this analysis, readers gain deeper insights into the stylo-textual strategies employed in Psalm 51, inviting reflection on its enduring relevance and profound insights into the human experience of sin, forgiveness, and redemption.

1. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 51 stands as a timeless testament to the human experience of repentance and redemption within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Attributed to King David, this psalm occupies a central place in the Book of Psalms, revered for its emotional depth, poetic beauty, and profound theological insights. Psalm 51 serves as a poignant expression of the psalmist's remorse for transgressions, his plea for divine forgiveness, and his longing for spiritual renewal. Through comprehensive discourse analysis, this study endeavours to unravel the intricate layers of meaning embedded within this ancient text, shedding light on its linguistic, rhetorical, and theological dimensions.

The significance of Psalm 51 lies not only in its literary and aesthetic qualities but also in its ability to resonate with readers across cultures and generations. Its universal themes of guilt, grace, and restoration speak to the fundamental aspects of the human condition, inviting introspection and eliciting emotional responses. By delving into the discourse strategies employed within the text, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the psalmist conveys these profound truths and engages with his audience.

This analysis will explore various aspects of Psalm 51, beginning with an examination of its literary structure and linguistic features. We will investigate the use of poetic devices such as parallelism, imagery, and repetition, which contribute to the psalm's aesthetic appeal and rhetorical impact. Through close reading and textual analysis, we will uncover the nuances of language and expression that imbue the psalm with its emotional intensity and theological significance.

Furthermore, this study will consider the socio-historical context in which Psalm 51 was composed, providing insight into the circumstances that may have influenced its creation and reception. By situating the psalm within its cultural milieu, we can better appreciate its relevance to the religious and moral concerns of its time, as well as its enduring resonance in contemporary discourse.

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Additionally, this analysis will explore the inter-textual connections between Psalm 51 and other biblical texts, illuminating the broader theological themes and motifs that resonate throughout Scripture. By tracing these inter-textual echoes, we can discern the rich tapestry of biblical imagery and symbolism that enriches the psalm's message and deepens its theological significance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

David Alan Black, Katharine Barnwell, and Stephen Levinsohn were the the earliest scholars who made attempts to approach Bible study from a discourse analytic perspective. They applied investigations to specific texts, such as discourse structure in Galatians (Parunak 1992), thematic development in Corinthians (Callow 1992), and imperative forms in Romans (Miller 1992), as well as methodologically focused analyses, such as constituent order in copula clauses (Callow 1992) addition to practical studies of specific texts such the imperative forms in Romans (Miller 1992), the thematic development in Corinthians (Callow 1992), and the discourse structure in Galatians (Parunak 1992). Another book, Porter and Carson (1995), offers specific studies of Philippians, such as constituent order (Levinsohn 1995) and cohesion shifts (Guthrie 1995), in addition to summaries of research and methodologies in discourse analysis and the New Testament. In addition, Porter and Reed's (1999) work is noteworthy for presenting studies that use a variety of diverse discourse analysis techniques to examine the New Testament. By doing this, these writers emphasized the findings rather than any one specific technique, saying is frequently at its best when it is reading texts rather than thinking about its methodology, regardless of the paradigm being used (Porter and Reed 1999). Several chapters reporting on discourse analytical investigations of the New Testament, each studying a different book, have been made available more recently by Todd Scacewater (2020).

Aside from the language of the Bible, Donovan (1976: 10) noted in his writing on religious language that religious language is effective in that it touches people's emotions, penetrates their imagination, affects their feelings, and frequently conveys the sense of profound truth. The use of language as a tool for persuasion by speakers is a crucial component of religious communication. Speakers utilize language to persuade and sway listeners to embrace, uphold, or alter particular beliefs. Additionally, they use rhetorical strategies to establish and preserve relationships with others.

Rhetorical appeals are frequently used in religious discourse to effectively convey their goals. The stylistics of religious electronic media advertisements in Nigeria were examined by Odeunmi (2006). He notes that religious advertisements exhibit special lexico-semantic, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic characteristics.

The tone of Christian discourse in Nigerian electronic media is explained by Taiwo (2006). The main focus of the research is an analysis of how participants in the discourse make and evaluate meaning in the discourse by fitting into a role structure. A stylistic-semantic analysis of Pastor Adeboye's season's greetings may be found in Adeyanju (2008). He notes that with the New Year greeting letter, Pastor Adeboye "skillfully manipulated linguistic and rhetorical resources to preach a coherent and soul-stirring sermon to the members of his church." Chilwa (2008) investigates how social visions are created in car stickers and how individual and group identities are related to their religious preferences. According to the publication, stickers serve as a kind of identity that ensures social security and grants group members rights. Stickers were divided into three categories: those that convey social vision, those that convey individual or group identification, and those that reinforce religious beliefs. Again, in this discursive activity, the possessive "my" and the personal pronouns "I, we, me" are linguistic markers of identity. According to the paper's conclusion, car stickers in Nigeria expose institutional and religious behaviors as well as the country's belief system and social discursive practices.

A systemic functional analysis of mood and modality in Christian Women Mirror is presented by Aboh (2012). Esimaje (2012) notes that sermons have their own lexis and discourse structure as discourse events, and the kind and usage of words in sermons are indicative of their contexts. This is based on a corpus-based lexical research of sermons in Nigeria. He asserts that if the preacher and his listeners had the same corpus of vocabulary, religious communication would be improved more effectively.

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

This paper utilizes the resources of both rhetorical analysis and functional stylistics influenced by G. A. Kennedy and M. A. K. Halliday respectively. Rhetorical analysis focuses on the persuasive and communicative strategies employed within a text. Scholars using this framework examine the rhetorical devices and figures of speech utilized in Psalm 51, such as parallelism, repetition, metaphor, and irony, to understand how these devices shape the psalmist's argument, evoke emotional responses, and engage the reader's attention while functional stylistics examines how linguistic choices contribute to the overall meaning and communicative goals of the text while functional stylistics examines how linguistic choices contribute to the overall meaning and communicative goals of the text. Scholars employing this approach analyze the stylistic features of Psalm 51 in terms of their pragmatic functions, such as how linguistic choices convey the psalmist's emotions, beliefs, and intentions.

Utilizing both frameworks allows for an interdisciplinary approach that draws from linguistics, literary criticism, and communication studies. This can lead to richer interpretations of texts by considering both their linguistic features and their rhetorical strategies. In literary studies, this integration can enhance the analysis of narrative techniques and character development. For example, analyzing how an author uses transitivity to construct characters' experiences (functional stylistics) alongside examining how these choices persuade readers about moral or thematic issues (rhetorical analysis) can yield profound insights into character motivations and plot dynamics.

The fusion of these frameworks will underpin parallelism, imagery, repetition, metaphor, syntactic configuration, register and tone, speech act, pragmatic context and textual structure in order to explore the stylo-textual principles that are evident in Psalm 51.

3. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Rhetorical Analysis:

Parallelism: Throughout Psalm 51, we observe parallelism, a hallmark of Hebrew poetry. For example, in verse 2, the psalmist pleads, "*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*" Here, the psalmist uses parallelism by repeating the request for cleansing in two similar but slightly varied phrases. The repetition of the idea of purification through different expressions enhances the emphasis on the psalmist's plea for spiritual cleansing and underscores the urgency of their request for forgiveness. This parallel structure not only adds rhetorical force to the psalmist's supplication but also contributes to the overall poetic beauty and symmetry of the psalm.

Imagery: The psalmist employs vivid imagery to depict the process of repentance and spiritual renewal. In verse 7, they implore, "*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*" This imagery of purification conveys the psalmist's longing for moral and spiritual cleansing.

Repetition: Repetition is used to reinforce key ideas and evoke emotional resonance. The repeated use of imperatives, such as "Have mercy on me, O God," throughout the psalm underscores the psalmist's fervent plea for divine mercy and compassion.

Metaphor: Metaphorical language is employed to convey abstract concepts. In verse 10, the psalmist prays, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,*" using the metaphor of a "clean heart" to symbolize moral purity and inner transformation.

3.2. Functional Stylistics

Syntax and Sentence Structure: The syntax of Psalm 51 is characterized by parallelism and repetition, contributing to its rhythmic and poetic quality. The use of elevated language and imagery reflects a formal register, appropriate for a prayer of confession and supplication.

Register and Tone: The register of Psalm 51 is formal and poetic, with a tone that fluctuates between expressions of contrition, anguish, and hope. The psalmist employs emotive language and rhetorical

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devices to convey their emotional state and rhetorical aims. An instance of register and tone in Psalm 51 can be observed in verses 1-2:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

In these verses, the psalmist addresses God with reverence and humility, employing formal language and expressions of profound contrition. The use of the imperative "*Have mercy on me, O God,*" reflects the psalmist's recognition of God's sovereignty and authority, while also conveying their desperate plea for divine intervention. Additionally, phrases such as "*according to your steadfast love*" and "*according to your abundant mercy*" emphasize the psalmist's reliance on God's character of compassion and faithfulness in granting forgiveness.

The tone of these verses is one of deep remorse and earnest supplication. The psalmist acknowledges their own moral failings and appeals to God for mercy and forgiveness. The use of emotive language, such as "blot out my transgressions" and "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity," conveys the psalmist's sense of guilt and their intense desire for spiritual cleansing and renewal.

Speech Acts: The psalmist engages in various speech acts, such as confession, supplication, and vow-making, as they address God and express their remorse for sin. These speech acts serve both expressive and performative functions, allowing the psalmist to articulate their feelings and intentions. An instance of a speech act in Psalm 51 can be found in verse 3:

"For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me."

In this verse, the psalmist performs the speech act of confession by openly acknowledging and admitting their wrongdoing before God. By declaring, "*For I know my transgressions,*" the psalmist takes responsibility for their actions and expresses self-awareness regarding their sinful behaviour. This statement serves as an act of confession, as the psalmist acknowledges the reality of their transgressions and confronts their own moral culpability.

Furthermore, the phrase "*my sin is ever before me*" reinforces the ongoing impact and awareness of the psalmist's wrongdoing. This declaration functions not only as an expression of confession but also as an indication of the psalmist's remorse and internal struggle with the consequences of their sin. Through this speech act, the psalmist lays bare their innermost thoughts and emotions, positioning themselves humbly before God and seeking reconciliation through honest self-reflection and repentance.

Pragmatic Context: The language and rhetoric of Psalm 51 are shaped by the religious beliefs, moral values, and communal rituals of ancient Israelite society. The psalmist's expression of repentance and longing for divine mercy is situated within the cultural and theological context of communal worship and religious tradition. An instance of pragmatic context in Psalm 51 can be observed in verse 16: "*For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.*"

In this verse, the psalmist addresses the cultural and religious context of ancient Israelite sacrificial rituals. The pragmatic context includes the prevalent belief that offerings and sacrifices were necessary for atonement and reconciliation with God. However, the psalmist challenges this conventional understanding by asserting that God does not delight in mere ritualistic acts of sacrifice.

By stating, "*For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it,*" the psalmist acknowledges the cultural expectation of offering sacrifices as a means of appeasing God. However, they also express a deeper theological insight – that true repentance and contrition are more significant to God than outward acts of religious observance. This reflects a pragmatic understanding of the divine-human relationship within the context of ancient Israelite worship practices.

Furthermore, the psalmist's assertion that God "*will not be pleased with a burnt offering*" underscores the importance of genuine repentance and a contrite heart in seeking reconciliation with God. This

pragmatic perspective challenges the prevailing religious norms and underscores the psalmist's emphasis on the inner disposition and sincerity of the worshipper over external rituals.

Through this pragmatic context, Psalm 51 invites readers to reconsider their understanding of religious practices and to prioritize authentic spiritual renewal and repentance over superficial acts of piety. It highlights the tension between religious tradition and heartfelt devotion, inviting readers to reflect on the true nature of their relationship with God and the significance of genuine contrition in seeking divine forgiveness and restoration.

Textual Structure: The textual structure in Psalm 51 can be observed in the progression from confession to petition and affirmation throughout the psalm.

Confession (Verses 1-6): The psalm begins with a confession of sin and a plea for mercy. The psalmist acknowledges their transgressions before God, expressing deep remorse and a sense of moral culpability. They appeal to God's steadfast love and abundant mercy, recognizing their need for forgiveness and spiritual cleansing. This section sets the tone for the psalm, establishing the psalmist's humility and dependence on divine grace.

Petition (Verses 7-12): Following the confession, the psalmist offers specific petitions for purification and renewal. They implore God to cleanse them thoroughly from their iniquity, to create in them a clean heart, and to restore the joy of salvation. The psalmist seeks not only forgiveness for past sins but also transformation and renewal of their inner being. This section represents a turning point in the psalm, as the focus shifts from confession to petition, emphasizing the psalmist's desire for spiritual transformation and restoration.

Affirmation (Verses 13-19): In the final section of the psalm, the psalmist expresses their commitment to God and vows to praise and honour Him. They declare their intention to teach others God's ways and to offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. The psalmist's affirmation of faith and commitment to obedience reflect a renewed sense of purpose and devotion. This section serves as a resolution to the psalm's themes of repentance and restoration, highlighting the psalmist's confidence in God's mercy and faithfulness.

Apparently, the textual structure of Psalm 51 follows a logical progression from confession to petition and affirmation, reflecting the psalmist's journey from contrition to renewal. This rhetorical progression contributes to the psalm's coherence and effectiveness in conveying its thematic concerns and emotional resonance, inviting readers to engage with its message of repentance, forgiveness, and spiritual transformation.

4. CONCLUSION

The comprehensive analysis of Psalm 51 using the principles of rhetorical analysis and functional stylistics illuminates the multifaceted layers of meaning embedded within this iconic biblical text. Through a meticulous examination of its linguistic, stylistic, and discursive features, we have gained deeper insights into the psalmist's expression of repentance, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal, as well as the broader cultural, theological, and literary dimensions of the psalm.

Rhetorical analysis has revealed the persuasive and communicative strategies employed by the psalmist, including parallelism, imagery, repetition, metaphor, and subtle instances of irony. These rhetorical devices serve to amplify the psalmist's emotional turmoil, intensify their plea for divine mercy, and convey the paradoxical nature of divine grace. Furthermore, functional stylistics has provided insights into the communicative functions of language within the psalm, including its syntax, register, speech acts, pragmatic context, and discourse structure. The formal and poetic register of the psalm, combined with its coherent textual structure, reflects the psalmist's engagement with the religious and cultural norms of ancient Israelite society, as well as their deep spiritual longing for reconciliation with God.

Moreover, the analysis has highlighted the enduring relevance of Psalm 51 as a timeless meditation on the human condition and the divine-human relationship. Its universal themes of sin, guilt, repentance, and redemption resonate across cultures and generations, inviting readers to engage with its message in

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new and meaningful ways. Whether as a source of personal reflection, communal worship, or literary inspiration, Psalm 51 continues to speak to the deepest longings and aspirations of the human soul, offering solace, hope, and the promise of divine forgiveness.

In sum, the comprehensive analysis of Psalm 51 using rhetorical analysis and functional stylistics underscores the richness, complexity, and enduring significance of this profound biblical text. By unraveling its linguistic, stylistic, and textual dimensions, we deepen our understanding of its literary artistry, theological depth, and cultural resonance, inviting ongoing exploration and interpretation in the pursuit of wisdom, compassion, and spiritual transformation.

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