

Psalm 50: Sin and Judgment



Psalm 50 (49) (Mode 2. 5....31 / 4.....32)

This is a psalm composed for the penitential liturgy. God is accusing his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions to the Sinai Covenant.

Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy, in which the people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There are many verbal connections between the two psalms.

Part I. Introduction

The mighty God [ʿel אֱלֹ], the high god of the Semites.

The Lord [YHWH]

God [ʿelohim אֱלֹהִים]- special Israelite plural

speaks

summoning the earth

from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Out of Zion,
the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.

Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?’(Lamentations 2:15).

‘My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and your heart’s desire’(Ezekiel 24:21).

‘Our holy place, our beauty and our glory’
(1Maccabees 2:12).

The language brings to mind the splendour of God on Mount Sinai: 'They saw the God of Israel, beneath whose feet there was, it seemed, a sapphire pavement pure as they heavens themselves'(Exodus 24:10).

We think of the beauty of the church, the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:6-8; 21-22).

Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire;
then a mighty tempest.

‘The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.’

(Job 38:1).

‘The mountains will melt under him and the valleys
will burst open, like wax near the fire,
like waters poured down a steep place’(Micah 4:1).

We recall the theophany on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-20).

‘Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory’(Psalm 97:2-6).

From on high God summons the heavens and the earth
to witness the judgment of the people:

‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you
today.’(Deuteronomy 4:26).

‘Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth
hear the words of my mouth’(Deuteronomy 32:1).

‘Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me’(Isaiah 1:2).

Part 2. God accuses the people

‘Gather to me my people, [the *h^asid*, תְּסִיד] who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.’

‘Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today’ (Deuteronomy 5:3).

Compare the convocation on Sinai (Exodus 19:4-8), and the covenant, and the sacrifices that sealed the Sinai covenant (Exodus 24:5-8).

The heavens declare God’s justice, for God is coming in person as judge.

‘Listen, my people, for I will speak;
Israel, I testify against you.
I am God, your God.
I accuse you. I lay the charge before you.

‘I find no fault with your sacrifices;
your offerings are always before me.
I do not ask more bullocks from your stalls,
or goats from your herds.

‘Every wild animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle in their thousands on my mountains.
I know all the birds of the air;
all that moves in the field is at my disposal.

If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?

- See Isaiah 1:10-20; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 7;
Amos 5:18-26; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-9;
Zechariah 7; Sirach 34:18 - 35:21.

*‘Offer to me a sacrifice of confession
and pay your vows to the Most High.
Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honour me.’*

‘If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors: if their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob. I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land’(Leviticus 26:40-42).

To the wicked God says:

‘How dare you quote to me my law.

How dare you invoke the covenant,
you who hate discipline, and turn away when I speak?

‘You make friends with a thief when you see one.

You keep company with adulterers.

You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue plots deceit.

‘You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother’s child.

This is how you behave
and should I be silent?

‘Do you think that I am like you?

I will accuse you to your face.

Mark you this,

you who never think of God!

‘I will tear you to shreds

without offering you an escape.

They honour me who bring to me as their sacrifice
admission of their guilt.

‘I will see that those who correct their conduct
will enjoy my salvation.’

Then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me’(Joshua 7:19).

Note that God is accusing them so that they may acknowledge the truth and be saved:

‘Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?’(Ezekiel 18:23).