

[Ps 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10](#)

Responsorial Psalm

Jerome Biblical Commentary

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

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

cf. *confer*, compare

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.

Haydock's Catholic Commentary

Ver. 1. Psalm. Protestants intimate that this was not in the Hebrew; but we find *mizmor*, "canticle," which is equivalent. (Haydock) --- David speaks of his own restoration to health as a figure of Jesus Christ, who is principally intended, Hebrews x. 7. The end of the psalm is nearly the same with the 69th. (Calmet) --- Some arbitrarily (Berthier) explain the words with relation to the revolt of Absalom. (Bossuet) --- Others think it may refer to the captives, (Ven. Bede) to Daniel, or Jeremias, rescued from prison. See Theodoret, who explains it of men waiting for the general resurrection. It may express the sentiments of the Church, when the persecutions ceased. (Euthymius) --- Christ sometimes speaks in his own name, and sometimes in that of his members. (St. Ambrose; St. Augustine) (Calmet) --- It is certain that David had Christ in view; and if he alludes to himself, it is only as the figure of him. (Berthier)

Ver. 2. Expectation, or patience. (Haydock) --- God has, at last, granted my request.

* 7.a. The sense of v 7b is difficult; the translation above is literal, based upon כרה, "to dig." On the meaning, if the translation is correct, see the *Comment*. But G has a quite different text: "but you prepared a body for me" (cf. Heb 10:5, which is based on G). כרה 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.

Ver. 3. Misery. Hebrew, "confusion," (Berthier) or "noise," (St. Jerome; Haydock) from the greatest danger. (Theodoret) --- *Dregs.* Mud, Jeremias xxxviii. 6. St. Augustine, &c., explain this of the Christian saved by faith from the sink of his sins. (Calmet)

Ver. 4. New. Excellent. (Haydock) --- I was before uttering complaints, now I give thanks with joy, for my health and conversion. (Calmet) --- *Song.* Hebrew, "Praise." The penitent changes his language, which is no longer understood by worldlings. (Berthier) --- *Many.* St. Augustine reads, *the just*, who take part in the welfare of their brethren, (Psalm xxxi. 11.) while the wicked are filled with alarm, at the ways of God; who humbles or exalts people as he pleases. (Calmet)

Ver. 5. Vanities. Hebrew, "the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies." (Protestants) (Haydock) --- All the world is vanity, (Psalm xxxviii. 6., &c.; Calmet) though idolatry may be here meant. (St. Cyril)

Ver. 6. Thoughts, or designs, "over us," as Hebrew adds. No one can fathom the counsels of the Lord. It is folly, therefore, to attack his mysteries. (Haydock) --- *Like.* Protestants, "and thy thoughts *which are* to usward, they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee." Literally, *non ordinare apud te.* (Montanus) (Haydock) --- But *haroc* means also *æquiparare*, which corresponds with the Vulgate. (Berthier) --- Syriac, "none is comparable to thee." (Calmet) --- *Number.* Christ and his apostles preached, so that many followed their doctrine. (Worthington) --- David also had many witnesses of his gratitude. They crowded round him. Some would improperly make *multiplicati sunt*, agree with *mirabilia*, *Greek: dialogismois*, which is in the masculine. (Berthier) --- "I find no order before thee; if I would declare and number, they are more (*wonders*) than can be counted." (St. Jerome) (Haydock) --- I am at a loss how to express myself, and must be content with the interior sentiments of gratitude. See Psalm lxx. 15. (Calmet)

Ver. 7. Sacrifice and oblation. Neither bloody nor unbloody sacrifices of the law will do. (Menochius) --- *Pierced ears.* Septuagint and St. Paul read, *a body thou hast fitted to me*, Hebrews x. 5. (Haydock) --- Nobilius mentions, that he found the reading of the Vulgate in one Greek manuscript in Eusebius, &c. --- The Arabic has both. "Thou hast prepared a body for me, and opened my ears." (Calmet) --- Both are, in effect, of divine authority. The version adopted by St. Paul, cannot be rejected, no more than the Hebrew confirmed by the Vulgate. James Pierce asserts, that the Hebrew is incorrect, *oznaim* being put for *az zip*, "then a body," as the letters are not unlike. The dissertation is ingenious: the author is, however, suspected of Socinianism. We know not the reason why the Vulgate here abandons the Septuagint. The sense is much the same; the prophet noticing the entire obedience of the Messiah, (Berthier) and the apostle comprising his whole person. (Menochius) --- His body was miraculous, (Haydock) and the incarnation the work of God. (Calmet) --- Nothing could come up to his submission. "Thou has dug ears for me," (St. Jerome; Haydock) alluding to the custom of making slaves for ever, (Exodus xxi. 5.) or "thou hast fitted, (Calmet) opened, (Protestants) my ears," enabling me to hear, and to obey. (Haydock) --- The sacrifice of Christ was never interrupted, from the first moment of his incarnation. (Calmet) --- He was always doing the will of his Father. (Haydock) --- This sacrifice is the most essential. God rejected all

such as were destitute of this condition, or were not offered by people determined to observe the whole law, 1 Kings xv. 22., Isaias i. 11., and Jeremias vii. 22. (Porphyrius, Abs. ii.) (Calmet) --- No sacrifice of the Old Testament was sufficient to satisfy God's justice for sin. Christ, by the *ear* of obedience, performed the redemption of man by his death, as was determined from eternity. See Hebrews x. (Worthington) --- *And* is omitted in the Latin version of St. Paul, *holocausta pro peccato*, inadvertently, or rather to intimate, that he was speaking of the holocaust of expiation, Hebrews x. 6, 8., and xiii. 11., and Leviticus xvi. 27. (Berthier) --- St. Augustine also admits only one species of sacrifice, "holocausts likewise for sin." But others distinguish them from the victims designed to expiate the sins of individuals, (Leviticus v., &c.) of which the prophet also speaks. (Calmet)

Ver. 8. *Head*, or *beginning*, (Genesis i., John i., and viii. 25.; St. Jerome, &c.) or at the commencement of this book of Psalms, (St. Augustine) or rather in the whole Bible. (Calmet) --- *Kephalis* denotes a volume, (Suidas) or stick, on which books were formerly rolled, being written on parchment. The Jews still observe the same custom in their synagogues. (Calmet) (Luke iv. 17, 20.) --- Hebrew, "In the volume of the book," means, in the book, (Amama) or the Bible, which is *the book* by excellence, where the incarnation and death of Christ, for man's redemption, are clearly specified. (Haydock) -- - This is the *sum* of the Scriptures. (Worthington) --- *They bear witness* to Christ, John v. 39., and Luke xxiv. 27. (Haydock) --- The apostle uses the word *capitulum*, for the sum, Hebrews viii. Whatever sense be chosen, we should meditate on this *head*, or volume. But Christ signed, as it were, this solemn engagement, from all eternity. If we adopt the passage to David, we may translate, "I come, having on me the volume of thy Scriptures." See 4 Kings xi. 12. (Calmet)

Ver. 9. *Heart*. So the Vatican Septuagint reads; while other editions have *Greek: koilias*, "belly." (St. Jerome, ad Sum.) --- Hebrew, "bowels." (Haydock) --- The sense is the same. (Berthier) --- I love the law so much, that I would hide it in my bowels, (Calmet) or in the most secret place. (Theodoret)

Ver. 10. *Thy*, is not expressed in Hebrew or Greek, but understood. (Berthier) --- *Church*, in the tabernacle, (Theodoret) or rather in the Catholic Church; the propagation of which, (Haydock) and the preaching of the gospel throughout the world are foretold. (Worthington) --- The justice, or mercies of our Saviour, are every where proclaimed. (St. Jerome) (Calmet)

Ver. 11. *Thy*. Some copies of the Septuagint have, *my justice*, as well as the Ethiopic version. (Eusebius; St. Augustine, &c.) (Calmet) --- But the Vulgate is more correct. (Berthier) --- *Council*. Christ conceals not his mercy and truth from the greatest and wisest congregations. He spoke boldly before Annas and Caiphas, as St. Paul did at Athens, &c. (Worthington) --- David testifies his gratitude, and invites all to praise God with him. (Calmet) --- But we must particularly learn from our Saviour, a horror of sin; the knowledge of his mysteries; confidence in his mercy; and a conviction, that we can never be saved but by his grace. He has announced these things, and then he finishes his career, by suffering for us, and pours forth his supplications to God. (Berthier)

Ver. 12. *Withhold not.* The prophet now speaks in the name of Christ's mystical body, the Church, praying to be made a partaker of mercy, and to be delivered from evils, (Worthington) or Christ speaks as the victim for our sins. (Haydock) --- *Uphold me.* This might be also rendered as a prayer, "May thy," &c., with the Hebrew and some copies of the Septuagint. (Berthier)

Ver. 13. *My iniquities.* That is, the sins of all mankind, which I have taken upon me. (Challoner) (Calmet) --- The sins even of those who believe, are so numerous, that they cannot be seen in particular. We may faint at the sight of so many sins committed by Christians. (Worthington) --- *Forsaken me* in the agony. (Calmet) --- Christ had all the sins of mankind laid upon him. (Berthier) --- He did not suffer to release those who were already damned; though they had received sufficient graces, in consequence of the merits of his future death. (Haydock) --- Christ knew the number and enormity of sin. (Menochius) --- But he would not disclose his knowledge. (Haydock) (Mark vi. 5.) (Menochius)

Ver. 14. *Be pleased.* The rest is nearly transcribed, Psalm lxi. (Calmet) --- The Church prays for her weak members. (Worthington)

Ver. 15. *Backward,* as those who came to seize Christ were twice, John xviii. 6. --- He prays for their conversion. (S.) --- Shame might have proved very salutary to them. (Theodoret) --- The reprobate will be confounded. (Worthington)

Ver. 16. *'Tis well.* The Hebrew here is an interjection of insult and derision, like the Vah, Matthew xxvii. 40. (Challoner) --- As St. Jerome here expresses it, Vah, Vah. See Mark xv. 29. (Menochius) --- The Jews have now become objects of contempt, (Calmet) a just punishment (Haydock) of scoffers, who wish evil to the good.

Ver. 17. *Magnified.* Thus may those speak, who sincerely love God. (Worthington)

Ver. 18. *Beggar.* King David might assume this title, as well as all mankind. (St. Augustine) --- The same may be applied to Christ, according to his human nature, as the end of this psalm, and the following, belong to him, more than to David. (Calmet) --- He speaks in the name of penitents, whose sins he had undertaken to wash away. (Worthington) --- *Careful.* Hebrew, "will think of me." (Haydock) --- *Slack.* The faithful prayed for the coming of our Saviour, as they still entreat him to hasten the reward of the good. (Worthington)

Old Testament Survey Series: Wisdom Literature and Psalms (non-Catholic)

Past Deliverance and Present Distress (Ps 40)

Three verses from Ps 40 are quoted in Heb 10:5–7. According to the inspired apostle, in these verses Christ is speaking to the Father at the time he left heaven to

come into the world. If Christ is the speaker in vv. 6–10—those quoted in Hebrews—then he probably should be regarded as the speaker throughout this psalm.¹

David wrote this psalm either at the time of Absalom's rebellion, or the rebellion of Adonijah. Ps 40 speaks of a great (1) deliverance (vv. 1–4); (2) program (vv. 5–8); (3) message (vv. 9–10); (4) petition (vv. 11–13); (5) prediction (vv. 14–16); and (6) confidence (v. 17).

40:1. The Father inclined his ear and heard the cry of his Son. The image is that of one leaning forward to catch a faint or distant sound.

40:2. Messiah describes the ordeal which he had gone through as a horrible pit filled with clay in which there can be no firm footing. He was delivered from that experience, he regained his footing.

40:3–4. Messiah's joy after deliverance is expressed in song and praise. Many will take note of his victory and will come to fear Yahweh. A beautiful beatitude is pronounced on those who continue to trust Yahweh. Such do not look to arrogant rebels who spurn God.

40:5. Messiah praises the Father for his wonderful works. These acts are the product of God's incomparable wisdom respecting his people. Examples of divine beneficence are so numerous they cannot be counted.

40:6. On the eve of his descent into the world to provide the once-for-all sacrifice, Messiah indicates the attitude of God toward the hypocritical offerings being presented at the altar. Messiah speaks of his ears being "pierced" or "opened."² This is an allusion to submissive obedience to the Father (cf. Exod 21:1–6).

40:7–8. Messiah declares his intention to enter the world. He understood that in "the scroll of the book," i.e., the Old Covenant Scriptures, "it is written of me." The "book" specifically testified that Messiah would delight to do the will of the Father.

40:9–10. Christ proclaims the message of God in "the great congregation," either the whole of mankind, or among the people of God. He proclaims: (1) the righteousness, (2) faithfulness, (3) salvation, (4) lovingkindness, and (5) truth of God.

1 For a detailed discussion of the personal messianic interpretation of Ps 40, see James E. Smith, *What the Bible Teaches about the Promised Messiah* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993), pp. 113–121.

2 Hebrews 10:5, following the Septuagint, renders the clause: "a body you have prepared me." Where there is an ear, there is a body. The piercing of the ear was a token that a servant belonged wholly to his master. When the ears of the Messiah were pierced in love, God got his entire body.

40:11. The unchangeableness of God's lovingkindness, and the truth of promises made to Messiah and through him are a solid ground of assurance that the Father would not withhold his tender mercies from the Son.

40:12. Since Messiah is the speaker, this verse should not be taken as a confession of sin but rather a description of what was done to the speaker. He is encompassed by evils. "My iniquities" are to be understood as "the iniquities done to me." The crimes committed against him had overwhelmed him: the unjust trials, the mockery, the buffeting, the scourging, the crown of thorns.

40:13–15. Messiah calls on the Father to aid him. He is confident regarding the fate of his enemies. On account of their shameful conduct with respect to Messiah, they would be desolate (cf. Matt 23:38).

40:16. While the enemies of Messiah face a bleak future, true worshipers rejoice and praise God.

40:17. Messiah describes himself in the midst of his suffering as afflicted and poor. Yet he knows the Father will remember him and make plans for his deliverance. He simply asks that God delay no longer in effecting the deliverance which he knows will be forthcoming.

1

¹Smith, J. E. 1996. *The wisdom literature and Psalms*. College Press Pub. Co.: Joplin, Mo.