

Form and Flexibility: A Commentary on Psalm 30

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Psalm 30 illustrates the complexity involved in determining the form and use of a biblical psalm. While it is a classic example of a psalm of thanksgiving, it includes multiple elements of praise and plea as well, thus displaying elements of three major literary forms found in the Psalter: psalms of praise, of crisis, and of thanksgiving. Depending on which lines one highlights, how one fills in gaps in the terse language of the psalm, and how one treats the tense or aspect of some of its verbs, one can understand this song as having been uttered by a person in the throes of a crisis, by a person who had emerged safely from a crisis, and perhaps by people who do not have any specific crisis in mind at all. This text, then, serves as a fine example of the flexibility of the psalms, of their tendency to use verbal ambiguities to make themselves adaptable for multiple situations and for many types of worshipers.¹

¹ A few notes on terminology:

I follow Benjamin Hrushovski, “Prosody, Hebrew,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 13:1200, in referring to the two or three subparts of a biblical poetic line as “versets.” This term corresponds to what others call “cola” or “hemistichs.”

While the ritual experts (priests and Levites) who helped Israelites offer sacrifice and prayer in ancient Israelite temples were male, the people whom these experts helped included both males and females. Thus the worshiper who recited any psalm of the individual (whether a psalm of crisis or of thanksgiving) in ancient Israel might have been male or, as 1 Samuel 2 shows, female. Consequently, one can refer to the worshiper of psalms of the individual as “he” or as “she.” In this commentary I use “she” to refer to the worshiper of Psalm 30, if only to remind readers that the individual reciting this text may have been female. On the role of women in the ritual use of psalms in ancient Israel, see Marc Zvi Brettler, “Women and Psalms: Toward an Understanding of the Role of Women’s Prayer in the Israelite Cult,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), esp. 41–56; see also the useful, if at times problematic, discussion of Erhard Gerstenberger, “Weibliche Spiritualität in Psalmen und Hauskult,” in *Ein Gott allein? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Martin Klopfenste and Walter Dietrich, (OBO 139; Freiburg: Universitätsverlage Schweiz,

Text and Translation

The language of this psalm is compact yet richly suggestive. Consequently, a translator must produce either a translation whose elliptical language is difficult to process, or a rendering that draws out connections that the psalm merely implies. Better yet: a translator can produce two versions. In what follows, the left side of the page preserves the choppiness, the brevity, and the cadence of the Hebrew. The text of the right side is an expansive version that aims towards clarity and readability but loses the rhythms and some of the ambiguities of the original. In the latter, connotations of some words are brought to the fore, while in the former they are not. But for the most part the two translations reflect a single interpretation of the text. Alternate understandings of equivocal terms and multivalent poetic lines are proposed only in the commentary that follows. Thus the difference between my two

1994), 349–63. On women as worshipers in biblical texts more generally, see Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 233–43.

This psalm, like most biblical texts, more or less assumes that Yhwh is basically male. Consequently, my summaries of the psalm's content refer to God as "Him."

I use the term "psalm of crisis" to designate one of the main genres found in Psalms, instead of three problematic terms common in biblical studies: "lament," "plea," and "petition." The first of these three terms is a misnomer: the crisis psalms do not simply express sorrow, and they are entirely distinct from the texts like in Lamentations or 2 Samuel 1. The second and third terms are also misleading. By referring to these texts either as "psalms of plea" or "psalms of petition," one raises up one element as representing the genre's definitive expression, when in fact different texts from this genre—or even different intonations in the recitation of a single text belonging to the genre—can highlight the one element or the other. Thus Claus Westermann tends to view complaint as the heart of these texts in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), while Erhard Gerstenberger regards petition as their essence in *Der bittende Mensch: Bittritual und Klagelied des Einzelnen im Alten Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009 [1980]). Westermann draws our attention towards the psychological effect these psalms on the worshiper, while Gerstenberger stresses their ritual setting. In fact both interpretations are valid, and thus a term that focuses attention on one over the other is unhelpful. Hence my suggestion of the neutral term "psalm of crisis."

renderings is not that they present competing understandings of the text; rather, they reflect different philosophies of translation.² For the translation on the left, it is important to pronounce “Yhwh” with two syllables, the second of which is stressed, e.g.: “*Hashem*.”

1 A psalm. A song for the dedication of David’s house.

2 I raise You up, Yhwh, for You drew me out,

I exalt You, Yhwh, for You took me out of danger,

And You did not delight my foes.

And You did not allow my foes to exult over me!

3 Yhwh, my God,

Yhwh, my God,

I called You, and You healed me.

I cried out to You, and You rescued me.

4 Yhwh, You took me up from Sheol,

Yhwh, You snatched my very life up from the underworld.

You gave me life so I did not go down to the Pit.

You revived me so I did not descend into the Pit.

5 Hymn Yhwh, O loyal ones,

Sing to Yhwh, You who are loyal to Him,

Give thanks unto His holy name.

And acknowledge, in regard to His holy name,

6 Yes: His anger — a mere moment;

That one spends a moment in His anger;

Life — through His will!

One’s wellbeing depends on His will.

At night — He puts down while weeping,

At night He lays one to sleep in tears,

And by morning — joy!

But by the morning there is joy.

7 I’d said, in my tranquility,

In my tranquility I wrongly thought

“Never shall I stumble.”

I would never stumble.

8 Yhwh, You were pleased to stand —

Yhwh, when You were pleased to

² Edward L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (BJS 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 85–118, describes a continuum along which various translations range. My translation on the left leans towards what Greenstein calls an author-oriented translation that emphasizes form. There I attempt to preserve the way the text said things, and I force the reader to do much of the work of interpretation. My translation on the right is an idiomatic, audience-oriented translation that emphasizes content. There I say things the way we might say things, and I have already done much of the work of interpretation.

My mountain had strength. You hid Your face — I gasped for breath!	<i>abide, My refuge was strong. But when You hid Yourself, I was in dismay.</i>
9 To You I called and called, And to my Lord I pleaded:	<i>It was to You I cried out again and again, To You I pleaded and pleaded:</i>
10 “What profit’s in my blood? My going down to nothingness?	<i>“How would You profit from my blood? From my descent into destruction?</i>
11 Listen, Yhwh! Be gracious with me! Yhwh, my helper be!”	<i>Hear me, Yhwh, and have pity! Yhwh, be me help, my hero!”</i>
12 You changed my grief to dancing; You loos’d my sackcloth, And made delight my cloak.	<i>You turned my mourning to my dancing, You took off my sackcloth, And girded me with exultation .</i>
13 So that a body hymns You, And will not be still; Yhwh, my God, I thank You always.	<i>So that my whole being will sing to You And not be silent; Yhwh, my God, I shall acknowledge You forever.</i>

Commentary

V. 1

מזמור שיר־חנכת הבית לדוד, *A psalm. A song for the dedication of David’s house.* The word לדוד in superscriptions to psalms often accompanies the word מזמור. Sometimes a subsequent phrase connects the psalm to a particular event in David’s life; usually this phrase is introduced by כ־ followed by an infinitive (e.g., 3:1, 34:1) or, rarely, by some other formula (7:1, 18:1). In other cases, information about the performance of the psalm and its musical form occurs along with the term לדוד (4:1, 5:1, 6:1, 8:1). In all these cases, לדוד modifies מזמור: “A psalm about David” in the former cases, and “a psalm /by/concerning/related to/about David.” If we understand the superscription of Psalm 30 following this well-attested pattern, we will translate it: “A psalm. A song for the dedication of the house. By/relating to David.” The

superscription might then be understood to tell us that David composed this song for use at a particular event after his own lifetime: the dedication of the Temple built by his son Solomon (since בית can refer not only to a house but also to a temple). Alternatively, the superscription might suggest he composed it to be used at the dedication of any family's house; apparently in ancient Israel there was some such ceremony when a new house came into use (see Deut 20:5).³

The cantillation of the Masoretic text (MT), however, puts a *munaḥ* under the word הַבַּיִת, indicating that this word connects with the next word to produce a two-word phrase: *David's house*, in which לדוד modifies “house” rather than “psalm.” The preceding words, שִׁיר־הַנְּבִיָּא (treated as a unit in MT), are also marked with a connecting cantillation mark, the *tarḥa*.⁴ This combination of cantillation marks creates the multiple word unit, “A song for the dedication of David's house.” Thus this superscription in MT connects the psalm with an event in David's life relating to his own house. Eliezer Slomovic suggests this event is the plague described in 1 Chronicles 21–22, which was followed by David's purchase of the field in Jerusalem where his son would build both the royal palace and the Temple.⁵ In MT's cantillation, the superscription emphasizes the former (the home of the Davidic dynasty) more than the latter, since the house is specifically identified as David's. While this reading may seem surprising, the psalm seems an appropriate song after the cessation of a plague (see v. 3, “You healed me”). Further, Slomovic points out that both texts include references to sackcloth (1 Chr 21:6, Ps 30:12) and a word with the letters שח"ת (1 Chr 21:15; Ps 30:10). Thus, for Slomovic, the superscription as punctuated by MT acts as a commentary. It reads the psalm

³ On this possibility, see Amos Hakham, *The Book of Psalms* (2 vols.; Da'at Mikra; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1979), 166 n. 14 [Hebrew].

⁴ This is not the divider mark *tifḥa*, which, in the cantillation system of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, is always located on the first letter of a word, while the identical-looking connecting mark, *tarḥa*, is always located on the stressed syllable.

⁵ Eliezer Slomovic, “Toward an Understanding of the Formation of Historical Titles in the Book of Psalms,” *ZAW* 91 (1979): 369.

as a song of thanksgiving that followed a particular crisis; later worshipers using this psalm are thus presented with an example of how the psalm can be used, especially after a crisis involving sickness, and perhaps also in situations that may lead to the establishment of a home.

A different, quite plausible suggestion, which follows the MT's cantillation, comes from ibn Ezra.⁶ The event referred to in the verse is the dedication of the house of cedars that Phoenician builders erected for David once he had consolidated his rule over all Israel and conquered Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5, esp. v. 11). That event can be seen to cap David's ascent to power after he was pursued by Saul and his forces, and thus this reading also makes sense of the poem's references to rescue from near-death.

Surprising though the reading that follows MT's cantillation is, it fits the content of the psalm better than the rendering of the type found in most translations (which ignore the cantillation): "A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the house/Temple."⁷ There is no meaningful connection between the wording of the psalm and descriptions of Solomon's dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8 or 2 Chronicles 6–7, or between the psalm's wording and the idea of dedicating a family's new house. Midrash Tehillim connects the psalm to the dedication of the First Temple by Solomon and of the Second Temple in 516 BCE, as well as the rededication of the Second Temple by the Maccabees in 165 BCE.⁸ The latter two events did at least follow crises (the Babylonian conquest and the war between the Maccabees and King Antiochus, respectively), so the re-use of the psalm in those contexts can be well understood. But the psalm was not composed specifically for either of those occasions. The language of the psalm does not suit a military conflict particularly well, and the psalm's language is classical, pre-exilic Biblical

⁶ All citations of commentators refer to their treatment of the verse under discussion unless otherwise noted.

⁷ The only well-known English translation that departs from this type of translation and instead follows MT's cantillation is KJV.

⁸ See Midrash Tehillim 30 §6 (ed. Buber, ק"י"ה ב' = 236), which also states that it was recited by Mordecai after the defeat of Haman and his followers.

Hebrew, not the late Biblical Hebrew of the post-exilic era.

It is clear from variations among the wordings of many psalms' superscriptions in MT, LXX, and Qumran that the superscriptions evolved over time. In fact the LXX of our psalm reflects a Hebrew text that had added the word למנצח (usually rendered “for/belonging to the choirmaster” in English) to our superscription. It is possible that the superscription to Psalm 30 originally simply read מזמור לדוד (“A psalm of/by/concerning David”), like almost all the psalms in the first book of the Psalter.⁹ Later this superscription was expanded to read what we have in the MT's consonantal text: מזמור שיר הנכת הבית לדוד, which in all likelihood was intended to be punctuated thus: מזמור. שיר הנכת הבית. לדוד. meaning, “A psalm — specifically, a song for the dedication of the house/Temple. By David.” The additional words in the superscription connected the song either to a repeated setting (the dedication of a family's house) or, more likely, to a historical event (the dedication of the Temple, whether the First or the Second, or the rededication by the Maccabees). At some point, the cantillation tradition found in MT reinterpreted the longer version of the superscription by parsing its syntax so that it means, “A psalm. A song for the dedication of David's house.” The significance of these several interpretations will be discussed in the conclusion below.

V. 2

This verse introduces what we might call “vertical language”. Both the verbs ארוםמך = *I raise you up = I exalt You*¹⁰ and דליתני = *You drew me out = You took me out of danger* indicate action that moves up; subsequent verses (4, 6, 10) will also use vocabulary describing upward and downward motion. Here, the verbs create a sense of מדה כנגד מדה (“measure for measure”): the fitting

⁹ So Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (HKAT Abt. 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 128; and Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 354; who regard שיר הנכת הבית as a secondary insertion.

¹⁰ In what follows, I provide the Hebrew original alongside both my translations, the first in regular print and the second in italics. When they are very close or in subsequent quotations, I provide only one English rendering.

response to God's lifting me up to rescue me is for me to lift God up by praising Him. The verb דָּלָה is used for drawing water up in a bucket (דָּלִי) from a well or a cistern. The verb may thus suggest the image of saving a person who has fallen down a well or a cistern. The dangers posed by wells and cisterns were a more prominent source of worry for the ancients than they are for those of us who get water from a faucet.¹¹ Hence, the second of my translations.

The verse can be read as a two-verset line, as I have translated it above, in which the first verset contains internal lexical parallelism of the two verbs. Alternatively, one could perform this opening line as containing three versets:

אָרוֹמַמְךָ ה'	כִּי דָלִיתַנִּי	וְלֹא־שִׂמְחָת אִיבֵי לִי:
<i>I exalt You, Yhwh,</i>	<i>for You took me out of danger,</i>	<i>And You did not delight my foes.</i>
<i>And you did not allow my foes to exult over me!</i>		

In this case, one would treat כִּי = *for* as an independent word to create a line with two stressed syllables (as is the case in MT). Both performance traditions were likely practiced in ancient times; there is no need to rule that one is right and the other wrong.

The word כִּי has multiple meanings: "for" makes contextual sense here, since statements of praise in the psalms are often followed by the worshiper's articulation of the reason for praising God. The term can also mean "if" as well as "when." Further, I render the prefix form אָרוֹמַמְךָ with present-tense verbs in English, to indicate action that is ongoing at this moment: "I raise You up = *I exalt You.*" But the prefix form can also indicate a future action. Thus it is linguistically possible to render this verse: "I shall raise You up, Yhwh / When You have drawn me out = *I shall exalt You, Yhwh, / When you have taken me out of danger.*" We return to the implication of this possibility in the conclusion.

¹¹ But at least they didn't have to worry about lead.

V. 3

It is not altogether clear how this verse reads as poetry. I have divided it into two versets (ה' אֱלֹהֵי / שׁוֹעַתִּי אֱלֹהֵי וְתִרְפָּאֵנִי), the first of which is shorter than the second, a situation which is unusual but not unknown in biblical poetry. There are no lexical, grammatical, or semantic parallels between the versets. The only parallel involves rhythm: two accented beats followed by three — and even that parallel is a loose one.¹² But in the free verse that is biblical poetry,¹³ this sort of line is perfectly acceptable. Though we might have read this verse as prose in another context, the environment in which it is found encourages us to pause somewhere towards the middle of the verse, creating two parts that are roughly parallel in their length. The rhythmic performance of all the surrounding lines leads us to introduce a caesura in our performance of the five words this verse contains, rendering it a two-verset

¹² Alternatively, one might divide it as follows: ה' אֱלֹהֵי שׁוֹעַתִּי אֱלֹהֵי / וְתִרְפָּאֵנִי

Yhwh, my God, I called You, / and You healed me. Yhwh, my God, I cried out to You, / and You rescued Me.

This division allows for a lexical parallel between the two versets, one in which the speaker does something to God, and the other in which God does something to the speaker. But in such a division, we would have a single-word verset, which is a near impossibility in biblical poetry. The rhythmic gap between a four-beat line and a one-beat verset also undermines this possibility.

¹³ On biblical poetry as free verse, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9–10, 95–177, esp. 98–99. Similarly, Hrushovski, “Prosody,” 1201, refers to the “free rhythm...based on a cluster of changing principles” of biblical poetry, which he clearly sees as a type of free verse. On earlier literary critics (esp. Gay Wilson Allen) who rightly recognize biblical poetry as a very early form of free verse, see Dobbs-Allsopp, 95, 393 n. 3, and 396 n. 32. Dobbs-Allsopp points out (177 and 394 n. 13) that Walt Whitman implied a connection between what we now call free verse and biblical poetry in his 1888 essay, “The Bible as Poetry.” Whitman cites the claim of Frederick De Sola Mendes (in Mendes’ lecture “Hebrew Poets”) that “rhyming was not a characteristic of Hebrew poetry at all. Metre was not a necessary mark of poetry. Great poets discarded it; the early Jewish poets knew it not.” Mendes, incidentally, was one of the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and a graduate of the older JTS in Breslau, Germany. (He is not to be confused with his brother, Henry Pereira Mendes, the American JTS’s president from 1897 to 1902.) Whitman’s essay is available in Walt Whitman, “The Bible as Poetry,” in *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 379–82. I have not been able to locate Mendes’ lecture. Dobbs-Allsopp suggests to me that the lecture may not exist in print; Whitman may have attended the lecture while living in New York City.

poetic line.¹⁴

וַתִּרְפָּאֵנִי = *and You healed Me=and You rescued me*. This verb usually refers to healing from illness, but its semantic range in Biblical Hebrew (BH) extends further to include the repair of inanimate objects (1 Kgs 18:30; 2 Kgs 2:22; Isa 6:10) as well as healing in a metaphorical sense. Hence, my second translation, “rescue,” which allows this psalm to fit a wide variety of situations. But the narrower sense, “heal,” remains present, so that the psalm is especially apt for recitation by a person who has recovered from an illness.

V. 4

הֶעֱלִית מִן־שְׂאוֹל נַפְשִׁי = *You took me up from Sheol = You snatched my very life from the underworld*. In the Bible this sort of phrasing typically refers to restoring health to a person who was about to die.¹⁵ But its meaning can go further than that. Contrary to a widespread misconception, Sheol does not necessarily refer to an unpleasant underworld to which all humans travel after death. Rather, Ruth Rosenberg has shown that Sheol in most cases refers to the destination of people who die an unhappy, untimely, or otherwise inappropriate death.¹⁶ Thus saving a person from Sheol in our verse can mean preventing an early or tragic death. This act of salvation not only leads to continued life in this world but may allow the saved individual to avoid an unpleasant form of existence in the afterlife.

¹⁴ On this sort of line, in which context creates the impression of parallelism, see Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 134–35; and cf. the comments on “mere comma” in James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 4–5.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. 82–108, 212–13. So, too, Peter Craigie and Marvin Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed. (WBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 253, commenting on our verse: “The meaning of v 4a is not that the psalmist had died and been restored to life; rather, he had been so close to death that it was as if he were already dead, and from that grave situation he had been rescued by God’s act of healing.”

¹⁶ Ruth Rosenberg, “The Concept of Biblical Sheol within the Context of Ancient Near Eastern Beliefs” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1981), demonstrates that in the Bible Sheol is not the ultimate destination of most humans. Rather, Sheol is almost exclusively associated with unnatural death and, she argues, divine judgment. See especially chap. 3 of the dissertation, and, regarding judgment, chap. 4. See also Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration*, 35–81.

נפשי = *me = my very life*. The descent of the נפש to the underworld and thus to death is a common motif; see 1 Sam 2:6, Ps 86:13; 115:17; and Job 7:9. But what exactly did God snatch out of the underworld in our verse? More precisely, what did God prevent from entering Sheol? The semantic range of the term נפש in BH encompasses “life,” “breath,” and “self,” and at times the word acts like a pronoun, simply referring to an individual human being. Thus, this verset can refer to God’s act of healing, which prevented the worshiper’s death, the cessation of her ability to breathe. But it is not impossible for it to have a broader meaning. In Northwest Semitic inscriptions contemporaneous with the Bible, the term נפש sometimes refers to an aspect of a human being that endures after death and the decomposition of the body.¹⁷ Many scholars have assumed that dualistic thinking was alien to ancient Israel, but the נפש could in fact be distinct from the body, as Richard Steiner has brilliantly shown.¹⁸ While the term נפש frequently parallels terms like בשר (“flesh”), whether because their meanings overlap or because the former was present within the latter (Job 13:14; 14:22; Ps 63:2; 84:3), in texts like Job 12:10 it is clear that the נפש is distinct from the בשר, which the נפש leaves upon death.

Thus understanding נפש to refer to an aspect of a person that endures after death and avoids the unpleasant post-mortem existence found in Sheol is linguistically within the range of Northwest Semitic texts of the Iron Age, including our psalm. In that case, the verse, understood in its ancient context, could also refer to a happy afterlife, and the translation “soul” comes very close

¹⁷ See the painstakingly thorough discussion in Richard Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The Nefesh in Israel and Kindred Spirits in the Ancient Near East, with an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription* (ANEM; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015). Note in particular the use of the term (spelled נפש) in the eighth-century BCE Panamuwa and Katumuwa inscriptions, Aramaic texts from Zincirli Höyük in present-day Turkey. On that usage see Seth Sanders, “The Appetites of the Dead: West Semitic Linguistic and Ritual Aspects of the Katumuwa Stele,” *BASOR* 369 (2013): 44 and 50, who emphasizes that this entity is not entirely identical to our western notion of an immaterial and immortal soul. While Sanders overstates his conclusion, his nuanced and learned treatment is enormously helpful.

¹⁸ See esp. Steiner, *Disembodied Souls*, 124–26.

to expressing a meaning that makes sense in the original cultural setting of this psalm. But we shall see that in light of v. 10, that interpretation is contextually less likely in this psalm.

חייתיני = *You gave me life = You revived me.* The Hebrew verb's semantic range includes "preserve life," "give life," and "revive, quicken, restore." In biblical texts it usually refers to saving a person from death (that is, healing a sick or wounded person), rather than bringing a literally dead person back to life. The latter meaning is common in postbiblical Hebrew (e.g., in the second paragraph of the *Amidah* prayer), but it appears in only a few biblical texts (e.g., 2 Kgs 8:5, Hos 6:2, the latter in a metaphorical sense).

מיורדי־בור = *So I did not go down to the Pit = So I did not descend into the Pit.* This rendering follows the MT's *qere*, which contains a *mem* indicating negative consequence,¹⁹ followed by an infinitive with a pronominal suffix²⁰ (מִיִּרְדֵּי), literally, "preventing my going down." The MT's *ketiv* reads מִיִּרְדֵּי־בור. Pre-MT scribes may have simply intended the *waw* in יורדי to indicate that the vowel is to be pronounced as an *o*, in which case יורדי may be an alternative spelling for the same infinitive found in MT's *qere*. Or one might read this as מִיִּרְדֵּי־בור: a partitive *mem* meaning "from among,"²¹ followed by a plural participle in the construct state.²² In that case, the verset translates as "You gave me life from among those who go down to the Pit," or "You gave me life, [distinguishing me] from those who go down to the Pit." Both possibilities

¹⁹ See *BDB*, 583 and 578, s.v. מן, mng. 7b, and cf. 1b.

²⁰ The typical form of the infinitive construct for this root would be יִרְדֵּי (and יִרְדֵּי with the pronominal suffix), but the form found here with the typical *o*-class vowel of the *qal* infinitive construct is possible as well; see *GKC* §69m. The presence of a *meteg* under the *yod* is unusual in a *qal* infinitive construct, because it implies that the *qamaṣ* there is long, in which case the form would not be an infinitive at all; so Radaq. But Frank Blake, "The Hebrew *Metheg*," *JAOS* 32 (1912): 82; *GKC* §69m; and G. Bergsträsser, *Hebräische Grammatik mit Benutzung der von E. Kautzsch bearbeiteten 28. Auflage von Wilhelm Gesenius' hebräischer Grammatik* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1982), II §26c* agree, against Radaq, that the *qamaṣ* is short, so that the form is an infinitive construct.

²¹ *BDB*, 580–81, mng. 3.

²² Cf. עם יורדי בור ("among those who go down to the Pit") in Ps 28:1 and 88:5.

make good sense, and both may have been performed in ancient Israel.²³

V. 5

והודו לו = *Give thanks unto=And acknowledge in regard to* The semantic range of this verb (viz., the *hiphil* of יד"י) includes *acknowledging* something positive and hence *giving thanks* for it as well as *praising* the one who provides it. These are not distinct meanings; to thank involves acknowledging a beneficial act.²⁴ Hebrew לוֹ means not only “to, unto, towards” but also “regarding, about.”²⁵ Hence, the two translations provided, practically speaking, differ from each other very little.

V. 6

כי רגע באפו / היים ברצונו = *Yes: His anger — a mere moment; / Life — through His will! = That one spends a moment in His anger; / One's wellbeing depends on His will* This poetic line is quite terse; its first verset consists of a verbless clause with three words; its second verset, a verbless clause with just two words. The sense of the first verset is clear in spite of its brevity: God's anger lasts but a moment. One can debate whether the subject in Hebrew is רגע [“a moment”], which would yield the literal translation, “A moment [is] in His anger.” Alternatively, we might understand the subject as the implied word, “a person,” “one.” In that case, רגע functions adverbially. This understanding yields my second rendering, *one spends a moment in His anger*. The thrust is basically the same either way. The first word of the line, כי, can mean “that” (introducing what is acknowledged by the verb of the previous line), “indeed, yes,” or “for, because.”

²³ Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 251, point out an advantage of reading the form as a participle: the normal form of the infinitive of יד"י appears in v. 9 (רדתי), which makes the *qere*, with its unusual infinitive form ירדי, less likely than the *ketiv*. That a text or speaker of a particular place or time would use an unusual form is completely possible; that a single text or speaker would use both in a single brief text is somewhat improbable.

²⁴ See the classic treatment in Claus Westermann, “ידה *Ydh* Hi. to Praise,” in *TLOT*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 502–9, esp. 507. The verb's semantic range also includes *confessing* something negative that one has done, though this usage is far less common for the *hiphil* verb.

²⁵ *BDB*, 514–15, s.v. לו, mng. 5f.

The second verset of this line, *היים ברצונו*, is more difficult. The meaning of these two words, the nature of their parallelism with the first verset, and the ideas implied but not stated in the verset's compact language are all elusive. Clearly, *ברצונו* ("in/by His will") echoes the syntax of *באפו* ("in/during His anger") in the first verset. Building on this parallel, some interpreters attempt to find in our line both syntactic and lexical parallelism, which often do appear together. If *היים* is parallel with *רגע* ("a moment"), then *היים* must mean something having to do with time. Moreover, since "His anger" is negative while "His will" is presumably positive, the lexical parallelism involves opposites—in other words, this line displays antithetical parallelism; the first verset is negative and the second, positive. In that case, *היים* from our second verset must mean something positive relating to time. Hence the rendering of this verset as "His favor is for a lifetime" (RSV).²⁶

The problem with this approach is that the Hebrew word *היים* does not have a temporal connotation like our English word "lifetime" or our legal expression "a life sentence."²⁷ Further, there is no reason to assume that the line's parallelism must be lexical; the fact that *רגע* has a temporal meaning hardly means that *היים* must have a temporal meaning, too. All lines of biblical poetry involve parallelism—indeed, as Roman Jakobson and others teach, *all* poetry anywhere involves parallelism—but not all poetic parallelism involves

²⁶ Similar renderings are found in NIV; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*; Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). So too Rashi, who paraphrases, *היים ארוכים יש בהרצותו ובהיפייסו*.

²⁷ The one case of a possible temporal connotation is the phrase *כעת חיה*, which (as noted by G. Gerleman, "*חיה Hyh to Live*," in *TLOT*, 1:414) means "at this time next year" (Gen 18:10, 14; 2 Kgs 4:16f.) like the Akkadian expression, *ana balāt* "in the coming year." But even that idea is not the same as "lifetime" or "long duration." Granted, Gerleman also says (1:415) that "a reduction of the meaning to 'lifetime' results when *ḥayyîm* is used in temporal designations," but as he goes on to note, this is usually in the expressions, *שני היים* or *ימי היים*, where the temporal element is explicitly present from the word for "days" or "years." Thus there is nothing temporal in the word *היים* itself. Even in the cases Gerleman goes on to cite with the sense "lifetime" (Gen 7:11, Lev 18:18, Judg 16:30, Eccl 3:12, 6:12), the temporal connotation comes not from the word *היים* itself but from the particle *-ב* that precedes it, meaning "during."

parallels of meaning, as opposed to parallels of rhythm, sound, or syntax.²⁸ In our verse, the two versets are parallel not in meaning but because of their syntax,²⁹ their rhythm and length,³⁰ and their extremely curt manner of expression, which requires the reader to fill in what is missing in both. The word חיים simply means “life, the ability to live.” It may also connote “a good life, well-being,”³¹ like its matching term in Akkadian, *balātu*.

רנה בלילה / ולבקר בנה = At night—He puts down while weeping, / And by morning—joy! = *At night He lays one to sleep in tears, / But by the morning there is joy.* This second line echoes the previous one in its charged brevity. Its parallelism is rhythmic, lexical, and phonological. The lexical parallelism is antithetical: “at night” parallels “by morning,” and “weeping” parallels “joy.” The phonological parallelism results from the analogous sounds of בנה and בקר, as well as the similarity of בלילה and רנה. (Regarding the latter, recall that *l* and *r* in many languages are perceived as similar sounds.) My translations assume that the subject of בנה is God, and that this verb is *hiphil*, so that it means “to cause someone to lodge overnight,” and hence “to put someone to sleep.” The object of this verb is not explicit; as is typical in poetry, crucial words are missing, and the reader must supply them from context. That object is either

²⁸ See Benjamin D. Sommer, “Poetic Form and Religious Function in Biblical Verse,” in *New Song: Biblical Hebrew Poetry as Jewish and Christian Scripture for the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Briggs, Stephen Campbell, and Richard Rohlfing (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming). For Jakobson’s approach, see, e.g., Roman Jakobson, “Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet,” *Language* 42 (1966): 399–42; idem, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. T. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 350–77; idem, “Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,” *Lingua* 21 (1968): 597–609. Functionally similar proposals appear in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 263 and 271; and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 38. Both Frye and Herrnstein Smith speak of recurrence and circularity as constitutive of poetry. Though they do not use the term “parallelism,” their approach leads to a conclusion similar to Jakobson’s: parallelism is a form of recurrence, as each parallel recalls the previous ones in one way or another even as it moves forward.

²⁹ A noun and then -ב + noun + י- suffix.

³⁰ Two or three accented beats in the first verset, depending on whether one takes כִּי as a separate word; then two in the second verset.

³¹ Cf. *BDB*, 312, mngs. 2 and 3.

“people generally, someone” or the worshiper who speaks here (“God puts people/me to sleep in tears”). Another possibility exists as well: rather than understanding the noun בכי (“weeping, tears”) adverbially as my translations have done,³² we could take “weeping” as the subject of the verb. This produces the translation, “Weeping puts one down” or “One’s tears put one to sleep.”

Ambiguity in this first verset is not only a function of brevity that allows either God or weeping to be the verb ילין’s subject. That verb could also be a *qal* verb (cf., e.g., ישׁים in the *qal*) and hence intransitive. In that case, our unstated “someone” is the verb’s subject, so that we can translate: “At night, one goes to sleep in tears.”³³ Ibn Ezra suggests yet another possibility: we may take “weeping” to be the subject of לין understood as an intransitive verb, which in the *qal* can mean “abide, remain.” In that case we can translate, “Weeping endures through the night.”³⁴

Because the verb in this verset could be either transitive (in the *hiphil*) or intransitive (in the *qal*), our perception of God’s proximity and timing remains unsure even if we take God rather than “weeping” as its subject. Is God responsible for our going to sleep in tears, and also, by implication, for our joy in the morning? This understanding might be implied by my *hiphil*-based translation (“He puts down while weeping = *He lays one to sleep in tears*”). Insofar as this is possible, the psalm prompts us to confront the possibility that God authors both weal and woe, that God not only forms the light we enjoy but fashions the darkness that troubles us.³⁵ Or are we weeping as we retire for

³² In other words, I translate בכי as “in tears.” In biblical Hebrew, all nouns that begin with the letters כ and פ can be understood to include a prefixed ב that renders them into prepositional phrases that function adverbially. Cf. *JM* §126h.

³³ Thus Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 103: “At evening one beds down weeping, / and in the morning, glad song.”

³⁴ Similarly John Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 428, renders: “In evening weeping takes up lodging.” Hakham (*Psalms*, 1:162) also suggests this possibility.

³⁵ On this aspect of the psalm, see especially Jacobson’s discussion of what Martin Luther calls “the alien work of God” in Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 295–96, 299.

the night precisely because God is distant, so that in the morning our joy results from God's sudden appearance? This possibility is implied by the equally valid *qal*-based translation ("One goes to sleep in tears"). The very terseness of this poetic line prompts us to contemplate both theological possibilities without coming to a determination. The psalm will return to the topic of God's availability and its effects on us in v. 8.³⁶

V. 7

ואני אמרתי בשלוי = I'd said, in my tranquility = *In my tranquility I wrongly thought* The phrase ואני אמרתי or אני אמרתי, followed by either אכן or אך, is a formula that means "I had thought X, but now I know Y," where X indicates some false or naive belief and Y introduces what actually turned out to be the case (Isa 49:4, Jer 3:19–20; 5:4, Jon 2:5; Zeph 3:7; Pss 31:23; 82:6–7; Job 32:7–8).³⁷ In a few cases, as here, the אכן or אך does not occur (Isa 38:10). The phrase ואני אמרתי or אני אמרתי by itself does not always introduce an incorrect belief, however (see Ps 41:5; 116:11; Ruth 4:4). Further, the word order we see in our verse, *waw* + subject + suffix-form verb, is often used in biblical Hebrew to indicate a past perfect. My first translation indicates the past perfect, which can imply that what the speaker said in the more distant past came to be revised in a more recent past. My second translation makes explicit the connotation this phrase has regarding false belief, which can affect the listener familiar with the norms of biblical Hebrew even without the following אכן or אך.

בלי-אמוט לעולם = "Never shall I stumble" = "*I would never stumble*" The speaker admits to hubris in this crucial line close to the center of the poem.

³⁶ The suggestion of Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 129, that we eliminate ילין out of loyalty to a procrustean prejudice concerning the meter of the verse would erase these rich and suggestive ambiguities.

³⁷ To my knowledge, this formula is first described in Karl Budde, "Ps. 82:6 f," *JBL* 40 (1921): 39–40. There are some minor variations—e.g., in Zeph 3:7 and Job 32:7, we find just ואמרתי rather than ואני אמרתי. Budde includes his plausibly emended version of Ps 66:18 in his list.

V. 8

The first line found in this verse is extremely difficult. It will be easier to address the second line first, as the interlinear parallelism between the lines will allow us to render the first line more easily.

הייתי נבהל / הסתרת פניך = You hid Your face— / I gasped for breath! = *But when You hid Yourself, / I was in dismay* The first verset introduces the idea, well-known in Psalms, of God’s mysterious absence, which causes the worshiper to feel, and to be, vulnerable: when God’s “face” or presence is unavailable, the faithful lack the protection they need.³⁸ The word נבהל means to be dismayed. Joshua Blau suggested that the original sense of this Semitic root (preserved in classical Arabic) was to be out of breath; from this developed the senses “be dismayed” and “rush” (the latter related to “panting”) in Hebrew and Aramaic.³⁹ This more literal sense underlies my first translation, I gasped for breath. As in the second line of v. 6, the two versets juxtapose two events in a sequence; my second translation brings the connotation of a sequence to the fore.⁴⁰

ה' ברצונך העמדתה / להררי עז A notoriously difficult phrase. Literally, “Yhwh, at Your pleasure you caused to stand, / to my mountain, strength.” We might

³⁸ On the hiding of God’s face in the Psalter, see esp. Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God. The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 49–64. The motif is found outside Israel as well, as Balentine notes (24–43). On the hiding of the divine face causing sorrow and chaos, and the bestowal of the divine face as bringing life, healing, and righteous living, see, e.g., the complaint/request psalm to Ishtar available *ANET*, 3rd ed. (1969), 384–85; and in Alan Lenzi (ed.), *Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: An Introduction* (SBL ANEM; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 270ff., lines 53–54, 77, 93, 95. On that Akkadian prayer and its relationship to the psalms, see further Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. Armin Siedlecki (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 66–67.

³⁹ Joshua Blau, “Etymologische Untersuchungen auf Grund des palaestinischen Arabisch,” *VT* 5 (1955): 339. The root, as Blau explains, appears as بجر in Arabic but בה"ל in Northwest Semitic, where ל corresponds to the Arabic root’s ج.

⁴⁰ Moshe Weinfeld, *Early Jewish Liturgy: From Psalms to Prayers in Qumran and Rabbinic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), 71 n. 59 [Hebrew], astutely point out that Ps 104:29 confirms this connection between God’s absence and the worshiper’s inability to breathe: תסתיר פניך יבהלון / תספ רוחם יגועון / ואל-עפרם ישובון.

render this, “Yhwh, You caused strength to stand up at my mountain,” meaning that God bolstered the defenses of the speaker’s mountain stronghold—in other words, God came to the speaker’s defense. But the phrase *העמיד עז* is otherwise unattested in Hebrew. Further, understood this way, the poetic line is enjambed: the verb occurs in the first verset, the object in the second. While enjambment is a regular feature of poetry in some languages, it is rare in biblical poetry, and absent everywhere else in this poem.⁴¹

Rashi suggests another interpretation: take the *לִי* in *להררי* as introducing a direct object, and regard the noun *עז* as functioning adverbially: “Yhwh, at Your pleasure You established / my mountain as a strong one.” This use of *לִי* is common in Aramaic and occurs in Late Biblical Hebrew, but this seems unlikely in a psalm that has no other signs of lateness. Further, this possibility still involves the unlikely enjambment of the object. Ibn Ezra proposes that the object of *העמדתה* is an implied first person pronoun: “You were pleased to stand me up,” or “You were pleased to establish me firmly.”⁴² He assumes that the reader has to fill in the missing object. This is perfectly normal in the compact language of poetry.⁴³

⁴¹ On the rarity of enjambment in biblical poetry, which overwhelmingly prefers end-stopping, see Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, 44–48, 135–39; Yaakov Kaduri, “Biblical Poetry,” in *The Literature of the Hebrew Bible: Introductions and Studies*, ed. Zipora Talshir (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2011), 297–98 [Hebrew]; Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984), 332–35. One might argue that v. 3 in our psalm contains an enjambment, with a vocative in the first verset and the statement to the party addressed in the second; this would be a much weaker enjambment than separating a verb and its object, since the first verset in such a case cannot be understood at all, while the first verset in verse 3 makes sense on its own. Similarly, in verse 7, the entire second verset is the object of *אמרתי*; but since the object of that verb is a whole clause, it has to be in its own verset. Further, the first verset in 7 makes sense by itself, so that this would be a much weaker enjambment—if we choose to use that term at all.

⁴² Ibn Ezra further suggests that *הררי* is an absolute noun—in other words, the *yod* here is not a pronominal suffix meaning “my” but part of the noun itself. This allows the translation: “You were pleased to establish me firmly / as a strong mountain.” The *לִי* in this case presumably is used “of a transition into a new state or condition, or into a new character or office” (*BDB*, 512, mng. 4.)

⁴³ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 353, does suggest the possibility of emending to *העמדתני*, but this is

My proposal is to emend the text slightly, keeping exactly the same consonants but dividing the words differently at one point: ה' ברצונָה עִמְדָהּ / להררי עז (reading the verb as *qal* rather than MT's *hiphil*). This yields my translation: "Yhwh, You were pleased to stand—/ My mountain had strength." Often in the Psalter, the speaker's high place or mountain is a refuge, a safe place that God has granted to the worshiper. As in the poetic line that follows and in the second line in v. 6, the two versets present a sequence—indeed, a cause-and-effect sequence. Hence my second translation, which adds connectors that are not explicit in the original: "Yhwh, when You were pleased to abide, / My refuge was strong."

Thus this line displays the same syntactic structure found in the immediately following line. The two lines in this verse are antithetically parallel to each other: the first line describes the positive effect of God's presence, and the second narrates the negative affect of God's absence. Both divine presence and divine absence are described in physical terms: God stands when present and turns His face when absent. I lean towards this reading rather than Ibn Ezra's (which makes good sense of the Hebrew without any emendation) because his reading loses the close parallel between God's presence in the first line (if God is the subject of the *qal* verb עמד) and God's absence in the second.

V. 9

ואלי-אדוני = אליך ה'...ואלי-אדוני = To You, Yhwh...And to my Lord = *It was to You...To You that* In Biblical Hebrew, the verb usually comes first in a sentence.⁴⁴ The placement of these phrases at the beginning of both clauses in this poetic line,

unnecessary in light of the fact that poetry often requires us to fill in missing words.

⁴⁴ For a defense of this widespread understanding of word order in BH, see Adina Moshavi, "Word Order: Biblical Hebrew," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 4:991–98. Moshavi notes (995) that in poetry word order is more flexible than in prose and that it is sometimes varied for stylistic as opposed to pragmatic reasons. In our case, the fronting of the prepositional phrase in both versets occurs for a pragmatic reason; there is no stylistic reason for the prepositional phrases to occur at the beginning of a clause.

each time before a verb, emphasizes that the worshiper turns specifically to Yhwh, after the worshiper's illusion of stability and self-reliance in verse 7 has been shattered.

אָקָרָא...אֶתְהַנֵּן = I called and called,...I pleaded = *I cried out again and again,...I pleaded and pleaded* The verbs are in the prefixed form, which has a variety of uses in BH. Here we see one of the most common of them: a repeated or ongoing action in the past. As in many prayers of thanksgiving in the Psalter, the worshiper quotes from a prayer of complaint and plea that the worshiper recited during the crisis. The quotation of that earlier prayer goes from the beginning of v. 10 to the end of v. 11.

In theory, however, one could also interpret the prefixed verbs in this line as present or future in meaning—that is, they could also describe actions that are incomplete either because they are still happening or because they have not happened yet. These are normal uses of the prefixed form in BH. We will return to the implication of this possibility in the concluding remarks.

V. 10

During the crisis, the worshiper had attempted to convince Yhwh to answer the prayer by pointing out (in the verse she quotes here) that her death would have deprived Yhwh of a vocal follower. This verse is one of several in the Psalter that seem to deny that Yhwh's domain extends beyond death. It assumes not so much that there is no life after death but that Yhwh is not relevant in the realm of the dead. It is for this reason that the otherwise plausible reading of v. 4 as alluding to the afterlife seems unlikely within the context of this psalm. Similar ideas occur in several other psalms—e.g., 6:6; 88:11; 115:17; 118:17; and 119:175; note also v. 18 in the psalm attributed to King Hezekiah in Isa 38:10–20. The assumption that Yhwh does not hold sway in the realm of the dead seems inconsistent with the Bible's monotheism—that is, the Bible's assertion that Yhwh transcends all forces in the cosmos.⁴⁵ This

⁴⁵ The core of biblical monotheism, as Hermann Cohen and Yehezkel Kaufmann maintain, is not that only one deity exists, but that there is one deity who is supreme over all other things, beings, and forces. On this qualitative (rather than quantitative) definition of monotheism, see

tension is explicitly corrected in various types of postbiblical Jewish literature, which on this point are more compatible with biblical monotheism than verses like the one found here.

בְּדַמִּי = in my blood = from my blood So MT, which makes perfectly good sense: either the worshiper's crisis, as so often in psalms, involves pursuers who literally or figuratively seek the worshiper's death, or the crisis was an actual illness. "Blood" may be a figure for death in the latter case, or the illness may have actually caused a loss of blood, as in a hemorrhagic fever or a cancer whose later stages caused bleeding, which, in the ancient world, could not be stopped effectively. Ehrlich proposes, however, a reading that makes equally good sense: he reads בְּדָמִי, from the root דָּמ"ם, "in my silence, from my becoming silent."⁴⁶ This term can refer to utter stillness, and thus to death. This root occurs in this sense in v. 13.⁴⁷ There is no need to choose between these options; different worshipers or performers might have chosen the one term or the other as fitting to their situation. In any event, both "blood" and "silence" connote the worshiper's death.⁴⁸

אֶל שָׁחָה = to nothingness = into destruction The Hebrew term literally means "a pit," and is a frequent figure for death; it can refer, in other words, to the deep pit that is the underworld (see Job 33:24; Ps 16:10; etc.). Although this word may be etymologically unrelated to the root שָׁח"ת from which are derived the verbs שָׁחַת and הִשָּׁחִית, both meaning "ruin, spoil, destroy," the sound of our

Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, 2nd ed., trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 35–49; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelit* (4 vols.; Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Bialik and Devir, 1937–56), 1:221–417 (Hebrew; English abridgement: Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged Moshe Greenberg [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], 7–149); and more briefly Benjamin D. Sommer, "Monotheism," in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 239–79.

⁴⁶ Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Psalmen. Neu uebersetzt und erklart* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1905), 64.

⁴⁷ The root in Ugaritic and Akkadian can also mean "to moan, to weep, to wail," so that Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 251, render, "in my weeping." This is a less likely reading, as it is specifically the silencing of the worshiper through death that is at issue.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ps 94:17, where the related noun דוּמִיָּה ("silence") signifies the death of the נַפֶּשׁ, whose descent to Sheol was referenced in v. 4 of our psalm and is alluded to again in our verse.

noun שָׁח nevertheless brings these verbs to mind.⁴⁹ Hence, though the noun in our verse denotes “pit,” it can carry a connotation of “destruction.” My second translation conveys the latter.

V. 11

שָׁמַע...וְרַחֲמֵנִי = Listen...Be gracious with me! = *Hear me...and have pity!* The terms appear together in some of the psalms of crisis, precisely the genre our psalm of thanksgiving is quoting. Cf. Ps 4:2b; 27:7; as well as references to prayers of plea in 1 Kgs 9:3 and Isa 30:19 (and also a reference to a plea to human listeners in Gen 42:21)

עֲזָרָה לי = my helper = *my help, my hero* The Hebrew term as vocalized in MT literally means “helper.” It sounds similar to the word עֲזָרָה “strength, might”⁵⁰ and to a term that means “warrior, hero” in Ugaritic.⁵¹ The one term could thus connote the other, and my second translation picks up on this possibility.

V. 12

After quoting the crisis psalm the worshiper recited while in distress, the psalm narrates God’s rescue. The worshiper had been in a situation for which mourning clothes (“sackcloth”) were appropriate, but now God metaphorically clothes her in joy.

In v. 12, for the first time in the psalm (or perhaps for the first time since the opening line of the poem, v. 2), we find a three-verset line. It is possible to read the next line (v. 13) as having three versets as well. While many biblical poems move freely between two- and three-verset lines, some psalms use three-verset lines to mark the end of the poem (as may be the case

⁴⁹ On the complexities of the noun’s etymology, see esp. Moshe Held, “Held: Pits and Pitfalls in Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew,” *JANES* 5 (1973; The Gaster Festschrift, ed. David Marcus), 173–90, who provides a comprehensive argument against the view, found in *BDB*, 1001, that שָׁח “pit” derives from the root שָׁח “to sink.”

⁵⁰ See *HALOT*, 2:812, s.v. עֲזָרָה.

⁵¹ The two roots did not sound completely identical. The root meaning “helper” is cognate to Ugaritic *ḏr*, while the term meaning “military strength, might” appears in Ugaritic as *ḡzr* (=“warrior, hero”). While the proto-Semitic phonemes *ḏ* and *z* had already merged in biblical Hebrew into the phoneme represented by the letter ר, the Hebrew letter ע in biblical times still represented the two phonemes *ḏ* and *ḡ* with distinct pronunciations.

here⁵²) or the end of each stanza within in the poem (e.g., Psalms 19 and 27).⁵³

V. 13

למען יזמרך כבוד = So that a body hymns You = *So that my whole being will sing to You* I take the subject of the line to be כבוד. That noun can mean “honor” or “glory” but at its core refers to something with weight or substance, and thus can mean “body” (usually in reference to the body of God).⁵⁴ The term can also refer to the essence of a person (again, especially in reference to God). In the ancient Near Eastern mindset, the כבוד as essence is not distinct from the body but encompasses it; the כבוד as living essence is a material entity, but perhaps a nebulous one.⁵⁵ In this sense the כבוד resembles the נפש.⁵⁶ Thus it is not surprising that in Ps 7:6 כבודי parallels both נפשי “my being, my soul, my life” and היי “my life.” Similarly, since כבוד denotes something with substance, we need not be startled that in Ps 16:11 it parallels לב “heart” and בשר “flesh.” Ibn Ezra, commenting on v. 8, suggests that we should understand כבוד here to

⁵² If we read v. 2 as a three-verset line, this poem both begins and ends this way.

⁵³ As Robert Gordis, “Psalm 9–10: A Textual and Exegetical Study,” *JQR* 48 (1957): 119 n. 32, notes, three-verset lines often are used to end a text or a stanza: “The same stylistic procedure,” Gordis points out, “is to be found in Ps. 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 37, 47, 53, 55, 63, 73, 90, 94, 103, 104, 111, 119, 125, 129, 140; Job, chaps. 10, 11, 19, 26.” Cf. Watson, *Classical*, 168–74, who makes the same claim about the stanza-formatting role of what he calls the monocolon or orphan line—which is identical to what I am calling the third verset of a three-verset line. On this technique in Psalm 27, see Benjamin D. Sommer, “From Confidence to Confusion: Structure and Meaning in Psalm 27,” in *Hakol Kol Yaakov: The Joel Roth Jubilee Volume*, ed. Robert Harris and Jonathan Milgram (Boston: Brill, 2019), 362; on the technique in Psalm 19, see Benjamin D. Sommer, “Nature, Revelation and Grace in Psalm 19: Towards a Theological Reading of Scripture,” *HTR* 108 (2015): 380.

⁵⁴ See Moshe Weinfeld, “Kābôd, כבוד,” in *TDOT*, eds. H. Ringgren C. Botterweck, and H.-J. Fabry, various translators (15 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974–2006), 7:22–38; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60–62.

⁵⁵ See Ehrlich, *Psalmen*, 64–65.

⁵⁶ Thus some would render this verset, “So that my soul hymns You.” See, e.g., deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 292. Ibn Ezra glosses, נשמה חכמה (“the rational soul” in the translation of H. Norman Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the First Book of Psalms: Chapters 1–41* [Brooklyn, NY: Yashar Books, 2006], 338). Cf. Ibn Janah, who notes that כבוד can be a term that substitutes for נשמה (see A. Z. Rabinovitz, *Peirush Lekhitvei Haqqodesh me-et Avi Hammedaqdeqim Vehapparshanim R. Yonah Hassefardi Ibn Janah* [Tel Aviv: Devir, 5686 (1926)], 101).

mean “my כבוד,” an interpretation found in the LXX of our verse as well. Hence my second rendering. My first rendering reflects a meaningful ambiguity: the worshiper may refer to the hymn that comes from her own body, or the praise sung from the body of anyone who hears of Yhwh’s saving power.

But it is also possible that the subject of the verb here is left unstated and refers generally to those who praise Yhwh.⁵⁷ In this case, כבוד is what they shout (as in Ps 29:9, and cf. Ps 66:2; 96:3): “So that someone sings, ‘Glory!’ to You”⁵⁸

ה' אֱלֹהֵי = Yhwh, my God This phrase, having appeared in the second line of the poem, recurs in the last. It announces the constant element in the psalmist’s experience. In the earlier verse, the worshiper recalled a crisis; in our verse, she exults in deliverance. In both, the worshiper refers not simply to “God” but “my God” to emphasize an enduring relationship.⁵⁹

אֲדַכְּ = I thank You = *I shall acknowledge You* The psalmist takes her own advice from v. 5; the prefixed verb here is the same one that appeared in the imperative form there. On the overlap of thanks, acknowledgment, and praise, see above on v. 5. The prefixed verb can refer to an action ongoing at the moment (so my first translation) or one that will occur in the future (so my second); since this prefixed verb could, in terms of its form, be understood as a cohortative,⁶⁰ it could also refer to an intention, which would yield the translation, “I should thank/acknowledge you.”

In the translation above, I treat this verse as a three-verset line, which,

⁵⁷ On 3rd masc. sg. verbs without a specific subject indicating an indefinite personal subject (like “one,” or in more colloquial English “you”; or *man* in German), see *GKC* §144d–e.

⁵⁸ So Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 133: “So that glory be sung You, never stilled.” However, in Alter, *Psalms*, 104, he picks up on the overlap of כבוד and לב: “O let my heart hymn You, never still.”

⁵⁹ So deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 296: “The psalmist did not conceive of his relationship with God as ended, but sought redemption and deliverance from the very one who seemed the problem. To cry out in lament is not the lack of faith, but precisely the opposite—it is a form of faith appropriate for life in the pit.”

⁶⁰ Third-י verbs (the root of our *hiphil* verb is יד) are identical in the regular prefixed and the cohortative/lengthened prefixed forms.

along with the preceding three-verset line in v. 12, marks the end of the poem. We saw above, however, that the words ה' אֱלֹהֵי (‘‘O Yhwh my God’’) seems to form a single verset in v. 3. Consequently, one could lineate v. 13 as follows:

13 So that substance hymns You,	<i>So that my whole being will sing to You</i>
And will not be still;	<i>And not be silent;</i>
Yhwh, my God,	<i>Yhwh, my God,</i>
I thank You always.	<i>I shall acknowledge You forever.</i>

It is entirely possible that some scribes, singers, Levites, and worshipers performed this last line as having two versets, while others performed it with three; there is no need for us as interpreters to choose between them. My own preference is to read v. 13 as a three-verset line, since the presence of three versets at the very end of the poem (and possibly at the very beginning) yields an orderly psalm in which the bulk of the poem has one form and the end another, as in several other psalms. But that is a comment about me, and probably about some ancient performers; it is not a comment about the psalm. Other readers today, and no doubt some ancient performers, are not bothered by a somewhat random alternation between two- and three-verset lines, which in fact occurs in many other biblical poems.

Interpretation

Biblical scholars starting with Hermann Gunkel have described a category of psalm known as ‘‘the individual song of thanksgiving,’’ sung by a person after a crisis has passed.⁶¹ Worshipers likely recited psalms of this type at a temple when they brought a thanksgiving offering, or when they brought a vow offering to fulfill a promise they had made in the crisis psalm they had recited

⁶¹ See the classic treatment in Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 199–221. Some scholars follow Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 81–122, and ‘‘יה' Ydh,’’ 503, in referring to this genre as ‘‘declarative praise’’ or ‘‘narrative praise’’ (thus focusing especially on an element discussed more briefly in Gunkel-Begrich, 201–2).

earlier. Individual thanksgiving psalms were probably also sung even without an offering and outside temples.⁶² But the plural imperatives found in thanksgiving psalms (see v. 5 of our psalm) indicate that they were typically sung in some public setting. Psalm 30 is a classic example of this category.⁶³ It contains all the genre's elements: an introductory statement of praise for having been rescued (v. 2); a narrative or description of the crisis (8b), including a quotation from the crisis psalm the worshiper had recited while in distress (3, 9–11) and a report that the prayed-for rescue had indeed occurred (the last word of v. 3; all of v. 12); a more general statement of praise (5–6); a concluding statement of praise and thanks (13).

This psalm demonstrates in a beautiful and clear way how the thanksgiving psalm encompasses two other genres. The prayer quoted in vv. 9–11 is itself a small but typical representative of a crisis psalm, containing three of the five elements of that genre: the vocative and the plea in v. 11, and the statement of a reason God should listen in v. 10.⁶⁴ A fourth element of the crisis psalm, a description of the extremes the worshiper was in, occurs briefly in v. 8b and is encompassed in the references to death in vv. 4 and 10. The fifth element, a vow to praise God in public upon being rescued, is fulfilled by Psalm 30 as a whole. Another genre, the hymn of praise, also appears briefly within our thanksgiving song. A general statement of praise in vv. 5–6, with its plural imperative verbs (וְהוֹדוּ, וְזָמְרוּ), reads like the opening verse of a hymn. In fact, these two parallel verbs in v. 5 appear in parallel in the opening one or two

⁶² These psalms often refer explicitly to a תודה, but it is often difficult to be sure when this term is intended to mean “thanksgiving offering” and when it means “thanksgiving song.” See the useful and brief discussion of the issue in Bernd Janowski, “Mein Schlachtopfer ist ein zerbrochener Geist’ (Ps 51,19): Zur Transformation des Opfers in den Psalmen,” in *Tradition(en) im alten Israel: Konstruktion, Transmission und Transformation*, ed. Ruth Ebach and Martin Leuenberger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 212–13.

⁶³ So Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 127; Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, 199; Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 102–5; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 353; Craigie and Tate, *Psalms 1–50*, 251; Janowski, *Arguing*, 253–54; deClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 289.

⁶⁴ This statement is what Gunkel refers to as “the rationale for divine intervention” in the complaint psalms; see Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, 170.

lines of other hymns of praise: Ps 33:2 and 105:1–2, as well as the brief hymn found in Isa 12:4–6.

Precisely because our psalm, like most songs of thanksgiving, contains elements of the crisis genre, it is possible to imagine Psalm 30 being sung not only after a crisis but during one.⁶⁵ Doing so requires us to understand several verses in ways that depart from the thanksgiving context but are linguistically plausible. In light of the expectation in the thanksgiving genre that the worshiper quotes an earlier prayer, it makes sense to understand the prefixed verbs in v. 9 (אתחנן, אקרא) as describing a repeated action in the past; this is how I render them above. But from the point of view of grammar and usage, one could also one read prefixed verbs as describing an ongoing action—here, a plea recited right now and into the near future. In that case, one can imagine that a person in the throes of a crisis might decide to recite this psalm, especially if she focused her attention on these verses. Or one can imagine a religious professional (a Levite in a temple, or a scribe or wise person at a town’s gate or some other setting) directing a worshiper or a client to recite this psalm because the professional was thinking especially of these verses.

Further, crisis psalms often conclude with a promise to thank God once the difficulties have passed (e.g., 7:18; 13:6; 26:12).⁶⁶ In some cases the petitioner in a crisis psalm even launches into the thanksgiving song itself, whether because she imagines that God has already rescued her or because

⁶⁵ Thus Terrien, *Psalms*, describes our psalm as “an oscillation between a cry of distress and the firm intention to sing praise” and regards it as a prayer of “supplication for oracular acquittal” (284) spoken by a “petitioner” (281). Similarly Ellen Charry, *Psalms 1–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), 152, refers to the psalm as “an individual supplication,” but most of her analysis assumes it is a narrative of salvation. This approach involves no self-contradiction, because, she explains (156), the psalm’s “persistent ambiguity invites a wide variety of applications to people in all manner of circumstance, as the various commentators recognize.” Similarly, Hakham, *Psalms*, 165, emphasizes that the language is flexible and allows three settings: during a crisis (so that the suffixed and *waw*-consecutive verbs in v. 3 are intended for the future, and the imperatives in v. 5 are spoken in part to the speaker who utters them), after a crisis (and thus the petition referred to in v. 9 took place in the past), or after a crisis but with the intention of asking for help in vv. 9–11 from future crises as well.

⁶⁶ For a fuller list, see Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction*, 184, esp. nn. 775–77.

she wants to let God know in detail what sort of praise God can expect to receive for doing so (e.g., 22:22b–32; 31:22–25).⁶⁷ Thus it was not unheard of for a crisis psalm to include a good deal of thanksgiving and praise. The presence crisis of elements of thanksgiving in crisis psalms made it easier to appropriate a thanksgiving psalm as a complaint and a plea. Indeed, Psalm 30 contains all five elements of the crisis psalm, albeit not in their typical order. With its imperatives and vocative, v. 11 reads like the beginning of such a psalm (see 4:2, whose third verset uses the two same verbs found in 30:11; 5:2; 7:2; 12:2; 16:1b; 17:2; all of which are the first lines of a crisis psalm⁶⁸).

A worshiper's decision to use Psalm 30 as a song of crisis would be abetted by the psalm's frequently terse language and the ambiguity of its verbs, which allow the person reciting it to fill gaps in more than one way. Once a worshiper understands the particle *כִּי* in v. 2 as “when” rather than “for,” and the prefixed verb there (*אָרוּמַךְ*) as referring to the future; once one reads the prefixed verbs in v. 9 (*אֶתְחַנֵּן, אֶקְרָא*) as describing ongoing action in the present; once one interprets the report of salvation in vv. 3 and 4 as quoting what the worshiper hopes to be able to say soon, or once the worshiper uses suffixed forms in v. 3 (*הַיְיָ, הַעֲלִיתָ*) out of confidence that redemption is as good as done; once one the worshiper employs the last two verses of the psalm to express her dream that the crisis has already passed—once one follows these linguistically possible routes, then this psalm fits a new setting; it can function as petition rather than thanks.⁶⁹

In making this observation, I do not intend to dismiss the attempts of form critics since Gunkel to identify the situations in which particular genres

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, 184–85, esp. n. 789.

⁶⁸ Further, the second stanza of Psalm 27 encompasses a psalm of plea; it begins in v. 7 with a line similar to 30:11, with which it shares *הַיְיָ, הַעֲלִיתָ* and *הַיְיָ, הַעֲלִיתָ*.

⁶⁹ The same thing may occur in Jonah 2, where the prophet, having just been swallowed by a fish, recites what in terms of genre is clearly a thanksgiving psalm. Yet we can wonder whether a person whose body was just ingested by a huge fish would want to express thanks; death by digestion is not much preferable to death by drowning. One can understand Jonah as reciting that song as much to petition God for rescue from the fish's belly as to express thanks for salvation from the watery depths.

functioned, much less to reject the form-critical project of recovering ancient genres to begin with. Rather, I am simply pointing out that in addition to what form critics have rightly identified as the primary settings of a text, secondary settings likely existed as well.⁷⁰ The phrasing of these songs and certain ambiguities of BH grammar grant worshipers a great deal of flexibility. Further, worshipers can focus their attention on some phrases that seem especially meaningful while more or less ignoring the content of other lines that they sing aloud; worshipers' minds can wander, often strategically. This reality enhances the elasticity of a psalm.⁷¹

In the case of Psalm 30, the superscription reflects, continues, and encourages the recasting of the psalm for new contexts. The phrasing of this superscription likely evolved over time. By expanding it to read "A psalm—specifically, a song for the dedication of the house/Temple—by David," ancient scribes connected the song either to a repeated setting (the dedication of a family's house) or a historical event (the dedication of the Temple, whether the First or the Second). By so doing, they obscured the connection of the psalm to a crisis, and thus gave evidence of their presumption that the psalms are flexible and that utilizing them in new ways is liturgically appropriate.⁷² Later, the cantillation tradition reflected in MT reinterpreted the superscription to mean: "A psalm. A song for the dedication of David's house." This interpretation reconnected the psalm to a crisis, probably the plague that occurred during David's reign. This second reinterpretation shows that the evolution of religious texts and practices is not unidirectional; it moves in fits and starts, in multiple directions over time. The varied possibilities of how to read this poem and even how to understand its superscription demonstrate

⁷⁰ The fact that Psalm 100, a textbook example of a hymn of praise, is called a "thanksgiving" (תודה) in its superscription is a further example of this phenomenon.

⁷¹ See the useful discussion of this issue in Brettler, "Women and Psalms," 47.

⁷² On this tendency in superscriptions generally, see Brevard Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16 (1971): 150.

not only the adaptability of the psalms but Judaism's happy willingness throughout history to make use of that adaptability.⁷³

⁷³ It is a pleasure to dedicate this study of song ללוד to my colleague, Professor David Marcus, a pillar of our department at JTS and a scholar of great range and accomplishment.