**# Commentary on Psalm 20**

---

**## Introduction**

Psalm 20 belongs to the small cluster of royal psalms and, with Psalm 21, seems to stand at either side of a military campaign: a liturgy of petition (Psalm 20) paired with a celebration of answered prayer (Psalm 21). The superscription “For the leader. A psalm of David” signals public performance and professional direction (לַמְנַצֵּחַ, “for/under the director”), a usage that in Chronicles denotes the temple’s musical overseers. The poem is not a private prayer; it channels communal intercession for the king into a carefully staged ritual.

The psalm’s distinctive thesis is framed in the very terms of its address: “May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble; may the name of the God of Jacob set you on high” (v. 2). Two elements require notice. First, the repeated verb “answer” (ענה) encloses the psalm (vv. 2, 10) and recurs at its hinge (v. 7), forming a quiet inclusio—an envelope structure marked by the same key word at beginning and end—so that everything in between is narrated as a movement from plea to assured response. Second, the agent of protection is “the name.” Across biblical usage the “name of YHWH” functions as a metonym for God’s present power and authority—operative, invoked, and protective. Proverbs 18:10 calls it a “strong tower.” Psalms 118:10–12 repeats, “By the name of YHWH I cut them down,” and 124:8 affirms, “Our help is in the name of YHWH.” Psalm 20 leans hard into that idiom and makes it a liturgical alternative to armament.

The poem unfolds in a three-part progression of divine epithets that matches its argument: “the God of Jacob” (v. 2) evokes ancestral fidelity and often appears in corporate affirmations of trust (e.g., Ps 46:8, 12; 84:9; 94:7; 76:7); then “our God” (v. 6) binds the praying community to the king they support; and finally the bare Tetragrammaton “YHWH” (vv. 7–8, 10) anchors the confident declaration at the psalm’s center. This progression from ancestral epithet to communal claim to the unadorned divine name mirrors the rhetorical movement from petition through praise to proclamation.

Two structural features drive that movement. First, the voice shifts. Verses 2–5 speak in the plural on behalf of a singular “you” (the king), invoking aid, acceptance of sacrifices, and the fulfillment of plans. Verse 6 turns to communal resolve (“we will shout for joy…we will raise the banner”). Verse 7 introduces a new, singular voice—an officiant or prophetic cantor—declaring, “Now I know.” That rare formula (עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי) appears only in Genesis 22:12; Exodus 18:11; Judges 17:13; and here—each time marking decisive insight into what God is in fact doing. The declaration is framed by a striking shift in spatial imagery: earlier help is “from the sanctuary, from Zion” (v. 3), the terrestrial locus of worship; now the answer comes “from his heavenly sanctuary” (מִשְּׁמֵי קׇדְשׁוֹ, v. 7), a unique phrase that lifts the scene into cosmic scale. Second, the psalm’s ideological crux is cast as antithetic parallelism: “These in chariots and these in horses, but we—in the name of YHWH our God we invoke” (v. 8). The first two cola omit the expected verb (“trust,” “boast,” “invoke”), a poetic ellipsis that concentrates attention on the nouns themselves as the rival objects of reliance. In other biblical texts “horses and chariots” stand as a metonym for military power (Deut 20:1; Isa 31:1; Ps 33:17; 147:10). The psalm does not merely prefer one resource to another; it redefines the theater: victory is won not by materiel but in an act of cultic memory and calling.

Several cultic terms make that claim concrete. In v. 4, “May he remember all your grain offerings and make your burnt offering fat,” the verb “remember” (זכר) is the courtly verb for God’s favorable regard; the verb “make fat” (Piʿel of דשן) is sacrificial shorthand for divine acceptance (cf. BDB, s.v. דשן: “find a burnt-offering fat = acceptable,” Ps 20:4). The rare Hiphil of זכר in v. 8—נַזְכִּיר (“we will cause to be remembered,” hence “invoke”)—is the cultic correlate, cognate with the memorial portion (אַזְכָּרָה) offered on the altar (Lev 2:2). The psalm’s decisive act is not the king’s charge but the community’s invocation that effects remembrance before God.

Verse 6 adds military imagery recast as liturgy: “In the name of our God we will raise the banner” (נִדְגֹּל). Elsewhere banner language marks tribal standards (Num 2:25, 31; 10:14, 25) or serves as a figure for divine rallying (Ps 60:6; Exod 17:15, “YHWH is my banner”). The Greek translators, reading differently, render “we will magnify” (μεγαλυνθησόμεθα), a divergence that has led some to emend the Hebrew to נַגְדִּיל (“we will make great”). Either way, the verse asserts that the communal act is conspicuous and public—standards lifted or God’s name exalted.

The closing line is characteristically terse and artful: “YHWH, save! May the king answer us on the day we call” (v. 10). The ambiguity is deliberate: does “the king” refer to the human monarch or to YHWH, the true king? Medieval Jewish commentators divide; the syntax allows both. The psalm leaves the two fused, as the entire liturgy has done: the community prays for the king in and under the reign of the King.

Thus Psalm 20 does not disdain strategy or strength. It relocates their meaning. The prayers move from altar to assembly to declaration, from Zion to heaven, from petition to assurance. In a world of chariots and horses, the psalm insists that the decisive movement is the raising of the divine name.

Terms used: “ellipses” refers to the poetic omission of a verb or other expected word, supplied from context. “Inclusio” denotes a bracketing repetition that frames a unit (here the verb “answer”). “Antithetic parallelism” is the balanced pairing of opposites in the line’s two halves, a basic device of Hebrew verse.

**---**

**## Psalm 20**

1. לַמְנַצֵּ֗חַ מִזְמ֥וֹר לְדָוִֽד׃‎        For the leader. A psalm of David.

2. יַֽעַנְךָ֣ ה׳ בְּי֣וֹם צָרָ֑ה יְ֝שַׂגֶּבְךָ֗ שֵׁ֤ם ׀ אֱלֹקֵ֬י יַעֲקֹֽב׃‎     May the LORD answer you in time of trouble,

the name of Jacob’s God keep you safe.

3. יִשְׁלַֽח־עֶזְרְךָ֥ מִקֹּ֑דֶשׁ וּ֝מִצִּיּ֗וֹן יִסְעָדֶֽךָּ׃‎     May He send you help from the sanctuary,

and sustain you from Zion.

4. יִזְכֹּ֥ר כׇּל־מִנְחֹתֶ֑ךָ וְעוֹלָתְךָ֖ יְדַשְּׁנֶ֣ה סֶֽלָה׃‎        May He receive the tokens of all your meal offerings,

and approve your burnt offerings. Selah.

5. יִֽתֶּן־לְךָ֥ כִלְבָבֶ֑ךָ וְֽכׇל־עֲצָתְךָ֥ יְמַלֵּֽא׃‎       May He grant you your desire,

and fulfill your every plan.

6. נְרַנְּנָ֤ה ׀ בִּ֘ישׁ֤וּעָתֶ֗ךָ וּבְשֵֽׁם־אֱלֹקֵ֥ינוּ נִדְגֹּ֑ל יְמַלֵּ֥א ה׳ כׇּל־מִשְׁאֲלוֹתֶֽיךָ׃‎     May we shout for joy in your victory,

arrayed by standards in the name of our God.

May the LORD fulfill your every wish.

7. עַתָּ֤ה יָדַ֗עְתִּי כִּ֤י הוֹשִׁ֥יעַ ׀ ה׳ מְשִׁ֫יח֥וֹ יַ֭עֲנֵהוּ מִשְּׁמֵ֣י קׇדְשׁ֑וֹ בִּ֝גְבֻר֗וֹת יֵ֣שַׁע יְמִינֽוֹ׃‎      Now I know that the LORD will give victory to His anointed,

will answer him from His heavenly sanctuary

with the mighty victories of His right arm.

8. אֵ֣לֶּה בָ֭רֶכֶב וְאֵ֣לֶּה בַסּוּסִ֑ים וַאֲנַ֓חְנוּ ׀ בְּשֵׁם־ה׳ אֱלֹקֵ֣ינוּ נַזְכִּֽיר׃‎        They [call] on chariots, they [call] on horses,

but we call on the name of the LORD our God.

9. הֵ֭מָּה כָּרְע֣וּ וְנָפָ֑לוּ וַאֲנַ֥חְנוּ קַּ֝֗מְנוּ וַנִּתְעוֹדָֽד׃‎        They collapse and lie fallen,

but we rally and gather strength.

10. ה׳ הוֹשִׁ֑יעָה הַ֝מֶּ֗לֶךְ יַעֲנֵ֥נוּ בְיוֹם־קׇרְאֵֽנוּ׃ {פ}‎       O LORD, grant victory!

May the King answer us when we call.-c

**---**

**## Verse-by-Verse Commentary**

**\*\*Verse 1\*\***

The superscription, “For the leader. A psalm of David,” places the poem under the temple’s musical direction (לַמְנַצֵּחַ), a term used in Chronicles for those who “superintend” liturgical song (1 Chr 15:21). The Septuagint’s εἰς τὸ τέλος (“unto the end”) is an old rendering that follows the noun נֵצַח (“perpetuity, splendor”) rather than the verb; in any case, by the late biblical period לַמְנַצֵּחַ functions as a performance heading. The Davidic attribution aligns the poem with the royal sphere without committing us to authorship; in the Psalter, “David” names a repertoire, a role, and a theology as much as a pen.

Psalm 20 is best read alongside Psalm 21: the petitions and liturgical acts here find their counterpart in thanksgiving and report of deliverance there. This pairing matches the inner logic of the psalm, with its alternation of voices and its closing appeal for an answer. In both psalms, public worship surrounds the king’s cause, offering a confessional counter-argument to the ideology of military self-reliance.

**\*\*Verse 2\*\***

“May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble; may the name of the God of Jacob set you on high.” The two jussive verbs (“may he answer…may he set you on high”) establish the staged petitions that run through v. 6. The causative sense of יְשַׂגֶּבְךָ (“set you securely on high”) is spatial and symbolic: the king is lifted out of reach. The second colon identifies the instrument of that protection: “the name of the God of Jacob.” In biblical idiom, “the name” (שֵׁם) metonymically denotes God’s operative presence and authority. It is not an abstract label but a power invoked, a presence claimed. The pattern is common and emphatic: “The name of YHWH is a strong tower” (Prov 18:10); “Our help is in the name of YHWH” (Ps 124:8); “By the name of YHWH I cut them down” (Ps 118:10–12).

The epithet “God of Jacob” anchors the royal liturgy in the ancestral covenant and appears frequently when communal trust is in view (Ps 46:8, 12; 76:7; 84:9; 94:7). Its choice here—rather than “God of Israel”—hints at the patriarch’s story of vulnerability and divine deliverance. The verse’s terseness invites hearing an inclusio already: “answer you” (יענךָ) anticipates “answer us” (יַעֲנֵנוּ) in v. 10.

**\*\*Verse 3\*\***

“May he send your help from the sanctuary and sustain you from Zion.” The parallel cola create a vertical axis. “Sanctuary” (מִקֹּדֶשׁ) names the sacred locus; “Zion” locates it in Jerusalem. The first verb, “send” (יִשְׁלַח), imagines help moving outward from that center; the second, “sustain/support” (יִסְעָדֶךָּ), suggests steadiness under pressure (cf. Ps 18:36; 41:4; 94:18; 119:117). The combination yields both deployment and undergirding.

This spatial frame anticipates the later expansion to the cosmic scale: “from his heavenly sanctuary” (מִשְּׁמֵי קׇדְשׁוֹ, v. 7), a phrase unique in the Hebrew Bible. The psalm thus moves from the temple’s earthly address to the heavenly court’s answer, without breaking the line of communication. That movement accords with the theology of Deuteronomy in which God “establishes his name” at a chosen site (Deut 12:11; 14:23; 16:2, 6) as the point where heaven and earth meet.

**\*\*Verse 4\*\***

“May he remember all your grain offerings; and your burnt offering—may he make it fat. Selah.” The verbs are cultic. “Remember” (זכר) in divine discourse is not mere recollection; it is the favorable act of taking into account for intervention (cf. Ps 106:4; Exod 2:24). The second verb, “make fat” (Piʿel of דשן), is technical for divine acceptance of sacrifice; BDB glosses Ps 20:4 as “find a burnt-offering fat = acceptable.” The verb’s concrete image (a rich, satisfying portion) is the idiomatic way to speak of God’s pleasure.

The pair of offerings covers the range of voluntary devotion: grain offerings (מִנְחָה) and the whole burnt offering (עוֹלָה). The connection to v. 8’s נַזְכִּיר is more than verbal: the Hiphil of זכר can mean “cause to be remembered,” the cultic function of the memorial portion (אַזְכָּרָה, Lev 2:2). The community’s invocation “in the name” (v. 8) is the vocal counterpart to the memorial portion’s smoke. Selah likely marks a musical or liturgical pause; it need not be pressed beyond that.

**\*\*Verse 5\*\***

“May he grant you according to your heart; and all your counsel may he fulfill.” The first clause’s כִּלְבָבֶךָ means “according to your heart,” not “all your heart.” The heart in Hebrew anthropology is the center of will, intellect, and desire. The paired noun עֵצָה (“counsel, plan”) is a kingly word: strategy, deliberation, the considered course. The two terms together frame the king’s interior capacity from intention to plan. The verbs match: “grant” (יִתֵּן) and “fulfill/complete” (יְמַלֵּא). The latter reappears in v. 6, forming a small hinge from petition to confident anticipation.

This is the one place where human planning sits explicitly in the petition, and the psalm neither devalues it nor absolutizes it. In wisdom and royal books, עֵצָה belongs to sound governance (cf. Isa 11:2). Psalm 20 places it under the larger rubric of God’s answer, keeping counsel from becoming trust in chariots by enfolding it within the liturgy.

**\*\*Verse 6\*\***

“We will shout for joy in your deliverance; and in the name of our God we will raise the banner. May YHWH fulfill all your requests.” The voice shifts to corporate resolve; the cohortatives (“we will shout,” “we will raise”) are not predictions but adopted liturgical stances. The line’s military image is recast as worship: the community rallies under a standard not of tribe or king but “in the name of our God.” The verb נִדְגֹּל is denominative from דֶּגֶל, “standard, banner,” the insignia for marching and battle (Num 2:25, 31; 10:14, 25). Psalm 60:6 uses banner imagery for divine truth as a rallying point, and Exodus 17:15 famously names an altar “YHWH is my banner,” linking victory and proclamation.

The Septuagint reads “we will magnify” (μεγαλυνθησόμεθα), and some moderns have proposed emending the Hebrew to נַגְדִּיל (“we will make great”). The MT’s banner fits the psalm’s martial lexicon and its argument: what is lifted before battle is not the king’s emblem but the divine name. The repeated “fulfill” (יְמַלֵּא) from v. 5 underscores continuity: what the community resolved to pray for, it now expects YHWH to complete.

**\*\*Verse 7\*\***

“Now I know that YHWH saves his anointed; he will answer him from his heavenly sanctuary with the mighty victories of his right hand.” The formula “Now I know” (עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי) is rare and weighty. It punctuates narrative realizations of divine action (Gen 22:12; Exod 18:11; Judg 17:13). Here it marks the pivot from petition to proclamation. The speaker may be a priestly officiant or a prophetic voice within the liturgy: either way, the line functions as oracle.

“His anointed” (מְשִׁיחוֹ) names the royal subject explicitly and ties Psalm 20 to the broader Davidic theology (cf. Ps 2). The spatial axis now extends beyond Zion: “from his heavenly sanctuary” (מִשְּׁמֵי קׇדְשׁוֹ)—a unique phrase in Scripture—locates the answer in the divine realm. The phrase “mighty victories of his right hand” (בִגְבֻרוֹת יֵשַׁע יְמִינוֹ) uses גְבוּרוֹת in its common sense for God’s mighty deeds (Deut 3:24; Ps 106:2; 145:4, 12; 150:2). The “right hand” is conventional shorthand for effective power in action (cf. Deut 4:34). The line answers earlier petitions point for point: from sanctuary/Zion (v. 3) to heavenly sanctuary; from “answer you” (v. 2) to “he will answer him”; from sacrifices (v. 4) to salvation.

**\*\*Verse 8\*\***

“These—in chariots; these—in horses; but we—in the name of YHWH our God we invoke.” This is the psalm’s theological crux, cast as antithetic parallelism. The first two cola omit an explicit verb—a poetic ellipsis that heightens the contrast. In biblical usage “horses and chariots” epitomize military strength (Deut 20:1; Exod 14–15; Ps 46:10; 68:18; 147:10). Prophets warned against trusting them rather than YHWH (Isa 31:1), and the Psalter discounts them as saviors (Ps 33:17). Here, “these” simply are their chariotry; words fail where trust shifts to objects.

The verb in the second colon, נַזְכִּיר (Hiphil of זכר), means “we will cause to be remembered,” hence “we will invoke, call upon.” It is cultic language, cognate with the memorial portion (אַזְכָּרָה) of offerings (Lev 2:2). Rashi was right to hear both prayer and sacrificial connotation in the line: the community’s invocation is a liturgical act that “makes present” the divine name. The Septuagint again reads “we will magnify,” leading some to think the Hebrew once read “we will make great.” But the MT’s “invoke” matches the psalm’s opening “answer” and its cultic thread: this is a liturgy of remembrance that unseats technological confidence.

**\*\*Verse 9\*\***

“They—bowed and fell; but we—arose and stood firm.” The perfects do not necessarily narrate a completed battle; they are the perfects of certainty, describing victory as liturgical fait accompli. The verbs pair opposites: to kneel/collapse (כָּרְעוּ) and to fall (נָפָלוּ) versus to rise (קַּמְנוּ) and to “strengthen ourselves” (וַנִּתְעוֹדָד). The last verb (Hithpolel) suggests active bracing, standing one’s ground, being heartened. The “they/we” pronouns sharpen the antithesis established in v. 8.

Elsewhere the Psalter uses such bodily metaphors for defeat and deliverance in stock fashion, but the combination here (“we stood firm/strengthened ourselves”) is relatively rare and carries the psalm’s logic forward: reliance on the name not only averts collapse; it confers renewed steadiness. The line has the ring of a victory shout and could have functioned responsorially in performance.

**\*\*Verse 10\*\***

“YHWH, save! May the king answer us on the day we call.” The final cry brings the opening “answer you” (v. 2) to a communal “answer us,” completing the inclusio around ענה (“answer”). The interpretive crux is “the king” (הַמֶּלֶךְ): is it the human king or YHWH as king? Medieval Jewish commentators take both sides. Syntactically, either is possible; the ambiguity is almost certainly intended. The psalm has already fused the royal cause with divine kingship by making the decisive act the invocation of the divine name rather than the king’s muster.

The Greek version seems to resolve the ambiguity differently (“Lord, save the king; and hear us in the day we call”), taking “the king” as the object of “save,” which simultaneously smooths the syntax and reduces the theological tension. The Masoretic text preserves that tension and lets it stand as the psalm’s last word: the king’s welfare and the King’s answer are finally one petition, and the community’s role is to call.

The structure of the psalm can now be seen in outline: A (answer/protect, v. 2) – B (sanctuary/Zion and sacrifice, vv. 3–4) – C (plans granted, banners raised, v. 5–6) – B′ (answer from heavenly sanctuary, v. 7) – C′ (invocation vs. chariots, v. 8) – A′ (answer us, v. 10), with v. 9 as the triumphant corollary of v. 8. Its artistry lies in how economy of words, a handful of technical terms, and the strategic use of the “name” carry the argument from altar to battlefield and back.

**---**

**## Methodological & Bibliographical Summary**

**### Research & Data Inputs**

- Psalm Verses Analyzed: 10

- LXX (Septuagint) Texts Reviewed: 10

- Phonetic Transcriptions Generated: 10

- Ugaritic Parallels Reviewed: 0

- Lexicon Entries (BDB/Klein) Reviewed: 12

- Traditional Commentaries Reviewed: 16 (Ibn Ezra (3); Malbim (3); Meiri (2); Metzudat David (3); Radak (3); Rashi (2))

- Concordance Entries Reviewed: 31

- Figurative Language Instances Reviewed: 100

- Master Editor Prompt Size: 112,861 characters

**## Models Used**

This commentary was generated using:

**\*\*Structural Analysis (Macro)\*\***: Claude Sonnet 4.5

**\*\*Verse Discovery (Micro)\*\***: Claude Sonnet 4.5

**\*\*Commentary Synthesis\*\***: Claude Sonnet 4.5

**\*\*Editorial Review\*\***: GPT-5