

## Psalm 41:14, or the Unity of the Masoretic Psalm 41<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*Against the almost unanimous consensus over the editorial character of the doxology of Ps 41:14, this essay defends v. 14 as belonging to Ps 41. First, the author indicates the link between v. 14 and the previous v. 13, then with the incipit of the psalm. In fact, beatitude (v. 2) and benediction (v. 14) form a typical pair in the Psalter. In a second stage, the author delineates a structure for the whole of Ps 41 with the inclusion of v. 14. He recognises four stanzas (2-4, 5-7, 8-11, 12-14) which correspond with one another chiastically. The psalm intends to contrast the care which Yhwh, the God of Israel, gives to the weak with the behaviour of men who tend to marginalise them. The inclusion between vv. 2-4 and 14 has the sense of holding up God's behaviour for the imitation of his people.*

KEYWORDS: Psalm 41, Psalm 41:14, unity of Psalm 41, doxologies, Psalter Book I.

### A PSALM 41: HEBREW TEXT AND TRANSLATION

לְמַנְצֵחַ מְזֻמֹּר לְדָוִד:<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>*For the choirmaster. A psalm. Of David.*

אֲשֶׁר יִמְשָׁכִיל אֶל־דָּגַל<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup>*Blessed is the one who understands  
the mystery of the weak!*

בַּיּוֹם רָעָה יִמְלֹטֵהוּ יְהוָה:<sup>3</sup> *YHWH saves him on the day of disaster.*

יְהוָהוּ יִשְׁמְרֵהוּ וַיִּחַיֵּהוּ<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup>*YHWH protects him and gives him back his life,  
so that he is proclaimed blessed in the land.  
Don't hand him over into the desire of his  
enemies!*

יְהוָה יִסְעֲדֵנִי עַל־עַרְשׂ דָּגִי<sup>4</sup> <sup>4</sup>*YHWH supports him on his bed of pain.  
During his sickness, you remake his bed  
completely.*

אֲנִי־אָמַרְתִּי יְהוָה חַנּוּנִי<sup>5</sup> <sup>5</sup>*As for me, I say: "YHWH, have mercy on me,  
heal my soul, for I have sinned against you!"*

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<p>6 אוֹיְבַי יֹאמְרוּ רַע לִי מָתַי יָמוּת וְאָבֵד שְׁמוֹ: 7 וְאִם-בָּא לְרְאוֹתוֹ שָׁוֵא יִדְבֹר לְבָבוֹ יִקְבֹּץ-אָוֶן לּוֹ יֵצֵא לְחַוֵּץ יְדָבָר:</p>	<p><sup>6</sup>My enemies are speaking evil about me: "When will he die and his name perish?" <sup>7</sup>And if one comes to visit me, he speaks insincerely, while his heart stores up wickedness: (then) he goes out and gossips.</p>
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<p>8 זָחַד עָלַי יִתְלַחֲשׂוּ כָּל-שֹׂנְאָי עָלַי וְהִשְׁבּוּ רָעָה לִי: 9 דְּבַר-בְּלִיעַל יֵצֵא בּוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר שָׁכַב לֹא-יִוָּסֵף לְקוֹם: 10 גַּם-אֵישׁ שְׁלוֹמִי אֲשֶׁר-בִּטַּחְתִּי בּוֹ אוֹכַל לֶחְמִי הִגְדִּיל עָלַי עַקֵּב: 11 וְאַתָּה יְהוָה חַנּוּנִי וְהִקְיִמְנִי וְאַשְׁלֵמָה לָהֶם:</p>	<p><sup>8</sup>All those who hate me whisper together against me, against me they plot my downfall. <sup>9</sup>"Something terrible has seized him: from where he is lying, he will never rise again." <sup>10</sup>Even my friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted high his heel against me. <sup>11</sup>But you, YHWH, have mercy on me, raise me so that I can repay them.</p>
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<p>12 בְּזָאת יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-תִפְצֹת בִּי כִּי לֹא-יִרְיעַ אֹיְבִי עָלַי: 13 וְאַנִּי בְּתַמִּי תִמְכַּת בִּי וּתְצַיְבֵנִי לְפָנֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם: 14 בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעוֹלָם וְעַד הָעוֹלָם אָמֵן וְאָמֵן:</p>	<p><sup>12</sup>From this I know that you love me, from the fact that my enemy will not sing \\ about his victory over me <sup>13</sup>As for me, you support me in my integrity and set me in your presence for ever. <sup>14</sup>Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel For ever and ever. Amen and amen!</p>

## B PSALM 41:14

Some years ago, I noted two features of the doxologies which characterise the respective ends of Ps 72 (vv. 18-20) and 89 (v. 53). On the one hand, they have an editorial character, marking the conclusions of the second and third books of the Psalter respectively. On the other hand, they are the logical conclusion of each psalm, forming an integral part of it.<sup>2</sup> The study of Ps 41 has led me to the same result. The purpose of the present article, which I am honoured to dedicate to my colleague, Prof Phil Botha, is to show that the doxology which concludes the first book of the Psalter, Ps 41:14, not only forms part of Ps 41 but is fundamental for understanding the unity of this psalm.

<sup>2</sup> Gianni Barbiero, "The Risks of a Fragmented Reading of the Psalms: Psalm 72 as a Case in Point," *ZAW* 119 (2007): 67-91; idem., "Alcune osservazioni sulla conclusione del Salmo 89 (vv. 47-53)," *Bib* 88 (2007): 543-544.

Generally speaking, scholars consider the doxologies of the Psalter as editorial additions,<sup>3</sup> even if some (actually few) admit the possibility that a whole psalm has been placed as a conclusion to a book on account of its doxology.<sup>4</sup> One of these is Wilson, who adduces three arguments in favour of this thesis: 1) if the doxologies stemmed from a single author, they would not be so lacking in homogeneity; 2) Psalm 150, at the conclusion of Book V, is without a doxology; 3) the colophon at the end of Ps 72 (v. 20) would be superfluous because the end of the book would have already been signalled by the doxology (vv. 18-19). He concludes: "The doxologies in 41:14; 72:19; 89:53 and 106:48 (...) are integral parts of the psalm they accompany."<sup>5</sup>

J.-M. Auwers addresses a pertinent criticism to Wilson, and it goes for the other supporters of this thesis also: "Il serait (...) de bonne méthode de commencer par examiner les indices internes."<sup>6</sup> However, this has rarely been done, and it is precisely this which we would like to do in this article, especially with regard to the doxology of Ps 41. Concerning it, Auwers states peremptorily: "Le caractère hétérogène de la doxologie (of Ps 41, *GB*) est admis quasi unanimement par les commentateurs."<sup>7</sup> The clues indicated by the Belgian exegete are, first of all, the rhythm of the verse which contrasts with that of the

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen* (BKAT 15/1-2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 8-9; Ernst Jenni, "Zu den doxologischen Schlussformeln des Psalters," *ThZ* 40 (1984): 114-120 („Man ist sich einig, dass der liturgische Lobpreis nicht zum betreffenden Psalm ursprünglich hinzugehört, sondern relativ spät zur Markierung der Unterteilung des Psalters in fünf Bücher – vielleicht nach Analogie des Pentateuchs – jeweils hinzugefügt wurde," 114).

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, already Sigmund O.P. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship, Volume 2* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 193, and Bernardus D. Eerdmans, *The Hebrew Book of Psalms* (OTS 4; Leiden: Brill, 1947), 27. I supported this thesis, cf. Gianni Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit: Eine synchrone Analyse von Ps 1-41* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1999), 56-62.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholar Press, 1985), 185. So again, with different reasons, Matthias Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (FAT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 125; Robert L. Alden, "Chiastic Psalms (I). A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 1-50," *JETHS* 17 (1974): 25; Marina Mannati, *Les Psaumes II* (CPV 26-29; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966-1968), 84; Jan P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis: II, 85 Psalms and Job 4-14* (SSN 41; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 153; Amos Ḥakham, *Psalms I* (The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Cook, 2003), 327; Casper J. Labuschagne, "Psalm 41," 4, obs. 5, [www.labuschagne.nl](http://www.labuschagne.nl), Psalm 41, consulted 29.10.2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Marie Auwers, "Le psautier hébraïque et ses éditeurs. Recherches sur une forme canonique du livre des Psaumes." (DPhil bibl thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain), 1994, 201 (sincere thanks to the author for sending me a manuscript copy).

<sup>7</sup> Auwers, "Le psautier hébraïque," 204.

rest of the psalm which is characterised by 4 + 4 stresses. The second clue is structural: the majority of scholars divide Ps 41 into four sestets (vv. 2-4, 5-7, 8-10, 11-13), leaving v. 14 apart.<sup>8</sup> The third clue concerns the content. The benediction of v. 14 is addressed to *יהוה אלהי ישראל*, that is, it has a collective, national character whereas the psalm speaks of the healing of an individual.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that, in his recent commentary, Wilson, different from his 1985-study, on the basis of this observation, ends up with the editorial character of 41:14, contradicting what he had stated previously: "The concern with the God of the community betrays the secondary nature of this doxology in relation to Ps 41, which is wholly focused on the experience and concerns of the individual."<sup>10</sup>

In reply to Auwers, it seems that the argument about rhythm is weak: v. 14 is a tristich, fully in conformity with the usage of the Psalter where the tristich often marks the beginning or conclusion of a poetic unit.<sup>11</sup> In Ps 41, for example, we have another tristich in v. 3, at the beginning of the second strophe. At the end of the psalm, it can assume a climactic function (as in Pss 2:12; 6:11; 111:9, 10; 112:9, 10).

The other two arguments, however, the structural and the one concerning the content, are weighty and have to be taken seriously. We begin with the structural argument.

In his first work devoted to the structure of the Psalms, Girard claimed about Ps 41:14: "Le statut extra-structurel de la doxologie finale (...) ne fait aucun doute: aucun terme structurel déterminant ne la relie au reste."<sup>12</sup> Our first

<sup>8</sup> Auwers, "Le psautier hébraïque," 204-205. The authors cited along these lines are Nic H. Ridderbos, Gianfranco Ravasi, Jacques Trublet and Jean-Noel Aletti, Marc Girard, Pierre Auffret. Girard later confirmed his position in *idem.*, *Les Psaumes redécouverts: De la structure au sens, I: 1-50* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1994), 694-701. To this list are to be added, more recently, Casper J. Labuschagne, "Psalm 41," 1, [www.labuschagne.nl](http://www.labuschagne.nl), Psalm 41; Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: With Special Reference to the First Book of the Psalter* (OTS 53; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 412-418 (see here, on pp. 415-416, a more extensive list of other structural proposals along the same lines).

<sup>9</sup> Auwers, "Le psautier hébraïque," 205.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 656.

<sup>11</sup> On the function of the tristich verse, cf. Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), 177-185; van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 522-535.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Girard, *Les Psaumes: Analyse structurelle et interprétation* (Recherches: Nouvelle Série 2; Montréal: Bellarmin 1984), 337. Even if, later, in n. 4 of the same page, he admits some links, both lexical and semantic, between the doxology and the body of the psalm.

step, therefore, will be that of contradicting this statement by displaying the important lexical links of v. 14 with the previous verses.

We note, first of all, that the second stich of v. 14, *מהעולם ועד העולם*, takes up the previous 13b: "you will set me in your presence *for ever* (לעולם)." Verse 13 affirms the human side of "eternity," while v. 14 bases the eternity given to man on the very eternity of God. The eternity of man is seen as a participation in the eternity of God: thus, the reference seems anything other than banal.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Alden already noted the chiasmic link between v. 14 and vv. 2-4, pointing out two repetitions: a) the tetragrammaton יהוה, present in 14a and in each of the three verses 2-4 (2b, 3a, 4a); b) the correspondence between the beatitude (אשרי) at the beginning of v. 2 and the benediction (ברוך) at the beginning of v. 14.<sup>14</sup> This latter correspondence is not accidental because it is confirmed by the presence of a beatitude [M] and a benediction [B] in each of the psalms which conclude the first four books of the Psalter (41:2, 3 [M] and 41:14 [B]; 72:17 [M] and 72:18, 19 [B]; 89:16 [M] and 89:53 [B]; 106:3 [M] and 106:48 [B]). As Weber emphasises, the beatitude has a "horizontal" character and concerns man, while the benediction has a "vertical" character and concerns God.<sup>15</sup> In Ps 41, the one declared blessed is the *man* "who understands the mystery of the weak" (אשרי משכיל אל-ידל, v. 2a), while the one to be blessed is "YHWH, the *God* of Israel" (ברוך יהוה אלהי ישראל, v. 14). Thus, the correspondence between the beatitude of v. 2a and the benediction of v. 14 reproduces the same "man – God" juxtaposition which we have noted in the passage from v. 13 to 14.

The "man – God" tension pervades the whole of the first stanza of the psalm, that is, vv. 2-4. Indeed, while v. 2a is focused on man (beatitude), from v. 2b on, the protagonist is YHWH, who is mentioned, not by chance, a good 3×. A parallel phenomenon, but with the proportions reversed, is observed in the psalm's final stanza, vv. 12-14. In fact, the first two verses (12-13) are focused

<sup>13</sup> "The closing doxology, marking the end of both the psalm and Book One of the Psalter, connects the dots between the enduring relationship that the psalmist claims with God (*in your presence forever*) and the universal reign of the Lord (*from everlasting to everlasting*)" (Rolf Jacobson, in Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* [NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014], 389-390).

<sup>14</sup> Alden, "Chiastic Psalms," 25.

<sup>15</sup> Beat Weber, "Makarismus und Eulogie im Psalter: Buch- und kanontheologische Erwägungen," *OTE* 21 (2008): 193-218; cf. idem., "Like a Bridge Over Troubled Water ...': Weisheitstheologische Wegmarkierungen im Psalter," in *Ex Oriente Lux: FS Rüdiger Lux* (ed. Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 296.

on man, in this case on the "I" of the psalmist<sup>16</sup>, while the last verse (14) is devoted to God (benediction). Here too, we find the last appearance of the tetragrammaton (cf. *Table 1*).

A	2a: man	אֲשֶׁרִי מִשְׁכִּיל אֱלֹהִים
B	2b-4: God	יְהוָה (3×)
A'	12-13: man	אֲנִי
B'	14: God	בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה

**Table 1**

By contrast with Alden, therefore, we see the correspondence not only between vv. 2-4 and 14, but between the two stanzas, vv. 2-4 and 12-14. This correspondence is suggested both by the same number of rhythmic verses (3), and by the same number of stichs (7 in both cases: 2 + 3 + 2 in vv. 2-4; 2 + 2 + 3 in vv. 12-14), as well as by the same number of words. Labuschagne and van der Lugt have observed that the number of words in vv. 2-4 is 26 (8 + 9 + 9), a highly theological number because it corresponds to the numerical value of the tetragrammaton.<sup>17</sup> Also, using the same criteria of calculation, the words in vv. 12-14 are again 26 (10 + 7 + 9). It is difficult to suppose that this correspondence is fortuitous. It is obtained only by including v. 14 in the final stanza.<sup>18</sup>

The correspondence between vv. 2-4 and vv. 12-14 is confirmed by the presence in both stanzas of the theme of the enemies (אֵיבִי, v. 3; אֵיבִי, v. 12) and by that of sickness, alluded to by the loving "sustaining" of God (סָעַד, v. 4; תָּמַךְ, v. 13).

From the point of view of literary genre, both stanzas correspond in that they are not exactly a prayer by contrast with vv. 5-11. Verses 2-4 are a sapiential aphorism, while, rather than a thanksgiving, vv. 12-14 are an act of trust in the hearing of the prayer which was raised in vv. 5-11. It can be said that vv. 2-4 point to the content of vv. 12-14 (and, *a fortiori*, that of 5-11) and draw from it a teaching that is universally valid.

<sup>16</sup> In v. 12, the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun appears 3×, and, on one occasion, the verb is in the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular; in v. 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun appears 4×. Note particularly the epiphora on the expression בִּי (12a, 13a).

<sup>17</sup> Van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 418; Labuschagne, "Psalm 41," 3, [www.labuschagne.nl](http://www.labuschagne.nl), Psalm 41. The two authors arrive at this number without taking the *maqef* into account.

<sup>18</sup> Fokkelman reaches the same conclusion by counting the number of syllables: "The syllable count and the exact norm figure as average may be an indication that v. 14 forms part of the poem" (Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 153).

On the other hand, however, v. 14 is separate from 12-13. In 12-13, the psalmist addresses God in direct discourse, prolonging the discourse of 5-11, while, in v. 14, he speaks of God in the third person. As already suggested by *Table 1*, we are structuring the stanza 12-14 into two strophes 12-13 ("I") and 14 (YHWH). In chiasmic parallelism, the first stanza, 2-4, is arranged in two strophes: 2 ("man") and 3-4 (YHWH).<sup>19</sup> In their turn, vv. 3-4 set in play two aspects of suffering, an external one ("enemies," v. 3) and an internal one ("sickness," v. 4). These two elements are taken up again in the penultimate strophe: as we have observed, v. 12, takes up the theme of the enemies (איביו), while v. 13 that of sickness (תמך) (cf. *Table 2*).<sup>20</sup>

A	3	enemies	איביו
B	4	sickness	יסעדנו
A'	12	enemies	איביו
B'	13	sickness	תמכת בי

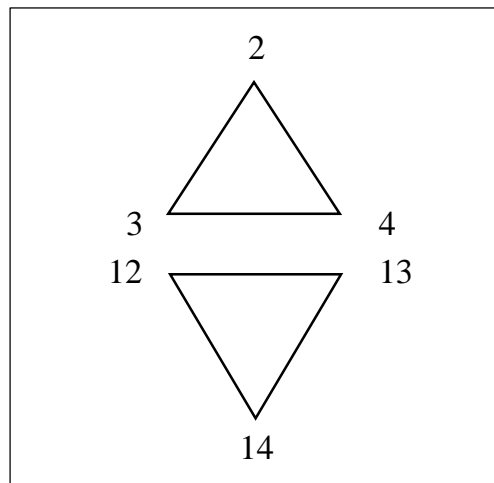
**Table 2**

The two stanzas exhibit a triangular structure in reverse form.<sup>21</sup> In the first stanza, the first strophe (2) forms the apex of the triangle, while the second forms its base, with the two verses, 3-4, focused on, the first, the enemies, the second, sickness. In the final stanza, the apex is formed by the last strophe (14), the base by the two verses of the penultimate strophe, 12-13, which take up the two themes of the enemies and of sickness (cf. *Table 3*). The table highlights the correspondence between the initial beatitude (the apex of the first triangle) and the final benediction (the apex of the second triangle).

<sup>19</sup> From the rhythmic point of view, v. 2b is to be linked with 2a, even if, from the point of view of content, it anticipates the themes of vv. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Another correspondence between vv. 3-4 and 12-13 is given from the fact that, whereas vv. 2 and 4 speak of YHWH in the third person, in vv. 12-13, and partly also in 3-4, the psalmist addresses him in direct discourse (cf. vv. 3c, 4b).

<sup>21</sup> We are borrowing this type of structure from Jacob Bazak, "Structural Geometric Patterns in Biblical Poetry," *Poetics Today* 6 (1985): 475-507, which he has developed for Pss 25; 34; 37 and 145.

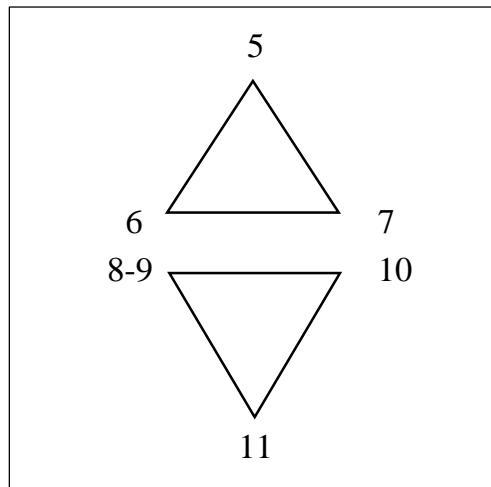
**Table 3****C THE STRUCTURE OF PSALM 41**

We shall have to return to the semantic aspect of the correspondence between the final stanza and the first. First, we shall complete what we have to say about the structure which Ps 41 assumes once we include v. 14 in it. We note, first of all, that the duo, enemies – sickness, which we found in vv. 3-4 and 12-13 respectively, unifies the whole psalm, apart from the beatitude and final benediction (cf. *Table 4*).

–	v. 2	beatitude	
A	v. 3	enemies	אִיבִי (3c)
B	v. 4	sickness	
B	v. 5	sickness	
A	vv. 6-7	enemies	אִיבִי (6a)
A	vv. 8-10	enemies	שָׁנְאִי (8a)
B	v. 11	sickness	
A	v. 12	enemy	אִיבִי (12b)
B	v. 13	sickness	
–	v. 14	benediction	

**Table 4**



**Table 5**

Within the frame formed by the first and last stanzas (2-4 and 12-14), the body of the psalm seems to be arranged in two stanzas: vv. 5-7 and 8-11. Analogously with the two triangles described above, here too we see the chiasmic correspondence of two further triangles because the second stanza, 5-7, is made up of an isolated poetic line which speaks of sickness (רפאה, v. 5), and 3 lines speaking of enemies (6-7, cf. אויבי, 6a), while the third, vv. 8-11, is composed of 4 poetic lines which speak of enemies (8-10, cf. שונאי, 8a) and of one, which is isolated and speaks of sickness (11, cf. הקימי, 11a) (cf. *Table 5*).

First of all, we emphasise the correspondence of the two points, vv. 5 and 11. These correspond, not only on account of the theme of sickness but also because of the complementarity of the personal pronouns with which they begin (אני, 5a; ואתה, 11a), which reproduces the polarity of the beatitude (2) and benediction (14). Secondly, there is the correspondence of the tetragrammaton which appears only here in vv. 5-11. Finally, we should note the exact repetition of the imperative חנני (5a and 11a). In these two verses, the two terms form a pair: יהוה חנני. From the point of view of the literary genre, what we have here is a real prayer, that is, the relationship of the worshipper with his God.

Regarding the two central strophes (6-7 and 8-10), the first consists of three, the second of four distich verses (vv. 7 and 10 are made up of four stichs, that is, of two rhythmic verses each, with Gunkel).<sup>22</sup> In these there is a passage from prayer in the strict sense to the exposition of the need. Whereas, in vv. 5 and 11, the allusion is to sickness, here the subject is the enemies (cf. *supra*, *tab. 4*). The exposition has a rhythm in three stages which correspond to one another

<sup>22</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 173. The correspondence between the masoretic verses and the poetic lines would be like that: vv. 2.3-4 || 5.6-7 | 8.10-11 || 12-13.14 → poetic lines 1.2 || 1.3 | 4.1 || 2.1 (a.b || c.d | d'c' || b'.a') = 3 || 9 || 3 poetic lines.

in linear parallelism. First mentioned are the enemies, in the plural (אויבי, 6a; שונאי, 8a), whose words are reported (6b, 9). Then there is mention of the false friend (in the singular: 7, 10) (cf. *Table 6*).

A	5	prayer (direct discourse)	sickness
B	6-7	lamentation (report)	a) enemies (6a: אויבי) b) direct quotation (6b) c) false friend (7)
B'	8-10	lamentation (report)	a') enemies (8: שונאי) b') direct quotation (9) c') false friend (10)
A'	11	prayer (direct discourse)	sickness

**Table 6**

#### **D THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VERSES 2-4**

The first stanza is composed, firstly, of a beatitude (2a: אֲשֶׁרִי מִשְׁכִּיל אֶל־דָּל) in which the psalmist calls the attention of the assembly to the person of the weak man, probably the invalid who will begin to speak in vv. 5-13. Then, as a reason for this beatitude, vv. 2b-4 present God's actions in this connection. God's attitude is presented as an example for the community which has to reflect on the importance of the poor who are in the midst of it. This explanation is characterised by the strong presence of the tetragrammaton, which appears at the end of v. 2 and at the beginning of v. 3 (anadiplosis), then, again, at the beginning of v. 4 (anaphora). The emphasising of the divine name, יהוה, is not by chance since, as we have observed, the stanza has exactly 26 words, a number which, in Hebrew gematria, corresponds to the numerical value of the word יהוה, as if to indicate that YHWH is the protagonist of these verses.

Usually, the initial stanza of Ps 41 is understood in the sense of Matt 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," a beatitude which finds its correspondence in numerous texts of the OT (cf. Prov 14:21; 14:31; 22:22-23; 29:7; 31:8-9; Job 29:12-17). Throughout the world of the ANE, care for the poor was the basic duty of the king (cf. Ps 72:1-4, 12-14). This would confirm the reading of Ps 41 as a royal psalm, something proposed by various authors.<sup>23</sup>

However, the MT does not permit this interpretation. In fact, the verb שָׁכַל *hip'il* indicates an intellectual activity, not a work of benevolence; it has to do

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wilson, *Editing*, 209-210; Barbiero, *Das erste Psalmenbuch*, 56-59, 618-620. In fact, the psalm is Davidic (cf. v. 1).

with thought rather than action. Significant in this connection is the parallel with Neh 8:13:<sup>24</sup> "On the second day, the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study (להשכיל) the words of the law." It is an intellectual activity which is being indicated here, something like "grasp, understand" (thus also the LXX, ὁ συνίωσ, and Vg *qui intellegit*).<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, rather than the poor in general, the substantive לַי indicates the "weak," and also the "sick," as 2 Sam 13:4, for example, helps us to understand.<sup>26</sup> It is true that the term can also indicate the "poor," as the Greek version underlines, but, in the context of our psalm, the link with the prayer of the sick man in vv. 5-13 is clear. Thus, we translate: "Blessed is he who understands the mystery of the weak."<sup>27</sup>

With the majority of scholars, Ravasi understands משכיל in the sense of "have compassion, look after," but he has to admit: "The reading offered by the present Hebrew text is conclusive, but it is inappropriate in the context of the psalm."<sup>28</sup> Airoidi asks: "How can we harmonise his (= the psalmist's, *GB*) lamentation (5-13) with the praise proclaimed in the first verse of his psalm? Is it praise reserved for himself (Castellino), for one who finds himself in this state (Dahood), or is it addressed to one who is taking care of him (ancient and modern versions)?"<sup>29</sup> It is understandable that many scholars have sought to solve the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. again, on these lines, Pss 64:10; 106:7.

<sup>25</sup> Nehemiah 8:13 and Ps 41:2 are the only passages where the verb שָׁכַל *hi.* is followed by the preposition אֶל, which suggests a parallelism between the two expressions: הַשְׁכִּיל אֶל (Neh 8:13) and מִשְׁכִּיל אֶל־דָּל (Ps 41:2). If this is true, then it means to say that understanding the mystery of the poor is equivalent to understanding the significance of the law of God. In fact, according to Matt 25:31-46, the whole law is summed up in the attention paid to the poor: the last judgement will turn on this point.

<sup>26</sup> On these lines, Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament: IV, Psaumes* (OBO 50/4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 238-240.

<sup>27</sup> "Béatitude pour (l'homme) qui entre dans le mystère du pauvre" (Mannati, *Les Psaumes II*, 80). The same author paraphrases: "Heureux qui comprend ce que Dieu fait pour le pauvre, ce qu'est le pauvre aux yeux de Dieu" (ibid., 85). This is also the sense of Augustine's comment: "Intellege ergo super egenum et pauperem, id est, super Christum: intellege in eo occultas divitias, quem pauperem vides" (Aurelius Augustinus, *Esposizioni sui Salmi* [Roma: Città Nuova, 1967-1982] I, 980).

<sup>28</sup> Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi: Commento e attualizzazione I* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1981-1985), 749.

<sup>29</sup> Norberto Airoidi, "'Beatus qui cogitat de egeno et paupere' (Ps 41, 2)," *RivBib* 16 (1968): 452. Cf. Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 231-232.

apparent incongruity of the MT with recourse to various conjectures which, however, remain highly hypothetical.<sup>30</sup>

If the retributive logic of Matt 5:7 is followed, the reason for the beatitude (vv. 2b-4) would see as the object of the kind acts performed by YHWH the one who had compassion on the poor. According to our interpretation, however, the object of God's attention is not the benefactor but the beneficiary, that is, the poor man himself. God's attitude towards him is held up as an example to the faithful so that he too may adopt it in his dealings with the poor of his community (*imitatio Dei*). Verses 3-4 are translated by the LXX and by the Vg in an optative sense: they are understood as a prayer in relation to the supposed benefactor of v. 1a.<sup>31</sup> According to the MT, however, they are not a prayer but an observation: they describe God's behaviour towards the poor, that same behaviour which is then exemplified in the prayer of vv. 5-13.<sup>32</sup>

"YHWH saves him on the day of disaster..." (2b). In our perspective, therefore, the third person pronoun refers to the "weak" man. The imperfect tense in vv. 2b-4 indicates not the future but the present: this is the usual way of acting of YHWH, the God of Israel, with the "weak." That Israel's God is different from the other gods is claimed in Ps 82:2-4 (cf. also Ps 113:5-9). By contrast with the false gods, the God of Israel is revealed as the true God because he does what a God worthy of the name has the duty to do, that is, to "save the weak." Since the pagan gods do not do this, they are not gods but idols, human constructions which are destined to die like men (Ps 82:6-7).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Here are some examples: "Beato chi sa cantare per l'infermo" (Airoldi, "Beatus qui cogitat," 452); "Heureux celui que garde le Dieu du pauvre et de l'indigent" (Paul Joüon, "Notes de critique textuelle [Ancien Testament]," *Mélanges de la Faculté orientale* 6 [1913]: 189-190); "Beato il misero che bada al Signore" (Giorgio Castellino, *Libro dei Salmi* [Torino: Marietti, 1965], 284.867); "Heureux celui qui a souci de Dieu, [serait-il] faible [et pauvre]" (Emmanuel Podechard, *Le psautier, traduction littérale et explication historique: I. Psaumes 1-75* [BFCTL 3; Lyon: Facultés catholiques, 1949], 192); "Bienheureux le pauvre, qui compte avec Dieu" (Louis Jacquet, *Les psaumes et le coeur de l'homme – Vol. I: Psaumes 1 à 41: Etude textuelle, littérale et doctrinale* [Gembloux: Duculot, 1975], 818).

<sup>31</sup> In fact, v. 3c is a vetitive statement, that is, it has a volitive sense even in the MT (we understand it as an aside, a parenthesis). The LXX reading is to be explained perhaps as a *lectio facillior*, putting the whole of v. 3, as well as v. 4, on the same level as 3c.

<sup>32</sup> Along these lines also, John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 582-583.

<sup>33</sup> The parallel of Ps 82 is especially interesting because, in v. 4, the object of God's "salvation" (פלט) is דל ואביון, as in Ps 41:2 LXX (πρωχὸν καὶ πένητα): that suggests that the translator of the LXX intended to associate Ps 41 with Ps 82.

## **E THE PRAYER OF SOMEONE WHO IS SICK (VERSES 5-11)**

In v. 5, the speaker changes: until now, the sick person has been spoken of in the third person, that is, someone else was speaking about him. Perhaps the voice of the community in the person of a priest or a teacher of wisdom. Now, it is the sick person himself who speaks. Framed by the two pronouns in the first person (ואני and אני, 5, 13, respectively), his discourse comprises precisely vv. 5-13. From the point of view of literary genre, the prayer takes on three forms: supplication (5, 11), lament (6-7, 8-10) and declaration of trust (12-13). This last form is to be considered separately as the conclusion of the prayer properly so called (from the point of view of the composition, it forms part of the last stanza, 12-14). Thus, the nucleus of the prayer comprises vv. 5-11 (with Gunkel, Herkenne, Kraus, van Uchelen and others).

In the supplication (vv. 5, 11), the (sick) worshipper addresses God directly, seeking a cure for his sickness. One notices that it is only here that the tetragrammaton appears in vv. 5-11. Attention is drawn to the relationship of the poor person with God, a relationship consisting of humility but also of trust in the divine mercy, based on profound reciprocal respect, as anticipated in 2-4, in which the divine name was also strongly present.

However, what concerns the patient is not so much his sickness as his social isolation which has been aggravated by his sickness. The merciful attitude of God is contrasted with human hostility, whether enemies (6, 8-9) or false friends (7, 10). The patient's prayer highlights the antithesis between God's way of acting with regard to the poor (5, 11) and that of men (6-10).

### **1 The attitude of men: lament (verses 6-10)**

The two central strophes of the psalm (vv. 6-7 and 8-10) correspond in a structural way. As we have indicated above (cf. *Table 6*), both put into play, first of all, the enemies, whose words are reported literally, then, a particular friend, whose treachery is denounced bitterly. Between the two strophes, one can detect the phenomenon of intensification, typical of Hebrew poetry.<sup>34</sup>

#### *a The first lament, verses 6-7*

As for the "enemies" (אויבי, v. 6), even if it possible to think of sorcerers and wizards<sup>35</sup>, we prefer to understand the text in its most obvious sense. The picture offered by Ps 41 finds its confirmation in other laments of the sick such as Pss 6:9-11; 22:13-22; 38:12-21. In these, rather than from his sickness, the psalmist suffers through sensing around him people who wish him evil. Verse 6a, אויבי

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Robert Alter, *L'arte della poesia biblica* (Rome and Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo and Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 102-137.

<sup>35</sup> Along these lines especially Harris Birkeland, *The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms* (ANVAO.HF 2; Oslo: Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1955).

יאמר, takes up v. 5a antithetically: אַנִּיאֲמַרְתִּי. The sincere and trustworthy words which the psalmist addresses to his God and which suppose a reciprocal relationship of friendship, are opposed by those of the enemies which are imbued with falsity and hatred. Moreover, the term רַע, 6a, takes up 2b: "In the day of misfortune (בְּיוֹם רָעָה), YHWH saves him." The day of misfortune is that of the poor man's sickness: that day which is the occasion for YHWH to save his friend is, for the enemies, the occasion to wish for his death. YHWH is said to make the poor man "live" (יַחֲיֶהוּ, 3a); the words of the enemies are reported as: "When will he die?" (מַתִּי יָמוּת, v. 6b). Whereas, for God, sickness and weakness are the time for mercy, for men, they are the opportunity to eliminate the adversary because he is not able to defend himself.

Verse 7 is made up of two distichs, both concluding with the word יִדְבַר.<sup>36</sup> The author wishes to highlight the contrast between what the false friend "says" in the sick man's bedroom (7b) and what he "says" outside, in the street (7d). If the violence of the enemy is highlighted, it is the falsity of the friend which is indicated.

The strophe moves from the plural of v. 6 to the singular, and from the external sphere of open enmity to the more intimate area of friendship. "Visiting the sick" is one of the works of mercy on which Jesus bases his judgement at the end of time (Matt 25:36, cf. 43). In the OT, the visit of the three friends to the sick Job is famous (cf. Job 2:11). The King of Judah, Ahaziah makes a similar visit to his colleague, Joram, in the Northern Kingdom (2 Kgs 8:29). Thus, (contrary to what Kimchi suggests),<sup>37</sup> v. 6 is concerned, not with enemies but with friends so that their hostile attitude is all the more painful. Psalm 35:13-14 shows what the behaviour of a friend should be on the occasion of sickness.

The basic meaning of the term שׁוֹא (7b) is that of "falsity, deceit," with the occasional connotation of "emptiness, uselessness."<sup>38</sup> In our case, the meaning of "falsity" is appropriate because what is being described is a contrast between the friend's words in the presence of the patient, which are naturally words of compassion, and what he is thinking in his "heart" (v. 7c). The contrast between the mouth and the heart reveals the "falsity" of the discourse, and also its "emptiness", as is often the case with conventional conversations.

The falsity comes to light when the visitor leaves (v. 7d). In the presence of the invalid, the friend is full of sweet-talk, but when the former does not hear,

<sup>36</sup> Contrary to the proposal of BHS, we are linking לְבוֹ not with the preceding יִדְבַר but with the following יִקְבֹּץ, translating: "And if someone comes to visit me he speaks falsely, while his heart heaps up malice." The author wishes to contrast the words ("speaks falsely") with the heart ("his heart heaps up malice").

<sup>37</sup> "If one of the enemies comes to visit me..." (David Kimchi, *Commento ai Salmi: I. Sal 1-50* [Rome: Città Nuova, 1991], 333).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. John F. A. Sawyer, "שׁוֹא šāw Trug," *THAT* 2: 882-884.

the latter tears him to shreds. Perhaps, as in the case of Job's friends, the friend attributes the psalmist's illness to his sins, and it is of these that he speaks to his acquaintances. The difference is that, while Job's friends speak evil of him to his face, the friend of Ps 41 does it behind the patient's back when he is not listening.

In a very moving way, Job complains of the betrayal of his friends and, therefore, of the loneliness in which someone worried by sickness finds himself (cf. Job 19:13-19). Job's case is not an exception: it is the usual reaction in the presence of someone who is sick. Care for the patient is not a spontaneous attitude; it is not the instinctive response to sickness.<sup>39</sup> That is why the author underlines that this is God's attitude, and he adopts it as an example to be imitated by the members of his people (vv. 2-4).

*b The second lament, verses 8-10*

Verses 8-10 repeat the lament against the enemies, taking up the scheme of 6-7. The strophe is framed by the preposition על with the suffixed pronoun of the first person: עלי, "against me," 8a, 8b, 10d. The parallelism with the previous strophe is accentuated in the incipit of each strophe: the substantive אויבי (v. 6a) is matched by שנאי (v. 8a), the expression יאמרו רע לי (v. 6a) by יחשבו רעה לי (v. 8b, cf. Table 7).

v. 6	יאמרו רע לי	אויבי
	↕	↕
v. 8	יחשבו רעה לי	שנאי

**Table 7**

The "whispering" (לחש) and "plotting" (חשב) of the enemies (8) materialise in the quotation of their words (9). The meaning of the expression דבר בליעל is debated. The only other occurrence is Ps 101:3, in which the moral dimension of בליעל is emphasised. As for Ps 41:9, this means that the enemies are setting up a link between sickness and sin, just like Job's friends.<sup>40</sup> The sin staining the psalmist – so the enemies think – has released (יצק) on him an inexorable power of death.

"From where he lies he will not rise." Apparently, like the enemies of Job, the psalmist's enemies are pious people who, in the name of religion, write off the poor sinner. The verb נשכ takes up the substantive משכב of v. 4. The contrast is clear. In v. 4, YHWH is one who "makes" the patient's bed completely with a

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, 232.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 174: "Hier sind es solche, die ihn für einen von Gott gekennzeichneten Frevler halten, der demnächst sterben muß."

view to his healing.<sup>41</sup> In other words: God does not resign himself to the death of his friend but gives him hope of life. God's attitude is diametrically opposed to that of men. The Psalms often denounce the attitude of enemies or false friends who take all hope from the poor man, considering him abandoned by God (cf. Pss 3:3; 71:11).

The description of human behaviour in the face of the sick man reaches its climax in v. 10. From the enemies (8-9) to the false friend (10). When Jeremiah laments with God over the enmity of his fellow countrymen, he hears God replying: "If you run with men on foot and they weary you, how can you race with horses? ... Even (גם) your brothers and the house of your father, even they (גם המה) are betraying you" (Jer 12:5-6). In the context, the "men on foot" are the people of Anathoth, whom Jeremiah already knows he cannot trust, while the "horses" are the members of his family against whom the prophet is totally defenceless because they are people he trusts (cf. Jer 9:3). From vv. 8-9 to v. 10 of Ps 41, therefore, there is a negative crescendo, expressed, in Ps 41 as in Jeremiah, by the adverb גם.

The expression איש שלומי, lit. "the man of my peace," is made clear in the parallel stich: "(the one) in whom I trusted" (v. 10b). The verb בטח expresses the feeling of one who feels himself secure without fear of dangers of any kind.<sup>42</sup> Since one feels secure with one's own friend, one opens one's heart to him, has no secrets from him. Therefore, the "friend" can profit from this trust to reveal to others the weak aspects of his sick friend.

Alongside Jeremiah, the betrayal of friends finds a parallel in the story of Job (cf. Job 6:15-17; 19:13-19). In common with Ps 41, the book of Job shares the fact that the reason for the friends' disappearance is their friend's sickness. The book of Proverbs observes bitterly: "The poor man is despised by his own brothers; all the more, his friends distance themselves from him" (Prov 19:7).

In the Psalter, the betrayal of friends is mentioned frequently. It is infinitely more painful than open enmity (cf. Ps 55:13-15). Often, at the root of the friends' betrayal or abandonment, there is a misfortune of which the psalmist

<sup>41</sup> We translate the difficult v. 4b כל־משכבו הפכת בהליו thus: "during his sickness, you make the whole of his bed." Understood in a concrete sense, the phrase is presenting God as a caring nurse who changes the patient's bed-linen. However, it could also be understood metaphorically as "transform" (הפך) the "sickness" (משכב) "completely" (כל) into health.

<sup>42</sup> The closeness of Ps 41 to Jeremiah is underlined by Pierre-Émile Bonnard, *Le Psautier selon Jérémie: Influence littéraire et spirituelle de Jérémie sur trente-trois Psaumes* (LD 26; Paris: Cerf, 1960), 97-101. However, see also the criticism of Joseph Coppens, "Les Psaumes 6 et 41 dépendent-ils du livre de Jérémie?," *HUCA* 32 (1961): 217-226.



is the victim. Precisely at the moment one has most need of help from one's friends, they vanish (cf. Pss 38:12; 88:9, 19).

## 2 The attitude of God: invocation (verses 5, 11)

We have shown above the correspondence of the two strophes, vv. 5 and 11. If the psalmist has sketched a horrifying picture of the enemies and the false friend in vv. 6-10, vv. 5 and 11 take up the bright picture of vv. 2b-4 and delineate in an antithetical way God's behaviour compared with theirs by making concrete the general statements of the initial stanza in a particular case. From the logical point of view, vv. 2b-4 are subsequent to the experience recounted in vv. 5-11: they bring the individual case into a universal dimension.

### a The first invocation (verse 5)

Despite the *qatal* of אמרתי, which would suggest a translation in the past,<sup>43</sup> the parallelism with יאמרו (6) favours translating in the present:<sup>44</sup> the invocation does not concern the past; it is not a song of thanksgiving but a fervent supplication.<sup>45</sup>

The worshipper knows that he is not in good standing with God. Thus, he does not appeal to justice, as if he had the right to be cured; he appeals to mercy: חנני. This fundamental aspect of the face of God reflects the experience of Israel after the sin of the golden calf when YHWH revealed himself as "a God of mercy and grace (חננו), slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6-7). In Jewish tradition, the tetragrammaton, יהוה, expresses the attributes of mercy whereas the common name of God, אלהים, expresses those of his justice. The formula יהוה חנני is frequent in the Psalter (cf. Pss 4:2; 6:3; 26:11; 30:11; 31:10; 51:3, etc.), but that doesn't alter the fact that our psalm has a special emphasis, above all by contrast with the human behaviour which is described in the following verses.

The conviction that God can heal sickness is rooted in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>46</sup> It often finds expression in the Psalms: "Have mercy on me (חנני), YHWH, I am weak; heal me (רפאני), YHWH: my bones tremble" (Ps 6:3). At the base of this conviction lies the very word of God: "I am YHWH, the one who

<sup>43</sup> According to Gunkel, in its central part (vv. 5-11), Ps 41 is to be understood as the account of a past experience, like Isa 38:10-14, which begins, like Ps 41:5 with the words: אני אמרתי, "I said." Verses 12-13, which echoes the first stanza, vv. 2-4, would be a thanksgiving for the hearing of this prayer (Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 173).

<sup>44</sup> From the syntactic point of view, this is perfectly possible: cf. Pss 31:15; 119:57; 140:7; 142:6; Gen 2:5; Job 32:10. See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL 14; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 175, according to whom "the formula communicates great urgency."

<sup>45</sup> In this sense, in addition to Gerstenberger, also Castellino, *Libro dei Salmi*, 284, who understands Ps 41 as a "psalm of trust."

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Hans Joachim Stoebe, "אני רפא'ן רפא," *THAT* 2: 803-809.

heals you (אני יהוה רפאך)" (Ex 15:26)<sup>47</sup>. By contrast with Egypt, the Promised Land is a land where there are no diseases because the divine physician is present in the midst of his people with healing power.

The reason for obtaining healing sounds paradoxical: "...for I have sinned against you" (v. 5b). Whereas, for the psalmist's enemies, sin is seen as a death sentence (cf. v. 9), the psalmist sees it as a reason to seek God's healing. Verse 5b is a real confession of sins like that which resounds in the *Miserere*: לך לברך, חטאתי, Ps 51:6. Ps 32 indicates the connection between the confession of sins and healing.<sup>48</sup> The worshipper had fallen prey to a grave illness, which he describes thus: "While I was silent, my bones were consumed through my roaring all day. Since you have weighed your hand on me day and night, my lifeblood has been upset through the summer's heat" (Ps 32:3-4). At this point, he addresses not the physicians but God: "I have made known my sin to you, and my guilt I have not covered. I said: 'I will confess my faults to YHWH', and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Ps 32:5).

*b The second invocation (verse 11)*

In the chiasmic structure of the psalm, v. 11 corresponds to v. 5. However, it is also linked with the two previous strophes (6-7, 8-10), characterised by the lament on account of the enemies. In the light of 6-10, the incipit, ואתה, has the value of an antithesis. Generally, the Hebrew pronoun is understood: if expressed, as in 11a, it has an emphatic value. Here it has the function of contrasting the behaviour of the friends and false friend, described in 6-10, with that of God: "My enemies wish me dead, they betray me, *but* you." The verb *hiph 'il* takes up v. 9, here too in the sense of opposing the words of the enemies (לא־יִוִּסֶיף לְקוֹם) with the prayer to God to "make him rise" (הַקִּימֵנִי, 11a). Finally, the intention to "repay" the enemies (אִישׁ שְׁלוּמֵי) is taking up 10a: the two passages are united by the lexeme שָׁלַם. The proposal to requit the evil done by the enemies (11b) refers precisely to their murderous plans in 6-10.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> On this passage, cf. Norbert Lohfink, "'Ich bin Jahwe, dein Arzt' (Ex 15, 26). Gott, Gesellschaft und menschliche Gesundheit in einer nachexilischen Pentateuchbearbeitung (Ex 15, 25b.26)," in *'Ich will euer Gott werden': Beispiele biblischen Redens von Gott* (ed. Norbert Lohfink; SBS 100; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 11-73.

<sup>48</sup> Psalm 32 is linked to Ps 41, not only through the initial beatitude, but also through the note מִשְׁכִּיל, "poem to teach wisdom" (Ps 32:1), which recalls the incipit of Ps 41.

<sup>49</sup> Verse 11b is difficult for the Christian reader because it seems to contradict the non-violent logic of the gospel (cf. Matt 5:38-42). Cf., among others, Bernard L. Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (KHC 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922), 122; Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, 233. In fact, revenge against the members of one's own people (such at least is the "false friend" of vv. 7, 10) is also contrary to the OT (cf. Lev 19:18, on which I refer to Gianni Barbiero, *L'asino del nemico: Rinuncia alla vendetta e amore del nemico nella*

As in v. 5, the presence of the tetragrammaton, יהוה, in v. 11 is not fortuitous. In vv. 6-10, it is never mentioned. Where disdain for the poor and betrayal of friends reign, God is not present. Secondly, the divine name, YHWH, is bound up with the aspect of mercy which will immediately come into focus.

The cry הוֹנֵי, "have mercy on me," expresses awareness of one's own sin, of unworthiness to be heard (cf. 5). What is the reason for willing the death of the sick man in the mind of the enemies is, for God, the occasion for showing his mercy. The enemies judge the sufferer to be a sinner worthy of death (9); God does not judge, he pardons.

According to the logic implicit in v. 5, the pardon is manifested in healing. The verb קוּם expresses "standing up on one's feet," which is the position of the healthy man by contrast with the horizontal position of the patient who lies stretched out on his bed. However, as the gospel saying Ταλιθα κουμ (Mk 5:41) recalls, the verb can also express the resurrection of the dead (cf. Hos 6:2). Even if the primary understanding in Ps 41:11 is healing from illness, this sense is not to be excluded in a Christian reading: the God of life is able to raise from any bed, even that of death. The enemies' saying: "he will never rise up again" (9) does not take account of the power of God. Immediately, the divine action of "making rise" is contrasted with that of the false friend who "raises his heel" against his sick friend (10),<sup>50</sup> making him remain prone for ever.

## F THE FINAL STANZA, VERSES 12-14

Verse 13 terminates the prayer of the sick man which began in v. 5 (see the inclusion: אָנִי, 5; וְאָנִי, 13). It closes with an attestation of trust in the divine help (12-13).<sup>51</sup> To this point, our analysis agrees with that of Castellino and

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*legislazione dell'Antico Testamento [Es 23,4-5; Dt 22,1-4; Lv 19,17-18]* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991], 265-296). It can be understood if one remembers that it is not just any person who utters these words but "David," the king whom YHWH has charged with exercising vengeance in his name (cf. Pss 2:12; 18:38-39; 21:8-10; 101:4-5, 7). The Davidic attribution of the psalm (cf. v. 1) is supported by the reference of אִישׁ שְׁלוּמֵי (Ps 41:10) to David's rebel son, Absalom, with regard to whom David's attitude was non-violent in an exemplary way (cf. 2 Sam 19:1-5).

<sup>50</sup> We understand the verb גָּדַל *hip 'il* (lit.: "make great") in the sense of "make great the kick," that is "raise high the foot" to give more force to the blow. It is a particularly brutal image because it supposes that the victim finds himself on the ground, incapable of defending himself, and the kick is in some ways the *coup de grâce* to finish him off ("Einen großen d. i. weit ausgeholten Fußtritt versetzen," Franz Delitzsch, *Die Psalmen* [5<sup>th</sup> ed., Gießen: Brunnen, 1984], 316). So too Ḥakham, *Psalms I*, 324 ("Has stamped upon me with his heel").

<sup>51</sup> By contrast with Gunkel, along the lines of Castellino and Gerstenberger (cf. *supra*, notes 44-45), we understand vv. 12-13 not as a thanksgiving for a cure obtained but as an act of faith in the hearing of the prayer of 5-11. This is the sense of the imperfect

Gerstenberger who see in Ps 41 a psalm of trust. However, vv. 2-4 have a particular character and do not come under this literary genre. They have a sapiential tone, that is, they transpose the individual's experience of prayer to a principle that is universally valid. In the face of the marginalisation on the part of men of which he feels himself to be the object (6-10), the sick man turns with trust to his God, sure that he will be merciful to him (5, 11). In this prayer, the psalmist grasps a fundamental attitude of YHWH, the God of Israel, and holds him up for the imitation of the community (אשרי משכיל אל־דל, v. 2a). YHWH is a God who acts differently from common practice: he loves the poor and makes them live (2b-4). This communitarian dimension is taken up in v. 14 where YHWH is described as "the God of Israel," that is, the God of a people who are called to act in a way alternative to that of the other peoples in order to deserve to be called people of YHWH.

On the one hand, the final stanza of the psalm, in vv. 12-13 (B'), summarises and concludes the prayer of 5-11 (B); on the other hand, it takes up 2-4 (A), holding up YHWH's behaviour, as described there, as exemplary for his people (14, A'). Two voices resound here: that of the sick man (12-13), and that of the teacher of wisdom or singer, the same one who uttered vv. 2-4 (cf. *Table 8*).

Introduction	A	2-4	God = He	Call to the community to imitate God's behaviour with regard to the poor (sapiential)
Body of the psalm	B	5-11	God = You	Prayer of a poor man to his God – Denunciation of the wicked behaviour of men (lament of a sick man)
Conclusion	B'	12-13	God = You	Trust in being heard by God (psalm of trust)
	A'	14	God = He	Israel = the people of a God who loves the poor (benediction)

**Table 8**

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יִרְיֶע 12b, which places in the future also the verbs of v. 13, making them understood as prophetic perfects.

*a* Attestation of trust (verses 12-13)

The two verses which form the first strophe of the stanza are linked by the expression בִּי, placed at the conclusion of the first and third stichs in linear correspondence.<sup>52</sup> We have understood the verbs in the future: the healing has not yet happened, but, through his prayer, the psalmist has reached the certainty that God has heard him.

This certainty derives from his experience of the love of God: "I know that you love me," ידעתי כי־הפצת בי. According to the Psalms, God shows his love for man fundamentally when he saves him. Salvation is the demonstration of God's love. The king of Ps 18 recognises it: יחלצני כי הפץ בי (Ps 18:20), and, in Ps 22, the enemies ridicule the worshipper because, if God allows him to die, it is a sign that he does not love him: יצילהו כי הפץ בו (Ps 22:9).

The psalmist's reasoning follows on from what we have seen in vv. 6-10. Since his enemies do not love him but "hate him" (8), they do not lift a finger to save him. On the contrary, either they give him up for dead (9), or they desire his death (6). In the case of the false friend, he even waits to give him the *coup de grâce* (10). Love shows itself concretely in making an effort to see that one's friend does not die: "To love is to say: you will not die" (Gabriel Marcel). God's attitude towards the sick man is that of "making him live" (יחיהו, v. 3). In v. 12, this attitude is brought back to its root: love.

As Delitzsch suggests, the initial ו of v. 13 has adversative value: it contrasts the psalmist with his enemies who are evoked at the end of the previous verse.<sup>53</sup> The reasoning is more or less this: the enemies would have rejoiced if the poor man had "fallen"; *instead*, "he has been sustained" (תמך) by YHWH. Again, there is a reappearance of the antithesis which pervades the whole of the psalm: the contrast between the behaviour of men, whether friends or enemies, and that of God.

The verb תמך, "seize, hold" (v. 13a), takes up the verb סעד of the introduction (v. 4a), but it has a different sense: it does not refer so much to "raising" one who is prostrate as "preventing someone from falling" (cf. Ps 17:5; 63:9). Precisely the opposite of the "friend" who kicks his fallen friend with his heel (v. 10).

תמך is a relatively rare verb which occurs twice in Deutero-Isaiah, both times in connection with the "servant" of YHWH: "Behold my servant whom I sustain (אתמך־בו), my chosen one in whom I am pleased" (Is 42:1, cf. 41:10). In addition to תמך, the verb "be pleased" (רצה) also recalls our psalm (הפץ, Ps

<sup>52</sup> We have encountered a similar phenomenon in v. 7 in which each of its two stichs end with the verb ידבר.

<sup>53</sup> Delitzsch, *Die Psalmen*, 316. So too Ḥakham, *Psalms I*, 325.

41:12). This parallel is added to the others in identifying the "David" of Ps 41 with the "suffering servant" of Deutero-Isaiah.

The divine sustaining prevents the worshipper from falling; therefore, it "makes him stand on his feet" (נצב *hip 'il*). However, the statement of v. 13b does not refer only to physical health because the poor man is now standing לפניך, "in your presence," and this לעולם, "for ever." The expression נצב לפניך with reference to God occurs again in Deut 29:9; Josh 24:1 and 1 Sam 10:19 in a cultic sense: it is the assembly of Israel which gathers "in the presence of YHWH" in the temple.<sup>54</sup> However, in addition to participating in the cult, "standing in the presence of YHWH" can also indicate personal communion with God. That is suggested by the final adverb, לעולם, "for ever." This expression does not necessarily indicate eternal life, after death. Usually, it indicates a very long period of time whether past or future. Kimchi comments: "for ever, that is, for all the time of my life."<sup>55</sup> If one understands the syntagma נצב לפניך in a cultic sense, this interpretation seems the most probable (cf. Ps 23:6).

A Christian reads the expression in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, and so in the sense of a real eternity, after death. However, such a hope is not foreign to the Psalter (cf., for example, Pss 16:11; 17:15; 73:23-26)<sup>56</sup>. In these three passages, the hope of an eternal life is founded on the eternity of the loving link which unites the psalmist to his God, and this is also the perspective of Ps 41 (cf. v. 12: כי הפצת בי). Confirmation of the possibility of this interpretation comes from v. 14b, in which the term עולם is particularly emphasised, and here, clearly, the sense is that of "eternity" because it refers to God.<sup>57</sup>

#### *b*      *Benediction (verse 14)*

If vv. 12-13 summarised and concluded the sick man's prayer (5-13), focusing, respectively, on the two figures of the "enemies" (12) and of the psalmist ("I,"

<sup>54</sup> Alonso Schökel thinks that the subject here is the readmission of a sick person to the temple. Since illness was seen as a sin, the sick person was excluded from the temple cult: once he was healed, he could enter again (cf. Ps 26, 6-8) (Luis Alonso-Schökel and Cecilia Carniti, *I Salmi* [Rome: Borla, 1992-1993] I, 698).

<sup>55</sup> Kimchi, *Commento ai Salmi*, 335.

<sup>56</sup> "The psalmist not only prays for recuperation from illness, but boldly requests the privilege of being assumed by God and placed in his presence for eternity. Thus תמך is a synonym of לקח, the technical term for 'assume'" (Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1-50* [AB 16; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965], 252). In the same sense, Castellino, *Libro dei Salmi*, 288; Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, 233. On the hope of resurrection in the Psalter, cf. Pius J. D'Souza, *Stronger than Death: Intimations of Afterlife in the Book of Psalms* (Bangalore: Dhyanavana Publications, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> According to the Talmud, the expression "for ever and ever" is directed at those who deny the world to come (bBer IX, 5, quotation according to Delitzsch, *Die Psalmen*, 316).

13), v. 14 takes up the initial stanza, vv. 2-4, focusing on YHWH whose name appears beside the generic term, אֱלֹהִים, for the sixth time. In fact, YHWH is the protagonist of vv. 2-4: the tetragrammaton is used there 3×: once for each verse. It is only in vv. 2-4 and 14 that God is spoken about in 3<sup>rd</sup> person: both times, we are not dealing with a prayer in the strict sense. While vv. 5-13 fixed the attention on that "weak" person whom YHWH will certainly save, demonstrating the seriousness with which God takes his prayer,<sup>58</sup> we could say that now, at the end of the psalm, the singer fixes the attention on the addressee of the initial beatitude, Israel, that is, the people who have (or ought to have) understood the mystery of the weak (v. 2a). In fact, the God who cares for the weak is now called the "God of Israel," both in the sense that Israel is being identified with the "weak," and in the sense that it is being called to adopt the same attitude as its God with regard to the "weak." The parallel with Deut 10:18-19 helps in understanding this dynamic. Having spoken of YHWH's loving choice of Israel, Moses presents Israel's response in these words: "YHWH, your God, is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great God, strong and terrible, who is not partial and takes no bribe, does justice for the orphan and the widow, *loves the stranger* and gives him food and clothing. *Therefore, love the stranger*, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt." By contrast with the gods of the pagan peoples, who give no importance to the poor (cf. Ps 82), YHWH, the God of Israel, has always been the God of the poor whether they are Israelites or foreigners. If Israel wants to be the people of this God, it must treat the poor as YHWH treats them.

The initial formula of v. 14, בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה, fits well with the previous verses. In them, the poor expressed his trust in being heard; now, the anonymous voice which spoke in vv. 2-4 speaks again, expressing in the name of the community thanksgiving and praise for the kindness done to one of its members.<sup>59</sup> The worshipping community thus demonstrates itself to be different from the group of enemies and false friends pictured in 6-10. Just as YHWH is a divinity different from the idols, the works of men's hands, so his people are a community different from the "world," which despises the weak and the poor. In the words of Scharbert, "blessing" someone always means "to be in solidarity" with him too.<sup>60</sup> Far from being the proof that v. 14 is foreign to the rest of Ps 41, the expression

<sup>58</sup> Thus, the distribution of the tetragrammaton is revealed to be of structural importance. The 6 occurrences form a double chiasmic correspondence: vv. 2-4 (3× YHWH) are balanced by v. 14 (1× YHWH); v. 5 (1× YHWH) is balanced by v. 11 (1× YHWH).

<sup>59</sup> On the meaning of the formula בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה, cf. Carl A. Keller and Gerhard Wehmeier, "ברך *brk pi. segnen*," *THAT* 1, 355-364.

<sup>60</sup> Josef Scharbert, "ברך," *ThWAT* 1, 815 ("Das Aussprechen der Formel ist ein Bekenntnis zur Solidarität mit demjenigen, dem die Formel gilt [the statement of the formula is an affirmation of solidarity with the one to whom the formula applies]").

יהוה אלהי ישראל is the keystone for understanding its extraordinary coherence in both form and content.

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