

A Royal Liturgy of Supplication (40:1-18)

Bibliography

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Translation

- ¹ For the musical director. For David. A Psalm.
- ²⁽¹⁾ *I have waited patiently for the Lord,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.* (3+3)
- ³⁽²⁾ *And he raised me from the pit of desolation,
from the slimy mud,
and he set my feet upon a rock;
and he made firm my footsteps.* (3+2)
- ⁴⁽³⁾ *And he put a new song into my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and will fear,
and they will trust in the Lord.* (3?+2)
- ⁵⁽⁴⁾ *Blessed is the man who made the Lord his trust,
and has not turned to the defiant, the fabricators of falsehood.^a* (3+2)
- ⁶⁽⁵⁾ *Many are your wonders, O Lord my God,
that you have done,
and your plans for us—
no one can arrange them for you!
I will declare, I will speak—
“They are too many to count!”* (2+2)
- ⁷⁽⁶⁾ *You have not desired sacrifice and offering—
you have dug two ears for me!^a
you have not requested burnt offering and sin offering.* (3+3+3)
- ⁸⁽⁷⁾ *Then I said, “Look, I have come!
It is written about me^a in the scroll of the book.”* (3+3)
- ⁹⁽⁸⁾ *I have desired to do your will, O my God,
and your instruction is in the midst of my being.* (4+3)
- ¹⁰⁽⁹⁾ *I have declared glad tidings of righteousness
in the great congregation;
Lo, I do not restrain my lips;
you know that, O Lord.* (2+2)
- ¹¹⁽¹⁰⁾ *I have not hidden your righteousness within my heart;
I have been outspoken concerning your faithfulness and your salvation.
I have not hidden your lovingkindness
or your truth from^a the great congregation.* (4+3)
- ¹²⁽¹¹⁾ *Come^a, O Lord, do not hold back
your mercies from me.
Your lovingkindness and your truth
continually protect me.* (3+2)
- ¹³⁽¹²⁾ *For troubles have surrounded me,
too numerous to count.
My wicked deeds have overtaken me,
so that I cannot see.
They are more numerous than the hairs on my head,
and my heart has failed me!* (2+2)
- ¹⁴⁽¹³⁾ *Please deliver me, O Lord!
O Lord, hasten to my help!* (3+2)

- ¹⁵⁽¹⁴⁾ *They shall be both ashamed and humiliated,
they who sought to snatch away my life.
They shall be turned back and put to shame,
they who desired my ruin.* (3+3)
- ¹⁶⁽¹⁵⁾ *They shall be desolate because of their shame,
they who said to me, “Aha! Aha!”* (3+2)
- ¹⁷⁽¹⁶⁾ *They shall exult and rejoice in you,
all they who seek you,
and^a they shall continually say,
“The Lord is great,”
they who love your victory.* (2+2+2)
- ¹⁸⁽¹⁷⁾ *Yet I am poor and needy;
think on me, O Lord.
You are my help and my rescuer;
do not delay, O my God.* (3+3)

Notes

5.a. The expression שׁוֹטֵי כֹזֵב (literally, “those that turn aside falsehood”) is of uncertain meaning. Dahood suggests “fraudulent images” (*Psalms I*, 243); cf. נִוִּי “false gods.” Leveen, art. cit., 56, reads יִפְּשׁוּ, “those who spread lies.”

7.a. The sense of v 7b is difficult; the translation above is literal, based upon כָּרַח, “to dig.” On the meaning, if the translation is correct, see the *Comment*. But G has a quite different dig: “but you prepared a body for me” (cf. Heb 10:5, which is based on G). כָּרַח may have the sense “to pierce,” implying that God’s word penetrates deafness (Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, II, 44); on this sense of the root, see further note b on Ps 22:17 (above). The safest approach is a literal translation, based on the assumption of ancient idiomatic usage of which the precise sense is no longer clear.

8.a. Dahood translates v 8b: “. . . it is written to my debit”; see *Psalms I*, 243. In support he cites Job 13:26 and Ugaritic texts to indicate the sense “debit” for על (Ugaritic ‘l. The interpretation is possible, depending essentially on judgment as to the sense of the passage as a whole.

11.a. The preposition ל here has the sense “from,” as in Ugaritic; cf. Gibson, *CML*², 149.

12.a. הָתָא is interpreted as the verb “to come” (cf. Airoidi, art. cit.), rather than the personal pronoun, “you.”

17.a. The conjunction is added with strong support from Heb. mss (De-Rossi, IV, 28, and also C), and also the versions (G, S, Tg).

Form/Structure/Setting

Psalm 40 is commonly identified as a composite psalm containing two originally independent units which have been linked into the present unified whole: A, vv 2-11 and B, vv 12-18 (though there is disagreement among holders of this view concerning where the precise point of transition might be; v 12 and/or v 13 could be viewed as a redactional link). The evidence giving rise to the two-psalm hypothesis is essentially twofold. (1) In form-critical terms, A is an *individual thanksgiving* psalm and B is an *individual lament*. (2) Verses 14-18 of this psalm are duplicated (with only minor changes) in Ps 70. If the latter is an independent composition, then Ps 40 might either be a composite work in which two psalms are joined by an editor, or a new

composition in which the poet takes an older psalm (Ps 70) and develops it by additions into a new work. The two-psalm hypothesis, whatever its faults, is based on a particular interpretation of the evidence and has many adherents (Airoldi, Braulik, Kraus, et al.).

Yet, for a number of reasons, the two-psalm hypothesis must be rejected. The problem and evidence are directly parallel to those encountered in the study of Ps 27; the argument for unity and the overall interpretation follow essentially along similar lines. First, it should be noted that the language in the two supposed "parts" of the psalm is intimately interrelated (see further Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen*, 290-97, who argues for the overall unity of the psalm). Forms of the following roots are found in both "parts" of the psalm (the list omits duplicate forms in one or other part). (1) אָזַב (vv 6, 18); (2) עָצַם (vv 6, 13); (3) מָסַפֵּר (vv 6, 13); (4) אָמַר (vv 8, 11, 16, 17); (5) גָּאָה (vv 4, 13); (6) הִפְיָץ (vv 7, 9, 15); (7) גָּצַח (vv 9, 14); (viii) תְּשׁוּעָה (vv 11, 17). The overlap in language and repetitive style strongly suggest a single, unified composition.

But more persuasive than the argument of language, is that based on form and setting. As was the case in Ps 27, the apparent diversity of form is in reality not diversity at all; the two-psalm hypothesis, in fact, rises in part from too rigid a view of form-critical categories. The essence of Ps 40 is that it is a part of a *liturgy*, and the formal and substantial changes within the psalm are to be understood against the background of progression within the liturgy. The liturgy begins with *thanksgiving*, thereby establishing precedent and laying a foundation for what is to follow. It then moves on to *lament* and *prayer*; it is only in the prayer that the overall purpose of the liturgy emerges, and the preparatory role of the thanksgiving is clarified.

In terms of classification, the liturgy must be viewed as a *royal liturgy of supplication*, as is persuasively argued by both Eaton (*Kingship and the Psalms*, 42-44) and Johnson (op. cit. 399-412). The details of the royal interpretation are elaborated upon in the comment which follows. The overall parallels between Pss 27 and 40 are clear from the foregoing remarks.

The relationship between Pss 40 and 70 remains somewhat uncertain. The hypothesis is proposed that Ps 40 is the original, and hence oldest, composition, dating from the monarchical period. Ps 70 is an adaptation and abbreviation, possibly undertaken to permit "popular usage" of a part of the psalm, but more likely dating from a period when royal psalms and liturgies were no longer in use. Psalm 70 could then be viewed as a "salvaged psalm" for use in a nonmonarchical age, perhaps during the Hebrew Exile.

Comment

Thanksgiving (40:2-11). The psalm begins with a general thanksgiving for past acts of divine deliverance; by this introductory act of thanksgiving, the king establishes the ground of precedent, framed in the appropriate praise, by which he will move forward to a prayer for further deliverance in a new crisis that threatens his life and kingdom. Just as past prayers had been answered after patient waiting (v 2), so too would his present prayer.

The language of v 3 ("the pit of desolation," the "slimy mud") is indicative of a former occasion in which God had saved the suppliant's life. Although it is possible that the former deliverance was from severe sickness (cf. Ps 30:3-4), the royal context of this psalm makes it more likely that the deliverance was experienced in a military crisis. Near disaster and death were turned into victory and stability (v 3b), and a hymn of praise had been sung (v 4). The hymn of praise was in all probability a victory hymn, celebrating not only God's deliverance, but also the impact of the victory on observers; in perceiving God's act, they would *fear* (v 4b), just as various foreign nations had feared after the great victory at the Sea (Exod 15:14). Likewise, the divine "wonders" celebrated in this psalm (v 6) are reminiscent of the wonders celebrated in the victory hymn following the Exodus (Exod 15:11). These past victories and acts of deliverance now form not only the precedent for the king's supplication, but also the substance of his public declaration of God's greatness and past achievements.

The following verses (vv 7-9) have often been interpreted as a condemnation of the sacrificial cult in ancient Israel, but to read them in such a fashion is almost certainly to misinterpret them; the context of the royal liturgy provides the appropriate setting for interpretation. The king is now engaged in a liturgy of supplication; he can only participate in such a liturgy (which may well have included sacrifices) after having faithfully performed all his royal tasks as king, which included the offering of appropriate sacrifices. But the offering of sacrifices alone was not enough; more was required of him. The general background, then, to these verses is to be found in the "law (or *Torah*) of kings" (Deut 17:14-20); when the suppliant states: "it is written about me in the scroll of the book" (v 8), he is referring to the Deuteronomic law and its cultic requirements of kings. But the Deuteronomic law, while imposing on the king certain cultic requirements, had a deeper spiritual dimension to it; it was to instill in the king the fear of the Lord and keep him humble amongst his brethren (Deut 17:19-20). These verses in Ps 40 thus point to the characteristics required of the king *beyond* the cultic offerings and sacrifices; the king, after all, had "two ears" (v 7) and had heard the basic requirements of the law, which concerned sacrifice. But now he has progressed further and when he says: "your instruction is in the midst of my being" (v 9b), he is perceiving that God's "instruction" (*Torah*) has the deeper and spiritual requirements of the *Torah* (Deut 17:18) of kings. For further commentary on these verses, see particularly Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 42-44 and Johnson, op. cit., 402-3.

Having thanked God for past deliverance, and having affirmed his adherence not only to the external requirements of royal law, but also to its inner requirements, the king now goes on to declare the manner in which he had publicly announced God's righteousness in the "great congregation" (vv 10-11). The great congregation might either be the actual congregation in an act of worship, or it might refer symbolically to the people of the entire nation. The statement of past declarations of God's "righteousness" (v 10a, v 11a) becomes in itself a new and present declaration. The "righteousness" of God is here celebrated as a possession of Israel, received and experienced

in God's acts of deliverance. Thus the individual note of the thanksgiving in vv 3-4 is here broadened in public declaration, so that God's acts of righteousness become the property of the community as a whole. And the public declaration is appropriate, for the words central to this declaration of praise ("righteousness," v 10; "faithfulness, salvation, lovingkindness," v 11) are all indicative of God's covenant character and his actions toward the chosen people as a nation.

Prayer (40:12). The brief element of prayer forms an appropriate transition between the thanksgiving for former acts of deliverance, and the lament (vv 13-17) which will culminate in an explicit prayer for a future act of deliverance (v 18). The whole thrust of the prayer is to be found in the imperative: "come." The king prays for the divine presence in the approaching crisis, for it had only been that presence which converted former crisis into victory. The divine presence would bring with it those covenant characteristics of God ("mercies, lovingkindness, truth") that would provide the necessary protection (v 12b) in crisis and would culminate in victory. But the prayer, which begins in v 12 and culminates in v 18, is now interrupted by a lamenting account of the dimensions of the crisis which launched the entire liturgy of supplication, interspersed by a further brief prayer (v 14).

Lament over a coming crisis (40:13-17). The opening verse of the lament (v 13) suggests two sources of the immediate crisis: (a) external troubles (v 13a), presumably foreign enemies in the light of vv 15-16; (b) "wicked deeds," presumably the king's own evil acts of the past. The first of these two is no doubt the principal cause of the crisis; the second source of trouble reflects the profound state of spiritual awareness which the king had achieved earlier in the liturgy. It is clear, on the one hand, that he is not burdened with unconfessed sin, for his relationship to God is healthy, as expressed in the foregoing verses. On the other hand, he is aware that former evil acts, albeit forgiven by God, may nevertheless have contributed to the present crisis in which he now finds himself. Hence, the sense of anxiety is produced by a profound awareness of the possible consequences of his extremely "numerous" (v 13c) past failures. So he pleads in the midst of the lament for deliverance (v 14).

While this section of the psalm clearly begins as a lament (v 13), the principal portion (vv 15-16) hovers somewhere between lament and a statement of confidence. On the one hand, the king is aware of enemies that desire his death and ruin; on the other hand, he affirms that they themselves will be devastated and made desolate. But the tension between lament and confidence is finally resolved in v 17, when confidence triumphs in an expression of exultation and the magnification of God that would follow victory. The "they" of vv 15-16 is thus the enemies of the king and nation, but "they" in v 17 refers to the king and his people who, in seeking God's aid, would find it in victory.

Concluding prayer (40:18). The exulting confidence of v 17 is now appropriately muted in the concluding prayer of the liturgy. The king and his people would rejoice in victory, but they could not achieve it by their own strength. Hence the prayer, which has punctuated the earlier portion of the psalm (vv 12, 14), reaches its climax precisely in the humility of these closing words.

The prayer is very personal, yet as the king prays for himself, he prays as one who carries the burden of an entire nation upon his shoulders. And though he opened his liturgical act with a reminiscence of how he had *waited patiently* (v 2), now the immediacy of the crisis propels him to the prayer: "Do not delay, O my God."

Explanation

In a remarkable manner, Psalm 40 unfolds the relationship between the one and the many in Israelite thought. The "one" in this context is the king, and the psalm as a whole is in the first person, for the king is the principal participant in the liturgy of supplication. The "many" are the citizens of the kingdom, who are referred to both in the expression "great congregation" (vv 10, 11) and in the anticipation of future exultation (v 17). The interrelationship is to be found in the king's representative role, for within the covenant context, he carried individually upon his shoulders the responsibility for his people. And his desire for the nation, as expressed in this liturgy of supplication, was deliverance or salvation (v 14). Thus, implicit in the psalm is a principle of representation within the kingdom of God, though here the kingdom is in the form of a nation state, Israel (and/or Judah). In one sense, every individual person shared in the covenant relationship with God. In another sense, given the context of kingdom, the relationship was channeled through the person of the king, for in a very real sense the future of the kingdom, as a national and political entity, depended on the king's role.

In the NT the theme to be developed most explicitly from Ps 40 is the passage on sacrifice, vv 7-9. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews develops the passage in his account of the permanent nature of the sacrifice of Christ. The words of the ancient psalm are now set in the mouth of Christ (Heb 10:5-10), though with some modification, for the writer of the Epistle employs the slightly different text of the Septuagint at this point (see note a on v 7). In one sense, Hebrews goes beyond Ps 40; the perpetual sacrifices of the past have become obsolete in terms of the permanent sacrifice of Christ. But in another sense, the writer of the Epistle grasps the fundamental sense of the psalm and neatly reverses it. The king in the ancient kingdom had been required to offer sacrifices, but that was not all; beyond the formalities of the cult, obedience and profound spirituality were required of him, for sacrifices in and of themselves achieved nothing. In Christ, says the writer of the Epistle, there is a reversal; first, he affirms his intention to do the divine will (Heb 10:9), and that intention in turn leads back inevitably to sacrifice, but now to the sacrifice that ends all sacrifices.

It is this theme of the sacrifice of Christ which made Ps 40 an appropriate passage for use as one of the proper psalms on Good Friday, during the development of Christian worship. The usage is appropriate to the intention of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. But in a certain sense, it is also appropriate to the original sense of the psalm, recalling the supplicatory role of the king on behalf of his kingdom.