PSALMS OF JEWISH MOURNING:
POETRY OF DESPAIR, POETRY OF HOPE

ALEXANDRA R. KLEIN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York

January 30, 2015 – 10 שבת 5775
Advisor: Rabbi Andrea Weiss, PhD

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Goals:

- To offer an in-depth annotated translation and literary analysis of Psalms 15, 16, 23, 90, and 121
- To understand how these psalms can be used to console the bereaved with the voices of our tradition, and in so doing, help mourners to find their voices to express the myriad emotions evoked by death.

Details:

- Number of Chapters: 5, Divided by each psalm, pastoral implications, and gleanings
- Type of works referenced: Original text of each psalm, corresponding translations and commentaries, secondary academic sources on psalms and Jewish mourning

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"For centuries, Jews and others have turned to the biblical Book of Psalms for solace, guidance, catharsis, and renewal. The psalms...reflect a wide range of experience and expression…and when we dig deeply enough, we can find wellsprings of great value."[1]

The following text immersion explores Psalms 15, 16, 23, 90, and 121, which together constitute five of the most-used psalms in the Jewish funeral liturgy. Each psalm offers unique theological and emotional content, which we can best understand through a close analysis of the language and poetry of each text. Each psalm will be studied through an in-depth annotated translation, structural outline, and literary analysis. The collection of five translations then will be supplemented by a careful consideration of the pastoral implications of each psalm's message, and how these psalms might be best utilized to offer comfort and consolation to those in mourning. Ultimately, this work seeks to understand: How can these psalms console the bereaved with the voices of our tradition, and in so doing, help mourners to find their voices to express the myriad emotions evoked by death?

[1] Weintraub, Simkha. "From the Depths: The Use of Psalms." In *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources*, 161. 2nd ed. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2010.

Psalm 15: The Jewish Ideal

Annotated Translation

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד
יְהוָה מִי־יָגוּר בְּאָהֳלֶךָ
מִי־יִשְׁכֹּן בְּהַר קָדְשֶׁךָ׃

1) A song of David. [1,2,3]

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[1] מזמור לדוד - This expression serves to introduce numerous Psalms, such as 3, 23, 29, 63, 141 and 143, appearing much like a title before the body of the psalm begins. In the introductory verse of many other psalms, we see this same word, מזמור, but paired with words relating explicitly to singing and song, such as Psalm 108: שיר מזמור לדוד and Psalms 48 and 88: מזמור שיר לבני קרח. While some translations translate מזמור as "psalm" rather than "song," I have chosen to use the translation "song," here, in reflection of the word's ties to שיר throughout the introductory lines of so many other psalms.

[2] דויד - There is much scholarly debate about the significance of this phrase in the title of this psalm, as well as in many others (see Pss. 29.1; 36.1; 40.1). The tradition that King David himself was the author of the book of Psalms is cited from both biblical and rabbinic sources. In 1 Samuel 16.16-23, we read an account of the young King David, who was known for his talents as a musician and poet. The text reads: "So Saul said to his courtiers, 'Find me someone who can play well and bring him to me.' One of the attendants spoke up, 'I have observed a *son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music*; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, *sensible in speech*, and handsome in appearance, and God is with him.' Whereupon Saul sent messengers to Jesse to say, 'Send me your son *David*, who is with the flock.'" Building on this biblical account, particularly that David was "sensible in speech," scholars of the Rabbinic period

attributed the book of Psalms to David. They recorded this attribution in Tractate Bava Batra 14b-15a of the Babylonian Talmud, which reads: “Who wrote the Scriptures? — Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. *David wrote the Book of Psalms*, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korach.” From these texts, throughout the premodern period David was considered the author of the psalms, and different psalms were attributed to different experiences in his life (Goldingay, vol. 1, p. 26). Modern scholarship has moved starkly away from this idea of Davidic authorship. Alter writes, “The one safe conclusion is that the writing of psalms was a persistent activity over many centuries. The Davidic authorship enshrined in Jewish and Christian tradition has no credible historical grounding” (xv). Many current scholars believe that rather than David actually authoring the Psalms, they were likely attributed to him only pseudepigraphically, because “once books have become accepted within the community [as the psalms were], people want to associate them with someone they know of,” (Goldingay, vol. 1, p. 27) most often a person who is revered, whose name makes the text seem more authoritative and authentic. (see also Alter, xv).

[3] לדויד - To fully understand this title, we must consider the different interpretive possibilities of ל- as it appears here. While it is traditionally translated as “of,” (see JPS, JSB, KJV, Segal, and others), there is much more ambiguity in its meaning. The prefix could also mean “belonging to” (see 2 Kings 5.9: “at the door of the house *belonging to* Elisha”), “for” (see Gen. 23.2: “Abraham wailed *for* Sarah.”), as well as “on behalf of,”

God[4], who will sojourn[5] in Your tent?[6]

"about," or "by" (Goldingay 27). Each of these different translations gives a different sense about the origins and intended use and audience of the psalms. For example, "by" might indicate David's authorship, while "for" could indicate that the text was meant for David's use or to be said in his name. Some translators have sought varying ways to preserve this ambiguity, such as "Composition. David's." (Goldingay), "A David psalm." (Alter). I have chosen to use Alter's translation here, albeit slightly modified.

[4] יהוה – This "ineffable" name of God is difficult to translate. Without any sure knowledge of its pronunciation, the Masoretes vocalized the tetragrammaton to be read as "Adonai," and thus many translators (JPS, Alter) choose to translate this name of God into the English as "the Lord." However, to do so eliminates to the wonderful ambiguity of the Hebrew, יהוה, a word which we neither know how to pronounce nor how to translate. To retain this ambiguity, Kraus and Goldingay both use a form of "Yahweh," but even that implies knowledge of pronunciation that we cannot know with certainty. Thus, I have chosen here to instead translate יהוה as "God," throughout these five psalms, because I believe it is the closest English word we have that is as neutral and open to interpretation as the tetragrammaton.

[5] יגור – Goldingay explains: "Why might someone want to stay or dwell there?...Perhaps [both verbs] suggest security and provision...'Dwell' may imply something more permanent than 'stay,' yet both suggest something less permanent than 'living.' That is realistic, for one cannot actually live in God's house - there is work to do" (vol 1, p 220). Drawing on Goldingay's idea that this refers to something more lasting than "to stay," yet less than "to live," I have translated the verbs as "sojourn" Other examples where גור

refers to a semi-permanent "sojourn" can be found in Gen. 12.10: "There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to *sojourn* there, for the famine was severe in the land." *(Note: All biblical translations found in the footnotes are from the JPS Tanakh, unless otherwise indicated.)* In this verse, we know that Abraham intends to spend a significant amount of time in Egypt waiting out the famine, but also that he does not intend to make Egypt his permanent home.

[6] אהלך – While the understanding of this word to mean *tent* is well established, the range of uses is wide. In some examples, it means *tent* in a very general sense, as the kind of dwelling in which the biblical characters lived, such as Gen. 12.8: "From there [Abram] moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his *tent*…" and Gen. 31.33: "So Laban went into Jacob's *tent* and Leah's *tent* and the *tents* of the two maidservants; but he did not find them. Leaving Leah's *tent*, he entered Rachel's *tent*." However, when the Exodus narrative begins, we see that the *ohel* becomes not merely a place where people dwell, but comes to be *THE ohel* – the one designated place where God will dwell amongst the Israelites in the desert, such as in Ex. 26.36: "You shall make a screen for the entrance of *the Tent*, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, done in embroidery," or in Ex. 33.10 where see both uses: "When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of *the Tent*, the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his own *tent*." The use of *ohel* in this verse, combined with the address to God, the word *yishkan* (see note #4, below), and the placement of אהלך parallel to הר קודש illustrates an image not just of any tent, but rather the mishkan, a place that provided stability, protection, and connection to God during the difficult years of the Exodus. The psalmist is seeking this same stability and connection now.

Who will dwell[7] on Your holy mountain[8]?

(ב) הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים
וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק
וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ׃

2) One who walks virtuously,[9]

[7] ישכן – The notion that the root *shakan* refers to a temporary dwelling place is well established in the narratives in Torah of the Israelites wandering in the desert, in which the portable משכן is a dwelling place for God. (see Exodus 25.8, and related usage of שכן in Ex. 29.46, 40.35, Num. 5.3 and others). Additionally, the parallelism evident in this verse places *yishkan* as equivalent to *yagur*, and we can thus intuit that they both refer to this kind of liminal sojourning – more than a brief stay yet less than creating a permanent home.

[8] הר קדשך - This term refers not just to any mountain, but God's holy mountain, a euphemism for Jerusalem, more specifically, the Temple. We can determine this from Daniel 9.16, which makes this connection explicit. Daniel speaks, using *har kodshecha* as a semantic parallel to Jerusalem: "O Lord, as befits Your abundant benevolence, let Your wrathful fury turn back from *Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain*." The parallelism in Psalm 43.3-4 corroborates this, as it uses this term in parallel with not only *shakhan* but also specific reference to the altar at the Temple: "Send forth Your light and Your truth; they will lead me; they will bring me to *Your holy mountain*, to *Your dwelling-place*, that I may come to *the altar of God*…" Thus, the full sense of the psalmist's request emerges - he wants not only to dwell temporarily with God in the *ohel*, but rather wants the permanent safety and security of being with God in God's permanent home, the Temple in Jerusalem.

and acts justly,

[9] תמים - Most frequently, the word refers to a state of ritual purity, such as the numerous occurrences in the book of Leviticus (see Lev. 1.10, 3.6, 4.3, 25.30, and many others). This word is most often used in reference to ritual offering that is perfect, without blemish or defilement. It is worth noting that since this psalm is describing what makes a person fit to enter the Temple, the language of תמים is particularly appropriate, as it harkens back to the language used to describe which sacrifices were fit for offering at the Temple. In this instance in particular, however, the word תמים is used to describe הולך, the way a person walks through the world. Thus, I have rendered the word here as "virtuously," which maintains the notion of purity and wholesomeness that accompanies תמים in the sacrificial narratives, but is more appropriately ascribed to the way a person should conduct him/herself in order to be fit for entrance to the Temple. Kraus writes, "הולך תמים refers to one's being tied into the life of a community in whose ordinances a blameless walk is required" (228).

and speaks truth in his heart.[10]

(ג) לֹא־רָגַל ׀ עַל־לְשֹׁנֹו
לֹא־עָשָׂה לְרֵעֵהוּ רָעָה
וְחֶרְפָּה לֹא־נָשָׂא עַל־קְרֹבֹו׃

3) One who has not gone about talking,[11]

[10] דבר אמת בלבבו - A slight variation of this phrase is found in, in Ecc. 2.15, in which דבר בלב is used to refer only to inner speech/one's own thoughts. We read: "So I *reflected*: "The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?" And I *came to the conclusion* that that too was futile." However, in the other clauses of this verse, the phrase refers to action; so we come to understand that this phrase defines truthful speech as when the words one says aloud also reflect what they truly feel in their heart. We see this idea in Psalm 12.3: "Men speak lies to one another; their speech is smooth; they *talk with duplicity*," where דבר בלב is used to imply that the speech in one's heart does not match the words said aloud, and is thus duplicitous. Thus, I have tried to retain the ideas of thought and speech in the verse, because truthful speech from one's innermost heart, combined with outward righteous action, offers a fuller picture of this perfectly moral person, fit to enter the Temple. Goldingay concurs, saying, "Verse 2 adds inner attitude to outward walk: both are important. It is possible for there to be a disparity between what people do and what they say in their heart...God does not countenance that" (vol 1, p 221).

[11] לא רגל על לשנו - This phrase is difficult to translate. Almost all of the other instances of the verb רגל use the word to refer to the act of spying - see Gen. 42.9-34, in which Joseph repeatedly accuses his brothers of coming to Egypt as spies, or Josh. 6.22: "But Joshua bade the two men who had *spied out* the land…" However, the use of the verb with *al-*

nor done evil to his neighbor,

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l'shono would render this phrase "one who has not spied on his tongue," which hardly makes sense. The use of "tongue" allows us to infer that the act described involves speech in some way, but we cannot get much further than inference. Kraus, Alter, Segal, and Goldingay all translate this phrase as "who does not slander" but that is not supported by any of the other occurrences throughout the Tanakh. JPS offers, "whose tongue is not given to evil," but there is no mention of evil in this clause so that is a poetic guess at best. We know that רגל in its noun form means foot, such as in Ex. 21.24: "hand for hand, *foot* for *foot*," or in Isa. 1.6: "from head to *foot*." Perhaps from this we can infer that *ragal* here refers to walking on foot, or, as Goldingay puts it, "going about" (vol. 1, p. 221). Thus, when we combine speech with this sense of going about with the sneaking around or plotting of a spy, we get the phrase as I have rendered it here, "one who has not gone about talking."

nor spoken shame[12] about those close to him.

(ד) נִבְזֶה ו בָּעֵינָיו נִמְאָס
וְאֶת־יִרְאֵי יְהוָה יְכַבֵּד
נִשְׁבַּע ׀ לְהָרַע וְלֹא יָמֵר׃

4) The despicable one is repulsive in his eyes,[13]
but he honors those who fear God.
When he makes a promise he does not break it.[14]

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[12] חרפה - This word appears throughout the Tanakh, especially in the books of the Prophets. In Isaiah 51.7, we see that it is placed parallel to מגדף. The word מגדף refers to unkind speech such as "jeers" or "mockery" (see Isa. 43.28: "So I profaned the holy princes; I abandoned Jacob to proscription And Israel to *mockery*," or Zeph. 2.8: "I have heard the insults of Moab and the jeers of the Ammonites, who have insulted My people and *gloated* over their country"). We also see the original root, חרף, used in the Dinah story in Genesis 34.14, in which the fact that Shechem is uncircumcised is considered an embarrassment: כי חרפה הוא לי. Thus, we glean that חרפה refers to speech about another that is shaming, embarrassing, or unkind. Thus, I have rendered the word in this verse as "spoken shame."

[13] בעיניו - This phrase uses a concrete expression, "in his eyes," to indicate "according to him," or "from his perspective," such as in Num. 13.33: "We saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we *looked like* grasshoppers *to ourselves*, and so we must have *seemed to them*," or Jer. 52.2: "He did what was displeasing *[according] to God*…" I have left the translation as "in his eyes" because it offers the same sense of "in his opinion," but uses more poetic language, true to the original Hebrew.

[14] נשבע להרע ולא ימר - This phrase is very difficult to translate with any degree of certainty. Kraus explains why, saying, "The text is corrupt. In the Masoretic text, the second half-verse is missing...Obviously, [at least one] word has dropped out in this passage. Rearrangements do not solve the problem" (226). Alter agrees that the text is problematic, but offers a different explanation. He writes, "[The Masoretic text] appears to read: 'he vows to do evil / and will not revoke it,' which is hardly an attribute one would attach to the moral person [described by this psalm]. But three ancient translations - the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Peshitta - read here instead of *lehara,* 'to do evil,' *lere'eihu*, 'to his fellow man,' which merely reverses the order of the consonants. It is the sort of error a scribe could have easily made" (44). Thus, whether we abide by Kraus' explanation that words are omitted, or Alter's explanation that letters were jumbled, we have a significant challenge when we try to translate this verse. Based on the context, which, as Alter points out, is a description of a highly moral person who deserves to dwell in God's Temple, it is fair to assume that *lehara* is either missing a preceding word such as לא, or is a scribal error. The wide variation in translations only further proves the difficulty of translating this phrase, particularly how to render *lehara*. Kraus' proposed translation of the verse is "who does not swear to *an evil deed* and does not change..." Alter offers, "when he vows *to his fellow man*, he does not break it." JPS and Brueggemann both translate this phrase as: "who stands by his oath even to his hurt"; Segal offers "if he vows to his detriment, he will not recant" (Kindle Location 1810), and finally Goldingay offers "he has sworn to bring calamity and does not change it." It is not possible be sure how to understand *lehara*, so I have omitted it from my translation

(ה) כַּסְפּוֹ ו לֹא־נָתַן בְּנֶשֶׁךְ֙
וְשֹׁחַד עַל־נָקִי לֹ֣א לָקָח
עֹשֵׂה־אֵ֖לֶּה לֹ֣א יִמּ֑וֹט לְעוֹלָֽם׃

5) He does not lend out his money with interest,
nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.[15]
One who does all these things will never falter.[16]

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entirely. The larger sense of the phrase is that this is a person who keeps promises, regardless of with whom he keeps them or what the content of the promises is.

[15] כספו לא נתן בנשך ושחר לא נקי לא לקח – The two clauses here: "does not lend with interest" and "does not take out a bribe against the innocent," offer different versions of the same idea. Together, they say that one who is fit to enter the Temple, who is moral and righteous, does not seek to become wealthy at the expense of others. This idea, that it is immoral to become wealthy at others' expense is emphasized throughout Torah: see Exodus 22.24, 23.8, Leviticus 25.36, and Deuteronomy 16.19, 23.20, and 27.25 (Kraus, 230).

[16] ימוט – See Footnote #4 on Psalm 121 for a discussion of למוט - this is a type of assurance that God provides.

Structural Outline

Psalm 15: The Jewish Ideal

I. Question: Who May Be Admitted to God's Temple? (v. 1)

II. Answer: The Ideal Israelite (vv. 2-5a)

A. Ideals for the Inner World

1. One who acts with right intention (v. 2a)
2. One who is true and honest (v. 2b)

B. Ideals for the Outer World

1. One who does not dishonor his fellow (v. 3)
    a) By speech (v. $3a_1$)
    b) By action (v. $3a_2$)
    c) By shaming (v. 3b)
2. One who judges others appropriately (v. 4)
    a) One who hates those who hate God (v. 4a)
    b) One who loves those who love God (v. $4b_1$)
3. One who is fair in dealing with others (vv. $4b_2$-5a)
    a) One who keeps his promises (v. $4b_2$)
    b) One who is honorable in financial dealings (vv. 5a)

III. Summary: One Who Fits these Qualifications will not Falter (v. 5b)

Literary Analysis

a. Genre and Structure

Psalm 15 begins with a question, and then responds with an answer. It asks in verse 1: Who is the person fit to stand in the presence of God? Then, verses 2-5 describe the various attributes of such a person (Kraus, vol 1, 226). Segal notes, "All cultures should have their ideal person – the model to be held up to children and adults alike, the goal of education, and the aspiration of the society. Psalm 15 articulates the Israelite ideal" (Kindle Location 1814). The final clause of verse 5, "one who does these things will not falter," serves to close the description of this ideal individual, acting as a stamp of validation and affirmation.

Brueggeman and Bellinger classify this psalm as a form of "Entrance Liturgy," which is a psalmic text that includes a question from pilgrims about entrance to a holy place and a didactic answer. Thus, they explain that while this psalm is both a form of liturgy, it is also intended as dialogical instruction for the community of Israelites (Kindle Location 2509). Kraus agrees with this description, and writes that since "the [opening] question is addressed to God, the answer is given on behalf of God, [and thus] the process of consultation has been transferred to a ritual of the worshipping community...[As a result,] Psalm 15 can in no way be understood as the inquiry of an individual" (vol.1, p. 226).

John Day's description of the parts of an entrance liturgy aligns perfectly with this text. Day writes about the three typical parts of texts in this genre: The first part is a question about who may be admitted to the temple (see verse 1). The second is an answer

that sets out the ethical requirement for entrance (see verses 2-5). The third and final part is words of blessing with regard to those who are qualified to enter the temple (see verse 5b) (Day, 60).

b. Poetic Devices

i. Key Words

The word אל, indicating "no," or "do not" is repeated throughout this psalm, seven times in five verses. What is the message of this emphatic repetition? Segal sites scholar Meir Weiss, who offers an explanation drawing on the tenses of the verbs that are paired with "אל." Paraphrasing Weiss, Segal explains "that the verbs associated with what this person does not do are all in the perfect...whereas the other qualities are either adjectives or imperfect... This, [Weiss] suggests, indicates that one first has to determine what to avoid and then go on to the positives" (Kindle Location 1863-4). Segal offers additional explanation that the "preponderance of negatives" in this text occurs because humans may understand ethical obligations more clearly when they are placed in negative, "do not" language, rather than positive language, which can be interpreted more permissively (Segal, Kindle Location 1866).

As an example of contrast, Psalm 1 similarly uses a list of positives and negatives to describe an ideal of a person who is happy, but uses לא rather than אל, since it seeks to describe the qualities of someone who already exists and thus uses "does not." Rather than in Psalm 15, which teaches people about an ideal and exhorts them to reach it with אל, "do not". Thus, this language further supports the categorization of Psalm 15 as both liturgical and didactic.

ii. Other Literary Features of Note

It is interesting to note the balance of positive and negative conditions in this psalm. Peter Craigie points out that verse 2 offers three positive conditions: walking virtuously, doing right, and speaking truth. Then follows verse 3, which balances verse 2 with three negative conditions: no falsity, no evil, and no reproach. Verse 4 offers two positive conditions: despise reprobates and swear to do good, followed by two negative conditions in verse 5: no usury and no bribery (Craigie, 150-1). Brueggemann and Bellinger explain that this balanced list of ten qualifications (that the person walks virtuously, does right, speaks truthfully, despises reprobates and keeps promises...and does not speak unkindly, do evil, say words of shame, engage in usury or take bribes) has two important effects: "One is that there are ten entrance requirements in the psalm, and thus [it] should be considered as part of the Decalogue tradition in the Pentateuch. [Also,] the list of ten serves as a quick reference for students and portrays morality as a whole for life" (Kindle Location 2510-2512). Accordingly, verse 6 offers a perfect conclusion of the psalm because offers a summary of these ten elements by incorporating positive and negative language to relay the greater message of the psalm: "*do* these things...[you] will *not* be moved [from God] forever" (Schaefer, 35).

Psalm 16: Promises of Faith Renewed

Annotated Translation

(א) מִכְתָּם לְדָוִד
שָׁמְרֵנִי אֵל
כִּי חָסִיתִי בָךְ .

1) A *michtam*[1] of David.
Protect[2] me, God,

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[1] מכתם - This word only appears six times in the Tanakh. The first occurrence is here, followed by identical occurrences in the introductory verses of Psalms 56, 57, 58, 59, and 60. In every case, the word *michtam* occurs paired with *l'David.* As such, the meaning of the word is hard to discern with any degree of certainty, but since we can safely assume that this verse follows the form of other introductory verses in the Psalms, we can say that it is a noun referring to the way in which the psalm was delivered (see Ps. 23: "A *song* of David"; Ps. 90: "A *prayer* of Moses," etc). Thus, I have chosen to follow a similar format here with my translation: "A *michtam* of David." The Septuagint translates this word as a kind of inscription carved into stone, perhaps on a stele or pillar of some sort. Kraus, building on the Septuagint's translation, suggests that "we can assume that Psalm 16 was intoned in the area of the sanctuary in Jerusalem," and that perhaps then "the petitioner ('David') has taken refuge in the protective area of the temple" (235).

[2] שמרני - This word could be equally translated as "keep," "guard," or "protect," and one finds a variety of choices across different translations. I have chosen here to translate this word as "protect," based upon its use in other psalms, particularly Psalm 121 (see footnote #6 and "Key Words" in the translation of Psalm 121), and also Psalms 17.8, 140.5, and 141.9. In each of these other psalms, the psalmist is beseeching God for help

for I seek refuge in You.[3]

(ב) אָמַרְתְּ לַיהוָה
אֲדֹנָי אָתָּה
טוֹבָתִי בַּל עָלֶיךָ.

2) I said to God:[4]
You are my master,[5]

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in the face of evil forces. Especially if we take Kraus' interpretation into account, that "a person in trouble flees to Yahweh in the sanctuary to find refuge with him," then we understand the author of this psalm as a person seeking the comforting, sheltering presence of God in the face of challenge. Thus, I have chosen to translate this word as "protect," which I think most clearly indicates what the psalmist requests from God.

[3] חסיתי בך - This language appears in the introductory verses of many other Psalms (see Pss.7.2, 11.1, 31.2 and 20, and 71.1). While the root, חסה, appears throughout the Tanakh, this particular first-person form only appears in the book of Psalms. Despite this, its translation is not particularly controversial - the idea of seeking a safe place or refuge from God follows the request of שמרני, "protect me." Of greater interest is the pairing of this word with בך, meaning "in You." With this word, the image of God in this psalm comes more clearly into view: God is "You," the sanctuary which can hold and shelter "I."

[4] יהוה – See note 2 on Psalm 15 for explanation of rendering the tetragrammaton as "God."

[5] אדני - Most translations (see JPS, Alter) translate this word as "my Lord," based on the literal meaning of אדון, which is "lord" or "master." Despite the fact that this hierarchical relationship does not inherently seem good according to modern sensibilities, we can

my goodness is only through you.[6]

ג() לִקְדוֹשִׁים אֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ
הֵמָּה וְאַדִּירֵי
כָּל חֶפְצִי בָם.

3) As to the holy ones in the land,
and those who are mighty-[7]

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imagine that in a time of struggle when one calls out for refuge, the idea of a God holding a greater power and control over one's circumstances could be very comforting. Thus, I have left this translation, with its hierarchical language, to retain the imagery of God as master.

[6] בל - This word is a poetic form of the negative אין or לא appears 69 times in the texts of *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, especially in the books of Isaiah, Psalms, and Proverbs (see Isaiah 14.21, 26.11, 26.14, 33.23, 40.24, Proverbs 10.30, 12.3, 23.7, 24.23, and Psalms 10.15, 16.4, 16.8, 104.5, 140.12, and many others). However, in all of these cases, it never appears as it does here, paired with the word עליך. It is illogical to conclude that the phrase is to be understood in the negative, "my goodness is *not* from/through you," since this phrase is a continuation of the earlier verses, which beseech God's protection. From the context, we assume that the phrase must be intended in the affirmative. As such, JPS and Segal both offer "there is none above you," NRSV offers "apart from you," and Alter offers "only through you." The variation across these texts indicates the difficulty of translating this expression with any certainty. Both Alter (45) and Kraus (234-6) note that the meaning of this phrase is unclear, most likely from a corruption of the text beginning here and extending through verses 3 and 4.

[7] אדירי - This word is often used in reference to God's majesty or greatness, such as Isa. 33.21: "For there God in His *greatness* shall be for us like a region of rivers…", Psalm

They were all my desire.[8] [9]

8.2: "O God, our Lord, How *majestic* is Your name throughout the earth…", or Psalm 76.5: "You [God] were resplendent, *glorious,* on the mountains of prey." In this verse, however, this word is applied to the gods of the polythesistic cultures that led the psalmist astray. It seems that the psalmist may have even been using this term sarcastically in an effort to emphasize his point that these other deities are *not* mighty like God. It is hard to translate this verse with any certainty (see footnote #9, below, for further explanation).

[8] הפצי – I have rendered this in the past tense, "were my desire," though this is not explicitly indicated by the text itself. However, in my interpretation, this verse along with verse 4 form a sort of confession on the part of the psalmist. Therefore, it is logical that the meaning of this verse would be in reference to past idol worship, rather than current or future.

[9] This entire phrase is difficult to translate with any degree of certainty. Goldingay writes, "many emendations have been proposed for this verse, but none have carried conviction" (vol 1, p 226). Alter concurs, saying, "Any translation here is guesswork. These terms (קדשים, אדירי) might refer to local deities...or they might indicate [non-Israelite] potentates who were idol worshippers" (45). I have rendered this here as a reference to other deities, based on the appearance of קדשים in Psalm 86.6-8, where it is parallel to בני אלים, meaning "divine beings" (see JPS). I have placed the second clause of this verse in the past tense, based on Alter's assertion that "the speaker at a point in the past had attachments to paganism" (45), and is now confessing this fact in order to ask for God's shelter. Konrad Schaefer offers a similar interpretation, explaining that "it is more

(ד) יִרְבּוּ עַצְּבוֹתָם
אַחֵר מָהָרוּ
בַּל אַסִּיךְ נִסְכֵּיהֶם מִדָּם
וּבַל אֶשָּׂא אֶת שְׁמוֹתָם עַל שְׂפָתָי.

4) May their sorrows be great,
for they betrothed[10] another.

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reasonable to understand this as a past affinity. He or she [now] adheres exclusively to the Lord" (38).

[10] מהרו - The word *maharu* is the verbal form of the noun מוהר, meaning a bride-price. Thus, the verb can be understood as to acquire a wife through the exchange of a bride-price, which indicates marriage. The only other time we see this verbal form of מוהר is in Ex. 22.15: "If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride-price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must *make her his wife by payment of a bride-price*." The image of marriage to depict a close relationship between humans and divine is present throughout the texts of the Prophets and Writings (see Isa. 54.5, Jer. 31.32 and others).

I will no longer[11] pour out their blood offerings,[12]
nor will I carry their names on my lips.[13]

(ה) יְהוָה מְנָת חֶלְקִי וְכוֹסִי
אַתָּה תּוֹמִיךְ גּוֹרָלִי .

5) God[14] is my assigned portion[15] and my cup.[16]

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[11] See note 8 for a discussion of this rendering in past tense.

[12] אסיך נסכיהם מדם – Kraus posits that "the singular statement that this is supposed to have to do with a [sacrificial] offering of blood is most unusual" (237), but we note Isaiah 66.3, which references a pagan blood sacrifice: "As for those who slaughter oxen and slay humans, who sacrifice sheep and immolate dogs, Who *present as oblation the blood* of swine, who offer incense and worship false gods…" From this reference as well as biblical history, we know that blood sacrifices were a regular part of pagan culture, and thus could have been a form of idolatrous worship that the psalmist knew about and even engaged in. Goldingay's research supports the idea that it is not the blood offering that is problematic, but rather the idolatry, saying "there needs [to] be no implication that blood libations were inherently abhorrent; what is objectionable is making them to other gods" (vol 1, p 230).

[13] אשא את שמותם – Carrying a name on one's lips is a euphemism for speaking about someone, as we see in the Decalogue (Ex. 20.7 and Deut. 5.11):
לא תשא את שם יהוה לשוא (You shall not swear falsely by the name of God").

[14] יהוה - It is important to note the use of the tetragrammaton at the beginning of this verse, as it represents the psalmist's change of heart. In verses 3 and 4, he renounced pagan practices; he now changes his language for the divine, which signals a pivots at this verse. Earlier, in verse 1, the psalmist addresses God as אל, which could be seen as a

generic name for any god figure. Now, in the verse that follows the repentant declaration in vv. 3-4, the psalmist addresses God as יהוה, a unique name for the God of the Israelites (Segal, Kindle Location 1902).

[15] מנת חלקי – This phrase is unusual in this context, as מנה is often used to describe a part of something, often a sacrifice, such as in Ex. 29.26: "Then take the breast of Aaron's ram of ordination and offer it as an elevation offering before God; it shall be your *portion,*" and 1 Sam. 1.4-5: "One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give *portions* to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he would give one *portion* only…" חלק has a wider variety of uses, including sacrificial portions, but also often in reference to land and God, such as in Num. 18.20: "And God said to Aaron: You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any *portion* in their midst; I am your *portion* and your share among the Israelites," and again in Deut. 10.9: "That is why the Levites have received no *hereditary portion* along with their kinsmen: the Lord is their portion, as the Lord your God spoke concerning them." The similar language here to Num. 18.20 and Deut. 10.9 have led some scholars to suggest that the author of this psalm was also a Levite (see Kraus vol. 1, p. 238).

[16] כוסי - The literal meaning of this word as "cup" is well established. However, we see that in Psalms (see Psalm 23.5 - "my cup abounds"), this word is sometimes used to refer to the bounty one experiences when in the favor of God. Kraus explains that "when the cultic-sacral backgrounds of כוס are considered, this conceptions means as much as 'decision,' [or] 'lot'...The statements in verses 5-6 express a final trust, based exclusively on [God]" (237). We see these symbols in Josh. 14.1-3, 18.8-10, and Psalm 142.5, where they are used to describe Israel's inheritance of the Promised Land, the fulfillment of

You, God, sustain my fate.[17]

(ו) חֲבָלִים נָפְלוּ לִי בַּנְּעִמִים
אַף נַחֲלָת שָׁפְרָה עָלָי .

God's promise to His people (Schaefer, 38). The metaphor of a cup and its links to other texts that use this word make it worthwhile to retain the more literal translation.

[17] גורלי – While I interpret this word as "fate," it actually refers to the items that would be used for casting lots to determine one's fate, such as in Jonah 1.7: "The men said to one another, 'Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us." They cast lots and the *lot* fell on Jonah." גורל literally means "stones," as the items used to cast lots were usually pebbles. While there is not a root גרל corresponding to stones in Tanakh, other scholars have indicated that the ancient form of the root in both Greek and Arabic indicated something rough or made of stone. (see Paul, p. 466, and BDB entry for גרל, p. 174.)

6) An inheritance[18] fell to me with delight,
indeed my estate is lovely to me.

(ז) אֲבָרֵךְ אֶת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר יְעָצָנִי
אַף לֵילוֹת יִסְּרוּנִי כִלְיוֹתָי .

7) I will bless God who has counseled me,

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[18] חבלים - Most literally, this word is used to refer to rope used to measure the length or distance of something, such as we see in II Samuel 8.2: וימדד שני חבלים– ("he measured out two lengths of cord"), in reference to measuring bodies for slaughter. We see this word used again in Ezekiel 47.13-14, with a more positive tone, this time used to indicate an allotted inheritance: "These shall be the boundaries of the land that you shall allot to the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph shall receive two *portions* [חבלים] and you shall share the rest equally. As I swore to give it to your fathers, so shall this land fall to you as your heritage [בנחלה]." As the Ezekiel reference involves similar parties as appear in this psalm - God as the giver and a pious individual as the receiver - we can assume that this figurative meaning, as opposed to the literal sense of a cord for measurement, is the correct one in this context. The use of the word "נחלה" (meaning "heritage" or "inheritance," see Isa. 57.13, Num. 34.29, and others) later in this verse confirms that this occurrence of חבלים is in reference to an allotment or inheritance of some sort. However, the context suggests that this word may appear here as synecdoche, referring specifically to an allotment of land to more generally indicate God's favor or blessing. Alter confirms this, saying: "Given the emphasis in the previous verse on the Lord as the speaker's portion and lot, the inheritance he now celebrates is probably not a reference to real estate but to his being happy in the his sense of sustaining connection with the God of Israel" (46).

indeed at night my conscience[19] would chastise[20] me.

(ח) שִׁוִּיתִי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִּי תָמִיד
כִּי מִימִינִי בַּל אֶמּוֹט .

8) I will[21] place God always before me,
for when God is at my right hand[22] I will not falter[23].

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[19] כליותי - Literally, this word means "kidneys," but is understood to refer to one's conscience, as cultures of the ancient Near East believed kidneys to be the seat of conscience, or as Kraus puts it, "the innermost impulses of the soul" (239). We see this same usage in Psalm 73.21 and Jer. 17.10.

[20] יסרוני - This word carries the sense of punishment or chastisement for wrongdoing, such as in Lev. 26.18: "And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to *discipline* you sevenfold for your sins," in 1 Kings 12.11: "My father imposed a heavy yoke on you, and I will add to your yoke; my father *flogged* you with whips, but I will *flog* you with scorpions,'" and in Jer. 2.19: "Let your misfortune *reprove* you, let your afflictions rebuke you…" Thus, I have translated it here as chastise, but reprove or rebuke would be equally valid.

[21] שויתי - While this verb is not in the future tense, I have translated it here as "will place" in keeping with the notion that the speaker is making promises about a change to be made going forward (see verse 4).

[22] ימיני - While this word simply means "right," the understanding that it refers to the right hand specifically comes from the myriad occurrences of the word paired with יד, meaning hand (see Jer. 22.24, Psalms 73.23, 110.5, 121.5 and 137.5, Ezekiel 39.3, and others). This word should not be understood literally, but rather to connote the positive valence placed on the right (see Psalm 118.16: "The right hand of God is exalted! The right hand

(ט) לָכֵן שָׂמַח לִבִּי וַיָּגֶל כְּבוֹדִי
אַף בְּשָׂרִי יִשְׁכֹּן לָבֶטַח .

9) Thus my heart rejoices and my whole being[24] exults.

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of God is triumphant!"), indicating that if God is at one's right, one is assured God's favor and protection. Goldingay writes that "we may infer that faltering or falling down refers to wavering in commitment, as in Psalm 15.5. God's being at the supplicant's right hand is a complementary image to [this]. The right hand is the position of support, and God's being there encourages the supplicant to stay faithful" (vol 1, p 232).

[23] בל אמוט - This is a common expression, especially in Psalms. In Ps. 46.6 we read: "God is in its midst, it will *not be toppled*"; in Ps. 55.23: "God will never let the righteous man *collapse*"; and in Ps. 62.3: "Truly God is my rock and deliverance, my haven; I shall never *be shaken*." In each of these occurrences, we see that they are rendered in the negative and enacted by God - God offers protection so that one will *not* falter.

[24] כבודי - There is disagreement across different manuscripts and translations about what this word is, let alone what it means. If it is vocalized as it appears above, it literally means "my heaviness," or "my greatness"; but it seems to be used here and in other instances throughout the Tanakh to connote one's whole being, or all of one's self (see Gen. 49.6, Ps. 7.6, and others). It is worth noting that some manuscripts render it "*keveidi*," meaning "my liver." While this may seem strange, it is actually in keeping with the body imagery of this verse and the one that proceeds it: hand, heart, kidneys, and now liver and body. However, I have rendered it here as "whole being," as per JPS and Goldingay, who asserts: "each term refers to a part of the human person but stands for the whole person" (vol 1, p 232). Thus, "whole person" relays the idea of the verse - that

Indeed, my body rests secure.

(י) כִּי לֹא תַעֲזֹב נַפְשִׁי לִשְׁאוֹל
לֹא תִתֵּן חֲסִידְךָ לִרְאוֹת שָׁחַת .

10) For You will not abandon my life[25] to Sheol,[26]
nor let Your faithful one see the Pit.[27]

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every part of the psalmist is joyful, and accounts for the literal translation of the Hebrew as it is vocalized in the Masoretic text.

[25] נפשי - See footnote #10 on Psalm 23 for a discussion of this word.

[26] שאול – Several names are given to the Netherworld, the abode of the dead, the most common being *Sheol*, always feminine and without the definite article. Tanakh indicates that *Sheol* is located somewhere under the earth (see Num. 16:30), or at the bottoms of the mountains (see Jonah 2:7), or under the waters–the cosmic ocean (see Job 26:5), all places far away and unreachable, even perhaps by God (Alfonso, 111). Kraus explains: "In [the underworld of] *Sheol* there is no thankful glorifying of God in praise, it is an area remote from worship…[a life in *Sheol*] is this soulless, shadowy existence which is far, far removed from God" (162). When we remember that the speaker is beseeching God's closeness, it is logical that the desire to avoid *Sheol* - the epitome of distance from God - would follow.

[27] שחת - The word *shachat* appears only 23 times in the entire Tanakh. However, in most of these instances, it indicates some type of hole or pit in the ground. For example, in Psalm 30.10, we see ברידתי אל שחת ("my descent into the pit"), which tells us it is down, or perhaps under; in Psalm 94.13, we read יכרה לרשע שחת ("[God] will dig a pit for the wicked"), which tells us that it is a place meant for those who are evil, or out of God's favor. From these instances, combined with the word's placement in this verse as a

(יא) תּוֹדִיעֵנִי אֹרַח חַיִּים
שֹׂבַע שְׂמָחוֹת אֶת פָּנֶיךָ
נְעִמוֹת בִּימִינְךָ נֶצַח

11) You teach[28] me the path of life[29].
The fullest[30] joy is in Your presence;

---

parallel to *Sheol*, we gather that these words are synonymous, and this is not just any pit but rather a pit of suffering where the unfaithful descend after death, where they remain distant from God in the underworld of *Sheol*.

[28] תודיעני - Literally, this translates as "you make me know." I have instead rendered it as "you teach me," which is more colloquial and follows the tone of prior verses which are all in the second person "you," addressing God directly and extolling the things that God will do for the psalmist.

[29] ארח חיים – We also see this phrase twice in Proverbs. In Prov. 5.5-6, we see this phrase connected to *Sheol*, as it does in the verse prior to this one. In this occurrence, we see a similar idea to our verse here but rendered in the negative: "Her feet go down to Death; her steps take hold of *Sheol*. She does not chart a *path of life*…" Similarly, in Prov. 15.24 we read: "For an intelligent man the *path of life* leads upward, in order to avoid *Sheol* below." From these sources, we glean the connection between ארח חיים and שאול: they are two opposing options, and a person either chooses or is sentenced to walk one or the other.

[30] שׂבע - There are very few occurrences of this word in this particular form in the text of the Tanakh. However, we can understand its meaning from similar, though not identical occurrences, such as Proverbs 13.25: צדיק אכל לשבע נפשו ("The righteous one eats to his heart's content"), indicating the translation of שבע to indicate fullness or a feeling of

delight is at Your right hand[31] forever.

satiety. Thus, we should understand its meaning in this verse to indicate an amount of joy so great that the psalmist is sated, hence “the fullest joy.”

[31] ימינך – See note #22, above.

Structural Outline

Psalm 16: Promises of Faith Renewed

I. Superscription (v. 1a)

II. Direct Address to God
   - A. Call for Help: The Psalmist's plea for refuge (v. 1b)
   - B. The Psalmist's Profession of Loyalty to God (v. 2)
     1. Pledge of monotheism (v. 2a)
     2. Declaration of divine benevolence (v. 2b)

III. Description of the Crisis: The Psalmist's Confession (vv. 3-4)
   - A. Admission of former idolatrous practices (v. 3)
   - B. Disavowal of any further idolatrous practices (v. 4)
     1. Curse upon those who continue idolatry (v. 4a)
     2. Disavowing of idolatrous practices (v. 4b)

IV. Elements of Renewed Faith (vv. 5-8)
   - A. Celebration of Divine Inheritance (vv. 5-6)
     1. God is the psalmist's lot (v. 5a)
     2. God sustains the psalmist's fate (v. 5b)
     3. The psalmist is pleased with his lot and fate (v. 6)
   - B. Promises of Allegiance and Confidence in the Results (vv. 7-8)
     1. Guilt-motivated commitment to bless God (v. 7)
     2. Protection-motivated commitment to prioritize God (v. 8)

V. Positive Conclusion: the Joyful Security of (Renewed) Faith (vv. 9-11)
   - A. Rejoicing of body and spirit (v. 9a)
   - B. Security (v. 9b)
   - C. Avoiding abandonment to the underword after death (v. 10)
   - D. Enduring rewards from God (v. 11)
     1. God sustains life (v. 11a)
     2. God provides joy (v. 11b)
     3. God provides protection (v. 11c)

Literary Analysis

1. Genre and Structure

Breuggemann and Bellinger describe Psalm 16 as an individual lament. Psalms in this genre typically arise out of a problem or crisis experienced by a person of who holds a deep faith in God. Most often, such psalms read like a petitionary prayer, and include 1) a direct address to God, 2) a portrayal of the experienced crisis, 3) a call for help, and 4) a positive conclusion (Kindle Locations 681-683). Psalm 16 includes each part of this structure, though in a seemingly extended form. In verses 1-2, the psalmist addresses God directly with a request, "Protect me, God, I seek refuge in you," followed by praise, "You are my God, my goodness is only through you." Verse 3 describes the crisis: the psalmist has strayed from God turned to other gods of the surrounding communities (verse 3). In verse 4, the psalmist offers a confession of wrongdoing: "I will no longer pour out their blood offerings, nor will I carry their names on my lips." This is followed by praise in verses 5 and 6, "God is my assigned portion and my lot. You, God, sustain my fate. An inheritance fell to me with delight, indeed my estate is lovely to me." This praise introduces a promise of renewed faith, trust, and loyalty to God in verses 7 and 8: "I will bless God who has counseled me, indeed at night my conscience would chastise me. I will place God always before me, for when God is at my right hand I will not falter." Finally, verses 9-11 conclude this lament with a positive outcome, namely the psalmist rejoicing in the security of his new (or renewed) favor with God: "Thus, my heart rejoices and my whole being exults. Indeed, my body rests securely. For You will not abandon

my life to *Sheol*, nor will You let Your faithful one see the Pit. You teach me the path of life. The fullest joy is in Your presence; delight is at Your right hand forever."

We note, of course, that the psalm does not fit neatly into Brueggemann and Bellinger's proposed structure for an individual lament. The psalm wanders a bit, repeating certain ideas more than once, and reordering things as a result. Kraus suggests that this may be the result of the likely textual corruptions in verses 3 and 4 (see footnote #8 for further discussion of these corruptions). He notes that "in considering the formal aspects of Psalm 16 the corruptness of the text...presents difficulties. Only with the proviso that the understanding of the text [as] presented in the translation is probably correct can the psalm be explained" (Kraus, vol 1, 234).

2. Poetic Devices

a. *Key Themes*

Despite some of the convoluted language in verses 2-4, Psalm 16 offers a clear overall message: that there is joyful security in God's presence for those who are faithful to God. After the psalmist's call for help and confession of idolatrous practices, this message is made clear through the final verses of the text. Verses 9-11 well-summarize the central theme of the psalm through both positive language (verses 9 and 11) and negative language (v. 10). Together, the joyful hope that the psalmist expresses about the benefits of his renewed faith in verses 9 and 11 is balanced by the message of relief in verse 10: now that the psalmist is faithful, God will keep him from *Sheol*.

b. Key Motifs

We notice that the psalmist utilizes two motifs in the text: that of home, and that of body. First, the text offers repeated references to home and dwelling. The psalmist

requests that God be מעון, his refuge. With this, the theme of refuge is established. In verses 5 and 6, the psalmist refers to God as "assigned portion," "lot," "inheritance," and "estate," all words that can be used to refer to land allotted to a person. In verse 9, we see the root שכן, which also refers to dwelling or settling down. Segal explains that the effect of these related words is that the psalmist clearly establishes God as his "newfound home" (Kindle Location 1916).

We also note the repeated body imagery present in the psalm: kidneys (כליות, v. 7), hand (ימיני, v. 8), heart (לב, v. 9), liver (כבדי, v. 9) and flesh (בשר, v.9). Together, these parts depict the psalmist's entire being. Goldingay explains that "this provides a basis for a joyful confidence for the future that embraces the whole person." Indeed, verses 7-11 depict a person who has, in every part of his body and soul, turned his trust and faith to God.

c. Key Words

While there is not a definitive *leitwort* in this text, it is worth noting the repetition of the word "בל" in verses 2 (בל עליך), 4 (בל אסיך, בל אשא), and 8 (בל אמוט). In verse two, בל introduces the psalmist's statement that he will no other gods. In verse 4, בל introduces the two clauses in which the psalmist confesses his past idolatry, and declares that he will no longer engage in such acts. In verse 8, בל introduces the notion that with this renewal of committed faith, God will not let him falter. Thus, we see that בל acts to draw our attention to the main ideas of the text: that if God is truly one's only God, God will protect him/her.

d. Other Literary Features of Note

A close reading of the psalm reveals two interesting additional features: the psalmist's shifting language for God between second to third person, and the summarizing effect of the final verse. If we turn first to the shifting God language, which changes from second-person (indicated by אתה, as well as the future tense –ת and the suffix –ך) to third person (אדני , יהוה, as well as the future tense –י) constantly, even within a single verse (see v. 2). Segal points out that this changing language "may reflect a subconscious need for bolstering and reassurance...The movement back and forth between the second and third-person references to God...hint[s] of moments of fluctuating awareness of God's immediate presence...there seems to be some doubt beneath the surface" (Kindle Locations 1912-1915). This fluctuation is even more powerful when contrasted against the surety of the concluding verses, which declare, finally, "God is with me forever, and will not abandon me!" The result is that we are brought into the psalmist's emotional journey in this psalm, from a place of repentance and unsure relationship, to one in which the psalm realizes that he will delight at God's right hand forever (v. 11).

We have already noted that no particular key words emerge from this psalm. Instead, the psalmist seemed to prefer synonyms, as evidenced by the seven references to body parts (all of which represent the person as a whole) and four words to refer to his allotted inheritance (Segal, Kindle Location 1920). This makes it even more noteworthy, then, when we see repetition for the first time in the final verse of the psalm. This verse does more than just reinforce the way in which the psalmist's relationship to God has changed over the course of the text. It also serves as a summary for the psalm, by repeating three important words that were used earlier in the psalm: שמח, נעם, and ימינך.

By choosing these particular words to reiterate in the concluding verse, the psalmist gives us a snapshot of what should be “takeaway” for the psalm: there is joy and delight with God’s protection.

Psalm 23: Comfort in God's Care

Annotated Translation

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר.

1) A David song:[1]
God[2] is my shepherd;[3]

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[1] לדודמזמור- For discussion of this superscription, the historical figure of David, and the meaning of "ל," see footnotes 1, 2, and 3 on Psalm 15.

[2] יהוה - This "ineffable" name of God is difficult to translate. Without any sure knowledge of its pronunciation, the Masoretes vocalized the tetragrammaton to be read as "Adonai," meaning "lord," from the Hebrew "אדון," which means lord or master. Thus it became customary to translate this substitute name of God into English as "the Lord." However, to do so eliminates to the wonderful ambiguity of the Hebrew, יהוה, a word which we neither know how to pronounce nor how to translate. To retain this ambiguity, Kraus and Goldingay both use a form of "Yahweh," but even that implies a knowledge of pronunciation that we cannot know with certainty. In the NJPS translation, translator Chaim Stern rendered יהוה as "The Eternal," which was "a choice that dates back to Moses Mendelsohn's 1783 translation of the Torah into German, and one that reflects a biblical understanding of this divine name as related to the Hebrew of 'to be'" (Eskenazi and Weiss, xxxiii). However, I wanted to offer this translation in the simplest way possible, so I have chosen translate יהוה as "God," because I believe it is the closest English word we have that is gender neutral and open to interpretation as the tetragrammaton, despite the fact that it obscures our ability to differentiate between "Elohim" and "YHWH" in this translation.

I lack nothing[4].

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[3] רעי - We often see this word paired with צאן, which refers to a flock of sheep (See Gen. 4:2; Isa. 63:11; Zech. 11:17). Thus, I have rendered it here as "shepherd," one who tends sheep, in keeping with the popular translation of this verse (see Alter, JPS). God is also described as shepherding the community or individuals in other psalms, such as in Psalms 28.9, which places רעם ונשאם parallel to הושיע וברך. We also see other biblical citations that depict God as shepherd, such as in Joseph's blessing to Ephraim and Menasseh in Gen. 48.15: "The God who has been my *shepherd* from my birth to this day"; in Isa. 40.11: "Like a *shepherd* God pastures God's flock"; or in Micah 7.14: "Oh, *shepherd* Your people with Your staff, Your very own flock." In Psalm 80.2, we see "Shepherd" used as a name for God: "Give ear, O *Shepherd* of Israel who leads Joseph like a flock!" Thus, we see that when God acts as a shepherd, it involves caring for, sustaining, and ensuring the blessing of His flock. With the understanding of the connection between רועה and צאן, the psalmist's image of God and the Israelites comes into light; the speaker is one of the sheep, and God is the protective shepherd who dutifully tends His flock. (It is worth noting that the shepherd metaphor for gods and kings was common throughout literature of the ancient Near East, and is found throughout texts such Homer's *Iliad* and Manetho's *History of Egypt*).

[4] אחסר - We see this verb in other texts which describe relationships in which one partner sustains the other in some way, such as in Prov. 31:11: "Her husband puts his confidence in her, and [he] *lacks nothing*." We see a similar use in I Kings 17:14, where תהסר is used as a parallel to תכלה ("to run out"): "The jar of flour shall not run out and the jug of oil shall not fail." Thus, we see that the verb refers to lacking or being deficient in some way,

(ב) בִּנְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יַרְבִּיצֵנִי
עַל מֵי מְנֻחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי.

2) In fields of grass[5] God[6] lays me down;[7]

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but often in the context of one *not* lacking because of relationships that provide for him/her. Thus, I have translated אחסר here as "I lack nothing."

[5] נאות דשא - The only other time these two words appear together is in Joel 2.22, when the prophet promises God's bounty to the animals, saying: "Fear not, O beasts of the field (שדי), for the *pastures* (נאות) in the wilderness are *clothed with grass* (דשאו)." In this verse, we see that שדי, meaning field, is parallel to נאות. Thus, we can conclude that these two words refer similarly to a field, especially one that might be used for grazing animals, i.e., a pasture. דשא appears in this verse from Joel as a verb which refers to a verdant and fertile field that is good for grazing. When we combine this idea with the shepherding imagery evoked with the word רעי in the first verse of this psalm, this image of a lush pasture comes further into focus.

[6] יהוה - While gender neutral Hebrew does not exist, certain words can be interpreted to have gender-neutral meanings. In keeping with the "gender accurate" translation practice established by David Stein in his updated translation for *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, I have rendered the subject of these verbs as "God," rather than "He."

[7] ירבצני - We see this verb, רבץ, in the causative form, only six other times in all of Tanakh. Of these six, four relate to shepherding, including this citation here. In Isaiah 13.20, we read: "Nevermore shall it be settled, nor dwelt in through all the ages...no shepherds *make flocks lie down* there." Similarly, in Jer. 33.12, we read: "Thus said the Lord of Hosts: in this ruined place, without man and beast, and in all its towns, there shall again be a pasture for shepherds, where *they can rest their flocks*." In both of these

to waters of rest[8] [God] directs[9] me.

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instances (see also Song 1.7), the verb appears with רועה as its subject, a reflection of the similar themes of sheep and shepherd in this psalm. Perhaps the best correlate to our verse here appears in Ezekiel 34.15-16, in which God is portrayed as the metaphorical shepherd, with the Israelites as his flock. The verse reads: "I Myself will graze My flock, and I Myself will *let them lie down*—declares the Lord God. I will look for the lost, and I will bring back the strayed; I will bandage the injured, and I will sustain the weak; and the fat and healthy ones I will destroy. I will tend them rightly." Thus, we see that רבץ is one of the protective tasks a shepherd does to tend his/her sheep, along with caring for the injured and bringing back the lost. It is a comforting, protective way of portraying God. This is corroborated by Alter, who writes "The verb used here, *hirbits*, is a specialized one for making animals lie down; hence the sheep-shepherd metaphor is carefully sustained." (Alter, 78).

[8] מי מנוחות - The typical translation of "still waters" does not take the geographical context into account. Goldingay explains that "this traditional rendering makes sense in a European context where many rivers and streams run through the countryside, but in a Middle Eastern wilderness the speed of streams is not a problem, and the [Hebrew Bible] makes no reference to it." My rendering, "water of rest," attempts to utilize Goldingay's point that these Middle Eastern מי מנוחות are "rather waters by which the sheep may rest, the idea being parallel to lying down in grassy pastures. The sheep may drink and lie down by the pool, again knowing they can get up and have another drink. It is an idyllic idea, perhaps rarely experienced in real life" (vol 1, pp 349-350). Others render the

(ג) נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב
יַנְחֵנִי בְמַעְגְּלֵי צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ.

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phrase as “quiet waters” (Alter), and “still waters” (NRSV, Hakham), but these do not make the notion of “rest” sufficiently apparent.

[9] ינהלני - This form of the verb נהל always appears in connection to shepherding imagery, such as in Genesis 47.17: “So they brought their livestock to Joseph...thus he *provided* them with bread that year,” and in Isaiah 40.11: “Like a shepherd God pastures God’s flock: God gathers the lambs in God’s arms and carries them in God’s bosom; gently God *drives* the mother sheep.” Thus, rather than the typical translations of “leads me” or “guides me,” we see that this is actually a particular type of directing that a shepherd does for his sheep: a kind of urging, pushing, or driving them towards pastures - or in this case water - that will be to their benefit. Tranquil waters are the perfect place for sheep to drink after eating in a verdant field. Goldingay agrees, “guiding - *nahal* - is the act of a powerful but caring party toward a weaker and needy party” (vol 1, p 349). (See also Gen. 33.14, 2 Chron. 28.15, and others.)

3) [God] restores[10] me;[11]
[God] benevolently leads[12] me in ways of righteousness[13] for the sake of [God's] name.

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[10] ישובב - Here, the verb שוב, meaning "to return," appears in the intensive *polel* form, שבב. While שוב appears over a thousand times in the Tanakh, this is the only occurrence of the verb in the polel form. Thus, its exact meaning is unclear, but we can conclude that it is an intensified form of return, such as restore or bring back. Goldingay explains that this is "an expression that suggests reviving a person...by given them food and drink, so that it sums up the implications of verses 1 and 2...as a shepherd, God restores my life and seeks that I lack nothing by making sure that I have food, water, and rest" (vol 1, p 350).

[11] נפשי - While many texts have traditionally translated this as "my soul," the word נפש is used throughout the psalms to refer to the totality of a person's self, used in the first person "me" (see Psalms 7:3, 17:13, 35:17, 86:2, etc). Using "me" here also suits the subject-verb pattern that is already present in these few lines: God lays *me* down, God directs *me*, and now, God restores *me*. The effect of this repetition is that it establishes the focus of the psalm on the individual through the use of the first-person singular.

[12] ינחני - While similar to נהל in verse 2, נחה carries a particular sense of being guided on a correct path, often by some benevolent person or by God. For example, in Genesis 24.48, we read: "Then I bowed low in homage to the Lord and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who *led me on the right way* to get the daughter of my master's brother for his son." Similarly, in Exodus 13.17, we read: "Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not *lead them by way* of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, 'The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to

(ד) גַּם כִּי אֵלֵךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת
לֹא אִירָא רָע כִּי אַתָּה עִמָּדִי
שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ
הֵמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי.

Egypt'" (see also Numbers 23.7). Thus, we see that like נהל, נחה refers to a particular kind of leading, specifically leading someone to a place of blessing and goodness (Gen. 24) or safety (Ex. 13). Thus, the pairing of ינחני with מעגלי צדק is particularly appropriate, and I have rendered it "*benevolently leads me* in ways of righteousness" to make this meaning clear.

[13] במעגלי צדק - These two words only appear together one other time, in Isaiah 26:7: "the way is straight for the righteous is straight; You, Just One, make smooth the *course of the righteous*." This indicates that not only is the way of the righteous straightforward, honest, and upright, but also that God makes it more so, easing the path ahead, literally "smoothing" it. We see similarly constructed phrases in Proverbs, such as מעגל טוב ("*good course*") in Prov. 2:9, and במעגלי ישר ("guide you in *straight courses*") in Prov. 4:11. In each of these verses, we see that it is a metaphor for a way of living, rather than a literal path of some kind. Together, these meanings make it the perfect subject for the verb, נהל. I have rendered the expression as "ways of righteousness" to reflect its metaphoric, rather than literal, meaning.

4) Though I walk in the valley of death's shadow,[14]

[14] צלמות - This word appears several other times, in Psalms 44.20 and 107.10-14, as well as in the books of Isaiah 9.1, Jeremiah 2.6 and 13.16, Amos 5.8, and several times in the book of Job. In each case, the word refers only to darkness, without including the "shadow" or "death." An example of this can be found in Job 3:5, in which צלמות is paired with חושך and used to connote an intensified form of darkness: "May darkness and *deep gloom* reclaim it." These words are also paired in Ps. 107.10: "some lived in *deepest darkness*." Goldingay, using these examples, translates this verse without any mention of death, saying "Even when I walk in the darkest canyon" (vol 1., p. 350). Goldingay explains the origins of the word further, explaining: "[צלמות] may have originally been pointed *tzalmut* (meaning shadowy-ness), but the [Masoretic text's] pointing heightens its effect by making it suggest a deathly shadow. In turn, 'deathly' is likely a form of superlative, as is sometimes the case in English ('dead wrong'), yet here an appositive one because the darkness [in valleys where flocks went to graze] did threaten death" (vol. 1, p. 351). Alter explains that "the [Masoretic] vocalization reflects...an orthographic pun or a folk etymology (*tsel* means 'shadow,' and *mavet* means death), so there is justification in retaining the death component" (Alter, 79). Thus, even though it is not the most literal translation, I have retained "valley of death's shadow" in deference to the proverbial "valley of the shadow of death"; yet I altered the expression slightly to retain the concise nature of the Hebrew.

I do not fear evil,[15]
because You are with me.
Your rod and staff[16] -

[15] לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי - We note that the converse of this phrase appears in Isaiah 41.10: אל תירא כי עמך אני - "Do not fear, because I am with you." In our text, the psalmist is the speaker; but in Isaiah, in nearly the exactly same language, God is the speaker assuring the Israelites of His abiding presence. In both instances, this is an expression of lasting trust and comfort that comes out of a faithful relationship between God and his flock.

[16] שבטך ומשענתך - These two words describe the implements that a shepherd uses in his work. At first, it might seem strange to think of a club (rod) and a walking stick (staff) as comforting, but we must consider these items from the sheep's perspective - these are the implements that explain "I do not fear for you are with me," in the clause prior. The shepherd makes his presence felt with these two tools. In Ps. 2.9, Isa. 10.5, and Ex. 21.20, we read that a rod is a tool that can destroy or even kill. In Zech. 8.4, we read that the staff is a tool the shepherd can lean on for support in order to remain alert and upright when he grows weary. Goldingay points out that the staff "is also the means by which a shepherd might keep the sheep in order and knock down olives for them to eat" (vol. 1, p. 351). Thus, these two tools bring comfort because the rod can be used to fight off attackers and protect the sheep, and the staff helps the shepherd attend to his task and also keep any sheep from wandering off and getting lost.

they comfort[17] me.

(ה) תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי שֻׁלְחָן נֶגֶד צֹרְרָי
דִּשַּׁנְתָּ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי
כּוֹסִי רְוָיָה .

5) You prepare a table[18] for me
before[19] all my enemies[20],

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[17] ינחמני - While some translators render this as "console me," "comfort" seems more appropriate in light of the shepherding imagery in the psalm (see note #17). We can imagine a flock of sheep being comforted when they see the shepherd's staff, indicating the protective, guiding presence of their leader. Goldingay adds to this image, saying, "comfort - *naham* - sometimes suggests emotional encouragement and sometimes action that changes a situation, and both would be relevant in this context" (vol 1, p 351).

[18] שלחן - Setting a table for a guest is to act as a gracious host. We see this in Prov. 9.2, in which Wisdom prepares to generously host a feast for those who are simple-minded and in need: "[Wisdom] has prepared the feast, mixed the wine, and also set the table." Another example can be found in Job 36.16, in which one of Job's "friends" speaks about God's generosity, saying: "God draws you away from distress...your table is full with rich food." Thus, we see that *shulchan* can be used as synecdoche, representing not only the table itself but also all that the table holds: God's favor and protection. The psalmist is the beneficiary of this, as Kraus explains, "God makes his appearance [here] as the beneficent host who visibly sets the table for one who is persecuted and in this way takes him into the sphere of protection" (vol. 1, p. 308).

[19] נגד - The word נגד is at times used in reference to something that is in opposition to something else. This can be in the context of relationship, such as עזר כנגדו ("fitting helper") from Genesis 2.18, which describes Eve as a helper who is an equal, balancing

You moisten[21] my head with oil,

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opposite force to Adam. This can also be in in the sense of physical space, that something is placed across from, or in front of, something else, such as Exodus 19:2: “Israel encamped there *in front of* the mountain.” Thus, I have chosen to translate נגד here “before,” because the verse does not mean that God literally sets a table in front of anyone, but rather metaphorically gives the psalmist the things he needs for sustenance in way that is noticed by his enemies and impedes them in some way.

[20] צררי - From the root צר, meaning "to make narrow" or "to constrain." Thus, we infer that the psalmist understood an enemy to be one who constrains another causing them distress of body and spirit. This is reflected in Psalm 31.10: “Have mercy on me, God, for I am *in distress*; my eyes are wasted by vexation, my body and soul as well.” We see this also in Psalm 42.11: “Crushing my bones, my foes *taunt/revile/belittle me*.” This elevates our understanding of the “table before my enemies” as God creating a space for the psalmist as a means of protection against those who seek to crush him and belittle him.

[21] דשנת - In most other occurrences of this root, דשן, the word is connected to fat, often used to literally mean “be fat,” such as Deut. 31.20: “When I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey that I promised to their fathers, and they eat their fill and *grow fat*.” In other instances, the root appears as a noun in verses related to sacrifice, specifically, to burnt offerings, perhaps because of the fat that oozed from them after their burning. For example, in Psalm 20.4, we read: “My He receive all of your meal offerings, and approve your *burnt offerings*.” We gather from these references that דשן is often connected to ideas of satiety and plenty, which fits with the image of God’s set table in this verse. However, Alter writes that rather than the more literal sense of fat or sacrifice,

my cup is brimming.[22]

(ו) אַךְ טוֹב וָחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי
כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּי
וְשַׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית יְהוָה
לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים.

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the word is used here as a metaphor - certainly, the psalmist is not being prepared for sacrifice! He writes, "the verb here, *dishen*, [has] associations [that] are sensual rather than sacramental. Etymologically, it means something like 'to make luxuriant.' This verse, then, lists all the physical elements of a happy life - a table laid out with good things to eat, a head of hair well rubbed with olive oil, and an overflowing cup of wine" (Alter, 79). I have chosen Alter's translation, "moisten," as a result.

[22] רויה - This root, רוה, appears infrequently (14 times) in the Tanakh. Besides this instance, it appears as a noun in Psalm 66:12: ותוציאנו לרויה ("you brought us out into abundance"). Also, in Isaiah 34.7, רוה appears as parallel to דשן, which means to be made fat, as per the discussion in note #23, above. The verse reads: "And their land shall be drunk with blood, their soil shall be *saturated with fat*," and thus equates רוה with the notion of fullness, saturation, and/or making fat. Thus, the contents of the cup should be understood as full and abundant, but without the notion of overflowing or spilling, which could be construed negatively. Goldingay agrees that the cup's full state is a positive thing for the psalmist, saying, "[it is] rightly inferred that the cup fills and gives great enjoyment to the person, rather than that the cup itself overflows" (vol 1, p 345). Goldingay chooses to translate the word as "amply satisfies," but I believe that such a translation ignores the contents of the cup, which are not irrelevant. Thus, I have chosen to translate the word as "brimming," which offers a positive connotation of fullness.

6) Surely, goodness and kindness[23] will pursue[24] me

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[23] חסד - Most instances of this word appear in instances when they mean kindness transmitted from one party to another who is faithful, or loyal, to him/her. An example of this is Genesis 21.23, which reads: "Therefore swear to me (Abimelech) here by God that you (Abraham) will not deal falsely with me or with my kin, but will deal with me and with the land in which you have sojourned - כחסד - *as loyally* as I have dealt with you." Another example of this usage is Joshua 2.12: "Now, since I [Rahab] have *shown loyalty* to you [the spies she hides in her house], swear to me by God that you in turn will *show loyalty* to my family." Thus, the use of חסד is used to describe loyalty, a type of kindness given out of a sense of reciprocity for one's faithful behavior. Often, the word specifically is used to describe the kindness extended by God to a person who is faithful to Him, such as Isaiah 54.8: "In slight anger, for a moment, I (God) hid My face from you (Israelites). But with *kindness* everlasting, I will take you back in love." From these sources, we see that חסד carries the idea of benevolence and protection given in return for one's faithfulness, be it to God or another person. This kindness reinforces the relationship, and accordingly, Goldingay translates it as "commitment" (vol. 1, p. 352). Thus, the use of this word tells us a great deal about the relationship the psalmist perceives himself to have with God, namely, that he has been, and will be, loyal to God, and thus trusts that God will be kindly towards him in return.

[24] ירדפוני - From the root רדף, meaning to "pursue," or "run after" often in a negative context, similar to "overtake." For example, in Gen. 44.4 we read: "They had just left the city and had not gone far, when Joseph said to his steward, "Up, *go after* the men! And when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why did you repay good with evil?" (see similar

all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the House of God.[25]
as long as I live.[26]

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use in Gen. 31.23; Josh. 24.6; 2 Kings 5.21 and others). However, we know that the subject of רדף can also be positive, as in Deut. 16.20: “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Likewise in this verse, the psalmist speaks of being pursued, no longer by enemies, but by goodness and kindness.

[25] בית יהוה - We know that this expression refers to the Temple in Jerusalem specifically from verses like Jeremiah 27.21: “For thus says Adonai of Hosts, God of Israel, concerning the utensils that remain in the *House of God*, the House of the King of Judah and Jerusalem.” The sanctuary in Jerusalem is understood as a place of comfort where God dwells, as evidenced in Psalm 27.4, “One thing I have desired of God...is to dwell in the House of God all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of God and frequent His Temple” and Psalm 134.1-2: “Now, bless God, you servants of God who stand nightly in the *house of God*. Lift your hands toward the sanctuary and bless God.” The description of God’s Temple as a home follows the “God as Host” theme in this section of the Psalm; the table is set in God's house. Kraus confirms this idea in his commentary on the Psalms, saying: "The place where [God] dispenses the rights of protection and guest status is...the Temple...The goodness and mercy experienced in the sanctuary now run after [the Psalmist]." (309).

[26] ארך ימים - We also see this expression in Psalms 91.14-16, which reads: “Because he is devoted to Me (God) I will deliver him; I will keep him safe, for he knows My name...I will rescue him and make him honored; I will let him *live to a ripe old age*, and show him My salvation.” Further, we see that this phrase is used as a parallel to כל ימי חיי (“all the

days of my life"). Thus, we know that it is incorrect to translate this as "forever," but rather a healthy, long life. Alter corroborates this when he writes, "The viewpoint of the poem is in and of the here and now and is in no way eschatological. The speaker hopes for a happy fate all his born days, and prays for the good fortune to abide in [God's] sanctuary...all, or perhaps at least most, of [his] days" (80). Thus, Alter offers the translation: "for many long days." Kraus, translates this expression as "as long as I live" (vol. 1, p. 309), which I have retained here - while the Hebrew does not directly offer this first person reading, the parallel with כל ימי חיי allows us to infer that these are the same ימים - the days belonging to the psalmist.

Structural Outline

Psalm 23: Comfort in God's Care

I. Superscription (v. 1a)
II. God as a Caring Shepherd (vv. 1b-4)
    A. Introduction of the Relationship and Metaphor: "God is my shepherd" (v. 1b)
    B. Description of God's acts as Shepherd (vv. 2-4)
        1. Acts of Physical and Emotional Sustenance (v. 2-3)
        2. Acts of Protection and Consolation (v. 4)
III. God as a Generous Host (v. 5)
IV. Conclusion: Expressions of Hope (v. 6)
    A. To only be pursued by goodness (v. 6a)
    B. To dwell with God (v. 6b)

Literary Analysis

1. Genre and Structure

Psalm 23 begins with four words: יהוה רעי לא אחסר (God is my Shepherd, I lack nothing). Of these four words, which Nechama Leibowitz referred to as an example of "monumental brevity," the first two refer to God and the second two refer to the psalmist.[1] God is a shepherd, a protector and provider, and thus the psalmist is provided for, their relationship demonstrated in these juxtaposed pairs of words. To understand this relationship in greater depth, we look to the symbolism of the psalm, which exists in two main sections. The first section, verses 1-4, depicts God as a shepherd and the psalmist as a member of God's flock. This relationship is described with vivid details of a gorgeous pastoral scene: verdant, lush pastures and cool, calm waters.

The second section, verse 5, depicts God as a host, and the psalmist as a guest in God's house. God prepares a beautiful, full table for this guest, offering him abounding drink and luxury of a head rubbed with oil. We note that despite the different symbols in each of these sections, there are significant similarities between the two. Whether as a shepherd or a host, God is depicted in this psalm as a provider and sustainer for the wandering, vulnerable psalmist. The psalm concludes with the confidence that only goodness will come to the psalmist, as he dwells eternally with God.

Brueggemann and Bellinger classify this psalm as a "trust psalm," placing it in a shared category with Psalms 91, 121, 125, and 131. Such psalms, they write, "praise God as worthy of the community's [or an individual's] trust, worthy of being trusted with their lives" (Kindle Locations 10143-10144). Kraus writes that rather than characterizing this as a "trust psalm," it is better placed in the category of "psalms of individual lament."

Such psalms “derive from a crisis of a person of faith... His/her prayers address Israel’s God, and portray the crisis and call for help. Most often the prayers come to a positive conclusion” (Brueggeman and Bellinger, Kindle Locations 681-683). Indeed, we do see that elements of this type align with the content of Psalm 23, namely a prayer to God in a time of crisis and a positive resolution. However, there is a key part missing that would definitely make this a psalm of individual lament, namely a call for help. We see that the psalmist is experiencing a crisis, made evident in verse 4, “though I walk in the valley of death’s shadow.” However, the psalm lacks any sense that God’s help and protection is in question or in jeopardy – the psalmist is assured throughout that despite his challenging situation, God is with him, and that God comforts him and provides him safety. For this reason, I concur with Brueggemann and Kraus’s characterization of this psalm as not sufficiently described by simply calling it a “psalm of lament”; rather it better fits into a sub-category of lament psalms, specifically “trust psalms.” Yes, the psalmist is in crisis but he is grounded by his firm trust in his relationship with God.

2. Poetic Devices

a. Key Words

With this relationship in mind, we turn to the pronouns utilized in this psalm for both God and the psalmist. In referring to God, the text alternates between the third person and second person. God is addressed as יהוה only in the first and last verses of the psalm forming an inclusio. The second person אתה appears only once, almost exactly in the center of the text. Brueggemann, in his book *The Message of the Psalms*, points out that “the name of Yahweh is uttered only twice, abruptly at the beginning and at the end, so that the poem, like this trustful life, is lived fully in the presence of this name” (154).

The oscillating between pronouns may also indicate the spiritual experience of the psalmist, at times feeling distant from God and only able to talk about God with third person, referential pronouns, and at other moments drawing closer, standing seemingly face to face with God, addressing God directly with "you."

In referring to himself, we note the psalmist's repeated use of first person pronouns and conjugations. Benjamin Segal, in *A New Psalm*, explains that this reflects the psalms "radically individual nature: the speaker talks about, and then to, *his* God and about *himself*. Whereas most Jewish prayer is in the plural, this speaker refers to himself seventeen times" (103). In so doing, the psalm focuses sharply in on the individual's relationship with God, a God who notices him out of his entire flock and provides for his unique needs. While shepherding imagery is common throughout the Tanakh, this psalm is only one of two instances in which this relationship is applied to an individual. Brueggemann explains that rather than reflecting an unhealthy self-obsession, "here, the 'I' statements are filled with gratitude, yielding, trust, and thanksgiving. The 'I' here knows that in every case, life is fully cared for and resolved by this Thou who responds to and anticipates every need" (155).

b. Key Metaphors

Psalm 23 centers on two main metaphors: that of God as the shepherd, and that of God as the host. We see elaboration of the shepherding imagery in verses 1-4. Verse 1 introduces this theme with the declaration "God is my Shepherd." Then, verses 2-4 explain the reasons why God is a Shepherd to the psalmist: God sustains him with food and water (green pastures and tranquil waters, verse 2), keeps him on safe paths (guiding him on paths of righteousness, verse 3), and comforts him with a strong, assertive

presence (your rod and staff comfort me, verse 4). The image of God as shepherd is best demonstrated in Ezekiel 34, in which God decries the human shepherds (the leaders of the Israelites) for not "tending their flock" – that is, they have not protected and cared for the Israelite people. God declares Godself the Shepherd of the Israelites, saying in 34.11-15: "Here am I! I am going to take thought for My flock and I will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some [animals] in his flock have gotten separated, so I will seek out My flock, I will rescue them from all the places to which they were scattered on a day of cloud and gloom. I Myself will graze My flock, and I Myself will let them lie down." We see very similar imagery between these verses and Psalm 23 – God is the Shepherd of the Israelite people, and in that role, God will provide them food and rest, protection from all evil, and rescue those who are troubled.

The remaining verses of Psalm 23 move from shepherding imagery to the other side of this "coin" – to imagery of God as a host. In 2 Samuel 9.7-13, we see that King David extends his generosity as a host to Mephiboshet by saying "you shall always eat at my table like one of the *King's sons*." Goldingay explains that hosting in such a generous way can only be done by those in power: "To lay a table for someone is to act as a gracious host, and that is what a king does for his extensive household. Verse 5 might then suggest the picture of the [psalmist] as a member of God's quasi-royal household, while other members of the community who are opposed to him…look on with frustration and envy" (vol.1, p.352). Thus we see that eating at the table holds as both a literal and metaphorical image – that of literal sustenance and that of metaphorical favor and protection.

c. Other Literary Features of Note

It is worth noting the excellent construction of the psalm in the growth of the images from small to big, from the least extreme to the most. If we note the cross-verse parallelism present, we see that the grass and water of verse 2 grow to a luscious banquet table in verse 5. The "lacking nothing" of the psalmist's basic needs in verse 1 grows into living all of his days in God's house, surrounded by divine goodness and kindness in verse 6. Thus, the psalm evolves over these six verses "smoothly but quickly, between extremes – from minimal to maximal degrees of association and support" (Brueggemann and Bellinger, Kindle Locations 2612-2613). This evolution builds an ever stronger sense of God's presence and comfort.

Psalm 90: From a Moment to an Eternity, From Anger to Joy

Annotated Translation

(א) תְּפִלָּה֮ לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִים
אֲדֹנָי מָעוֹן אַתָּה הָיִיתָ לָּנוּ בְּדֹר וָדֹר׃

A prayer of Moses,[1] man of God.[2]

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[1] תפילה למשה - This is the only psalm attributed to Moses. Alter offers two explanations for this unique attribution, one theological and one historical. He writes: "Given the focus of the psalm on the limitations of the human condition, the editor may have been thinking...of 'the man Moses': Moses is the great founding leader and yet but a man…[alternatively,] of the eight times that the name of Moses is mentioned in Psalms, seven occur in the fourth book of psalms which begins [with Psalm 90], so this may have been a signature device on the part of the editor" (317). Goldingay supports Alter's explanation, saying, "in this context Moses is an appropriate person to be imagined uttering a plea for Israel; he did that at Sinai [see Ex. 32.12-13], urging God to 'turn' from 'your anger' and 'relent over' the people, and to think about 'your servants...alternatively, the psalm might have been written to indicate how Moses might pray for the people in their present circumstances" (vol 2, pp 23-24).

[2] איש האלהים - This expression occurs nearly 70 times in the Tanakh, always as an epithet used in reference to a person who is a messenger of God. We see this epithet used in reference to Moses in Deut. 33.1, as a means of introducing him before he gives his final speech to the Israelites. Additionally, we see other messengers of God's word referred to with this title, such as 1 Kings 12.22: "The word of God came to Shamaiah, *man of God*," several times in 2 Kings 1.9-14 as a means of introducing the prophet Elijah, in

My Lord,[3] You have been our refuge[4] in every generation.

Nehemiah 12.24 in reference to David, and many others. From this we glean that it is a title of both function and status. To introduce this psalm not only with the name Moses, which itself carries weight, but also with this particular epithet heightens the reader's expectation of the import of the message to come in the subsequent verses.

[3] אדני - See footnote #5 on Psalm 16 for a discussion of translating this name of God. The use of this word in the opening invocation of a psalm is unique to Psalm 90, and is particularly apt for the message of this psalm. Thus I have rendered it here (and in verse 17) in its literal sense, "My Lord." Goldingay explains this translation possibility, saying, "By its nature, [the word Adonai] appeals to the commitment a master would show his servants; the [ensuing] plea will spell that out. If are right to take the suffix as suggesting 'my,' the invocation is especially appropriate as pointing both to God's sovereign power and to God's relationship with the supplicant" (vol 2, p 24).

[4] מעון – This noun is used in reference to a lofty place where God dwells, such as in Deut. 26.15, when it is a place semantically parallel to "שמים," heaven - "[God,] look down from מעון; from Heaven." It also appears in Jer. 25.30, when it is placed parallel to "מרום," meaning "on high" - "God roars from מרום; God makes His voice heard from מעון." However, in both of these examples and others, *ma'on* refers to a place where God is, but in this psalm it is used as metaphor to describe God, such as in Ps. 71.3: "[God,] be a *sheltering* rock for me to which I may always repair; decree my deliverance, for You are my rock and my fortress." Goldingay explains that this is a way of the psalm expanding from one smaller, metaphor to another, more profound one: God has a lair becomes God IS a lair (Goldingay, vol 2, p 25). Separately, we also see that the word *ma'on* also is

(ב) בְּטֶרֶם ו הָרִים יֻלָּדוּ
וַתְּחֹולֵל אֶרֶץ וְתֵבֵל
וּמֵעוֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם אַתָּה אֵל׃

Before the mountains were born
and You birthed[5] the earth and world,[6]

---

used in Jer. 9.10, 10.22, 49.33, and 51.87 to describe a hiding place for animals. When we combine this idea of a protective hiding place, with that of God as a lair on high, we develop a picture of a heavenly place of protection.

[5] ותחולל - This word is highly descriptive, not just referring to birth, but to the great pain of going through labor. Goldingay understands this word to describe the physical, bodily process of giving birth, saying that this word as "a vivid verb [which] refers to a woman's twisting, turning, and struggling as she gives birth" (vol 2, p 25). Thus, ותחולל depicts a female God that cares for Her creation, as a mother does for her child. We see a similar image in Deut. 32.18: "You neglected the Rock that begot you, forgot the *God who brought you forth*…" (*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 1258). This comforting image is particularly apt for the general message of the psalm, which is that God cares for us and teaches us to number our short days.

[6] ארץ, תבל - When we look at instances where the two words appear separately, we see that as much as they are very close in meaning, there are times when they diverge. On one hand, if we look at the use of ארץ in Gen. 10.10-11, we understand that it is being used in the sense of a specific area of land or territory that is inhabited: "The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh in the *land* of Shinar. From that *land* Asshur went forth…" or in Jer. 25.20: "all the mixed peoples; all the kings of the *land* of Uz; all the kings of the *land* of the Philistines…" Thus, we see that ארץ can sometimes

from eternity to eternity, You are God.

(ג) תָּשֵׁב אֱנוֹשׁ עַד־דַּכָּא
וַתֹּאמֶר שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי־אָדָם׃

You return humans to dust,[7]
and say: "Turn back,[8] humankind!"

---

have a narrower scope than "earth." תבל, on the other hand, seems to be more expansive in its scope, referring to the entire earthly realm. We see this connotation in 2 Sam. 22.16: "The bed of the sea was exposed, the foundations of the *world* were laid bare…" or Job 18.18: "He is thrust from light to darkness, driven from the *world…*" However, in this verse the two words are paired, which combines the sense of inhabited land with the entire earth, as in Job 37.12: "אל פני תבל ארצה - throughout the *inhabited earth*," or in Prov. 8.31: "משחקת בתבל ארצו - rejoicing in God's *inhabited earth*."

[7] דכא - Ordinarily, the word עפר is used for dust, but here, we see דכא, which only occurs three times in the entire Tanakh. The first is in Isaiah 57.15, which reads: ואת דכא ושפל רוח ("the *contrite* and lowly in spirit"). The second is Psalm 34.19, קרוב יהוה לנשברי לב ואת דכאי רוח יושיע ("God is close to the broken-hearted, those *crushed* in spirit God delivers"). Neither of these instances refer to dust, but rather to a kind of lowliness, or being crushed down in spirit. It is thus hard to be sure what this word means; but many translators understand dust as the product of something crushed. Alter writes that the word "*daka* is...reasonably understood here as a poetic substitute for dust, ordinarily *afar*" (318). Kraus cites Genesis 3.19 to support this agreement that "the human being that is made of dust is brought back to dust" (216). Goldingay makes a meaningful link between crushing/making low and the notion of dust, explaining, "God has demonstrated the capacity to put down the people from whom the [Israelite] community needing to find shelter" (vol 2, p 27).

(ד) כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ
כְּיוֹם אֶתְמוֹל כִּי יַעֲבֹר
וְאַשְׁמוּרָה בַלָּיְלָה׃

For one thousand years in your eyes
are like yesterday which passes by,
like a watch in the night.[9]

---

[8] שובו - It is important to note that in most cases where God makes the command שובו, it is intended in the sense of turning from one's evil ways and returning to God through acts of *teshuvah* - repentance. We particularly see this usage in the writings of the Prophets, such as in Zech. 1.3: "Thus said God of Hosts: *Turn back* to me—says the God of Hosts…" or Jer. 3.14: "*Turn back*, rebellious children—declares God," or Joel 2.12: "'Yet even now'—says God— '*Return* to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting.'"

[9] אשמורה בלילה - This phrase refers to the Biblical convention of dividing the day into three parts: the morning watch (see Ex. 14.24), the midday watch (see Judges 7.19) and the evening watch (see in this verse and in Lam. 2.19). There is not more detail included in the Tanakh about the length of these times, but later rabbinic sources like the Mishnah and Talmud teach us that the night watch in particular was divided into three parts. In the Babylonian Talmud Brachot 3a, we read: "R. Eliezer says: The night has three watches....What does R. Eliezer understand [by the word watch]?...The beginning of the first watch needs no sign, it is the twilight!...The end of the last watch needs no sign, it is the dawn of the day!" Alter draws on biblical and rabbinic sources to inform his interpretation of this phrase, saying, "In the eloquent triadic structure of this line, the psalmist moves from a thousand years, to a passing day, to a watch in the night (a mere

(ה) זַרַמְתָּם שֵׁנָה
יִהְיוּ בַּבֹּקֶר כָּחָצִיר יַחֲלֹף׃

You flood them[10] with sleep,
in the morning they will be like grass[11] renewed.[12]

---

third of the night). Thus, he concretizes a vision of time seen from God's end of the telescope" (318).

[10] זרמתם - Both Kraus and Alter believe this word is corrupt. Kraus suggests that it should likely be read as זרעתם, meaning "you seed them." This would fit much more seamlessly with the images of planting and grass in this verse and the verse that follows. However, in the absence of alternative manuscripts, I have left retained "flood" from the Masoretic text's זרמתם, rather than changing it to the proposed "seed." This is supported by the translations of JPS and Alter (who render it "engulf"), and NRSV ("sweep them away"). By maintaining this translation, the image portrayed is of something trivial that can be easily consumed or even swept away. This pairs nicely with the image of withering grass in the next clause.

[11] כחציר - The image of withering grass is used in various books of the Tanakh as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of humankind. In Isa. 40.7, we read: "Grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of God blows on them. Indeed, man is but grass"; and Ps. 103.15 states: "Man, his days are like those of grass; he blooms like a flower of the field; a wind passes by and it is no more, its own place no longer knows it."

[12] יחלף - The usage of this root, חלף, is varied. Sometimes, it infers to exchange or substitution, such as in Lev. 27.10, in reference to animals designated for sacrifice, saying "one cannot *exchange* another for it." In the Book of Job, we see a similar use, in reference to trees. Here, rather than "substitute," we can understand חלף to mean "replace"

(ו) בַּבֹּקֶר יָצִיץ וְחָלָף
לָעֶרֶב יְמוֹלֵל וְיָבֵשׁ׃

In the morning it flourishes and renews;
at night it withers and dries up.

(ז) כִּי־כָלִינוּ בְאַפֶּךָ
וּבַחֲמָתְךָ נִבְהָלְנוּ׃

For we are consumed in your anger,[13]
and in your rage[14] we are terrified.

---

or "renew," as in Job 14.7: "There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will *renew* itself…" and Job 29.19-20: "My roots reaching water, and dew lying on my branches; My vigor refreshed, my bow *ever new* in my hand." Grass, of course, is much closer to trees than to sacrificial animals, so we can conclude that understanding the verb in the sense of regrowth or renewal is most appropriate. Thus, I have attempted to include all of these various, yet related, meanings in reference to the subject of this phrase, which is grass that *changes* - it both *vanishes* and is *exchanged* for something new. Thus, the translation reads: "like withering grass renewed."

[13] אפך - Literally, "Your nose." However, we see "nose," specifically, one that is flaring, used as a euphemism for anger, such as in Gen. 31.2: ויחר אף יעקב ("Jacob was *angry*," literally - Jacob's nose flared). See also: Gen. 39.19, 44.18, Ex. 4.14, Deut. 7.4, and others.

[14] חמתך - It is worth noting the root of this noun is "יחם," meaning "to be hot." Thus, the word describes a heated anger, or perhaps even a burning fury. Alter writes that because this word suggests something hot and burning, "the language carries forward the image of grass withering and [drying out]" (319).

(ח) שת [שַׁתָּה] עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ לְנֶגְדֶּךָ
עֲלֻמֵּנוּ לִמְאוֹר פָּנֶיךָ׃

You placed our sins before You,
our hidden deeds[15] in the light of Your face.

(ט) כִּי כָל־יָמֵינוּ פָּנוּ בְעֶבְרָתֶךָ
כִּלִּינוּ שָׁנֵינוּ כְמוֹ־הֶגֶה׃

[15] אלמנו - Literally, the root אלם means "to conceal" or "to hide." We see this usage in Ecc. 12.14: "...that God will call every creature to account for everything *concealed* be it good or bad," and in 2 Kings 4.27: "Gehazi stepped forward to push her away; but the man of God said, 'Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; and God has *hidden* it from me and has not told me.'" We see this root in a similar context in Job 28.11, which uses the same language of things that are hidden being revealed in the light. We read: "[God] dams up the sources of the streams so that *hidden things* may be brought to light." With the translation, we must ask what does the psalmist say hidden? We know from our Ecclesiastes citation that the word אלם can apply to a wide variety of things, both good and bad. Beyond this, the context of the verse is ambiguous and does not allow us to determine the subject with such certainty. Goldingay offers one idea, which draws from Ps. 44.21-22, which uses "secrets" as a euphemism for praying to foreign Gods, saying: "If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god, God would surely search it out, for God knows the *secrets* of the heart." Thus, Goldingay suggests that אלמנו is a "reference is to private prayer to other deities, [hidden] in people's homes. Even if such acts belong in the distant past or take place in darkness, they have not escaped God, and to God it is as if they had been done ...out in the open, in the light" (vol 2, p. 29).

For all our days clear away[16] in Your fury,
our years are consumed like a moaning.[17]

(י) יְמֵי־שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ בָהֶם שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה
וְאִם בִּגְבוּרֹת ׀ שְׁמֹונִים שָׁנָה
וְרָהְבָּם עָמָל וָאָוֶן
כִּי־גָז חִישׁ וַנָּעֻפָה׃

The days of our years are seventy years,[18]

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[16] פנו - The verb פנה carries a literal sense of clearing out an area to make it clean and/or empty, such as in Lev. 14.36: "The priest shall order the house *cleared* before the priest enters to examine the plague…" However, this is often used as a metaphor for a kind of destruction or elimination of sin or the creation of space for God, such as Isa. 40.3: "*Clear* in the desert a road for God!" or Zeph. 3.15: "God has annulled the judgment against you, God has *swept away* your foes." Since the verb here appears as an active verb, "clear" or "clear away" is the most appropriate translation.

[17] הגה - This root appears as a verb to indicate a low murmuring sound, such as Isa. 31.4: "As a lion - a great beast - *growls* over its prey…" or Isa. 38.14: "I *moaned* like a dove…" As a noun, this root only appears three times in the Tanakh, including in our verse here. In Ezekiel 2.10, we read: "written on it were lamentations, *dirges*, and woes," and in Job 37.2, we read: "listen to the noise of God's rumbling, to the *sound* that comes out of His mouth." Thus, we see that when the root is in his nominal form, it takes on a negative valence. Thus, in this translation, I have rendered הגה as a rumbling sound that comes from one's mouth as an expression of sadness or lament. Many translators have rendered it as "sigh," but that does not seem to carry the proper emotional subtext. Thus, I have instead rendered it here as "moaning."

or if we are strong, eighty years.

[18] שבעים - In the Tanakh, we only see this number of years in reference to times of great difficulty. “Seventy” describes how long a difficulty will last, such as in Jer. 25.11: “this whole land will be a ruin and a waste, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for *seventy years*” and in Zech. 1.12: “Oh God of Hosts, how long will you not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which you have had indignation these *seventy years*?” Thus, the number seventy is not merely indicative of a lifespan, or a long period of time, but specifically reminds us of times of calamity, like the one in which the psalmist finds himself at this time. That the years could lengthen to eighty is worse, not better, for the years are difficult, filled with toil and struggle.

Yet their pride[19] is merely toil[20] and sorrow,
for they are quickly swept up[21] and we fly away.

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[19] רהבם - The root רהב is quite uncommon, so it is hard to translate this with any certainty. There is no consensus amongst different translators. Some have offered: "span" based on connections to similar Greek words (NRSV, Brueggemann), while others have used "pride" (JPS, Alter, Hakham). I have translated it as "pride" based on the appearance of the root רהב in Ps. 40.5: "Happy is the man who makes Adonai his trust, who turns not to the *arrogant* or to followers of falsehood." From this, we understand pride as an over-abundance of pride, perhaps about something that does not deserve pride, and thus becomes arrogance. This would fit with the notion that humans' days are fleeting and will not last, and thus our years are undeserving of pride.

[20] עמל - This word appears throughout the Tanakh with varied translations and usage. We see here from the context of this verse that עמל means something related to און, sorrow, yet with a connotation of futility - pride over something that will quickly disappear. There are many examples of עמל being used to connote synonyms of sorrow, such as Gen. 41.51, which reads "God has made me forget completely my *hardship* and my parental home," and Isaiah 53.11: "Out of his *anguish* he shall see it…" From these, we understand that *amal* carries a negative emotional valence, but these examples do not offer the additional connotation of futility. The best example of a similar usage of *amal* is found in Ecclesiastes 1.3, which reads: "Utter futility! All is futile! What real value is there for a man in all the *gains* he makes beneath the sun?" From this verse, we see that *amal* refers to work that is for naught - futile gains. Thus, I have translated the word here as "toil."

(יא) מִי־יוֹדֵעַ עֹז אַפֶּךָ
וּכְיִרְאָתְךָ עֶבְרָתֶךָ׃

Who knows the strength of Your anger?
And the fear of You is Your fury.[22]

(יב) לִמְנוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע
וְנָבִא לְבַב חָכְמָה׃

Teach us[23] to number our days correctly[24]

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[21] גז חיש - This expression appears only here in the entire Tanakh and is thus quite difficult to translate with any certainty. חיש itself is a hapax legomenon, appearing only in this verse, and גז appears one other time, in Num. 11.31, in reference to the action of wind strong enough to sweep birds out of the sea and onto the land. Other translators have offered a wide range of options, such as "for it *soars in haste*," (Hakham), "*swiftly cut down*," (Alter), or "they are *soon gone*" (NRSV). Across these very different translations, we gather a sense of something quickly removed from a given situation. We note that there is subject-verb disagreement here: גז is a masculine singular verb, and "they" (indicating the years of one's life) is the subject of this verb. The implication of this disagreement is uncertain.

[22] כיראתך אברתך - It is difficult to render the second half of this verse in clear English without distorting the concise nature of the Hebrew. Alter explains that the Hebrew indicates "with good reason are people afraid of You because the manifestations of Your anger are indeed awesome."

[23] הודע - The root of this verb is ידע, meaning "to know," but it appears here in the hiphil, meaning "to cause to know." We see other examples of this form of ידע in Prov. 9.9, where it is placed parallel to תן, meaning "give." The verse reads: "Instruct a wise man,

so we may attain a heart of wisdom.

(יג) שׁוּבָה יְהוָה עַד־מָתָי
וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־עֲבָדֶיךָ׃

Return, O God! How long?[25]
And relent[26] concerning Your servants!

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and he will grow wiser; *Teach* a righteous man, and he will gain in learning." Similarly, in Job 10.2, we read: "I say to God, "Do not condemn me; *Let me know* what You charge me with." Thus, I have translated הודע in this verses as the more colloquial form of "make me know" or "instruct": "to teach."

[24] כן - We can understand this word as "honestly" or "correctly," as in Gen. 42.11: "We are all of us sons of the same man; we are *honest* men; your servants have never been spies!" Hakham points out that כן, in this sense, is a sort of *double-entendre*, because it indicates "1) Let us remember *honestly* the number of our days and not deceive ourselves into believing that we will live forever, [and] 2) Let us do each day what is proper" (353).

[25] עד מתי - This question appears numerous times throughout the Tanakh as an expression of lament, especially in the Book of Psalms. In Ps. 6.4-5 we see this expression paired the same plea: "שובה יהוה." We read: "My whole being is stricken with terror, while You, God—O, *how long! O God, turn!* Rescue me!" Similarly, in Ps. 80.5, we read a similar plea: "O Adonai, God of hosts, *how long* will You be wrathful toward the prayers of Your people?" We see that this is a form of protest and lament, often directed at God as a form of pleading that God alleviate suffering. With this language, we sense that the psalmist's plea has grown more desperate, and it leads us into the climactic conclusion of this text.

(יד) שַׂבְּעֵנוּ בַבֹּקֶר חַסְדֶּךָ
וְנָרַנְּנָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּכָל־יָמֵינוּ׃

Satisfy us in the morning with Your kindness,[27]
and let us rejoice and be happy all of our days.

(טו) שַׂמְּחֵנוּ כִּימוֹת עִנִּיתָנוּ
שְׁנוֹת רָאִינוּ רָעָה׃

Make us as happy as the days when You afflicted us,
the years when we saw evil.

(טז) יֵרָאֶה אֶל־עֲבָדֶיךָ פָּעֳלֶךָ
וַהֲדָרְךָ עַל־בְּנֵיהֶם׃

Let your deeds be seen by Your servants,
and their children Your glory.

(יז) וִיהִי ו נֹעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנְנֵהוּ׃

May the pleasantness of my Lord[28] our God be upon us,

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[26] ינחם - We see this verb, which is often translated as "to comfort," take on a slightly different meaning when paired with שוב "to return." When these two verbs appear together, it is usually to indicate a plea for God to *relent* His punishment against the Israelite people. In Ex. 32.12, we read: "*Turn* from your fierce anger and *repent* of this evil against your people!" and in Joel 2.14, "Who knows if God will not *turn* and *relent*, and even leave a blessing behind Him?" This is thus a continuation of the pleading language of "עד מתי" in the prior clause, and continues to make a request for God to lighten God's wrath.

[27] חסדך - See footnote #25 on Psalm 23 for discussion of the translation of חסד.

and the work of our hands firmly established[29] for us -
the works of our hands firmly established!

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[28] אדני - See footnote #3, above for a discussion of the various translations of the names of God.

[29] כונן - The root כנן/כון means to "be stable," or "be firmly established." We see examples of this in 1 Sam. 13.13: " You acted foolishly in not keeping the commandments that Adonai your God laid upon you! Otherwise God would have *established* your dynasty over Israel forever," and in 1 Kings 2.12, we read: "And Solomon sat upon the throne of his father David, and his rule
was *firmly established*." We see that this word is used in these citations (and in others, see 2 Sam. 5.12) in reference to the establishment and lasting support of kingdoms or dynasties. Alter explains that the use of כונן in this verse is "strategically important...Against the dismaying ephemerality of human existence, in which a life sprouts and withers like grass, God can give fleeting human experience solid substantiality" (320).

Structural Outline

Psalm 90: From a Moment to an Eternity, From Anger to Joy

I. Superscription (v. 1a)

II. The Past: God's Powerful Protection (vv. 1b-2)
   - A. God as eternal refuge (v. 1b)
   - B. God as eternal Creator of the earth (v. 2)

III. The Present: A Limited Life with a Wrathful God (vv. 3-12)
   - A. Part 1: Humankind's limitations, God's eternality (vv. 3-6)
     1. God limits human time (v. 3)
     2. God's time is limitless (v. 4)
     3. Humans are ephemeral (vv. 5-6)
   - B. Part 2: A lifetime of God's wrath (vv. 7-12)
     1. God's anger consumes us (vv. 7-8)
     2. God's anger defines our days (vv. 9-10)
     3. God's anger is beyond human comprehension (v. 11)
     4. God's anger limits our time; we must make it count (v. 12)

IV. The Future: Pleading and Praying for Mercy and Joy (vv. 13-17)
   - A. A plea for compassion (vv. 13-14a)
     1. A plea for a relenting of God's anger (v. 13)
     2. A plea for God's love mercy (v. 14a)
   - B. Prayers for joy (vv. 14b-15)
   - C. Prayer for the continued revelation of God's presence (v. 16)
   - D. Prayer for continued support and strength (v. 17)

Literary Analysis

a. Genre and Structure

In comparing this text to Psalms 15,16, 23, and 121, Psalm 90 stands out for the use of the first person plural language of "we." Right away, this indicates to the reader that this is a different variety of psalm, one that uses the communal, rather than individual, voice. Indeed, the voice of Psalm 90 is that of an entire community, struggling to gain perspective of their mortality and feel sheltered by God in their numbered days. Brueggemann and Bellinger classify this psalm as a Communal Lament, making it the only communally- focused text of this group of funeral psalms. A communal lament is much like an individual lament in responding to a crisis with an address to God, a description of the crisis, and a call for help, and arrives at a positive conclusion (Brueggemann and Bellinger, Kindle Locations 681-683). However, unlike an individual lament such as Psalm 16, which focuses on a single person's crisis, such as illness, communal laments address a crisis that affects the entire Israelite community, such as famine, war, or exile. Kraus adds that there are traces of different genres in parts of this psalm, namely that the initial verses of the psalm reflect elements of hymnic address and that later verses mimic aspects of wisdom psalms (vol. 2, p. 214). Overall however, Kraus concurs with Brueggemann and Bellinger's categorization, referring to this text as fitting "the basic form of community prayer" in the form of a lament (vol. 2, p. 214).

We see that the psalm essentially has three parts (Goldingday, vol. 3, p. 22), which fit neatly into this genre of communal lament. Verses 1-2 open the psalm with a description of the nature of the prior relationship between God and the community, and includes elements of hymnic praise which Brueggemann and Bellinger define as "psalms

[that] offer adoration and praise to God as creator and redeemer" (Kindle Location 684). These introductory verses praise God the Creator, who has been their refuge from eternity to the current day, and declare that God is so great that for God, eternity is like a passing day.

Next, verses 3-12 move the psalm into the heart of this of communal lament, describing the current experience of the community. In the first part this section, we see lament about humanity's ephemeral nature (vv. 3-6). In this second part of this section (vv. 7-12), the text shifts to lamenting the humanity's experience of the wrath of God. This psalm does not offer a description of a specific crisis, but rather describes the constant terror and divine wrath under which the community lives. This part concludes with a request that God instruct the community to achieve meaning in human's limited time. The lack of specific crisis, combined with this request for instruction, reflects the theory that the author utilized motifs from wisdom literature to "formulate a lament that leads into a plea" (Goldingay, vol. 3, p. 24).

Finally, in verses 13-17, the community pleads for a reprieve, begging that God's wrath be replaced with expressions of God's loyal kindness. The concluding verse prays that God strengthen and support the community, so that the work of their hands might prosper. We note that the final verse repeats "*Adonai*" from the first verse, completing the bracketing of this text with a direct appeal to God. This, combined with the pleading language of "*ye'hi*" - "may it be" in the final verse lends a distinctly prayerful feel to this text - we can imagine it being recited in a public forum, perhaps by a king or a priest. As Brueggemann and Bellinger explain that "in times of crisis, the community of ancient Israel would gather at the sacred place. Led by their priests and other leaders, the

community would fervently articulate their crisis in prayer to God in order to seek God's intervention and deliverance from the crisis at hand" (Kindle Locations 10049-10052).

b. Poetic Devices

i. Key Words and Themes

There are two overarching themes in Psalm 90, that of time - specifically God's eternality and human mortality - and anger. The psalmist relays these themes with the repetition of synonyms, rather than single *leitwort*.

Verses 1-6 focus on time, differentiating between God's limitless experience of time with that of humanity. Ibn Ezra explains that this section depicts "God as an eternal anchor for ephemeral man" (Segal, Kindle Location 8607). This comparison is highlighted by words and phrases related to God's time such as *dor v'dor* (verse 1: "in every generation"), *m'olam ad-olam* (v. 2: "from eternity to eternity"), with those related to human time, such as *yom*, *etmol*, and *lilah* (v. 4: "day," "yesterday," and "night," respectively), and *boker* and *erev* (v. 6: "morning" and "evening," respectively). Human time is thus counted in units as long as 70-80 years, and as short as days and even parts of days, whereas divine time is counted in generations and eternities. The stark contrast easily supports the psalmist's lament, and the "essential inequality reflects the overwhelming inferiority of man" (Segal, (Kindle Location 8613).

With this contrast firmly established, the psalmist turns to anger and the experience of God's anger in the fleeting time humans have. Synonyms for anger pepper verses 7-11. We read various words describing God's fury: *apecha*, *chamatcha* (v. 7), *evratecha* (v. 9), and again *apecha* and *evratecha* (v. 11). These words are paired with words describing the human experience of this divine anger: *chalinu*, *nivhalnu* (v.7),

amal va'aven (v. 10), and *yirah* (v. 11). Even without description of a specific crisis, these words make it clear that the relationship between the community of Israel and God is challenged by the human experience of God's wrath.

Finally, in the final verses of the psalm, we see a repetition of these themes, utilizing language found in earlier verses. The shift in the usage of certain words (בוקר and the verb-roots ידע and ראה), represents the shift from lament to prayer. For example, in verse 12, we see the word *hoda*. This is repeated from verse 11, *yodei'ah*. However, in verse 11, what is known is God's anger. In verse 12, the lament shifts to a plea, as the community asks to know how to number their limited days. Another example is the word *boker*. In verses 5 and 6, *boker* is used to reference the depressing futility of waking each proverbial morning only to wither by evening. This lament shifts to prayer in verse 14, in which the community asks for kindness and satiety each morning so that every day can be filled with joy. A final example of this is the use of *lir'ot*, "to see." It appears in verse 15, in reference to the years in which the community only saw evil. Then, in verse 16, this complaint turns into a request that rather than evil and calamity, "let your works be seen." Taken together, these repeated words in shifting context powerfully move the communal lament into the realm of prayer.

ii. Use of Repetition and Word Play

The author of this psalm introduces repetition and word play to cohere this text as a single whole. Simple repetition is present as we see בוקר in verse 5, repeated in verse 14. In verse 5, בוקר is associated with the ephemerality of human time, using the metaphor of grass renewed at daybreak, only to die later that same day. When בוקר returns in verse 14, it is now associated with a plea for God's mercy at daybreak. The

connection drawn between these two verses illustrates one of the main messages of the psalm: a plea for God' mercy in humankind's limited days.

Through word play, the psalmist is able to offer another level of connection between pairs of non-identical words. With clever means, slight changes in words are used to illustrate the psalm's wider themes. For example, the *shanim* of verse 4 - years - becomes *sheinah* - sleep - in verse 5. This illustrates the first theme, that of the contrasting notions of time between God and humans, by using word play to liken a night's sleep for human beings to a mere one thousand years in God's limitless time.

Similarly, we see this in the second section as well. In verse 8, we read about *avonoteinu* and *alumeinu* - our sins and hidden deeds - those acts for which the community receives God's anger. The author of the text plays with these words, connecting them with *aven* and *amal* - sorrow and toil, the effects of God's anger, in verse 10.

Finally, drawn from *ma'on* in the first verse to *no'am* in the final verse. These words are made of the same exact letters, yet in the reverse order: מ ע ו ן and נ ע ו ם. Thus, this word pair brackets the psalm an ananym which expresses yet another aspect of the community's desire: protection and pleasantness from God.

iii. Use of Metaphor and Simile

Psalm 90 is a text rich with metaphorical language. To fully appreciate the depth of meaning enveloped in this psalm, it behooves us to note a few examples of this use of metaphor. In verse 1, we note the metaphor of God as refuge. The idea of God as a sheltering, protective place would have no doubt been comforting to the community in the face of God's wrath. At times מעון is used to refer to heaven, such as in Deut. 26.15,

in which מעון קדשך is equated to שמים, "heaven." This intertextual connection makes us appreciate this metaphor even more: God is not just a protective place, but God is *both* heaven and (as indicated in the next clause), earth. Thus, the metaphor of God as refuge reminds us that God is everywhere, all-powerful, and an enduring source of comfort.

The next significant metaphor is found in verses 5-6, where the text describes humans as grass. In contrast the enormous, powerful, enduring God of the opening verses, humans are is described as weak and insignificant - like grass that grows and dies in a single day. When we place these images together, we note that in other uses of מעון it refers to a protective cave or dwelling place for an animal. Thus, we gain an image of God as a protective, sheltering cave, and humans, in contrast, as but a blade of grass cowering on the ground of that cave.

Finally, verse 9 states that a human lifetime is like nothing more than a sigh or a moan: a short, unusually unintended sound emitted from one's lips. הגה is no more than a single syllable, a single sound; and verse 9 reminds us that life passes by, amounting to no more than this. Hakham adds a second level of meaning, noting that "another point made by these words is that there is nothing tangible or enduring in a person's whole life...just as there is nothing tangible about a sounds that leaves his/her lips, disappears, and is gone" (351). Thus, this simile offers us a human, relatable image to understand the fleeting mortality of humankind.

iv. Other Literary Features of Note

We would be remiss if we discussed the literary features of Psalm 90 without noting that this text offers a remarkable example of anadiplosis, a poetic technique in which related words (either by root or by sound) are repeated in an interlocking chain.

This technique is present in nearly every verse of the psalm, which further explains why the text reads so clearly as a single unit. For the sake of clarity, I have color-coded the psalm to illustrate the use of this technique:

(א) תְּפִלָּה֮ לְמֹשֶׁה֒ אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִ֗ים אֲדֹנָ֣י מָעוֹן֮ אַתָּ֣ה הָיִ֣יתָ לָּ֣נוּ בְּדֹ֣ר וָדֹֽר׃
(ב) בְּטֶ֤רֶם ׀ הָ֘רִ֤ים יֻלָּ֗דוּ וַתְּחוֹלֵ֣ל אֶ֣רֶץ וְתֵבֵ֑ל וּמֵעוֹלָ֥ם עַד־עוֹלָ֗ם אַתָּ֥ה אֵֽל׃
(ג) תָּשֵׁ֣ב אֱנ֣וֹשׁ עַד־דַּכָּ֑א וַתֹּ֥אמֶר שׁ֝֗וּבוּ בְּנֵי־אָדָֽם׃
(ד) כִּ֤י אֶ֣לֶף שָׁנִ֣ים בְּעֵינֶ֑יךָ כְּי֥וֹם אֶ֝תְמ֗וֹל כִּ֣י יַעֲבֹ֑ר וְאַשְׁמוּרָ֥ה בַלָּֽיְלָה׃
(ה) זְרַמְתָּ֥ם שֵׁנָ֗ה יִהְי֫וּ בַּבֹּ֥קֶר כָּ֭חָצִיר יַחֲלֹֽף׃
(ו) בַּבֹּ֤קֶר יָ֘צִ֤יץ וְחָלָ֗ף לָ֭עֶרֶב יְמוֹלֵ֣ל וְיָבֵֽשׁ׃
(ז) כִּֽי־כָלִ֥ינוּ בְאַפֶּ֑ךָ וּבַחֲמָתְךָ֥ נִבְהָלְנוּ׃
(ח) שת [שַׁתָּ֣ה] עֲוֹנֹתֵ֣ינוּ לְנֶגְדֶּ֑ךָ עֲלֻמֵּ֥נוּ לִמְא֝וֹר פָּנֶֽיךָ׃
(ט) כִּ֤י כָל־יָמֵ֨ינוּ֮ פָּנ֪וּ בְעֶבְרָתֶ֫ךָ כִּלִּ֣ינוּ שָׁנֵ֣ינוּ כְמוֹ־הֶ֑גֶה׃
(י) יְמֵי־שְׁנוֹתֵ֨ינוּ בָהֶ֤ם שִׁבְעִ֨ים שָׁנָ֗ה וְאִם֮ בִּגְבוּרֹת ׀ שְׁמֹונִ֪ים שָׁנָ֫ה וְרָהְבָּ֥ם עָ֭מָל וָאָ֑וֶן כִּי־גָ֥ז חִ֝ישׁ וַנָּעֻֽפָה׃
(יא) מִֽי־יוֹדֵ֗עַ עֹז֮ אַפֶּ֢ךָ ׀ וּכְיִרְאָתְךָ֥ עֶבְרָתֶֽךָ׃
(יב) לִמְנ֣וֹת יָ֭מֵינוּ כֵּ֣ן הוֹדַ֑ע וְנָבֵ֖א לְבַ֣ב חָכְמָֽה׃
(יג) שׁוּבָ֣ה יְ֭הוָה עַד־מָתָ֑י וְהִנָּחֵ֖ם עַל־עֲבָדֶֽיךָ׃
(יד) שַׂבְּעֵ֣נוּ בַבֹּ֣קֶר חַסְדֶּ֑ךָ וּ֝נְרַנְּנָ֗ה וְנִשְׂמְחָ֥ה בְכָל־יָמֵֽינוּ׃
(טו) שַׂמְּחֵ֨נוּ כִ֪ימוֹת עִנִּיתָ֡נוּ שְׁנ֬וֹת רָאִ֗ינוּ רָעָֽה׃
(טז) יֵרָאֶ֣ה אֶל־עֲבָדֶ֣יךָ פָּעֳלֶ֑ךָ וַהֲדָרְךָ֥ עַל־בְּנֵיהֶֽם׃
(יז) וִיהִ֤י ׀ נֹ֘עַם֮ אֲדֹנָ֪י אֱלֹהֵ֫ינוּ עָ֭לֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂ֣ה יָדֵ֑ינוּ כּוֹנְנָ֥ה עָ֝לֵ֗ינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂ֣ה יָ֭דֵינוּ כּוֹנְנֵֽהוּ׃

This use of anadiplosis, combined with the numerous examples of other literary devices present in this text (metaphor, simile, motifs, themes, and word play) render Psalm 90 as an astonishing example of biblical poetry.

Psalm 121: God, Eternal Guardian of Israel

Annotated Translation

(א) שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת
אֶשָּׂא עֵינַי אֶל־הֶהָרִים
מֵאַיִן יָבֹא עֶזְרִי׃

1) A song of ascents.[1]
I lift my eyes to the mountains,

[1] שיר למעלות - Many scholars have claimed that the psalms which begin with this phrase are a part of a group of psalms meant for people making sacrificial pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem (see I Kings 12.32, II Kings 23.2). According to this interpretation, the "mountains" mentioned in v. 1 are the Judean hills around Jerusalem, and the coming/going of the final verse is a reference to the process of travelling to and from the Temple. Kraus even translates this phrase as "A Pilgrimage Psalm" (vol 1 pp 23-24, vol 2, p 426). However, Alter writes, "All of this may be excessively specific. We cannot be sure that these are actually pilgrimage psalms, and the resonant language of the [text] is quite general: The speaker, fearful of unspecified danger - of the sort that any person might encounter in life - looks up at the mountains around him and wonders who or what will help him" (437, see also JSB p. 1424). Thus, I have chosen to offer the translation of "a song of ascents," which best retains the ambiguity of this phrase.

from where will my help[2] come?

(ב) עֶזְרִי מֵעִם יְהוָה
עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ׃

2) My help comes from God,[3]
Maker of heaven and earth.[4]

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[2] עזרי - This word is relatively uncommon in the Tanakh, appearing only 21 times, including the two here. It is noteworthy that in all of these instances, God is the only entity able to confer or remove עזר ("help"). Most often, parties are reminded that God is their *ezer* in times of trouble, such as in Psalm 20.2-3: "in time of trouble...may God send you *help* from the sanctuary, and sustain you from Zion," or in Deut. 33.29: "O happy Israel! Who is like you, a people delivered by God, Your *protecting Shield*, your Sword triumphant!" (see also Exodus 18.4, Deut. 33.7, Psalms 33.20, 70.6-11, and others). In other texts, we are reminded that God can equally remove help from those who are not faithful to Him, such as Ezek. 12.14: "And all those around [the Prince in Jerusalem], his *help* and all his troops, I will scatter in every direction." Thus, we can infer that עזר is not help that humans give one another; rather, the psalmist looks to the heavens seeking a kind of help that can only come from God.

[3] יהוה - For a discussion of the translation of this name of God, see footnote #2 on Psalm 15.

[4] עושה שמים וארץ - The use of "heaven" and "earth" offers a merism, where two extremes convey everything in between: God is ultimately powerful, because God is the Creator of all. We see a similar usage in Psalm 124.8, where the phrase is paired with the word *ezer* as in this verse: "Our *help* is the name of God, *maker of heaven and earth*." Thus, we understand that the comfort of God's help in a time of need like Psalm 121 stems directly

(ג) אַל־יִתֵּן לַמּוֹט רַגְלֶךָ
אַל־יָנוּם שֹׁמְרֶךָ׃

3) [God] does not let your foot falter,[5]
Your Guardian[6] does not sleep.[7]

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from the fact that God is the Almighty Creator. If we imagine a person about to set out on an unknown journey, we understand why a God who is ultimately in control would be comforting. Arthur Weiser, in his commentary on the Psalms, explains this further, saying, "Because all things are God's handiwork, He has the power to help whatever may happen; for even now all things are still in His hand…[referring to God in this way] represents not a piece of knowledge but a decision to submit oneself to God's creative will and power" (747).

[5] למוט רגלך - We see this expression in several other verses of the Tanakh, namely Psalms 38.17, 94.18, 66.9, and Deut. 32.35. In all of the psalms where we find this metaphor, including this occurrence it is mentioned in the positive, namely that God's support and protection prevents one's foot from slipping. In the reference in Deuteronomy, it is notably mentioned in the negative, stating that as a punishment God can cause one's foot to slip. While the expression למוט רגל is found in different forms and conjugations, all of these citations point to a similar usage of the phrase – that one's "foot slipping" is not meant literally, but rather serves as a metaphor for bad events befalling a person, for a person losing stability or safety in a certain moment in their life, etc.

[6] שומר - We know this word in many contexts, from the commandment to keep Shabbat (Deut. 5.12), to God's instructions to Adam to tend the earth entrusted to him (Gen. 2.15). While its use and translation vary widely – "tend," "keep," "observe," "guard," "watch over" - all of these usages relate to a sense of protection over something of value.

(ד) הִנֵּה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן
שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

4) Indeed, the Guardian of Israel
neither sleeps nor slumbers.[8]

Thus, I have here translated שומר as "Guardian," as it best portrays both the sense of watching over something - being on guard - and also the nurturing sense of a caring protector - a trusted guardian.

[7] יישן - We also find mention of God sleeping in Psalm 78.65, in which the psalmist describes God's decision to act to defeat the foes of Israel, saying "the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a warrior shaking off wine." In Psalm 44.24, the psalmist asks God pleadingly for his support and redemption, saying "Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, oh Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!" These occurrences, coupled with Psalm 121 (which repeats emphatically that that God, Guardian of Israel, does not sleep or slumber), paint an image of a God that is either present or absent in His protection/favor of the His people depending on whether or not He is "sleeping." In Psalm 121, the Psalmist's emphasis that God does not sleep makes a clear point that God is most present and engaged in His role as Guardian of Jews and of the Israelite people. It implies a sense of vigilance and attentiveness, the opposite of rejection or "hiding God's face" (see Pss 13.2, 27.8, 88.5, Deut. 31.17, Isa. 54.8, and other citations with this common image).

[8] יישן ,ינום - It is worth noting that while these words are used nearly synonymously here, ישן appears much more frequently throughout the Tanakh (24 times) than נום (only 6 times, two of which are in this psalm). נום seems to be a deeper kind of sleep, near a stupor as Psalm 76.6 depicts, a sleep so deep that "the bravest of men could not lift a hand." *Yashein* can be used to refer to a more typical kind of nightly sleep, such as in

(ה) יְהוָה שֹׁמְרֶךָ
יְהוָה צִלְּךָ עַל־יַד יְמִינֶךָ׃

5) God is your guardian,
God is your protection[9] at your right hand.[10]

Psalm 3.6: “I lie down and sleep and wake again, for God sustains me,” or an equally deep sleep like *num*, such as Jeremiah 51.39: “I will set out their drink and get them drunk, so that they may become intoxicated and sleep an endless sleep.” We also note that this exact phrase - לא ינום ולא יישן - appears in Isaiah 5.27 in refer to an army in service of God: “in its ranks, none is weary or stumbles, they *never sleep nor slumber*, the belts on their waists do not come loose, nor do the thongs of their sandals break.” Thus, we see that like this psalm, this expression is used to describe a type of hyper-vigilance and dedicated attention to a task, much like the modern expression of not “sleeping on the job.” Here, unlike in Isaiah 5, the job is the protection of the psalmist.

[9] צלך - Literally, the word צל refers to the shade in which one receives respite from the sun. One of the best examples of this can be found in Jonah 4.5-6: “Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city. He made a booth there and sat under it in the *shade*, until he should see what happened to the city. God provided a ricinus plant, which grew up over Jonah, to *provide shade* for his head and save him from discomfort.” However, the word here appears metaphorically; shade is a type of protection from unpleasantness, discomfort, or even harm. Thus, this verse is saying that God is our shade, not in the literal sense of offering cover from the sun, but rather meaning that God offers protection and will act to alleviate suffering or discomfort. Thus, I have translated the word as “protects” rather than “shades.”

(ו) יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכֶּכָּה
וְיָרֵחַ בַּלָּיְלָה׃

6) By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.[11]

(ז) יְהוָה יִשְׁמָרְךָ מִכָּל־רָע
יִשְׁמֹר אֶת־נַפְשֶׁךָ׃

7) God will guard You from all evil,
[God] will guard your life.[12]

(ח) יְהוָה יִשְׁמָר־צֵאתְךָ וּבוֹאֶךָ
מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם׃

8) God will guard your going out and your coming in,[13]
now and forever.

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[10] יד ימינך - For a discussion of this term, see footnote #22 on Psalm 16.

[11] יום/לילה, שמש/ירח - These pairs each serve as a merism, because as opposites they encompass everything. Thus, the psalm leaves the reader with the impression that if God protects your comings and your goings (see note #13) during the day and night, then God truly protects in all circumstances and at all times. This image of the all-encompassing, all-powerful God echoes God's introduction, also a merism, in verse 2: "Maker of heaven and earth."

[12] נפש – See footnote #13, Psalm 23.

[13] צאתך ובואך - also a merism. See note #9, above. Additionally, Alter reminds us that "this concluding reference to the eternality of God's protection completes an arc begun with the reference to creation at the beginning of the psalm" (438).

Structural Outline

Psalm 121: God, Eternal Guardian of Israel

I. Superscription (v. 1a)

II. Question: From Where Comes My Help? (v. 1b)

III. Answer: My Help Comes from God, Guardian of Israel (vv. 2-8)

- A. My help comes from God, Creator of all (v. 2)
- A. Assurances of God's Enduring Help (vv. 3-8)
  1. God will steady you (v. 3a)
  2. God guards you and never rests (vv. 3b-4)
  3. God protects you from harm at all times (vv. 5-8)

Literary Analysis

a. Genre and Structure

Psalm 121 begins with a question: "From where will my help come?" Immediately, the psalm conveys a clear answer: God provides that help. The psalm offers an image of this "help" in the form of God as a guard. The psalm sends a clear message that God is both the guardian of Israel, שומר ישראל, and also of individual members of the Israelite people with the use of the 2nd person singular possessive suffix: ימינך, שמרך,צלך (your shade, your guardian, your right hand, etc). The psalm expresses in numerous ways that God's protection is enduring and without end – day and night, without rest.

Kraus, along with Brueggemann and Bellinger, classify this psalm as a "Trust Psalm," which is a highly appropriate characterization given the confident, comforting message of Psalm 121. Trust Psalms are a subtype of Praise Psalms, characterized by their use of language that "praise[s] God as worthy of the community's [or an individual's] trust, worthy of being trusted with their lives." Like the larger genre of Praise Psalms, Trust Psalms often take on a dialogical form, often as a call and response, and the body of the psalm articulates reasons why God is worthy of praise (Brueggemann and Bellinger, Kindle Location 10143). Kraus adds that verses 2 and 3 share elements of psalms of thanksgiving, though the psalm's lack of reference to a single, specific act deserving of thanks renders that characterization too narrow to describe the psalm as a whole. Overall, Psalm 121 praises God's steadfast presence, focusing on the realm of the individual. Indeed, it is the personal, intimate nature of the psalm that makes it so powerful.

However, in discussing genre and structure we must note that a close reading of the pronouns and pronominal suffixes reveals that this psalm reads like a conversation,

beginning with a question (verse 1), with pronouns in the first-person singular), followed by a lengthy reply (verses 2-8, in which the pronouns shift to the second-person singular). Goldingay writes that the opening first person verses may have been intended to represent the voice of a king "who first speaks of his own trust in God," and then continues with a minister's response, the "you/your" verses, which affirm the king's trust (vol. 3, p. 455). Kraus concurs with the notion that this text is meant to convey a conversation, but notes a number of other possibilities for the two parties in dialogue, namely that it could be intended for use as a call-and-response liturgy for public prayer, a quotidian conversation upon a son's departure from his family, or an internal dialogue "with one's own soul" (vol. 2, p. 427-8).

Of these options, two main possibilities emerge. One possibility is that the psalm is a dialogue, involving the original speaker, either speaking to himself or addressed by another. If the text is a dialogue, the original speaker is the subject of "You," and the text "reflects a need for reassurance" (Segal, Kindle Location 11718). The other possibility is that the speaker is speaking to someone else, the subject of "You." If this is the case, Segal justifies it by saying, "There are linguists and psychologists who contend that a switch to the use of the second person often indicates an underlying lack of confidence on the part of a speaker. Reassuring an outside party is often a way for a speaker to reassure himself in light of doubts" (Segal, Kindle Location 11718). Ultimately, there are too many possibilities of to be sure who speaks in each part of the text was intended by the author of the text, but in all cases, it is clear that these are the words of a person who needs help and is heeded to take comfort in a partner's assurances of God as an ever-vigilant guard.

b. Poetic Devices

i. Key Words

Forms of the root שמר appears six times in this 8-verse text. The repetition of this root as a *leitwort* produces assonance in the reading of the psalm and also draws our attention to the psalm's main message: God is our guardian. The root is used equally in its nominal and verbal forms. Its participle form, שומר, appears three times as a noun to describe and identify God, perhaps even interpreted as God's name (vv. 3, 4, 5). The root is also used three times, all in the future tense, ישמר, to describe God's enduring actions (vv. 7-8). The conjugated form, ישמר, is found with a direct object, ישמר את נפשך, and without a direct object but with a prepositional phrase, ישמר מכל רע; we thus learn from the psalm both whom God protects and also from what God protects us. In both the verbal and nominal forms, we see the ten occurrences of the second person masculine singular possessive suffix ך, which emphasizes the personal nature of God's protection over each individual.

ii. Parallelism

While Psalm 121 is rife with examples of poetic devices, there are several in particular that stand out because of the function they serve in delivering the main image of the poem: that of God as never resting, ever vigilant guardian of individual Israelites and the Israelite people. The text uses both paradigmatic and syntagmatic parallelism for this purpose.

One device is the use of antithetical paradigmatic word pairs such as day-night (v. 6) and going-coming (v. 8). These pairs each serve as a merism, as is discussed in footnotes 11 and 13. As a result, the psalm leaves the reader with the impression that if

God protects your comings and your goings, during the day and during the night, then God truly protects in all circumstances and at all times.

Another key example of paradigmatic semantic parallelism is found in the relationship between v. 3b and v. 4. The two clauses of v. 4 (a and b) serve to expand upon the two halves of v. 3b ($3b_1$ and $3b_2$) and thus our understanding of the psalm's image of God. Verse 3b states: אל ינום ($3b_1$) followed by the subject, שמרך ($3b_2$). Verse 4 follows, mirroring and expanding upon $3b_1$ and $3b_2$. Verse 4a parallels $3b_1$, "אל ינום" with the expanded text of 4a: לא ינום ולא יישן and thus emphasizes through repetition God will neither slumber nor sleep; God protects at all times without "rest" and without end. Verse 4b parallels $3b_2$, שמרך, with the extended text of 4b: שומר ישראל. In this case, the clear substitution implied through this paradigmatic parallelism tells us the two main ways that the psalm identifies God: as "your Guardian", and also congruently, as "the Guardian of Israel."

Syntagmatic semantic parallelism is also used as a poetic device that delivers the main message of this poem. We see an example of nominal-verbal, clause level parallelism in verse 2: עזרי מעם אדני is the nominal clause, which names God as the source of the psalmist's help. The verbal clause, 2b: עושה שמים וארץ, explains who God is by identifying what God has done, namely, that God made heaven and earth. Taken together, these two clauses remind us about God's creative power and the significance from where our help comes.

iii. Key Metaphors

Two metaphors are central to this text: God as a guard, and Guard as a shade. We see three references to God as a guard in verses 3-5. Describing God as a guard draws on

the duties of literal guards, that is people tasked with protection of places or people of worth. In biblical times (and indeed, still today) a guard's duty is to stay awake, despite at times working through the night. If a guard neglects his duties (such as by falling asleep), catastrophe can strike. The proverbial "city may fall, the palace be invaded, or the king assassinated" (Goldingday, vol. 3, p. 458). Thus, we see the emphasis in verses 3-4 on God as a guardian who does not sleep. As a guardian, God is ever alert, always awake and attending to the important task of guarding the people Israel.

The other metaphor for God in this text is God as shade. While שומר and צל are similar, they are not identical and instead balance one another. While the notion of a guard conjures up images of protection against aggression or violence, shade carries a somewhat softer connotation, offering a sense of protection that shields the shaded (see Ps. 36.8, 57.2, 91.1, and others). We note the connection between "shade" and weather: with God as your shade, the sun and moon cannot harm you (v. 6). In the context of the Middle East, the weather can be dangerous (high temperatures in the desert, freezing temperatures in the mountains), and God as your shade offers shelter (Goldingay, vol. 3, p. 458, and Segal, Kindle Location 11741).

iv. Other Literary Features of Note

The psalm reads as a very tight, coherent whole. More than anything, this is due to repetition of words that convey the key ideas of the text: God offers *help*, God does not *sleep*, God is the *Guardian* who *will guard* you at all times. These words that repeat in a "terraced" fashion: certainly a fitting organization for a psalm of "ascent." Specifically, we note that עזר appears in verse 1b and is repeated in verse 2a, ינום appears in verses 3b and 4a, שמרך appears as a noun in 3b, 4b, and 5a, and then as a verb, ישמר, in 7a and 8a

(Goldingay, vol. 3, p. 455). At times, these terraced words appear in a chiastic structure, especially in verses 1b and 2. The effect of this terraced structure, along with the clear key words and metaphorical imagery, is that the assurances offered in this text are clear and convincing.

Pastoral Implications: The Psalms of Jewish Mourning Rituals

"Suffering and loss mute us - they leave us without words. Whether overwhelmed, confused, distraught, despairing - or profoundly grateful, reflective, renewed, attuned - whatever our state, we are often left speechless, feeling that words fall flat or do not convey what we want, need, or intend. In the face of these challenges, those who are in pain need new ways of communicating, new tools for talking, and new modes of relating...Enter the book of Psalms."
- Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, "From the Depths: The Use of Psalms"
(Jewish Pastoral Care, p. 162)

The Psalms offer an amazing array of words and voices, giving language to the range of experiences and emotions in the human lifespan. This makes them a natural fit for an array of pastoral contexts. Spanning from the individual to the communal, from the joyful, to the sad, to the angry, they speak beautifully and powerfully to the range of human emotions we experience throughout our lives, particularly when we lose a loved one. This section will consider how and when clergy might best utilize the in-depth understanding gleaned from the annotated translations, structural outlines, and analyses of Psalms 15, 15, 23, 90, and 121 in varying pastoral situations related to death and mourning. Let us first look at each psalm individually.

1) Psalm 15

Psalm 15 is used across Jewish communities in a variety of different mourning rituals. The Reform movement's rabbinic manual, *Ma'aglei Tzedek*, suggests that a poetic, modified version of the text be read as an introductory reading at a funeral (116) or at an unveiling (168). The Conservative movement's manual, *Moreh Derekh*, also suggests that modified version of Psalm 15 be read at a funeral (E-14). *HaMadrikh*, an orthodox rabbinic manual, suggests a reading of the entirety of Psalm 15 at an unvieling (159), and/or verses 16-17 only or at a consecration of a new cemetery (171). While there is not a clear consensus across these different resources about the most appropriate time

and place to use this text, it is clear from its presence in each source that the message of Psalm 15 is considered appropriate and perhaps needed, in some form, in ceremonies related to death.

Psalm 15 is often included in Jewish mourning rituals as a result of a non-literal interpretation of its meaning. Taking the psalm out of its original Jerusalem/Temple context, we can imagine "God's house" as Heaven or an afterlife in which one who is good lives in the presence of God. The characteristics listed in verses 2-5, rather than their original intent as a list of requirements, which one may or may not have, become reinterpreted as a list of characteristics that are positively attributed to the deceased. These characteristics are a particularly appropriate way to praise the deceased in liberal, non-halachic Jewish communities, because, as Benjamin Segal writes, "in defining what qualifies one to be in God's presence...the poet chose matters neither of ritual nor of belief, but of ethics. One achieves godliness by caring about others and through moral behavior" (Kindle Locations 1831-1833).

The use of this psalm in funerals moves the text out of the didactic, quantitative sphere and into the metaphorical. The text, interpreted as metaphor, builds up the deceased with positive attributes, and implies that he/she is rewarded in the afterlife for these attributes by getting to be in the presence of God. Thus, the psalm places the dead in a peaceful location that, for some mourners, might be quite comforting, rather than imaging their loved one in the grave. The psalm also implicitly reinforces the idea that those who live a life of goodness and righteous are rewarded with God's favor when they die. Segal supports this metaphorical reading of the text, saying, "similar requests for eternally living with God (e.g., Pss. 23: 6; 27: 4; 61: 5) clearly emphasize the spiritual

rather than the physical proximity. The psalm's purpose is not time or location specific, but rather a contemplation on what one must do to be 'with' God" (Kindle Locations 1822-1824).

2) Psalm 16

Psalm 16 is utilized in different ways from Psalm 15 in mourning rituals. *Ma'aglei Tzedek* suggests it as a reading during a funeral, but only excerpts - either verses 8-11 (111), or verses 1, 2, 5a, 7-9 as a single, highly poetic and non-literal reading (119-120). *Ma'aglei Tzedek* also suggests verses 8-11 as a reading for an unvieling (165), or at a congregational memorial service at a cemetery during the High Holidays (180). *Moreh Derekh* and *HaMadrikh* suggest that the text, if recited at all, not be featured prominently, perhaps because of the same textual difficulties that lead to *Ma'aglei Tzedek* only using parts of the psalm. Specifically, *Moreh Derekh* suggests that it be read, not at as a part of any particular service, but as a possible reading to be reciting over the coffin during the procession to the burial site (E-54). *HaMadrikh* opts not to include Psalm 16 in any of its ritual suggestions.

As evidenced by the editing of Psalm 16 in *Ma'aglei Tzedek* and its diminished use in *Moreh Derekh*, many have concluded that it is difficult to use this entire psalm as a text in a funeral service. Verses 3 and 4 neither relate to the themes of death and mourning, nor do they offer peaceful, comforting images. In fact, they present images of punishment and blood, images that could be downright inappropriate and even painful to reference in a funeral setting. When we remember our earlier discussion of the likely corruption of these verses, it makes sense why they might not fit with the other parts of the psalm.

As a result, it is more appropriate to read excerpts from the psalm so as to distill the psalm's pastoral message. A reading of verses 8-11, as suggested by *Ma'aglei Tzedek,* would be ideal, as this excerpt includes promises of eternal protection from God, along with uplifting messages of the rejoicing that can come with faith in God. I would make some alterations to my earlier annotated translation so as to be comprehensible without the context of the larger psalm, as well as for the tenses to befit a person who has died:

> I have placed God always before me,
> for when God is at my right hand I will not falter.
> My heart rejoices and my whole being exults.
> Indeed, my body rests securely,
> for God will not abandon me,
> nor be distant from those faithful to God.
> You teach me the path of life.
> The fullest joy is in Your presence;
> delight is at Your right hand forever.

These verses, offered in this or a similar translation (one which is less literal but still true to the psalm's essence) move away from the literal understanding which might seem to imply that God actually keeps the faithful from death itself, and instead offers a message that those who trust in God enjoy eternal happiness and protection in the presence of the Divine, never to be abandoned. Many mourners might find these ideas comforting, especially if the deceased was a person connected to his/her faith, as well as if the mourners are looking to their own relationships with God for comfort in their loss. As Breuggemann and Bellinger write, "[this] kind of trust makes life possible in the midst of difficulty" (Kindle Location 2637).

3) Psalm 23

Out of these five psalms (and any other psalm), Psalm 23 is used the most often, and in the most complete form. In fact, all of the rabbinic resources utilized the text in its entirety. *Ma'aglei Tzedek* suggests using this psalm for nearly any mourning related

ceremony, such as funerals (117-8), unveilings, (169-70), and congregational memorial services (182). Similarly, *Moreh Derekh* suggests reading it as part of a funeral (E-16), during the procession with the coffin to the burial site (E-48-9), and/or at an unveiling (E-77). *HaMadrikh* suggests that the entire text be read after the clergy remarks at an unveiling ceremony (160). Accordingly, it is no wonder that Psalm 23 is the one psalm most readily associated with the Jewish funeral liturgy. Its use across the funeral liturgy of both Jews and Christians only further supports this impression. Perhaps it is so popular and widely remembered because of its clear metaphorical imagery and because of its focus on how God comforts and cares for the individual.

When a person is in mourning, it is a time when he/she might feel most bereft, most unsure and alone, and so it makes sense that the images of bounty, presence, and faith that resound throughout this text could be a source of great comfort. The poetry itself, from the balanced verses to the repeated occurrences of assonance and consonance give the text a rolling, predictable quality that is comforting to the ear, even if one does not understand the Hebrew. Further, it creates room for the individual expression of sadness and with its use of "I" language in a way that does not force anyone into communal religious imagery that might be alienating. For the individual, the psalm is also extremely relatable. J. Clinton McCann writes in the *New Interpreter's Bible* that "it is actually a psalm about living, one that puts daily activities, such as a eating drinking, and seeking security, in a radically God-centered perspective" (767). Every person experiences these things, most of us regularly. Thus, the images presented in this psalm are that of the everyday, elevated out of the stress of daily living, to a place where God can offer control and comfort.

The conclusion of Psalm 23 is most powerful in the context of bereavement. One might not want to offer the more literal translation "I will dwell in the house of Adonai as long as I live," since that could raise concerns or upset about whether or not the deceased is still able to be with God. Surely, we want to assure mourners that even in death, beyond the days of one's life on earth, they can rest in God's presence. Thus, I would suggest the more common, funeral-appropriate version: "I will dwell in the house of Adonai forever." The power of mourners declaring this aloud is profound, and serves as a reminder that our relationships with God are eternal.

4) Psalm 90

The use of this text in the life-cycle ceremonies surrounding death is well established for many centuries. Some form of Psalm 90 is prescribed for death-related ceremonies (funerals, unveilings, dedication of a cemetery, Yizkor, etc.) in all of the rabbinic manuals discussed here, and even in in the Protestant Book of Common Prayer, which dates back to 1789 (472). However, in each of these instances, only excerpts of Psalm 90 are used. What is omitted varies widely, and is instructive to note what portions of the psalm are included in each Jewish liturgy:

> *HaMadrikh* lists verse 17 only, for use at the consecration of a new cemetery: "And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; Establish Thou also upon us the world of our hands; Yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it" (134).
>
> *Moreh Derech* cites verses 4-6 or verse 12 only, for use as a reading at the graveside, or at an unveiling: "For in [God's] sight a thousand years are like a yesterday that has past, like a watch in the night. You engulf people in sleep; at daybreak they are like grass that renews itself; at at daybreak it flourishes anew; at dusk it withers and dries up," or "Teach us to make our every day count, that we may obtain a heart of wisdom" (E-101).
>
> *Ma'aglei Tzedek* cites verses 1-3, then 10a is combined into a single verse with 4, followed by highly poetic, non-literal renderings of verses 12 and 17. This generates the following text, which it suggests for use at a funeral or unveiling:

> "O God, You have been our refuge in every generation. Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity, You are God. As for us, You turn us to repentance and say: 'Return you mortals.' The days of our years are threescore and ten, or by reason of strength, four score years. But a thousand years in God's sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. Teach us therefore to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom. May Your favor, O God, be upon us. Establish the work of our hands that it may long endure" (113).[1]

Looking across these various sources, we note a number of commonalities. As we might expect, each of them limits or omits the middle section of the psalm that focuses on God's anger. From a pastoral perspective, this makes perfect sense: the harsh language might exacerbate the already painful experience of mourning a loved one, and in fear of exacerbating that pain, many people, including clergy, might avoid the idea of God's anger altogether. Surely, the idea that a loved one dies because of God's anger is far from the kind of pastoral message clergy would seek to convey at a funeral, and in many situations it might be best to omit this part of the psalm from public mourning rituals.[2]

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[1] *The Book of Common Prayer* also only includes verses 1-12, but for the sake of focusing solely on Jewish sources, I have not included that in my discussion.

[2] Note: We know that anger is a common response to the death of a loved one (see Levitz and Twerski, p. 167). It is possible that removing all references to anger may do a disservice to mourners who are feeling angry and might be comforted in knowing that such themes are also present in our sacred texts. It is certainly worth considering ways to incorporate this idea into the array of pastoral care offered to mourners, and might be best suited for study or reference during individual counseling with someone who exhibits such emotional response.

The second omission that these sources share is more surprising. Not one of them includes the entire text of the psalm, and while each source selected a different excerpt, all of them chose to leave out verses 13-15, the words of prayer for a cessation of God's wrath and a turn to love and mercy. This may simply be because these final verses are a response to the section on anger (vv. 7-12), which was omitted. Without verses 7-12 as context, it is possible that authors of these manuals thought it best that if those verses of lament were removed, to remove the connected verses of prayer. However, this removal closes off the opportunity to use these final verses to offer comfort to mourners by showing them that the community speaking in the psalm turns from lament to hopeful prayer. Given the great interpretive latitude taken by the author of *Ma'aglei Tzedek*, who cuts up and even re-orders the psalm, it seems that verses 13-15, equally finessed, might offer a meaningful *nechemta* for mourners. Thus, a gentler translation in the non-literal style of *Ma'aglei Tzedek* for verses 13-15 might be:

> Return, God!
> How long until we once again feel your kindness?
> We pray that in the morning when we rise,
> we feel comforted by your steadfast love,
> that we may once again sing and rejoice.
> As much as we suffer now,
> we ask that you one day bless us with equal joy.

Used in this way, more of the psalm's text could be retained in the funeral liturgy, and clergy could maintain a wider range of emotional content (pleading *and* hope) with their text selections.

5) Psalm 121

The concise nature and strong, comforting nature of the message of Psalm 121 makes it a natural fit for use in mourning rituals. *Ma'aglei Tzedek* suggests that it be read, in its entirety, at funerals, and *Moreh Derekh* suggests the same complete reading, but

either right before the coffin is lowered into the grave (E-56), or at an unveiling (E-82). Surprisingly, *HaMadrikh* does not include it at all.

Despite its omission from *HaMadrikh*, the text of Psalm 121 has much to offer in mourning rituals. It is easy to imagine how the intimate first and second person language of "I" and "You," combined with the notions of a personal God who helps and protects each of us, could offer great comfort to a mourner. At a time of loss, when a person might feel helpless and afraid, this text offers the assurance of an enduring relationship with a powerful God. The rendering of the verbs in present (vv. 1-5), and then future tense (vv. 6-8) comforts us with a reminder that God guards us now, and will continue to do so in the future. This text reminds us that God's help is "made possible by the fact that God is the maker of the heavens and earth, [and thus] the Creator-God is not dormant, but continues to act" (Goldingay, vol. 3, p. 460).

At the same time, it is worth considering times when, in the aftermath of a particularly tragic loss, the trusting message of this psalm might be difficult to receive. When a death seems unfair or unjust, the strong message of this text might sweep over, or even discount, the way mourners might be feeling. In the face of sadness, loneliness, or despair, the message of Psalm 121 might be profoundly comforting. Yet, in the face of anger, such assurances might be perceived as profoundly alienating. Clergy should be careful not to lean on the pleasant message of this text in a way that makes them deaf to the at-times Jobian cries of those in mourning. Ultimately, the power of this psalm depends on context, and requires clergy to be attuned to their congregants' needs in order to console them with texts that speak honestly and movingly to their hearts and minds.

Gleanings

The power of these psalms as a whole is that they offer so many different expressions of a coherent message: that of our enduring relationship with a God who is both transcendent and immanent. This message is conveyed through examples of individual and communal experience, and through an emotional range that includes doubt and certainty, joy and sorrow, anger and gratitude. Maurice Lamm, in his seminal work *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, explains that Judaism has a "long history of dealing with the soul of man, [and holds] an intimate knowledge of man's strengths and foibles, his grandeur and his weakness...the ancient teachers of Judaism had intuitive wisdom about human nature and its needs" (74). Indeed, mourning is experienced differently by every person, and within these five ancient texts there is content to relate to every experience.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of each of these psalms depends on context, and thus requires clergy to truly know their proverbial "flock" in order to comfort them with texts that serve as a "place...where God and Israel meet" (*Jewish Pastoral Care*, 183). We can look to Psalms 15, 16, 23, 90, and 121 as meeting places to be present with the mourners in our communities. It is in such meetings, when we are face-to-face, that we can hear their cries and allow the words of our sacred texts to console their hearts and minds.

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