

PSALM 4 – ISAGOGE, EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION (PART I)

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ABSTRACT. In this research paper, we intend to offer the reader the possibility of becoming more familiar with the main types of biblical commentaries through an exegetic exercise centred round Psalm 4. The choice of the supporting text is not at all random since, even from ancient times, the psalms have benefitted from the attention of an impressive number of scholars and have been the beginning of both dialogue and controversy between religions (Christianity and Judaism) and Christian denominations. Throughout the exegetical analysis, we took into consideration the rigors of the Critical approach, which we correlated with the rabbinic and patristic commentaries in order to accomplish a very ample interpretation. Even if these commentators did not entirely agree, rather than bringing to relief their interpretative differences, we tried to underline the common elements existing in the specific manner of interpretation of each exegetical school. Thus, the complexity of this isagogic, exegetical and theological study resides in the fact that it approaches the text of the psalm from a literary, allegorical and spiritual point of view and it can become a hermeneutical paradigm for those who wish to study the Holy Scriptures with scientific and spiritual accuracy.

Keywords: psalm, rabbis, Church Fathers, critical interpretation, king, LORD, Messianic perspective

¹ TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A PSALM OF DAVID. Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

² O men, how long shall my honour be turned into shame¹? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah

³ But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

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¹ The expression עַד־מַה כְּבוֹדִי לִקְלִמָּה (ʿad-meḥ kəḇôḏî liq̄limmā^h) – how long shall my honor be turned into shame was translated into Greek with ἕως πότε βαρυκάρδιοι – how long will your hearts be unmerciful. Cf. Peter Craigie, Psalms 1-50, in WBC 19 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 81.

⁴ Be angry², and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent³. Selah

⁵ Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

⁶ There are many who say, "Who will show us some good⁴? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O, LORD!"

⁷ You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine⁵ abound.

⁸ In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O, LORD, make me dwell in safety⁶ (ESV).

When first reading this text, the reader may develop the impression that the psalm is rather a collage of independent notions⁷, than an individual lamentation or a prayer of trust as most theologians state⁸. This subjective opinion is greatly influenced by the plans developing within the dialogues between the psalmist and his two companions. Even if at first sight the ideas presented in his dialogue with God do not resonate with this apparently incoherent discourse that he presents in front of the *sons of men*, all the statements of the author have the purpose to underline the fact that only the one who settles his trust in God may truly have protection, spiritual peace, joy and welfare. This reflection, which offers coherence to the psalm, will be better emphasized when we present the historical realities that this hymn is based on.

Elements of isagoge

The event that generated the composition of the psalm. Having a musical character, the title of this psalm ascribed to David does not offer details regarding a certain event. Hence, the attention of the exegetes focused on the

² The Septuagint translates this verb with ὀργίζω – *to get angry*, replacing the action with the feeling that it is based on.

³ The meaning that the Greek text offers to the last part of this verse is this: "on your beds repent of those things spoken into your hearts".

⁴ M. Dahood translates the term טוב (tôb) – *good* with *rain* also because this was the utmost good in Israel. This is why he thinks that this psalm includes the controversy between a faithful servant of God and the Israelites who chose to sacrifice to the idols in order to obtain rain. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, in AB 19A (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 25.

⁵ The translators of the Septuagint have also added oil besides wheat and wine (cf. Dt 28:15; Hos 2:10.24), but the insertion is not necessary. Cf. George Phillips, *The Psalms in Hebrew; with a critical, exegetical and philological commentary I* (London: J. W. Parker, 1846), 34.

⁶ The Septuagint translates the last part of the verb as follows: "because you alone, O Lord, settled me in hope".

⁷ Rabbi Benjamin Segal, „Psalm 4 – Of Words and Personality,” accessed 8 May 2013, <http://psalms.schechter.edu/2010/03/psalm-four-and-still-need-for.html>.

⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 79. Cf. Alois Bulai et al., *Psalmii. Traducere, note și comentarii* (Iași: Sapientia, 2005), 23.

content and the position that this psalm secures within the Book of Psalms in order to be able to offer a historical reference point to their interpretative approach. The traditional exegesis considered that the psalm was written after David's victory in his conflict with Absalom⁹. This opinion based on several linguistic and thematic elements that established a relationship between this hymn and the previous psalm that we know when it was written. The arguments brought in favour of their viewpoint are the following:

a. Both in this psalm and in the previous one occurs the idea that the author calls God on his side imperatively, and He answers him according to a custom based on the relationship built on trust and faithfulness (3:5/4:2)¹⁰;

b. Also, the two psalms refer to the fact that their author goes to rest and falls asleep peacefully, without him being disturbed by the agitation and excitement around him because of the impenetrable protection of God, which he enjoys (3:6/4:9)¹¹;

c. The expression רַבִּים אֹמְרִים אֹמְרִים (*rabbîm ʾōmrîm*) – *there be many that say* is used in both hymns to introduce the statements of those who are adversary to the psalmist (3:3/4:7)¹²;

d. The term *selah* which is used in both hymns indicates a similar metrical construction¹³;

e. In the trade literature these psalms are considered to be *paired psalms*¹⁴ because of the position they occupy within the cultic structures. Psalm 3 is used within the Matins (cf. v. 6), and psalm 4 which suggests a vesperal atmosphere is part of the evening rite (cf. v. 9). Even though in the initial stages these chants were not written with this purpose, their content determined their natural insertion within these liturgical moments¹⁵. In order to better consolidate the relationship

⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An introduction and commentary*, in *TOTC 15* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 72.

¹⁰ Albert Barnes, *Notes, critical, explanatory, and practical, on the book of Psalms I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868-69), 33.

¹¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary on The Psalms I*, trans. Fancis Bolton (Edimburg: T. & T. Clakk, 1871), 109. Cf. Ernst Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms I* (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), 55.

¹² Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegewille: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 12-3.

¹³ Peter Craigie considers that the term reflects rather a musical indication and consequently it cannot be considered as argument for the establishing of the identity of the two psalms. Craigie, *Psalms*, 80.

¹⁴ Barnes, *Notes*, 33.

¹⁵ Abraham Cohen, *The Psalms: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1945), 23. Cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 79; Charles Briggs and Emilie Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms I* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906-07), 29; Gherasim Timuș, *Note și meditațiuni asupra psalmilor I* (București: Tipografia „Gutenberg” Joseph Göble, 1896), 44. Iuliu Olariu, *Explicarea Psalmilor din Orologiu* (Caransebeș, 1899), 146; Robert Davidson, *The vitality of worship: A commentary on the book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Handsel Press, 1998), 22.

between these psalms, the Church Fathers¹⁶ and some of the rabbis¹⁷ identify, besides the arguments mentioned above, other elements which confirm obviously that the psalmist refers in the two chants to different stages of the same event: Absalom's rebellion.

Some of the exegetes oppose to this tendency to fix the period for the creation of the psalm in the context of the mentioned events, because they think that the described historical situation is completely different from that presented in psalm 3, where a king finds himself under the pressure of a hostile people¹⁸. In the case of this psalm, a leader is presented to us, who is probably not the king, who has the people's support, but is in conflict with very powerful men, high-class persons. It seems that this hypothesis was first presented by Rashi, who situated this psalm in the context of David's escape from Saul's anger.

This moment was speculated by some of those who were part of the king's entourage, who started to accuse him of different things in order to discredit him. In Rashi's opinion, David tries with this chant to exonerate himself of the charges brought against him¹⁹. Because of this reason, the experience described in this psalm belongs rather to an innovator than to a monarch cast away from his throne. To support this opinion, Charles Briggs offers as arguments the fact that during Absalom's rebellion, David's enemies were common people, deceived by his Son (2 Sm 15:1-6), and not noblemen as the text of the psalm suggests and also the confused and uncertain state of the waif king (2 Sm 17:24 – 18:33) that does

¹⁶ "The third psalm was written by David during the war against Absalom. That is why it contained plights. This one, the fourth, he directs towards God, the one that gives victory, full of gratitude". Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor I (1-8)," trans. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Mitropolia Olteniei* 4 (1989): 45. The bishop of Cyrus states that psalm 4 is David's answer to those who are saying of him: "God will not deliver him" (Ps. 3:2). Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms. Psalms 1-72*, in *Fathers of the Church* 101, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 63. Cf. Eftimie Zigabenuș și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinților Părinți I*, trans. Ștefan Voronca (Galați: Egumenița, 2006), 81.

¹⁷ *Midrasch Tehillim*, trans. August Wünsche (Trier: Sigmund Mayer, 1892), 38-9. Rabbi David Kimhi, *The longer commentary of R. David Kimhi on the first Book of Psalms*, trans. R. G. Finch (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 27. "This psalm is closely connected with the previous one. Verse 3 *O ye sons of men* is addressed to the rebels and asks them to give up on their rebellion. [...] Based on the same experience here, a more personal note than in psalm 3 is presented. Psalm 3 concludes that only from God comes men's deliverance. This psalm underlines the personal faith (trust) and spiritual peace of those who put their faith in God". Rabbi Solomon Freehof, *The Book of Psalms: A commentary* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938), 17.

¹⁸ Ch. Briggs considers that the psalm may be better related to Zerubbabel (cf. Ezr 4). Briggs and Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 30.

¹⁹ Mayer Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* (Boston: Leiben, 2004), 185-6. Cf. Rabbi Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, *Da'ath Sofrim: Book of Tehillim (PSALMS)*, trans. Yehoshua Starrett (Jerusalem: Vagshal Publishing, 2010), 18 and J. M. Neale, *A commentary on the Psalms: from primitive and mediaeval writers and from the various office-books and hymns of the Roman, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Gallican, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Syrian rites I* (London/ New York: J. Masters/Pott and Amery, 1869), 110.

not correspond with the confidence shown by the psalmist²⁰. Briggs' arguments may be easily contradicted if we take into account the fact that psalm was composed immediately after the repression of the revolt when David's triumph was proclaimed and peace was re-established²¹ and if we observe that the persons who supported and advised Absalom have also been part of David's governing system²².

Even if there is not an opinion unanimously accepted by the exegetes regarding the historical context that determined the composition of this psalm²³, we will assume within the exegetical approach the point of view accepted by the majority of the scholars, without trying to enforce it on the others.

The application of the content of the psalm to different contexts confirms the fact that the truths expressed by this hymn have a generally valid dimension and may be easily applied even to our lives. In fact, the Church Fathers state, besides the Christological approaches²⁴, the fact that the psalm offers an answer to all the sceptics who deny the divine providence and oppose to those who believe in God²⁵.

The author. Taking into account the early dating of the psalm²⁶ and the linguistic-thematic relationship with the previous psalm, the majority of the commentators ascribed this chant to David. However, there have been some positions that questioned the Davidic paternity and stated that the psalm is

²⁰ In the exegetes' point of view, the expression בְּנֵי אָדָם (*bənē 'āḏām*) – *sons of men* does not refer to common people indicated by the expression אֲנָשִׁים (*bənē ānāšīm*), but to dignitary, to noblemen, persons involved in governing. Robert Bratcher and William Reburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 42. Cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 80.

²¹ Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l'homme: Étude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale I* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1975-9), 252.

²² It is sufficient to mention here Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor and Amasa, chief over Absalom's army.

²³ Some consider that the psalm was written after the Amalekites attacked the fortress Ziklag (cf. 1 Sm 30) and brought in captivity some of the members of David's family (Phillips, 30), and others, such as M. Dahood state that this chant is rather a *prayer for rain*, offered to God by a servant of the Temple or by a prophet. He draws attention and chides the noblemen who doubt God's power and direct their attention to idols. The psalmist asks them to trust God unconditionally, to repent for their sins and to bring sacrifices, for God will hear their prayer. Dahood, *Psalms*, 22. Cf. Bulai et al., *Psalmii*, 23.

²⁴ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Tâlcuirea psalmilor*, 45-6. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 8, trans. Philip Schaff (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 8. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), 73. Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 81.

²⁵ Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalms 1-51*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Boston: Liden, 2005), 12. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms 1-81*, trans. Robert Hill (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 41. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 13. Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, trans. Jean-Éric Stroobant de Saint Éloy (Paris: du Cerf, 1996), 60.

²⁶ Briggs and Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 29.

rather a collective creation prior to the period of prophet Jeremiah. To this respect, the mention מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד (*mizmôr ləḏāwīḏ*) – a psalm of David in the title, which presents the king as author, is a later addition²⁷.

The structure of the psalm. Influenced by the content, by the dialogues that the psalmist has with his two companions or by the use of the term *selah*, the exegetes have divided the psalm into two²⁸, three²⁹ or four parts, depending on the criteria taken into account. The most appropriate of these divisions that we also assume is the following: the title (v. 1); the request addressed to God (v. 2); the advice addressed to the opponents (v. 3-6); the contrast between the psalmist and the doubtful opponents (v. 7-8) and the conclusion (v. 9)³⁰.

Exegetical analysis

Verse 1 (The title)

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A psalm of David

Besides the information regarding the author and the lyrical category to which the text belongs, the title offers us several details of a musical nature.

The term לְמַנְצֵחַ (*lamnaššē^{ah}*) which can be found in the title of 54 psalms³¹ refers to the person to whom the chant is addressed, namely “the person who was in charge of the choir and had to practice with the Levites”³² within the divine cult (cf. 1 Chr 15:22), in order to sing the psalm that was offered to him³³. Although the majority of the exegetes attribute this meaning to the word *lamnaššē^{ah}*, its significance is yet uncertain. This may be easily noticed starting from the manner in which this term was translated in the old versions: the Septuagint renders it by εἰς τὸ τέλος – *to the end*³⁴, Aquila translates it with *begetter of victory*; Symmachus

²⁷ Jacquet, *Les Psaumes*, 252-3.

²⁸ Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 74. Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, 60. Bratcher and Rebyburn, *The Book of Psalms*, 41.

²⁹ Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1905), 17. Craigie, *Psalms*, 79.

³⁰ Barnes, *Notes*, 33-4. Cf. Bulai et al., *Psalmmii*, 23.

³¹ Apart from the Book of Psalms, this term can also be found at the end of the chant of prophet Habakkuk (3:19).

³² Ioan Popescu-Mălăiești, „Suprascrierile psalmilor,” *Studii Teologice* 1 (1931): 75.

³³ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 26. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary*, 185. Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship II*, trans. James Crenshaw (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 212.

³⁴ From the Fathers' point of view, this translation that refers to the purpose and finality of things involves a prophetic, Christological and eschatological dimension. “This psalm has its title *in the end*, because the last verse is a prophecy for the resurrection of the dead, as I shall prove later on, which is a feature of the future times, which are the end of these ages”. Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghiritul, *Psaltirea*, 81. Cf. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, „La titlurile Psalmilor,” în *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 30, trans. Teodor Bodogae, (București: IBMO, 1998), 169. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 13; *Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Ecleziastul, Cântarea Cântărilor* 4/1, ed. Cristian Bădiliță et al. (București: Polirom, 2006), 47.

with *song of victory*; Theodotion with *for victory*, and Jerome translates it with *victori* or *pro victoria*³⁵. These nuances were possible because of the verbal root נצח (*nch*) from which the word comes which may mean *to make victory possible, to obtain victory for*³⁶ or *to be clean, to shine, as well as to be in charge* (1 Chr. 23:4). The scholars consider that the last two meanings must be considered in order to define the term מְנַצֵּחַ (*mənāṣṣēʿh*). The first of these meanings refers to his abilities that single him out and make him shine before the others, and the other refers to the dignity he holds within the Temple, namely that of supervising and coordinating the group of musicians³⁷.

The other term of the title בְּיָגִיןֹתָ (*binḡînôṭā*) refers to one of the categories of instruments (chordophones) used by the Levites within the cult³⁸. The word occurs five times within the psalms³⁹ and only once in Habakkuk 3:19 and it is translated either simple *for chords*, or *accompanied by chords*, or *to be played on chordophone instruments*⁴⁰. The use of this term in the title suggests the idea that the psalm was composed to be sung in the temple accompanied by some chordophone instruments⁴¹ under the direct supervision of a musician who was probably in charge with those who played this type of musical instruments⁴².

Verse 1

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

The defeat of Amasa's army and Absalom's death determined the Israelites who supported the usurper son, to turn yet again their hearts towards David, the one who had freed them from the Philistines' domination in the past and to wish for him to come back on the throne of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, a dispute occurred between the Israelite tribes and the tribe of Judah. They accused the Judeans that hastened to greet the exiled king of contempt for they did

³⁵ Popescu-Mălăiești, „Suprascrierile psalmilor,” 75-6. Contextualizing this possible translation of the term to the recommended historical context, the Fathers believe that David dedicated this psalm to the Lord, the *victory-giving*, Who helped him defeat his usurper son. Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Tâlcuirea psalmilor*, 45-6. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 13.

³⁶ Rabbi Samson Hirsch, *The Psalms. Translation and commentary* (New York: Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society, 1960-66), 19.

³⁷ Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 111. Popescu-Mălăiești, „Suprascrierile psalmilor,” 76.

³⁸ According to some exegetes, the term *nəḡînôṭā* designates either a certain instrument or a melody that could be applied to other chants too. Cf. Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 26; Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 19; Phillips, *The Psalms*, 31.

³⁹ Pss. 4, 6, 54, 67 and 76.

⁴⁰ Popescu-Mălăiești, „Suprascrierile psalmilor,” 82.

⁴¹ Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 73. Cf. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 8.

⁴² Barnes, *Notes*, 32. Cf. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 57.

not wait for them, since they should have had the privilege to speak the first word at David's return (2 Sm 19:41-42). This tension between the tribes was even more amplified by the attitude of Sheba, son of Bichri of the family of Benjamin, who made the people to revolt again and determined the Israelites' separation of the king and of the house of Judah. Thus, before David came back on the throne he faced an imminent civil war that could cause the disintegration of the kingdom, which was far worse than Absalom's rebellion (cf. 2 Sm 20:6). Hence, if we accept the opinions of the exegetes who state that the psalm was written after Absalom's defeat, then we may state that these are the events that determined the king to ask in the beginning of his chant for God's help and mercy⁴³.

Thus, taking into account the acts through which he was delivered from his son's hands, David prays to the Lord to listen to his prayer and deliver him from this trouble as well. The king was convinced that God will show mercy on him, that He will answer as soon as possible to his cry, and will offer him again the possibility to feel free⁴⁴ in this want made by Sheba. The reference to the previous salvation that David thinks about is expressed within the text by the form of the verb רָחַב (*rahab*) – *to deliver at large*⁴⁵ which indicates an action already accomplished as opposed to the other three verbs from this verse which are in the Imperative form⁴⁶. Some scholars think that the Perfect form of this verb expresses in fact also a completed future action, according to a practice used within the prophetic books where the authors, inspired by God's Spirit, referred to future events as if they were completed facts⁴⁷. To this respect, the psalmist's deliverance, by his removal to an enlarged place, was done simultaneously with his cry through which he required heavenly support⁴⁸.

⁴³ Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 59.

⁴⁴ Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 20. Cf. Freehof, *The Book of Psalms*, 17.

⁴⁵ "The expression describes the feeling of freedom that the migrant shepherd feels when he comes out of the want of the fortress' walls and from throng to the open field, facing the lawn extended to the mountains". Bulai, 21. It is important to observe the fact that between the verb *rahab* and יָשָׂה (*yasha*) – *to deliver* there is a semantic unity. The primary meaning of the second verb is *to be spacious* or *to enlarge the place*. The presence in a more spacious place offers a person who is in want, deliverance, redemption. In cases such as this the context commands an interpersonal relationship in which the presence of a superior person is highly necessary in order to achieve deliverance from a situation created by another hostile person. This term was used most often in a military context. Gerhard Kittel et al., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament V* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 973-8.

⁴⁶ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-150: A Commentary II*, trans. H. C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 166.

⁴⁷ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 27. Cf. Schaefer, *Psalms*, 13.

⁴⁸ Asterius, bishop of Amasia, states that God enlarged the psalmist in two ways: "the first because He heard his prayer, and the second because He heard him quickly. It is a double gift not because he was heard, but because He did it quickly. To be heard at once in troublesome times is similar with what we call large place". Asterius the Homilist, „Homilies on the Psalms 4, 1,” – Craig Blaising et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50) VII* (New York: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 27. The same idea is observed by Saint John Chrysostom, one of his contemporaries, who

For a better understanding of this dimension proposed by the exegetes it is important to emphasize the fact that the action of the verb *rahab* develops on two levels: firstly on a spiritual level, and then on a physical level. The already confirmed trust in the divine help offered David a spiritual peace⁴⁹ which determined him to believe that the victory over his enemies is no longer questioned, the only unknown element being the time and the manner in which this will be achieved. Supporting this double perspective, Saint John Chrysostom states that God first offers the psalmist the ease to suffer the troubles that still persist⁵⁰ and, and then He confirms his trust that He is always besides him. “And how – says he – could enlarging be in times of trouble?”

The same way it was in the fiery furnace and in the lion’s den. For He did not put out the fire, but then He enlarged them; nor did He kill the lions to protect Daniel from their fear, but the furnace burning heavily and the beasts ready to tear him apart, the righteous enjoyed even more easing⁵¹.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria completes Saint John’s statement by saying that God did not enlarge David only by delivering him from the troubles he confronted with but also offered him the necessary things, victory over his enemies and enlarged his heart in joy⁵².

The approach of this text from a spiritual point of view was encouraged by the Greek text which translates the verb *rahab* with *πλατύνω* – *to delight, to enchant*. This translation option was based on the fact that in the biblical language the delight is conceived as an enlarging of the heart in order for God to dwell inside it⁵³. To this respect, Saint Augustin considers that to be enlarged means to

states that “the prophet does not say that only for us to know that his prayer was heard, but to learn how those who call God can be heard immediately and can receive the fulfilment of our request even before the completion of the prayer. For he did not say *after I called on you* but *when I called on you*. This is God’s promise to the one that calls for His help: *Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I* (Is 58:9)”. St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988), 47.

⁴⁹ Origen states that God enlarges man not by blocking the action of the evil, but by offering a great soul to the faithful. Origen, „Selection from the Psalms,” in *PG* 12, 1136 – Blaising, *Ancient Christian*, 27. “But me, he says, in times of trouble and gloom, you enlarged me and you delighted me, O God, and you gave me such greatness of heart that I immediately commanded to my soldiers not to kill my son, the parricidal, saying to them: *Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake* (2 Sm 18:5)”. Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 82.

⁵⁰ “Sometimes God instead of comforting us in our troubles gives us the courage to endure it”. Didymus the Blind, „Fragments on the Psalms,” in *PG* 39, 1165 – Blaising, *Ancient Christian*, 28.

⁵¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 53.

⁵² Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Tâlcuirea psalmilor*, 46.

⁵³ Timuș, *Note asupra psalmilor*, 45. God’s presence in a man’s heart supposes lack of sin: “But we are also speaking about another type of enlargement, such as that when the soul, sore by the multitude of temptations is delivered from passions and from many spiritual illnesses”. St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 53.

achieve the capacity to feel God's presence in your soul and to communicate directly with Him⁵⁴.

Based on this reasoning, the Western bishop stated that David addressed directly to God only after his heart became enlarged and felt that He is dwelling inside it, because up to that moment the psalmist spoke only in the third person⁵⁵.

The manner in which the psalmist addresses to God is not at all random. Calling Him אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק (*ʾēlōhê ʾiṣṭāq*) – *God of my righteousness*⁵⁶, he appeals to God's status of supreme judge⁵⁷ and to his spiritual innocence, justice being considered in the language of the Old Testament a sum of virtues⁵⁸. Diodore of Tarsus thinks that the psalmist does not refer to his life when he speaks about justice, but to the request he makes, suggesting by this that only they who make righteous requests receive immediate answer from God⁵⁹. Thus, "David cites his own case here to include all who have such an attitude – I mean righteous and blameless – and then in his wish to show what a right request it is: passing over many others he classes all right requests under this one [*hear me when I call*]"⁶⁰.

In fact, the hearing of the prayer is possible thanks to God who is righteous and, hence, does not amnesty any request that has as purpose reestablishing justice into the world and deliverance for the oppressed⁶¹. If the psalmist's prayer

⁵⁴ St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 8. Cf. Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 20.

⁵⁵ The text that Saint Augustin interprets is indeed in the third person: "When I called, the God of my righteousness heard me, in tribulations Thou hast enlarged med..." St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 8.

⁵⁶ Bishop Gherasim states that through this unique manner of addressing, David considered God author of the grace that makes him righteous or the avenger of his innocence or the judge of his behavior, The One that judges the state of his soul, who sees whether he is innocent or sinner. Timuș, *Note asupra psalmilor*, 45. Cf. Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 112.

⁵⁷ Kidner, *Psalms*, 72. In the rabbinic writings, the name Elohim was associated with the state of incorruptible judge, and the tetragrammaton (YHWH) was associated with that of all merciful. Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 27. Cf. Abraham Cohen, *Talmudul*, trans. C. Litman (București: Hasefer, 2002), 65. *The Babylonian Talmud. A Translation and Commentary. Tractate Berakhot I*, trad. Jacob Neusner (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2005), 412-3.

⁵⁸ "But do not think justice only as a part of the virtue here, but consider it whole and complete, thus comprising all the virtues". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 47.

⁵⁹ Saint John stated that God did not listen to David for who he was, but for his righteous deeds. To this respect anyone can receive immediate help from the Lord provided that his request is righteous: "If you have deeds that will plead for you, you will always be heard. The same way, if you don't have them, even David if you'd be, you will not be able to convince God [...], because he loves justice, and the one who comes to Him in righteousness will not be sent away empty-handed, just as the one who is outside righteousness and involved in sins against nature, even if he'd pray a thousand times, he will not receive anything more [...] hence if someone wants to obtain something from God, let him come to the Lord in justice". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 47. Cf. Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 27.

⁶⁰ Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalms*, 14.

⁶¹ Rabinowitz, *Book of Tehillim*, 19. Cf. Briggs and Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 31.

had not been listened to, his reputation as an innocent man would have been stained⁶². That is why, the king waited anxiously for God to manifest immediately His justice and for this reason he uses the epithet *šidqî*⁶³.

Hence, of what we have already presented results the fact that the psalmist states from the beginning that all his righteousness, all his virtuous feelings are owed to God. Even the fact that he was listened to in the time of his prayer and that God enlarged him in his tribulations is nothing else than heavenly gifts. Based on this reason his following words are addressed to God as a sign of gratitude because He never delayed His action of deliverance from the tribulations the psalmist found himself in.

Although he came out victorious from the want generated by his son's rebellion, David continued to ask for the divine mercy, praying to God to protect him always, to listen to his prayer and to deliver him from the troubles generated by the sneaky Sheba⁶⁴. Saint Cyril sees in the cry at the end of the verse a precaution on the king's side, who does not know what awaits him in the future. The invocation of divine mercy constitutes the only way in which he can evade temptation: "Those who want to live a righteous life – says he – are continuously oppressed by tribulations in this life. That is why, although all his prayers were heard, [David] yet he is afraid for the future. For this he prays again for he knows the benefit he has from praying⁶⁵. For, although he was delivered from pains and sorrows, but as a man who is afraid of future, lest he not be able to conquer the trials that await him he asks to be enlarged and to pass over the tribulations that bear sorrows. That is why he says: *have mercy upon me*⁶⁶, meaning stop the war, help me escape from it"⁶⁷. In agreement with the Alexandrine hierarchy, Saint John Chrysostom states that God's mercy can be asked for in any situation and, that is why, he does not cease from advising the righteous to insist before God to obtain it: "And if we were to do thousands of deeds, we still are heard because God is merciful and loves humankind. And even if we reached the utmost virtue, we are still delivered by mercy"⁶⁸. Justice and virtue are not enough

⁶² Who will have the courage to fight David when they know that God helps him when he asks Him to? Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms*, 43.

⁶³ Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, 60. In Psalm 17 where this divine epithet is used again יהוה שדק (*yhw̄h šedeq* – *the Righteous God*), justice for the psalmist consists of the invalidation of the false accusations and the discovery of truth. Dahood, *Psalms*, 23.

⁶⁴ "If up until now you enlarged me, now is the time to show mercy on me". Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary*, 185.

⁶⁵ In other words, one may say that the psalmist presents here a certain type of therapy: continuous praying. Cassiodorus states that a prayer which follows another prayer which is accepted is the real prayer that places you in communion with God. Cassiodorus, *Explanation on the Psalms*, 74.

⁶⁶ This phrase represents David's cry to God, especially in the Book of Psalms, when he finds himself in a difficult situation. John Goldingay, *Psalm 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 119.

⁶⁷ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Tâlcuirea psalmilor*, 47. Cf. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 10.

⁶⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 55. Cf. Cassiodorus, *Explanation on the Psalms*, 74.

for the man to defeat evil. To this respect, he offers David as example, who although found himself in both situations (righteous and sinner) never ceased to ask for God's mercy⁶⁹.

Verse 2

O ye sons of men, how long will ye turn my glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing? Selah.

Ending his lamentation in which he requests God's mercy and permanent protection, the psalmist directs his attention towards his opponents and reproaches them their attitude completely lacking wisdom. The text of the psalm lets us understand the gloom that David has for those *sons of men* (שׂוֹנֵי אָדָם – *bənê 'îš*) who reprimanded his glory, plotting vain things and lies against him⁷⁰. The exegetes underline the fact that the king does not address to common people for whom the psalms use a common name אָדָם (*bənê ādām* – 11:4; 14:2; 31:20)⁷¹, but he addresses to noble people, most probably members of the aristocracy who joined Absalom's rebellion in order to dethrone him⁷². The psalmist gently reproaches, like a loving father, those who gave up easily to the vain promises made by his usurper son and advises them to renounce their sly manner of plotting in front of the evidence that they themselves can notice: the permanent support that God offers to the king each time he asks for it⁷³. Rabbi Samson Hirsch states that David referred there to the contempt that those people had for his prayers in which he asked for the divine help. For this reason, he interrupted his dialogue with God, addressed to those that considered his prayer to be vain and his hope in God's help improper and asked them to judge the situation differently since they

⁶⁹ Theodoret of Cyrus consider that the psalmist's gesture rather underlines his manner of relating to prayer. "Righteous people [David], says he, never have enough of prayer; instead, being in need and taking advantage of goodwill they reap the fruit of prayer and continue offering supplication, realizing as they do the benefit coming from it". Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 64.

⁷⁰ Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary*, 185. Cf. James Mays, *Psalms. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 55.

⁷¹ Phillips, *The Psalms in Hebrew*, 32.

⁷² Rabinowitz, *Book of Tehillim*, 20. Cf. Barnes, *Notes*, 34. Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 113. Except for those who state that David addresses to people in general, and not to noblemen, Saint Euthymius is the only one who states that the psalmist speaks here to his friends that accompanied him in his exile and who were hopeless and very upset: "David says this word to his friends and acquaintances who tried to help him when he was in danger, saying to them: How long, o friends of mine, will you not rise your hearts to God, when you are in tribulations, but harden them and descend them down to earthly matters, with human thoughts and worldly concerns?". Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 82.

⁷³ Olariu, *Explicarea psalmilor*, 147. Those who challenge the reality of God's providence are considered to be fools. Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalms*, 14. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms*, 45.

were noblemen, learned people. However, it was exactly because of their privileged status that they considered the idea of prayer so wrongly⁷⁴. In agreement with the rabbi's opinion, Saint Cyril of Alexandria states that David said these words to those who considered that they would be able to defeat the righteous by the power of the large army.

Calling them *sons of men*⁷⁵ for their life in slyness and their lack of faith, the king offers them a piece of the intrigue they plotted, a useful teaching telling them: "O, you people blind in your hearts and thick in your minds, when will you know that the reliance on people is vanity and lie? No warrior escapes by his great strength"⁷⁶. The exhortation for reconciliation and implicitly to obedience that David addresses to the rebels bases on a reality, which is impossible to deny. The attempt to usurp the king failed, and the intrigues plotted through lies by Absalom⁷⁷ and his counsels are now pure emptiness. All the chances to success of this rebellion died along with the death of the king's son. That is why, those who are still cloddish in their hearts⁷⁸ and think that they will succeed on casting out of the throne God's anointed, the sovereign that was reconfirmed by the recent victory, do nothing else than plot in vain (cf. Ps 2:1)⁷⁹ and fruitlessly despise the glory (royal dignity) of God's legitimate representative in Israel⁸⁰.

Observing the wisdom with which the psalmist addresses to his enemies, Saint John Chrysostom underlines the pedagogical manner in which David first shows God's power, His kindness and His love for people and implicitly the fact that He is inclined to be merciful and enlarge in tribulations and only after that, thinking of their viciousness, as if *he drowned in discouragement*, turns His word to those who live an evil life and says to them: "Having a God who is so good, so

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 20-1.

⁷⁵ Saint John Chrysostom names here *sons of men* those who live an evil life and are attracted to evil, those indurated in their hearts, earthly, riveted to the ground, following evil, pairing themselves with slyness, followers of the pleasures..." who make no effort to rise to the privileged status that the righteous have and are called *sons of God* (St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 58). Cf. Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire sur les Psaumes*, 61; Neale, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 111 and Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 18.

⁷⁶ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Tâlcuirea psalmilor*, 47.

⁷⁷ Absalom's rebellion was based on the lies with which he discredited his father, the vain promises he made to the Israelites that were unsatisfied by the king's judgement and the deceit of David (cf. 2 Sm 15:1-9). Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 61.

⁷⁸ This phrase that occurs in the Greek edition of the text has the purpose to emphasize the obduracy with which they continue to stand against reality and against truth. "Hard-hearted are those who do not distinguish lie and vanity from the truth, and love inexistent things, despising the steady things and those worthy of love". Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *La titlurile Psalmilor*, 142. Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 64 and Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 75.

⁷⁹ Freehof, *The Book of Psalms*, 18. Vanity are all things that do not bring us benefits and that will never happen (in this case – Absalom's reign). Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 75. Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 28.

⁸⁰ Barnes, *Notes*, 35.

loving, so powerful, how do you turn to infidelity? [...] and blaming their life, he shows the origin of their disbelief, namely that it is this that prevents them to look to higher things”⁸¹.

Verse 3

But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

If with the previous interrogations David drew his opponents’ attention on their futile adversity, in this verse he urges them to reflect on the fresh realities and to accept the fact that God is on his side⁸². In other words, the king asks those who revolted against him to acknowledge the fact that God has not left him, that his kingship has divine legitimacy and that by opposing to him, they rise against the One who chose him to rule over Israel⁸³. The term הִיָּלָאֵל (*hiplā^h*) – *separated from* through which the psalmist refers to his choice, also implies a warning. In all the contexts in which the verb *pala^h* occurs, it implies a separation between those who are protected by God according to His promises and those who are about to be punished for their adversity (cf. Ex 8:18; 9:4; 11:7; 33:16⁸⁴)⁸⁵. Thus, the unacceptance of the sovereignty of the king chosen by God exposes the rebels who continue to stand against him to the divine punishment. Nevertheless, with the use of the word חֲסִיד (*hāsīd*), David wishes to specify that him being elected and supported by God is not a discretionary act, but is determined by holiness, kindness, piety and devoutness for God⁸⁶. This noun sums up all the virtues of a person who is in close proximity to God⁸⁷, who felt His love and mercy and who has learned to share the gifts he has received with the others⁸⁸.

Using the verb θαυμαστόω – *making wonderful* instead of the Hebrew term that indicates differentiation, the text of the Septuagint emphasizes more obviously the privileged status of the pious man. This becomes the ideal model in which the

⁸¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 58.

⁸² Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 21. Cf. Rabinowitz, *Book of Tehillim*, 20.

⁸³ Barnes, *Notes*, 35.

⁸⁴ “How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

⁸⁵ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 28.

⁸⁶ Rabbi Samson defines the pious man like this: “A man who offers himself completely to God, who dedicates all his efforts to God and entrusts himself completely to God”. Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 21. Cf. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 61.

⁸⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms*, 45.

⁸⁸ David has shown numerous times that he is like God, recompensing evil with good (1 Sm 24:18). Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 28. Cf. Craigie, *Psalms*, 80 and Kirkpatrick, *The book of Psalms*, 18.

correct manifestation of the divine blessing can be found⁸⁹. The image of this man loved by God, with which David identifies himself⁹⁰, is offered to the opponents as an alternative of life. To such a man, God never rejects his prayer, and always fulfills his requests⁹¹. By this, the psalmist wished to draw their attention on the fact that he did not become king by mistake, but he was chosen by God from all the others for this dignity from his youth and so long as he remains obedient to the one who chose him and will walk in step with the righteous he will be supported and heard in tribulations⁹².

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⁸⁹ "What does it mean that he made wonderful? That He made His servant known, brilliant and famous. [...] For he did not say only that he gave him gifts, but also that he *made him wonderful*, showing both that he gave him in a wonderful way and that he blessed him with wonder-workings". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 60. Applying these words to the context that generated the composition of the psalm, Saint Euthymius observes: "Indeed, how was he not made wonderful and known by God, he who, fighting Absalom, defeated the one who hated him, and being oppressed by him, he defeated his persecutors and having few men, crushed the one who had tens of thousands?" Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 83. Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 14 and Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalms*, 14.

⁹⁰ Timuș, *Note asupra psalmilor*, 47. The Western Fathers identify Jesus Christ with that pious and holy man that God glorified. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 8-9. Cf. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 75 and Neale, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 111.

⁹¹ Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms. A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 120.

⁹² Emphasizing David's trust in God, Saint Euthymius paraphrases: "I, says he, since I obtained so quickly God's help and I escaped beyond all hope from the great danger of my son's rebellion, I understood from this that the Lord has mercy on me and listens to my prayer, and I hope that He will listen to my prayer again, when I cry to Him in my dangers and tribulations". Eftimie Zigabenu și Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 83. Cf. Phillips, *The Psalms in Hebrew*, 33.

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