

# A Liturgy for the Sick (41:1-14)

## Bibliography

**Coppens, J.** "Les Psaumes 6 et 41 dépendent-ils du livre de Jérémie?" *HUCA* 32 (1961) 217-26. **Dietrich, M.; Loretz, O. and Sanmartín, J.** "Zur ugaritischen Lexikographie (VII)." *UF* 5 (1973) 85. **Eaton, J. H.** "Some Questions of Philology and Exegesis in the Psalms." *JTS* 19 (1968) 603-9. **Rainey, A. F.** "Observations on Ugaritic Grammar." *UF* 3 (1971) 160-62.

## Translation

- <sup>1</sup> For the musical director. A psalm of David.
- <sup>2(1)</sup> Blessed is the one who gives consideration to the weak and the poor<sup>a</sup>; in an evil time, the Lord will deliver him. (4+4)
- <sup>3(2)</sup> The Lord will keep him and give him life; he will bless<sup>a</sup> him in the land and will not<sup>b</sup> give him up to the desire of his enemies. (3+2+3)
- <sup>4(3)</sup> The Lord will support him on his sickbed; in his illness, you<sup>a</sup> have changed his whole bed. (4+3)
- <sup>5(4)</sup> I said: "Have mercy on me, Lord. Heal me, for I have sinned against you." (4+4)
- <sup>6(5)</sup> My enemies speak evil of me: "When will he die and his name perish?" (4+4)
- <sup>7(6)</sup> And even if one came to see me, he would speak falsehood in his heart. He would gather for himself wicked thoughts; he would go and speak them outside. (3+3)
- <sup>8(7)</sup> All my haters whisper about me amongst themselves; against me, they are plotting my misery. (4+4)
- <sup>9(8)</sup> "A devilish disease<sup>a</sup> has been put upon him. <sup>b</sup> He has lain down; he will not rise again." (4+4)
- <sup>10(9)</sup> Even my good friend<sup>a</sup> whom I trusted, my dining companion,<sup>b</sup> has raised up his heel<sup>c</sup> against me. (5+5)
- <sup>11(10)</sup> But you, O Lord, have mercy upon me and raise me up that I may recompense them. (3+3)
- <sup>12(11)</sup> By this, I know that you are pleased with me, for my enemy does not shout in triumph over me. (4+4)
- <sup>13(12)</sup> As for me, you have supported me in my integrity and have made me stand in your presence for ever. (4+3)
- <sup>14(13)</sup> Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, from everlasting and to everlasting. Amen and Amen. (4+3)

## Notes

2a. "The poor" (יְדוּאִים): the word is added to MT, following the suggestion of G (καὶ πένηρα), thus providing (provisionally) metrical balance to the verse.

3.a. The verb is pointed and translated as Piel (with suffix), rather than MT's Pual; the rendering has the support of Q and G, and is implied by context and syntax.

3.b. אָלִים is read for MT's אָלִים; cf. G.

4.a. A third person form of the verb is expected: there is limited support for such a reading from one ms of G. On the sense, see the *Comment*.

9.a. Literally, "a thing of *beliyye'al*."

9.b. MT's אָלִים is puzzling in terms of syntax, and is here omitted either as a gloss, or as dittography (on the basis of אָלִים in v 10). Dahood (*Psalms I*, 251) interprets the term as a compound relative, "that he who. . ." He claims also that Ugaritic *atr* functions in the role of a compound relative. Ugaritic *atr* in the use cited by Dahood occurs in *UT* 2060 (= RS.18.38 = *PRU* V. 60): 34-35. But in this text, the term almost certainly means "where, wherever" (see Dietrich, Loretz and Sanmartín, art. cit. 85), and Dahood's interpretation of the term as a relative pronoun cannot be sustained on the basis of the Ugaritic texts (Rainey, art. cit., 160-62).

10.a. Literally, "man of my peace."

10.b. Literally, "the one eating my bread (food)."

10.c. The expression is curious, the preceding verb (lit. "making great") seeming out of place with the noun "heel"; though the idiom is rare, the sense is clear enough. Dahood translates "spun slanderous tales," which is possible, though it rests on rare nuances (if they can be sustained) of both the Heb. verb and noun in question (*Psalms I*, 251). The Ugaritic evidence in support of the sense "malign, slander" for Heb. אָלִים should be removed from the discussion. In Ugaritic, the noun "heel," is well established, but the verb 'qb has the sense "hinder, hold back." In the text cited by Dahood, 3 Aqht. rev. 19 (=CTA.18.i.19), *m'qbk* does not clearly mean "he who maligns you"; the more obvious sense is "he who hinders you." See further Gibson, *CML* 2, 154; A. Caquot, et. al., *Textes ougaritiques I*, 436; Aistleitner, *WUS*, #2086.

## Form/Structure/Setting

There has been some debate as to the most appropriate classification of Ps 41. While many scholars have classified it as an *individual thanksgiving* psalm, others have interpreted it as an *individual lament*. The difficulty arises in that the psalm appears to be characterized by a variety of forms of language, including didactic poetry reminiscent of the wisdom tradition (vv 2-4), prayer (vv 5, 11), lament (vv 6-10), and confidence or praise (vv 12-14). The most appropriate description in general terms is to recognize the psalm as a psalm of illness (Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, II, 1-9).

Nevertheless, it is possible to be more precise in the descriptive analysis of the psalm. The variety in forms of language is to be explained in a liturgical context; the text must be interpreted as a liturgy (or a part of a liturgy) for use within a ritual in which a sick person comes to the temple in quest of healing. The analysis which is provided here follows essentially that of Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen*, 298-300. The ritual begins with some words addressed to the sick person by the priest (vv 2-4). Then the sick person declares his lament, framed in a prayer for healing. Between vv 11 and 12, one must suppose the priestly declaration of an oracle from the Lord. The liturgy closes with the sick person's declaration of confidence in God's intention to heal him. In summary form, the psalm's structure can be expressed as follows.

1. Introductory words of the priest (vv 2-4).
2. The sick person's words (vv 5-11)
  - a. Prayer for healing (v 5)
  - b. Lament over the crisis (vv 6-10)
  - c. Prayer for healing (v 11).
3. (A priestly oracle from God is supposed.)
4. Concluding statement of confidence by the sick person (vv 12-13).

More precise details of this analysis are provided in the *Comment*. The psalm, as a liturgy for a sick person, thus has general similarities to Pss 6 and 38, though the cultic and liturgical associations are much clearer in the case of Ps 41 than is the case with the parallel psalms. As was the case with Ps 6, the similarities between the language of this psalm and Jeremiah need not form the basis of any theory of literary relationship or interdependence (cf. Coppens, art. cit.).

The concluding verse of the psalm (v 14) functions as a doxology for Book I of the Psalter (see further THE COMPILATION OF THE PSALTER in the INTRODUCTION).

### Comment

*The introductory words of the priest* (41:2-4). The opening words are typical in style of the didactic tone of wisdom poetry (cf. Ps 1:1), but they may also be interpreted as characteristic of a statement of priestly blessing (or of the nature of a person who might expect to be blessed by God). The background to the words is to be found in the setting; the sick person comes to the temple to seek divine healing, but before speaking, he must hear a statement from the priest concerning the basic character of the kind of person who could legitimately seek God's blessing and healing.

The first words of the priest (v 2a) indicate that the person who would seek divine deliverance must be one who had given active consideration to the needs of the weak and the poor. One who had never helped a fellow human being had little right to look for divine help in a time of crisis. Eaton has argued that this first qualification is one of several pieces of evidence for associating the psalm with the king, and interpreting it as a *royal psalm*, for the king's responsibilities included the care of the weak (J. H. Eaton, art. cit., and *Kingship in the Psalms*, 44-46). While it is possible to interpret both the verse and the psalm as a whole in a royal context, the evidence is far from decisive and the possibility must remain as an hypothesis. It is equally likely that the concern for the weak and poor, reflected in v 2, is that which was incumbent on all Israelites as members of the covenant community (cf. Deut 10:18-19; 24:17-18).

The general principle contained in the priest's words is that the one who has shown concern for the weak may legitimately seek God's blessing in his own time of weakness. The general characteristics of God's blessing, as stated in v 3 (protection, long life and a fruitful existence), are then brought into focus in v 4 with respect to the immediate situation; the sick person may expect God's support (though the words do not contain any guarantee of healing as such). Verse 4b is difficult to interpret, partly for grammatical reasons; for "you have changed," one might expect "he will change" (see note a on v 4). If it is correct to assume that the subject of the verb *change* is God (regardless of the correct form of the verb), then the metaphor is that of God the nurse, who constantly changes the bedclothes and provides the sick person with some comfort and consolation.

*The sick person's words* (41:5-11). Having heard the opening declaration of the priest, the sick person immediately expresses his most urgent concern

in prayer to God; the vocalizing of the prayer in the liturgy presupposes the worshiper's understanding of the implications of the priest's opening words. From the words of the prayer, it is clear that the suppliant has two things on his mind: sin and sickness. And so he prays both for the divine mercy (experienced in the forgiveness of sin) and for the divine healing. In the sick person's mind, the sin and sickness appear to be interrelated. In reality, there may have been no interrelationship; that is, the advent of sickness was not necessarily a direct consequence of sin. But the words of the prayer are nevertheless entirely appropriate, for full healing must encompass both body and soul.

Having expressed the basic prayer, the suppliant now expresses the words of lament (vv 6-10). The lament does not have its focus on the sickness as such, but on the sick person's enemies, who seem to hover round the sick bed like vultures, awaiting the end. In this focus on the sick person's enemies, Ps 41 has similarities to Pss 6 and 38, though in this context, the focus is much more sustained and virtually excludes specific reference to the nature of the illness. In a literary sense, however, the substance of the lament is striking; it is framed by prayer (vv 5, 11) to God who is the only possible source of help, given that human beings, foes (v 6) and friends (v 10) alike, appear to have turned against the sick person in the time of distress. As in the other laments, it is difficult to know the extent to which the enmity toward the psalmist is real, and the extent to which it is the result of a paranoid imagination inflamed by sickness (see further the *Comment* on Ps 38:12-21). Verse 7 may well reflect the paranoia of disease; the visitors come to the sick person's room and speak the common pleasantries, but all the patient can think of is the words which he supposes them to be formulating in their minds, which they will make public the moment they leave his room. The greatest sense of betrayal is expressed in v 10; even the good friend, the one with whom so many a pleasant meal had been passed, would "raise up his heel" against the sick person. On the inimical metaphor of the "heel," see Jer 9:3 (Hebrew) where the verb  $\text{רָפַע}$  is used in the sense of the modern idiom, "to be a heel"; Gen 3:15 may also illustrate the metaphor.

After the lament of enemies, the sick person then turns to the final words of prayer (v 11), asking again for mercy and healing. Then, in the context of the liturgy, he must await the outcome of his plea, while the priest seeks a divine oracle, "yes" or "no," with respect to his request addressed to God.

*The concluding statement of confidence* (41:12-14). The words "by this" ( $\text{בְּזֶה}$ , v 12) are the key to the supposition of an antecedent priestly declaration of an oracle. In a strict grammatical sense, there is no antecedent to the word  $\text{בְּזֶה}$  ("this"); in the larger cultic context, the antecedent is clearly the positive oracle from God indicating the coming of healing. It is the oracle which provides the sick person with the knowledge of the divine pleasure (v 12a); the word from God has eliminated the possibility of a triumphant shout from the threatening human enemies (v 12b). The divine response is a reflection in part of the sick person's "integrity" (v 13a); that is, the qualifications contained in the priest's opening remarks (vv 2-4) have been met and rewarded. But basically, the positive response from God was an act of mercy, and it was for mercy that the sick person had prayed (vv 5, 11). The expression

of confidence is for the healing that would come, even though it was not yet experienced at the time the words were offered. But the degree of confidence is clear in v 13b: the sick person was confident that he would “stand in (God’s) presence,” referring specifically to future visits to the temple for worship, but generally to the survival in life beyond the threat of death which had come so close. On v 14, see *Form/Structure/Setting* (above).

### *Explanation*

For general reflections on the *psalms of sickness*, see particularly the *Explanation* at Pss 6 and 38.

In John’s Gospel (13:18), the lamenting words of the psalmist concerning betrayal by an intimate friend are used by Jesus in anticipation of his own betrayal. Thus, words which were originally part of a liturgy of sickness in the face of death, are transformed into what amounts to a prophetic prediction of betrayal in the life of Jesus. This quotation of the psalm in the NT is a further illustration of the manner in which the evangelists have set forth their passion narratives in the context of what is, in effect, a liturgy of dying, as was so evident in the NT quotation of Ps 22 (see above).