

# Psalm 50

## The Sacrifices Sought by God

### Type

This psalm is a covenant psalm.

### Structure

The major recurring motifs of the psalm are cosmic witness (CW), the Sinai Covenant (SC), breaches of the Decalogue (BD), the silence of God (SG), the judgment of God (JG), the people of God (PG) offerings/sacrifices (O), sacrifices of thanksgiving (ST), honouring God (HG), and deliverance (D).

- CW: The earth is summoned as witness (v1)
  - SC: The God of Zion is the God of the Sinai Covenant (vv2-3)
    - JG: The God of Sinai is terrifying (vv2-3)
    - SG: The God of Sinai will not be silent (v3)
- CW: The heavens and earth are summoned as witnesses for the prosecution (v4)
  - SC: Gather God's people as at Sinai (v5a)
    - PG: God's people are God's "consecrated ones" (v5a)
    - O: God's people made a covenant with Yahweh by sacrifice (v5b)
- CW: The heavens testify (v6)
  - SC: God the judge is righteous (faithful to the Sinai covenant) (v6)
  - JG: God's accusation of his people (vv7-22)
    - JG & O: God's judgment not based on sacrificial impropriety (vv7-13)
      - PG: God's people confronted by their covenant Lord (v7)
      - O: It is not sacrifices that occasion God's judgment (v8)
      - O: God's people greatly rely on presenting their sacrifices (v8)
      - O: God does not need these sacrifices (vv9-13)
    - ST & HG: **But God is honoured by sacrifices of thanksgiving** (vv14-15)
      - D: God will deliver those who offer such sacrifices and fulfil their vows when they call upon him in their distress (v14b-15)
  - JG: God's indictment of the wicked based on ignoring God (vv16-22)
    - SC: Spurning the Sinai Covenant (vv16b-17)
    - BD: Breaches of the Decalogue (vv18-20)
      - BD: Stealing (v18a)
      - BD: Adultery (v18b)
      - BD: Evil speech and slander (vv19-20)
    - SG: Impunity wrongly assumed from God's silence (v21)
    - JG: God's dire warning of inescapable judgment to those who forget him (v22)
  - ST: Commendation for the one who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving (v23)
    - HG: This honours God (v23a)
    - DG: It prepares the way for the manifestation of God's salvation (v23b)

## Setting

Suggestions are sometimes made that this psalm is a liturgy or part of a liturgy which was used in a covenant renewal ceremony at the Jerusalem temple.<sup>1</sup> But there is no way of substantiating such a thesis and the evidence from the psalm itself is too vague to allow such a view to be held with any confidence.

## Court Convened (vv1-5)

At the commencement of the psalm God “summons the earth”. God acts as Judge and as such he calls the earth to be “a witness to a judgment scene.”<sup>2</sup> A comparison with verse 4 - where “heavens” and “earth” are summoned shows that here in verse 1 the earth is not God’s agent of judgment.

Given that in verse 4 the “heavens” are also summoned as God’s witness it may be that in both verses 1 and 4 “earth” is the physical world in which we live, though Leupold takes it as referring to the world’s inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>

God summons the earth “from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.” This expression can be understood in either of three ways:

1. *As being place-oriented:* Yahweh summons all places from *where* the sun rises to *where* the sun sets.
2. *As being time-oriented:* Yahweh summons the earth at all times of the day from *when* the sun rises to *when* it sets.
3. *As being glory-oriented:* Yahweh summons all parts of the earth which experience the glory of the sun to witness his glory which shines forth from Zion.

Since in verse 2 God “shines forth” like the sun from Zion it would seem that the last interpretation is to be preferred.

Verse 1 begins with the presupposition that “God the Lord”, that is, Yahweh, Israel’s covenant lord, is the Creator whose realm extends over the whole earth. Furthermore while God will be sitting in judgment on his people and not on all peoples (for the purposes of this psalm), this judgment is of cosmic significance. What God does and says to his people is of immense significance to the entire universe. We are used to limiting ourselves to circumscribed roles. My identity as a lecturer is only a subset of all that I am as a person. But when God acts and speaks with reference to his people he is not adopting a restricted role. He ever does this with the entirety of his being, in his full identity as Creator.

## Zion and Sinai

The language of verse 2 is evocative of the theophany at Sinai, and this is confirmed by verse 3. The significance that was once accorded to Sinai is now transferred to Zion. The God of the Davidic covenant is the God of Zion. But this God is one and the same as the God who revealed himself at Sinai. Zion is “perfect in beauty”, the place to which all the nations are attracted, because the glory of God dwells within her; the glory of God “shines forth” from Zion. Implicitly his glory “outshines” the sun and the earth, which experiences the glory of the sun from its rising to its setting, is summoned to compare the two glories and testify that indeed God’s glory is far greater.

The glory of God which shines forth more gloriously than the sun not only makes Zion a magnet for the nations. In the immediate context it is necessary for God's people to take seriously the full implications of God's glory shining forth from Zion. Since the God of Zion is one and the same as the God of Sinai it must be remembered that when God came to Sinai it was to speak to his people and that he also came as a consuming fire.<sup>4</sup> Since this God is "our God", the God who covenanted with "us", it is time now for God to ensure that his covenant is being met by his people. God's people in present day Zion - so the psalmist continues - must be as frightened of God as their ancestors were when they stood before the mountain and when the voice of God terrified them. At that time the Lord descended on Mount Sinai in fire (Exodus 19:18), and the whole theophany was also accompanied by what the psalmist, thinking of the thunder and lightning (Ex 19:16), calls a "tempest." It is this same God, the God whose glory now dwells in Zion, who is about to come in judgment.

### God Judging his People

The reason why God is convening court is now made manifest in verse 4: it is to judge his people. The invocation of "heavens and earth" as witnesses is regarded by many scholars as corresponding to ancient treaties between suzerains and vassals (as especially reflected in Hittite treaties) according to which the deities of the suzerain and vassal respectively are invoked as witnesses to the treaty which has been made. The reference to "covenant" in verse 5 can be appealed to as providing strong encouragement for seeing here such a background.

However, given that the psalm is concerned with a court scene, we are well-advised not to make a final judgment on the basis of merely circumstantial facts. On closer examination the preceding context does not appear to really support such a hypothesis. In Hittite treaties the purpose of invoking the gods as witnesses was different to the purpose involved here. In Hittite treaties the gods were witnesses who would bring down curses upon the party which violated the treaty, especially the vassal. But here God summons the earth to testify to the fact that his glory outshines the sun (vv1-2). When God summons the heavens and the earth as witnesses it is as the Creator that he does so, and the implication is that his judgment of his people is of cosmic significance, not that he looks to the heavens and earth to testify that his people have violated the covenant and are deserving of experiencing covenant curses.<sup>5</sup> Further the reference to covenant is quite adequately explained by the Sinai imagery just used. Therefore I do not believe the summoning of heaven and earth as witnesses speaks in favour of Hittite treaty parallels.

### Saints, Sacrifice and Sinai

The Judge calls for his "saints"/"consecrated ones"/ "loyal ones" to be gathered in the court room. But the imagery involved here is of profound theological significance. It was at Sinai that God's people gathered before the mountain. It was at Sinai that the Israelites were identified as being God's holy nation and a royal priesthood, as God's dedicated ones who committed themselves to obeying his covenant. Further this resolve to obey the Decalogue, and thus the entirety of God's law, was sealed by sacrifice. Immediately following the Sinai theophany and the giving of the ten words, the Israelites are commanded to make an altar of earth and to offer sacrifices upon it (Ex 20:24ff). Apparently, though it is hard to be certain, this command was to be acted upon immediately even though it is expressed in a manner which will have perpetual relevance. At any rate this command is immediately obeyed when Moses

builds an altar at the foot of Sinai and offers up sacrifices there (Ex 24:4ff). It is in this context that the people consecrate themselves to Yahweh pledging their complete obedience (Ex 24:7), and it is then that Moses sprinkles them with the blood of the covenant and says, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

This background is crucial for the understanding of what the psalmist is saying about sacrifice in this psalm. The meaning of sacrifice must be understood in the light of the Exodus 24 passage. Sacrifice is the means by which God's people pledge their obedience to God, recognising him to be their covenant lord.

The people of God who now live in Zion have confirmed the fact they are in a covenantal relationship with Yahweh by the sacrifices they have offered him.<sup>6</sup> The reference to the covenant in verse 5 also anticipates the grounds of the indictment which follows. God's people are accused of violating the covenant. As the psalm progresses it will become clear that this violation of the covenant is expressed in two ways:

1. A formalistic approach to sacrifices which shuts out true devotion.
2. Violations of the second half of the Decalogue.

## The Witness Gives Testimony

"And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge" (v6)

The heavens have been summoned as a witness and now they testify that God is fully qualified and worthy to pass judgment because he is righteous. Just as Leupold supposed, probably incorrectly, that "earth" connoted "the inhabitants of the earth", so it might be conjectured that "heavens" is a metonym for "heavenly beings." But this is improbable - the language is poetic and stresses that God is Creator.

Here "righteousness" connotes that God can be relied to act rightly in his role as judge. In context this right acting has to do with the covenant between God and his people. Therefore God's righteousness consists in his being true to the covenant that operates between him and his people (v5). He will pass a just sentence. In short, a fair trial is assured.

## The Case for the Prosecution

*The Accused are called upon to hear the Indictment (v7)*

"I will testify against you" says the Judge, now assuming the role of prosecutor. The ancient court system did not involve prosecuting and defending attorneys. Rather the judge prosecuted and decided the case single-handedly. In assuming this role God stresses the relationship between himself and his people: "Hear, O my people...I am God, your God." The psalm is permeated by covenant language. Indeed the words "Hear, O my people...O Israel" clearly recall the Shema (Deut 6:3-4).<sup>7</sup> Implicitly God is seeking from his people a wholehearted obedience.

*The Failure of the Accused to Offer the Sacrifices Sought by God (vv8-15)*

As noted above, the grounds for the accusation are implicit in verse 5. They concern covenant and sacrifice. These are not separate, distinct dimensions. But there is a certain distinction made by way of emphasis in the psalm. In verses 8-15 the stress falls on sacrifice. Verse 5 indicates that sacrifices sealed the covenant at Sinai.

Therefore, if properly offered then sacrifices express the commitment of God's people to obeying his covenant.

As verse 8 indicates, God finds no fault with the cultic ritual and ceremonial side of the sacrificial system used by Israel. External religion is not the problem. What matters to God is the relationship of these sacrifices to his covenant. The problem comes when a wedge is driven between sacrifice and covenant.

In verses 9-13 God calls upon the Israelites to realise that they are not doing him any favours when they offer sacrifices to him. He is the Creator and as such is utterly self-sufficient. He does not need anything. Consequently the importance of sacrifice does not consist in what God's people can do for God - as though through the flesh of oxen and the blood of goats they could satisfy God!!! The importance of sacrifices does not consist in them being a means of 'feeding' God; of satisfying him.

Rather the Lord is looking for true devotion as expressed by thanksgiving, the making of well-considered and responsible vows, and calling upon him at times of trouble. The idea of God delivering those who honour him through sacrifices of thanksgiving is matched in verse 23. A literal sacrifice could be intended, but it seems likely that pure praise or thanksgiving is received by God as the sacrifice he seeks<sup>8</sup>, compare Hosea 14:2; Hebrews 13:15.

When God says "fulfil your vows" it may be that the vows made at Sinai are in mind rather than vows which Israelites might make in the course of their everyday lives.

### **Indictment of the Wicked (vv16-21)**

#### *Evidence of Guilt (vv16-20)*

Verse 5 anticipates that Yahweh's complaint will concern covenant and sacrifice. As verse 5 itself indicates these are inextricably linked. But in verses 8-15 Yahweh indicates the way in which the covenant is undermined when sacrifices become merely a matter of form and not a way of recognising him as "our God" and as the Creator who needs nothing, and before whom nothing else is required than to give him thanks for all the blessings he has bestowed on his people as their covenant lord. Now in verses 16-20, as verse 16b indicates, the psalmist turns his attention to the covenant *per se*, as revealed at Sinai. More especially he considers the second half of the Decalogue. There Yahweh made certain commands and the violation of these commands constitutes a spurning of God's covenant:

"You shall not commit adultery"	"you throw in your lot with adulterers"
"You shall not steal"	"When you see a thief, you join with him"
"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour"	"You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son"

Some understand verse 16 to have in mind a public reading of the law, but it is probably better to see a more general reference as intended.<sup>9</sup> There are those Israelites who speak about God's covenant and his laws but who show their disdain for

his word by the way they disobey his requirements. The wicked are those who “hate instruction” or “hate discipline.” They therefore do not act as true sons of God who understand the motive behind God’s discipline (Deut 8:5). In this context “discipline” does not seem to refer so much to experience of hardship but to the ‘hard words’ of God.<sup>10</sup> But it is important for us to remember that in this psalm covenant and sacrifice are inextricably fused together. The emphasis may now fall on ethical behaviour but it is presupposed that those now indicted are the very same persons who are punctilious and regular in presenting their sacrifices to God (cf. v8). Once this is appreciated the disdain of such people for Yahweh becomes even more reprehensible.

With respect to the Decalogue, their contempt for God is displayed by the company they keep: complicity with thieves, following suit with adulterers. And it is also made manifest by the way they use their tongues: to carry out evil purposes, to deceive people, to bad-mouth and slander even one’s brother. In verse 20 it reads: “You sit and speak against your brother.” The word rendered “sit” can also mean “continue”, hence “you speak continually against” (NIV). But if it is taken literally<sup>11</sup> it may have in mind that this slander takes place in the place of worship itself, or that the one who sits in the place of worship also commits this slander.

When people behave in such a way their underlying conception of God is exposed. Such people by their actions betray their belief that God is “altogether like” them; that he, like them does not really care about being morally scrupulous; that there is nothing to discriminate Yahweh from the Canaanite gods who in their conduct and behaviour were almost a mirror image of the immoral Canaanites. Such a belief as to Yahweh’s moral indifference is encouraged by the fact that he remains silent while wickedness is committed. But Yahweh’s silence is not a sign of complicity. Rather, for those who know Yahweh, it is an ominous indication that he “will tear [the wicked] to pieces, with none to rescue.”

In describing the terrible fate which awaits the wicked, such people are described as those “who forget God.” This is not a memory problem which can be blamed on any kind of mental deficiency. This is basic covenantal language drawn from the pages of Deuteronomy. To “remember Yahweh” is to cling to him and obey him; to never forget that he is the covenant lord who must be obeyed. To forget him is to disobey him and turn one’s back on his commands.

## **Summary: The Sacrifice which Honours God and Prepares for Salvation**

The psalm ends in verse 23 by repeating the thought of verses 14-15: God delivers those who honour him through sacrifices of thanksgiving.

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<sup>1</sup> So Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word BC 19; ed. (OT)., John D.W. Watts; Waco, Texas; Word, 1983) 363. It is not sufficient to simply draw attention to covenant themes and a reference to Zion in defending such a thesis. Much more information than is available would be needed to corroborate such a hypothesis which would certainly not stand up in a court of law. It is hard to see how one can leap from such speculation to Craigie’s declaration: “It is *probable* that the entire proceedings were undertaken as an occasional part of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles.”

<sup>2</sup> H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1959) 391.

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<sup>3</sup> *Exposition*, 391; similarly D.C. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Tyndale OTC; ed. D.J. Wiseman; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978) 186.

<sup>4</sup> Leupold (391) takes the shining forth of God's glory to simply consist in the judgment motif. This is indeed how this image is applied to the context facing the psalmist. But before this is done God's glory is compared with the sun and is explained to be the key of Zion's beauty and international pre-eminence.

<sup>5</sup> Those who wished to press for a parallel with Hittite treaties could counter that Yahweh summons heaven and earth as witnesses because his covenant curses come upon his people from the heavens and the earth. But this goes beyond the text of Psalm 50 which does not have a hint of this.

<sup>6</sup> Leupold, 392.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, 187.

<sup>8</sup> Kidner, 188.

<sup>9</sup> Kidner, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Kidner, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Kidner, 188.