

STUDIES IN PSALMS

PSALM 50

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

Judgment on Israel Pronounced amid the Solemnities
of an Audible and Visible Divine Manifestation.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-7, Preparations for Judgment: consisting of a Divine Announcement and Appearing, and a Summons to Heaven and Earth to Declare the Righteousness of the Judge, who now Opens his Address to His People. Stanza II., vers. 8-15, Formalists Admonished to Supplement their Offerings by Gratitude, Faithfulness, and Prayer in the Day of Distress. Stanza III., vers. 16-23, Secret Deserters Denounced for Hypocrisy and Lawlessness. *First Refrain*, a Summons; *Second Refrain*, an Admonition; *Third Refrain*, a Proclamation.

(Lm.) Psalm—By Asaph.

- 1 Jehovah¹ hath spoken and called the earth,
from the rising of the sun unto the going in thereof
- 2 Out of Zion the perfection of beauty
God hath come shining forth.²
- 3 A fire before him devoureth,
and around him it stormeth exceedingly:
- 4 He calleth to the heavens above and unto the earth,—
in order to minister judgment to his people.
- 5 “Gather unto me my men of kindness,
the solemnisers of my covenant over a peace-offering,”
- 6 And let the heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is about to judge.
- 7 “Hear O my people and let me speak,
O Israel and let me admonish thee:—
God thy God³ am I

1. M.T.: “El, Elohim, Jehovah,” as in Josh. 22:22; but prob. (w. Br.) due to accidental repetition; and the subsequent restoration of the displaced name “Jehovah.”

2. M.T.: “Let our God come and not keep silence”—wh. has the appearance of an added pious wish. Yet see Dr., Tenses, 58.

3. Prob. an elohistic substitute for “Jehovah thy God.” Cp. 45:7.

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- (who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.)"¹
- 8 "Not concerning thy peace-offerings will I reprove thee
nor concerning thine ascending-offerings before me
continually;"²
- 9 I will not take out of thy house a bull,
out of thy fields he-goats;
- 10 For mine are all the beasts of the forest
the cattle on the mountains in their thousands,³
- 11 I know all the birds of the heavens⁴
and that which moveth in the plains is with me:⁵
- 12 If I were hungry I would not tell thee
for mine is the world and the fulness thereof:
- 13 Shall I eat the flesh of mighty oxen
or the blood of he-goats shall I drink?
- 14 Sacrifice unto God a thank-offering,⁶
and pay to the Highest thy vows;
- 15 And call unto me in the day of distress,
I will rescue thee and thou shalt glorify me."
- 16 But to the lawless one⁷ saith God:—
"What hast thou to do with telling my statutes
and taking up my covenant on thy mouth?
- 17 Since thou hast hated correction
and cast my words behind thee?
- 18 If thou sawest a thief thou didst run⁸ with him
and with adulterers hath been thy chosen life:
- 19 Thy mouth hast thou thrust into wickedness
and thy tongue weaveth deceit:
- 20 Thou wouldst sit down—against thine own brother wouldst
thou speak
in thine own mother's son⁹ wouldst thou expose a fault:—
- 21 These things hast thou done and I have kept silence,
thou deemest I should really be like thyself.

1. Prob. a copyist's abbreviation, words in brackets understood by pious Jew—Br. Cp. 81:10, Exo. 20:2.

2. Or: "And thine ascending-offerings are continually before me"—(w. Del., Dr., Per., R.V., text, Leeser, Kp.).

3. Some read [omitting one letter]: "mountains of God," as in 36:6—O.G. 49.

4. So Sep.

5. "In my mind"—Dr. (comparing Job 10:13, 13:11.)

6. So Br. "Thanksgiving"—Del., Per., Dr.

7. Cp. 1:1 note, 25:5.

8. So it shd. be (w. Aram., Sep., Syr., Vul.)—Gn. M.T.: "wast pleased."

9. Felt to be still more mean in polygamous society.

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- 22 I will convict thee and set it forth to thine eyes,
pray consider this ye forgetters of God.¹
- 23 He that sacrificeth a thank-offering² glorifieth me.
and him who is consistent³ in behaviour⁴ will I cause to view
with delight the salvation of God."

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician.

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 50

The mighty God, the Lord, has summoned all mankind from east to west!

2 God's glory-light shines from the beautiful Temple⁵ on Mount Zion.

3 He comes with the noise of thunder,⁶ surrounded by devastating fire; a great storm rages round about Him.

4 He has come to judge His people. To heaven and earth He shouts.

5 "Gather together My own people who by their sacrifice upon My altar have promised to obey⁷ Me."

6 God will judge them with complete fairness, for all heaven declares that He is just.

7 O My people, listen! For I am your God. Listen! Here are My charges against you:

8 I have no complaint about the sacrifices you bring to My altar, for you bring them regularly.

9 But it isn't sacrificial bullocks and goats that I really want from you!

10, 11 For all the animals of field and forest are Mine! The cattle on a thousand hills! And all the birds upon the mountains!

12 If I were hungry, I would not mention it to you—for all the world is Mine, and everything in it.

13 No, I don't need your sacrifices of flesh and blood!

14, 15 What I want from you is your true thanks; I want

1. M.T. adds: "Lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver."

2. So. Br. "Thanksgiving"—Del., Dr.

3. Or: "whole-hearted." *Gt.*: *tam*, instead of *sham* or *sam*—Gn.

4. *ML.*: "way."

5. Literally, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty."

6. Literally, "comes, and does not keep silence."

7. Literally, "who made a covenant with me by sacrifice."

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your promises fulfilled. I want you to trust Me in your times of trouble, so I can rescue you, and you can give Me glory!

16 But God says to evil men: Recite My laws no longer, and stop claiming My promises,

17 For you have refused My discipline, disregarded My laws.

18 You see a thief and help him, and spend your time with evil and immoral men.

19 You curse and lie, and vile language streams from your mouths.

20 You slander your own brother.

21 I remained silent—you thought I didn't care—but now your time of punishment has come, and I list all the above charges against you.

22 This is the last chance, for all of you who have forgotten God before I tear you apart—and no one can help you then.

23 But true praise is a worthy sacrifice; this really honors Me. Those who walk My paths will receive salvation from the Lord.

EXPOSITION

This impressive psalm includes many things which require and will repay careful consideration. It is clear that the Judgment it describes is held on Israel as a nation. This being the case, it is the more remarkable that *earth* and *heaven* are summoned to interest themselves in the proceedings: thus teaching the momentous character of the issues involved, the Divine Equity and Grace in desiring that whatever can be said in Israel's favour shall be advanced, and the Divine Determination that right shall be done. That the Divine Glory comes shining forth *out of Zion*, intimates that the issues to be tried are connected with Jehovah's settlement as King in Israel, and grow out of the worship established in Jerusalem. That the Divine Majesty comes forth with *fiery tempest* and *raging storm* betokens that God's holy anger with his people is roused, and therefore that the time is one of national degeneracy. The summons to *gather* Israel does not perhaps imply that the greater Dispersions have yet taken place, so much as simply that the gathering is to be national, one of the whole people, on the largest scale possible, so that all classes may be reached, and a general verdict on the nation be pronounced. The description of the nation in the summons as *the men of Jehovah's kindness* is probably de-

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signed to remind the people of what by their national calling they ought to be (Cy. Intro., Chap. III., "Kindness"); and though, in a suitable context, the further description of the people as *those having solemnised Jehovah's covenant over a peace-offering*, might very well have directly pointed to Moses and the Elders who so accepted the covenant at Mount Sinai, according to the sublime account in Exo. 24,—yet it would seem less imaginative, and more pointedly practical, rather to think of some recent confirming of the Sinai Covenant, such as we read of in the history of Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Ch. 29:10, 34:31). To go no further than Hezekiah, we can easily see from the very opening of Isaiah's prophecies, how easy it was for Israel to sink from national reform into national formalism. And, truth to tell, heavy as are the charges against Israel which follow in this psalm, they do not go beyond the corrupt state of things which at that time characterised the people as a whole. The voluntative moods of the verbs which open the climax to this stanza (*let me speak, let me admonish*) may usefully remind us of the patience of Jehovah in listening so long in silence to the calumnious speeches of men; while the assertion by Jehovah of his relation to Israel as her Redeemer may remind us of the reasonableness of all Divine demands, seeing that they are based on privilege already bestowed (cp. Isa. v.: "my vineyard—what more could I have done to it?").

The great lesson of the second stanza appears to be, that stated and especially national worship is apt to degenerate into formalism; and, what is still worse, may lead worshippers to feel as though by its regular maintenance they were conferring a favour upon the Object of their worship. Hence the indignant protests of Jehovah of his independence of any material service which men can render him (cp. Acts 17:24, 25). What he desires is men's gratitude; and as *thank-offerings* are personal and spontaneous, and so more certain expressions of gratitude than stated public offerings, they are here preferred—especially where they have been promised by *vows*; in which case faithfulness as well as thankfulness is involved. It seems to be further taught that thankful returns for the more common of special blessings, laid a basis for the outcry of the soul to God in the severer trials of life. Thus may days of sunshine prepare us for days of storm; and pervading thankfulness may slowly generate the confidence in God needful to draw us near to him in times of *distress*. *Deliverance then* will prompt the soul to a public *glorifying* of the Deliverer.

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In a soil of formalism the germs of apostacy may take root. Men may become so accustomed to repeating "the commandments," that they may keep up the appearance of piety even when the practice of profanity is seducing them into rebellion and unutterable meanness. This appears to be the underlying thought of Stanza III. The Apostle Paul might have had this stanza in mind when he wrote, "Thou that proclaimest—Do not steal! Art thou stealing?" (Rom. 2:21). Presuming on God's silence as though it were indifference, is a sure way to become *forgetters of God*; and to forget Him is to be startled and *convicted* when he pleases to speak. The climax of the third stanza seems to fold back on the whole foregoing psalm: the *thank-offering* counselled at the end of the second stanza, is now invested with the dignity of a standing proclamation of habitual truth; and whereas thankfulness appeared in vers. 14, 15 as only the beginning of a course which would end in glorifying God, it is now (ver. 23) said to be in itself a rendering of glory to the Divine Majesty. There is frequently a difficulty in suitably rendering in English the small Hebrew word *tam*, which Ginsberg here prefers to *sham* ("there") or *sam* ("put" or "place"). It means "wholeness," "completeness"; and so in some contexts may be translated "wholehearted," "devoted," "perfect." Perhaps, here, "consistent," "all-of-a-piece" sufficiently represents it. Taking the word *derek*, "way," as here equivalent to "way-of-life," "behaviour," and connecting the two, we get the simple and practical conception—which admirably folds back over this third stanza—*him who is consistent in behaviour*: who does not profess one thing and practise another, who does not uphold the national covenant in words and then deliberately break its great and vital commands one after another,—*him will I cause to view with delight the salvation of God*: a very remarkable ending. It is not: "he is already saved"—from the point of view of Hebrew twilight and imperfection, that could hardly be said. Besides, there may be a forward glance towards a great national deliverance. We know of some who were spared to view with delight *the salvation of God* when the Assyrians were overthrown; and who doubtless rang out the words, "Lo our God is this! We waited for him that he might save us,—This is Jehovah! We waited for him. Let us rejoice and exult in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9). And even the Christian may remind himself that as yet he is only "saved in hope"—that he yet "waits for the redemption of the body,"

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and "for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). But to return for a moment to *him who is consistent in behaviour*, it is clear that he need not be a work-monger, or a self-righteous person; but that there are such things as "works meet for repentance"—that, though sincerity cannot save, yet there can be no saving without sincerity; that, in short, though the kingdom of heaven can only spring from the word of the kingdom, which is the seed, yet the very heart to receive that seed is the "noble and good" heart that feels its emptiness and poverty.

Into what historical situation does this psalm, by its terms and tenor, fit itself? It is the first of the psalms attributed *To Asaph*; but who was he? Was there a seer of that name in Hezekiah's days as well as one in David's? Dr. Thirtle (O.T.P., 91) thinks there was; but the evidence he submits does not appear conclusive. Yet he may be right; and the more we reflect on the inner elements of the situation revealed by this psalm, the more it identifies itself with the state of things known to have existed in Hezekiah's days. In David's time there may have been some formalism; but we have no ground to think there was any apostasy, even incipient; nor—to be quite candid—is formalism just the sin we should have charged on Israel in the days of David. But, in Hezekiah's time, there was not only rampant formalism, as Isaiah so pungently witnesses, but there was that sort of lawlessness which wavered in its adherence to the worship of Jehovah? That "villain" Rabshakeh doubtless appealed to faltering hearts in Israel. His bold plausibilities and blasphemies and insinuations were bearing fruit in some restive and resilient hearts. Gross corruption and practical atheism had eaten out the moral life of some places in Israel, as the fourteenth psalm disclosed to us. The *day of distress* was near; and some would soon need all the comfort derivable from the promise of *deliverance*. The day of secret apostasy had come. These elements constitute a situation which strikingly suits this psalm.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the theme or title of this psalm? Who is to be judged—by relating ourselves to Israel we shall learn *much* from this psalm.
2. Who is the judge? What are the two charges? (see verses 7-15 and 16-21).

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3. Read verses 1-3 as introducing the judge. Vs. 4-6 as the opening of the judgment.
4. Who are the spectators at this trial?
5. Do you conclude that the first charge in this trial is *Formalism*? Just what is involved in this?—Is this a serious flaw?
6. God *wants* expressions of worship, but He *does not* need them for Himself—why are they given?
7. Read verses 14 and 15 as a description of the true worship of God. Cf. John 4:24.
8. To see just how far hypocrisy can go, read carefully verses 16-21. It is possible to speak against stealing and at the same time be a thief! Discuss the psychological development of this tragic condition.
9. What commandments of the ten commandments were taught against and then performed by the very ones who taught against them.
10. God did nothing while such open rebellion was practiced—how did these people interpret the silence of God? Cf. Rom. 2:1-4.

PSALM 51

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Prayer of a Penitent.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-4, Petitions for Pardon and Cleansing sustained by Confessions, Condemning Self and Vindicating God. Stanza II., vers. 5-9, In Further Pleading for Pardon, the Psalmist Confronts his own Deep Need and God's Just Requirements, passing on to Consenting Petitions and Petitions pure and simple. Stanza III., vers. 10-14, Petitions for Renewal, against Banishment and Deprivation, for Restoration and Upholding; urged, with Alternating Hopes and Fears. Stanza IV., vers. 15-19, Assured that Only his Divine Lord can open his Lips, the psalmist Depreciates Accustomed Sacrifices as Inadequate to meet his Own Desperate Case, but prays for Such Prosperity in behalf of Jerusalem as shall make Right Offerings Acceptable.