

LIFE WITH YAHWEH AFTER DEATH:
HOW THE PSALTER'S REFERENCES TO LIFE AFTER DEATH COHERE

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the America Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BDB</i>	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>CANE</i>	<i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East</i>
<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i>
<i>CTA</i>	<i>Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939</i>
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i>
<i>EHV</i>	Evangelical Heritage Version
<i>ESV</i>	English Standard Version
<i>GELS</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i>
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>HSM</i>	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>KAI</i>	<i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften</i>
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>KTU</i>	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint

NIV	New International Version
RS	Ras Shamra
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>SM</i>	<i>Studia Missionalia</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TUAT.NF</i>	<i>Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments: Neue Folge</i>
<i>VeE</i>	<i>Verbum et Ecclesia</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

ABSTRACT

Tackmier, Bill J. "Life with Yahweh after Death: How the Psalter's References to Life after Death Cohere." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2020. 237 pp.

This dissertation demonstrates how seven Psalms passages that refer to life beyond death reflect a single, coherent view of postmortem existence held in ancient Israel. Although it has been argued by some over the past hundred years that four of the passages (Pss 6:6; 30:10; 88:10–12; and 115:17) reflect a time when Israel either did not believe in an afterlife or had a very limited view of postmortem existence, this dissertation argues that the seven passages are muted expressions of afterlife belief — muted so as not to be confused with beliefs among Israel's neighbors that the dead could speak to the living. The psalmists, like many in ancient Israel, opposed the cult of the dead practiced throughout the ancient Near East. The three other psalms examined (Pss 16, 49, and 73) focus on how the individual believed he would go on to an existence of eternal bliss with Yahweh without reference to other deceased persons sharing that existence. The psalmists do not deny that such a community of the dead existed, but they appear to avoid addressing the topic since Israel was often tempted to practice the cult of the dead, which involved offering sacrifices to the dead and soliciting their counsel and guidance from beyond the grave. The dissertation first surveys the cult of the dead as practiced by Israel's neighbors, then surveys how the rest of Hebrew Scripture cautiously handles the topics of afterlife and the cult of the dead, and finally examines exegetically the seven Psalms references to show that the psalmists are affirming belief in a continued postmortem existence with Yahweh, but one in which the dead were unable to communicate to the living either Yahweh's praises or his counsel.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Modern Old Testament scholars have sometimes claimed that the passages in the Psalter that speak of the silence of the dead¹ bear witness to a time in Israel's history when the Israelites believed that there was no postmortem existence, that life simply ended with physical death.² Other moderns have interpreted these references differently, claiming that there was a time when Yahweh's authority was not viewed as extending over the realm of death, and so those who died were out of Yahweh's purview and thus unable to praise him. These interpreters have often pointed to passages like Ps 139:7–8 and Amos 9:2 as evidence of a time when Israel, having evolved from an initial polytheism to a henotheism in which Yahweh had limited spheres of influence, finally emerged into a full-blown monotheism in which Yahweh had power even over the realm of the dead.³ No matter how these verses have been interpreted, a common thread that runs through most of the past century's literature on the topic of the afterlife in the Psalter is that the few passages that speak of what happens to the individual after death show a gradual—and very late—development of afterlife beliefs in Israel.

In this dissertation I will look at seven key passages in the Psalter and show how the four passages that speak of the silence of the dead⁴ as well as three that were traditionally viewed as

¹ E.g., Pss 6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13; 115:17.

² Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 132, 214; Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 1:240–41.

³ See the explanations of this evolutionary theory of Israel's afterlife beliefs in Diethelm Michel, "Ich aber bin immer bei dir: Von der Unsterblichkeit der Gottesbeziehung," in *Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 157–59; Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 138.

⁴ See footnote one.

expressions of faith in an afterlife through most of the history of exegesis⁵ show a coherent point of view about what happens after death, one which can be explained by Israel's situation in the midst of its polytheistic neighbors. I will not undertake a study of the current theories of the composition of the Psalms that posit different beliefs about death and the afterlife to different proposed periods of Israel's theological development. I will simply take the Psalter as it exists in its canonical form and show that there is no disparity in how these various Psalms references present ancient Israel's view of the afterlife, but rather that there is coherence in the way the seven references address the topic of the afterlife.

One factor that must be taken into account about the references to the silence of the dead is that they must be weighed against the background of the general purpose of the book of Psalms. The Psalter is a collection of liturgical texts intended for believers in Yahweh—living believers in Yahweh—to use in worshipping him. Since worship in Old Testament times was a corporate experience in which worshippers audibly proclaimed the praises of Yahweh in the presence of other worshippers, the book of Psalms is designed with living worshippers in focus. And since ancient Israel lived among peoples who believed in regular interaction between the community of the living and the community of the dead, it is not surprising that its book of worship texts would contain words and phrases that articulate Israel's unique perspectives on worship, which differed from the worship practices of those around them. In contrast to the way their neighbors believed that the deceased went on to a realm where they lived with the pantheon of the gods, and in contrast to the way these people believed that living worshippers should pray and offer sacrifices not only to their gods but also to the spirits of the deceased who lived with those gods, Israel believed that there was only one God and that he alone was to receive their prayers,

⁵ Pss 16:9–11; 49:16; 73:23–26.

praises, and offerings. Unlike their neighbors who believed that they could contact the dead and that the dead could speak to them, offering them advice and even blessings much like the gods themselves could dispense,⁶ the Israelite Psalter reflects a belief that there is only one divine being—Yahweh—with whom the believer is to communicate. He is their only source of spiritual advice, fellowship, and blessing.

These factors account not only for why the psalmists speak of the dead as being silent (since they could not praise Yahweh audibly in the company of the living), but they also account for why the three Psalms that do speak in an affirmative manner about an afterlife (16, 49, and 73) focus uniformly on the relationship between the individual, living believer (“I”) and Yahweh. Yahweh was the only being in the spiritual realm with whom the living Israelite believer was to interact and from whom he could receive supernatural guidance, protection, and blessing. When the three authors of Pss 16, 49, and 73 express their beliefs in what the afterlife will be like, they naturally focus on the relationship and fellowship they have with Yahweh, a relationship and fellowship that they are confident will continue even after death. As I will show in this dissertation, there is no reason to restrict the interpretation of any of these three Psalm sections to being mere descriptions of the individual believer’s relationship with Yahweh on this side of the grave. Each one of them is a profession of confidence that just as Yahweh has been with, advised, protected, and blessed them on this side of the grave, so he will continue to be at their side on the other side of the grave providing even greater blessings. In the dissertation I will propose that a significant reason for the statements about the afterlife in the Psalms being so rare and so reserved is that the psalmists did not want to inadvertently contribute to any of the

⁶ Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 31–32; Josef Tropper, *Nekromantie: Totenbefragung im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1989), 15–16.

misconceptions about the afterlife that were circulating in Israel because of the influence of neighboring religion.

My thesis is that these seven Psalms' statements about the postmortem state of believers in Yahweh reflect a common belief that the individual believer continues to live on with Yahweh after death but that he is cut off from the community of the living worshippers of Yahweh at the time of death. In support of my thesis I will propose that the reason the references to afterlife in the Psalms are relatively rare and are worded so cautiously is that the psalmists do not want to say anything about life after death that could be misconstrued or used to support attempts by some to accommodate Israelite faith to the cult of the dead.

The Psalter is focused on this mortal life. Frequently the psalmists express the imminent danger they are facing—enemies trying to kill them, illness to which they are about to succumb, exhaustion from which they are about to faint. They plead with Yahweh to preserve their physical lives. One of the arguments they use is that without breath in their lungs they will be unable to praise Yahweh. One of the passages that speaks of the silence of the dead puts it this way: “What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?” (Ps 30:10).⁷ An essential aspect of the living believer was that he was alive so that he could praise Yahweh. And that praise was not just for Yahweh’s benefit. It was aural so that others could hear it. It had a proclamatory nature. It not only gave honor to Yahweh, but it was heard by others who had gathered for worship. It was done for mutual encouragement. It was verbalized so that others could hear about the characteristics of Yahweh and about the wonderful things he had done, so that those in the worshipping community could

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 1973 1978 1984 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

be mutually encouraged in their faith and dedication to him. As a consequence, the death of any one believer in Yahweh impacted this praise and proclamation.

Three of the four passages that speak of the silence of the dead employ rhetorical questions. These questions are thought-provoking and penetrating. The death of the psalmist will not have a positive effect on either praise or honor for Yahweh. Hans-Joachim Kraus, commenting on Ps 30:10, puts it this way: “The petitioner confronts Yahweh: if I die (‘go down to the pit’), Yahweh, you lose a person who could otherwise praise you and declare your נִזְנָת.”⁸ Yahweh would lose a valuable spokesman if he were to let the psalmist die. Rolf Jacobson, commenting on Ps 6:6, another of the “silence of the dead” passages, says, “The psalmist here is not bargaining with God in the crude sense, not appealing to God’s self-interest. Rather the psalmist is stating a simple reality and placing his own hope in the divine-human relationality that remembering God and praising God describe.”⁹ The believer has a relationship with Yahweh. Yahweh created man to declare his praises, and in their earnest pleas the psalmists are imploring him to let them go on doing just that—to go on declaring his praises in the land of the living.

This is especially common in the lament and thanksgiving Psalms. Either the psalmist is asking to be rescued from mortal danger or he is thanking Yahweh for having already rescued him from it. And what makes this preservation of life so important is that it enables the worshipper to continue to proclaim the name and deeds of Yahweh to his fellow believers. Psalm 116 is a typical example. The psalmist has been rescued from the brink of death (vv. 1, 3, 8). His death would have cost Yahweh dearly (v. 15).¹⁰ After he cried out to Yahweh, Yahweh saved

⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Commentary*, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 356.

⁹ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 104–05.

¹⁰ The Jerusalem Bible translates this verse, “The death of the devout costs Yahweh dear.”

him so that he might continue to “walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (v. 9). What is his response now to Yahweh’s goodness? He will call on him as long as he lives (v. 2) and proclaim his name to the people (vv. 13, 17–18). He’s very explicit about the fact that his praise will be voiced in the presence of God’s people (“in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD,” vv. 18–19). This is typical in the Psalter. The psalmists are not primarily focused on the afterlife. Their acknowledged *raison d’être* is to praise Yahweh among the living and to proclaim his saving deeds to them. And since the Psalter is a collection of “praises” (פָּנִים) to be sung by the assembly of the living, it is not surprising that the state of the dead does not often come into focus.

However, might there be an unstated reason—or perhaps one only hinted at—why the psalmists tend to avoid the topic of the afterlife? It is noteworthy that a body of worship literature as large as the Psalter, written and gathered in the ancient Near East, contains so few references to an afterlife. By comparison, Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors had an abiding fascination—one might almost say preoccupation—with what happened after death.¹¹ A study as tightly focused as this one will not be able to examine all the evidence for afterlife beliefs in the ancient Near East or even among Israel’s immediate neighbors, but will of necessity be limited to surveys of what is currently known about Israel’s more immediate neighbors. Research into ancient Israel’s more immediate neighbors in the Levant in the early first millennium BC, as well as indications in the Old Testament itself, shows that belief in an afterlife was indeed of major interest among Israel’s Semitic neighbors and that the Hebrew Scriptures reflect major concerns about Israel adopting the afterlife beliefs of its neighbors.

The documents unearthed at Ugarit make it clear that Israel’s Semitic neighbors

¹¹ Charles A. Kennedy, “Dead, Cult of the,” *ABD* 2:106.

worshipped a pantheon of gods and that the spirits of their deceased, at least of their deceased kings, were believed to have moved on to be with the gods. It was the obligation of the living not only to offer sacrifice in order to appease the gods, but also to keep their deceased ancestors happy in the afterlife.¹² Inscriptional evidence from other places in the Levant, such as the Katumuwa inscription,¹³ supports the fact that in the early first millennium BC offerings were expected to be brought to deceased ancestors to honor them and to ensure their well-being in the afterlife so that they in turn would be able to use whatever influence they had in the spiritual realm to make life go well for their survivors in the land of the living. Chapter Two of the dissertation will survey the afterlife beliefs of Israel's neighbors beginning with the older civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia and then zeroing in on the more immediate Semitic neighbors to the north of Israel in the early first millennium in order to understand the religious milieu Israel found itself in at the time of the monarchy. Common in the cult of the dead in these cultures was the contacting of the dead through necromancy for advice and encouragement. It was against this background that the psalmists insist on the silence of the dead.

Chapter Three will provide an overview of the prohibitions of and negative portrayals of the practices of the cult of the dead in the rest of the Old Testament, passages that make it clear that such forbidden practices were going on in Israel. The Pentateuch forbids offering sacrifices to the dead¹⁴ as well as contacting the dead via mediums and spiritists.¹⁵ There are a couple of historical accounts that speak of Israel offering sacrifices to the dead and contacting the dead through mediums, the most prominent of which is Saul's visit to the medium of Endor for the

¹² Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 31.

¹³ Dennis Pardee, "A New Aramaic Inscription from Zincirli," *BASOR* 356 (Nov 2009): 51–54.

¹⁴ Deut 26:14.

¹⁵ Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:9–14.

purpose of bringing up the dead prophet Samuel for advice.¹⁶ The accounts portray these events in a negative light. The prophet Isaiah condemns the practice of contacting the dead numerous times, in the most prominent one telling the people that they should look only to Yahweh for advice, not to the dead who chirped and muttered through the mediums.¹⁷ It is against this background too that the psalmists insist on the silence of the dead. In the remainder of Chapter Three we will see how the Old Testament's references to what happens to those who have died are noticeably understated, in clear contrast to the literature of Israel's neighbors who were always concerned about what the dead were doing in the afterlife so that they might know how best to solicit their aid in their spiritual journey in the land of the living.

Chapter Four begins the exegetical study of the Psalms I have focused on. There I will exegete Ps 16, the pivotal Psalm for my thesis. The psalmist alludes to the cult of the dead in vv. 3–4, where he explicitly says that he will not even take on his lips the names of the spiritual entities that his opponents contact. He appears to be alluding to the invocation of the dead, a prominent ritual in the cult of the dead. The other ritual that he renounces is the pouring out of libations of blood, part of a cultic meal alluded to in other parts of the Old Testament and attested in extra-biblical literature. Instead of participating in such illicit rites, the author of Ps 16 insists that he will look only to Yahweh for protection, blessing, and guidance. And just as Yahweh has been his only source for supernatural aid in this life, so he brings his poem to a climax with a profession of confidence that Yahweh will not abandon him to the grave (**לֹא תִשְׁחַת**), but that he will enjoy an abundance of pleasures in Yahweh's presence forever. In Chapter Four we will take a close look at how the psalmists use the word **לֹא תִשְׁחַת**, a term that has tended to be

¹⁶ 1 Sam 28:3–25.

¹⁷ Isa 8:19–20.

viewed for the last century as quite analogous to the idea of the realm of the dead in the other ancient Near Eastern religious systems, but that we will see is much more nuanced in the Psalter as the *condition* of the dead rather than as a spatial location to which all the dead are consigned.

In Chapter Five we will examine Ps 49, which emphasizes that death is the fate of all people. However, the psalmist makes clear that his ultimate destiny differs from that of the arrogant wealthy. Though they boast that their wealth gives their lives value, they will go to the generation of their fathers, where “they will not see light forever.”¹⁸ לֹא תִשְׁבַּח occurs three times in the climax of the Psalm (vv. 15–16), first personified in parallel to death as a shepherd who pastures the dead, secondly as a force that consumes their physical form, and finally as a condition from which God will redeem the psalmist. This psalmist, like the author of Ps 16, asserts that he as an individual will be rescued from death and taken by God to himself.

This expectation of being taken by Yahweh to himself occurs again in Ps 73, the third Psalm we will study exegetically in Chapter 6. This one contains virtually no reference to death as an intervening event between premortem and postmortem existence. Life with Yahweh is forever, with little difference for the psalmist between this life and the next. Because of his earthbound perspective, the psalmist confesses that he had almost lost sight of this fact. He had envied the arrogant wealthy, until an experience in the sanctuary of Yahweh brought home for him the realization that what gives life value is being with Yahweh. The threefold occurrence of לֹא תִשְׁבַּח in the climactic verses (22–25) highlights what gives the psalmist’s existence meaning—the relationship between him and Yahweh. Yahweh is always with him. Yahweh has taken hold of his right hand. Yahweh has guided him with his counsel. And afterward Yahweh will take him

¹⁸ This translation of Ps 49:20b is mine.

gloriously to himself. Yahweh is the psalmist's rock. He is the psalmist's "portion,"¹⁹ a significant word used for the apportionment of the land of promise in Israelite culture, as we will see in Chapter Six. As the assigned portion of the land was to remain with one's family in perpetuity, so Yahweh will be the psalmist's portion forever.

In all three of these Psalms it is eternal postmortem existence with Yahweh that is in focus. There is no mention of others—and significantly, not of previously deceased persons—in the beyond that the psalmists expect to experience. This is in striking contrast to all the religious systems around Israel, where the afterlife is peopled with the deceased and their gods. Not only do the psalmists never address the deceased in their worship literature; they never even refer to them, an anomaly in ancient Near Eastern literature. When they do refer to the condition of the dead, the point that repeatedly surfaces is that the dead do not praise Yahweh. They are silent. Though this has usually been interpreted over the past century as either a belief that death is the end or that the believer's relationship with Yahweh ends at death, the four "silence of the dead" passages that we will examine in Chapter Seven actually point to a disruption that occurs between the dead and the living, rather than to an end of the relationship between the dead and Yahweh. This too stands in marked contrast to the cult of the dead, where communication was believed to continue between the living and the dead.

In Chapter Seven we will examine the four "silence of the dead" references in the Psalter. All four passages share the assertion that the dead do not praise Yahweh. This has commonly been interpreted over the last century as indicating a disruption in the deceased's relationship with Yahweh, when this does not at all seem to be the intent. Coupled with the assertion that the

¹⁹ The Hebrew word is פָּנָן.

dead do not praise Yahweh in the first three passages²⁰ are references to their inability to *proclaim* Yahweh. The psalmists clearly have in mind audible proclamation that is intended for the benefit of other living worshippers. Worship was a corporate experience in ancient Israel. In the worship setting audible praises of Yahweh were sung and spoken, and the purpose of these praises was not just to express something to Yahweh but to proclaim his deeds and his characteristics to fellow worshippers who were gathered together. It is significant that each of these first three examples are worded as rhetorical questions. The authors do not state that the dead are unable to praise Yahweh. They simply ask what benefit there would be if they died and were incapacitated from voicing his praises. The implied answer to their questions is not, “The dead are incapable of praising Yahweh.” The implied answer to their questions is, “No, there would be no benefit to their being incapacitated from proclaiming Yahweh’s characteristics and deeds.” The fourth of the “silence of the dead” passages²¹ is worded in the form of a statement, but it is stated this way to spur the living on to worship Yahweh rather than to make a statement about the condition of the dead. The author’s point is that praise and proclamation is quintessential for the living believer. There is virtually nothing in the contexts of these four passages that would lead to the conclusion that they reflect a time in Israel’s history when they believed that death was the end of existence, or at least the end of the believer’s relationship with Yahweh. One can only reach such conclusions if one is constrained by the paradigm of an evolutionary development of Israel’s belief system about afterlife that started with no afterlife belief. That simply is not the case in the ancient Near East. Afterlife belief is a given in all these cultures in all periods.

²⁰ Pss 6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13.

²¹ Ps 115:17.

Therefore, this dissertation will argue that these seven Psalms references reflect a coherent point of view during the Israelite monarchy that death separated the believer in Yahweh from the living, worshipping community, but did not separate him/her from Yahweh. Psalms 16, 49, and 73 express a deep longing to be with Yahweh in a personal, face-to-face way after death, an existence in which they would experience eternal pleasures. All three Psalms either state or imply that this is a condition that will last forever. The references to the cessation of praises to Yahweh at the time of death in Pss 6, 30, 88, and 115 do not imply the end of existence or the end of a relationship with Yahweh, but rather reflect a belief that death brings a disruption between the deceased and the community of Yahweh's living worshippers. I propose that the reason for the rarity of and cautious wording of these expressions of afterlife belief in the Psalter flows from the uniqueness of the Israelite faith in this regard during the time of the monarchy compared to the religious beliefs of its neighbors. The psalmists are careful not to say things about the afterlife that could be misunderstood or used as support for those who wanted to accommodate Israel's religious practices to the cult of the dead. Instead, these psalmists were articulating their distinct belief that the individual's relationship with Yahweh, celebrated exuberantly in the worship experience of the living, would continue in a pleasurable state in Yahweh's presence that would last into eternity.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CULT OF THE DEAD AMONG ISRAEL'S NEIGHBORS

There is abundant evidence from across the ancient Near East that the living honored their deceased in rites that involved invoking their names, devoting offerings to them, and soliciting advice, protection and blessing from them. They believed the dead lived on and could influence what happened in the world of the living. Likewise, the living could care for the dead to ensure that things went well for them in the realm of the dead. The evidence for the cult of the dead is most abundant in the two highly developed civilizations that lay at the two polar ends of the travel and trade continuum that Israel lived within: Egypt and Mesopotamia. In this chapter we will take a brief look at the cult of the dead practices in these two civilizations and then zero in on Israel's more immediate neighbors in Syro-Palestine. In all three regions these cults experienced a gradual evolution from their early history when the cult was exclusively a royal phenomenon (cult of the deceased kings) to a more "democratized" phenomenon available to lower social strata by the time of the Israelite monarchy.

The Cult of the Dead in Mesopotamia

We'll start with Mesopotamia since it shares Semitic ties with Israel. Much older than Israel, the various Mesopotamian states had a history reaching back at least to the turn of the third millennium BC. From their early development they practiced features of what would become common ancient Near Eastern cult of the dead practices.

The *kispu* ritual of Mesopotamia included the invocation of the dead, the presentation of food, and a libation of water.¹ Lewis points out that the invocation of the deceased's name (*šuma*

¹ Kennedy, "Dead, Cult of the," *ABD* 2:106.

zakāru) was believed to be one of the most important things that could be done for the dead because it preserved their identity in the land of the living and ensured that they would be cared for. Kings of course could accomplish this by having their names put down in writing, but for commoners the speaking of their names in the funerary ritual was often the only way their memory could be perpetuated.² There is evidence from Mesopotamian texts from a range of times and places throughout their history that food and drink were offered to the deceased. Clay pipes for carrying libations into the grave, known in Akkadian as *arūtu*, are attested both textually and architecturally.³

Hays theorizes that the *kispu* was performed by royal families to confirm the continuity of their ruling authority.⁴ He cites the “Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty,” which appears to have been composed by the great-grandson of Hammurapi, Ammišaduqa King of Babylon between 1646–1626 BC. It begins by invoking a long list of Mesopotamian rulers stretching back to individuals whose historicity is questionable. The author is clearly trying to show his right to the throne, though ostensibly the invocations are for the purpose of honoring the dead. It’s clear that the author is not only honoring his forebears but wants to avoid offending any deceased individuals who might do harm to his ruling power from beyond the grave. The document closes by inviting to the cultic meal any deceased persons who may have been overlooked, including:

the dynasty not recorded on this tablet, and the soldier(s) who fell while on perilous campaigns for their lord, princes, princesses, all “persons” from East to West who

² Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 32.

³ Christopher B. Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and Its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 41.

⁴ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 42.

have neither *pāqidu* nor *sāhiru*, come ye, eat this, drink this, (and) bless Ammişaduqa the son of Ammiditana, the king of Babylon.⁵

A *pāqidu* was the designated heir, usually a son, whose duty it was to care for the spirit of a deceased father in the afterlife.⁶ The role of a *sāhiru* is less clear, but it too seems to have had a similar purpose.⁷ The *kispu* rite was performed at the time of burial, but it was also performed after burial at intervals whose length varied depending on the custom of the place.⁸ It was performed not just out of concern for the deceased's well-being in the afterlife, but to keep them favorably disposed to the living. The deceased were believed to have influence over the well-being of their survivors in the land of the living. That's no doubt why King Ammişaduqa was careful to include anyone connected to his kingdom who might potentially be uncared for in the afterlife. He could not afford to offend any departed spirits who could bring harm to him or his kingdom. From the opposite perspective, a living king, as he looked ahead to his eventual death, wanted to make sure that there was someone to care for him in the afterlife. If he had no biological son, he would name some other individual to carry out the role. At Nuzi, wills have been discovered that name a specific person to care for the testator's spirit, and at times the person named is not a biological heir.⁹

As we shall see later in Egyptian belief, Mesopotamian belief associated several different types of spirit with the deceased. Besides his corpse (*pagru*), there was the breath of life (*napištu*); the ghost (*etemmu*) of the person, which usually remained close to the deceased's physical remains; and a "wispy apparition" (*zaqīqu*) equated with the wind, which could wander

⁵ Jacob J. Finkelstein, "The Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty," *JCS* 20 (1966): 97.

⁶ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 53.

⁷ Finkelstein, "Genealogy of the Hammurapi," 115.

⁸ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 42.

⁹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 43.

about more freely than the *etemmu*. It was the *etemmu* that the survivors were careful to propitiate. Because the deceased was usually buried near the family's home, sometimes beneath it, the survivors wanted to keep the *etemmu* happy. A happy *etemmu* could bring good to the family, but an unhappy one could afflict them with things like sickness. A common medical diagnosis was "hand of a ghost."¹⁰

The spirits of the dead in Mesopotamian belief were not weak but powerful. If tended to by the living they could be helpful, but if left unattended they could be vicious. Especially dangerous were those who had died violent or unhappy deaths or had been left unburied. Their vengeful spirits could become associated with the demonic *utukku*. Numerous exorcism texts have been discovered which were written to put such destructive spirits to rest. The Sumero-Akkadian incantation series called "Evil Demons" (*Utukkū lemniṭu*) has a large catalog of demons. In one section it contains spells intended to protect against those who had died tragically through murder, mauling by an animal, a fall, or drowning. As the spells address the spirits, it is clear that the composer wants to leave no unfortunate, potentially harmful spirit unincluded: "whether you are an unburied ghost, or the one who has no *pāqidu*, or the ghost who has no one to make a funerary offering or the ghost who has no one to pour out a water libation; whether you are one with no one to call (his) name."¹¹

Seeking information from the dead through necromantic rites was also common in Mesopotamia. It seems to have reached its peak during the reign of the Sargonids (722–627 BC). There are more divinatory tablets in the libraries of Aššurbanipal and Esarhaddon than have been found in any other period.¹² Sennacherib consulted diviners to find out why his father, Sargon,

¹⁰ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 43–44.

¹¹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 44–45.

¹² Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 47.

had died in battle. In a later instance the ghost of Sennacherib was invoked to justify a policy that seems to have been instituted by his son Esarhaddon. In a letter of Esarhaddon, an exorcist quotes the words of the latter's deceased queen to support his controversial choice of Aššurbanipal as his heir apparent. So it seems to have been quite common at the Assyrian court to summon the spirits of the dead to support political decisions.¹³ Awareness of this type of strategy in ancient Near Eastern decision-making helps one to understand why Saul sought advice from the spirit of Samuel when making military decisions in 1 Sam 28.

In summary, we find the following features in the cult of the dead in Mesopotamia, all of which will be important for our consideration when we look at how the cult impacted Israel during its monarchy:¹⁴

1. The living invoked the dead in part to honor them and to indicate their continued existence and in part to assert a living leader's right to carry on the authority of a deceased forebear.
2. The living offered food and drink to the dead not only to sustain their continued existence but to ensure a favorable disposition on the part of the dead toward their survivors.
3. The living practiced the cult of the dead to avert the harm that might be inflicted on them by an uncared-for spirit or by the spirit of a person who had died badly or had been left unburied.
4. To ensure that one would receive the proper care needed in the afterlife, he designated a specific descendant or other person (*pāqidu*) to carry out such duties.
5. The living contacted the dead through necromancy for advice and support in decision-

¹³ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 48.

¹⁴ Israel's monarchy coincides approximately with Iron Age II in the ancient Near East (ca. 1000–586 BC). The two terms will sometimes be used interchangeably in this dissertation.

making, especially in Assyria during Iron Age II.

The Cult of the Dead in Egypt

Because of the vast evidence of afterlife beliefs in ancient Egypt, our synopsis of it will need to be limited to those features that are of value for comparing or contrasting beliefs expressed or hinted at in the Hebrew Psalter and other related Old Testament texts. Though afterlife beliefs in Egypt are quite distinct from those of the people who lived in the rest of the ancient Near East, we shall for our purposes focus on the care that the Egyptians believed they should give their dead and on what they believed the afterlife to be like.

The highly complex Egyptian beliefs about and practices in regard to the afterlife find their origin in the myth of Osiris. Osiris was believed to have been one of the early kings of Egypt and the first to have a brother. Since the previous royal generations had only had single male heirs, there was no question about succession. But Osiris' brother Seth became envious of his kingship and killed him. Dismembering his brother, Seth threw the various body parts into the Nile, where they floated down to different regions of the country. His sisters, Isis and Nephthys, in sorrow and love searched for the various parts and gathered them back together. Subsequently Osiris became god of the underworld and Isis, his sister and later wife, the goddess of salvation.¹⁵

The myth became the prototype for the Egyptians' view of death. Death was a dissolution of life. The elaborate Egyptian embalming process was a religious reenactment of what had happened to Osiris. The body of the deceased was dismembered—all the individual organs removed, the bodily fluids extracted, the empty shell desiccated—and then the entire thing was to a large extent rebuilt by the various artists and craftsmen who made up the highly mortuary

¹⁵ Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 23–24, 35.

Egyptian economy.¹⁶

Not only was the body taken apart and reassembled, but the person was also believed to have become dismembered from society as a whole. Socially he needed to be re-integrated into the social fabric which included the living, the dead, and the gods. The tomb served as the portal between the world of the living and the world of the dead and of the gods.¹⁷ There were several aspects of the deceased that allowed them to interface with both worlds. A dead person had not just one soul but numerous spiritual aspects: the *ba*, the *ka*, the *akh*, the “heart,” the “shadow,” and the “name.”¹⁸ Not only was there a cadre of artisans working on the physical mortuary aspects, i.e. the mummy, the tomb and its accessories, but the priests and relatives of the deceased were also preparing him/her spiritually and socially for the afterlife. During the seventy days of the mummification process, there were spells and incantations that needed to be spoken over the body in order for the reintegration in the afterlife to take place.¹⁹

The *ba* was the spiritual aspect of the deceased whose most characteristic feature was freedom of movement. At the end of the mortuary process, as part of the funeral rite the mummy was exposed to the open sky in front of the tomb, an offering was made to it, and the *ba* ascended heavenward. Carried in the sun god Re’s bark, the *ba* would travel each day through the arc of the sky and then descend each night into the netherworld, where it would need to find its corpse once more and unite with it. This daily reconnection regenerated the *ba* and prepared it for the following day’s circuit through the sky.²⁰ In art and writing, the *ba* was pictured as a bird

¹⁶ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 32–33.

¹⁷ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 72–73.

¹⁸ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 88; Michaela Bauks, “‘Soul-Concepts’ in Ancient Near Eastern Mythical Texts and Their Implications for the Primeval History,” *VT* 66 (2016): 184–85; Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 76–77.

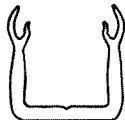
¹⁹ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 33–34.

²⁰ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 90–95.

because of its freedom of movement.²¹

While we Westerners might think of the *ba* as something spiritual, ancient Egyptians tended to see it as something physical because it was so interconnected with the body. For them, the social standing of a person—his interconnectedness with the rest of society—was the spiritual side of a man. Death isolated a person from others, and mortuary practices were designed to re-integrate the dead into society as much as they were intended to reassemble the body. The *ka* was in many ways the social spirit of the deceased. The hieroglyph for *ka* is a pair of arms outstretched upward, probably to embrace another person (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Hieroglyph for *ka*.²²



Since the deceased had been separated from the community of the living, his honor, dignity, and status would need to be recalled regularly in the land of the living in order for his *ka* to be restored to the community.²³ Likewise, he would need to be integrated with the individuals in the world beyond. It was sometimes said about the deceased that he “went to his *ka*.” Assmann sees this as analogous to the biblical phrase, “gathered to his people.”²⁴ It indicated social acceptance in the afterlife.

The role that a son played in this social reintegration was key. Not only did he need to support his father’s dignity and social advancement in the afterlife, but he also needed to

²¹ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 90; Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 77.

²² Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 44.

²³ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 96–97, 101.

²⁴ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 99.

maintain the father's legacy in this world. This is where the third Egyptian term for the spiritual aspect of a person comes into play, the *akh*.²⁵ The *akh* was a shared spirit, usually passed on from father to son. Hays notes, "The *akh* of a dead person was the powerful, divinized spirit of a deceased person, which was thought able to act in ways that the living could perceive."²⁶ This view probably also had its origin in the Osiris myth.

From what can be pieced together from the various references to the myth, when Osiris arrived in the underworld, physically restored thanks to the work of Isis and Nephthys, he was threatened again by Seth, who could kill him a second time and destroy him forever. He needed to be restored in the social sense so that the inhabitants of the underworld would support him in this dangerous conflict with Seth. Osiris thought that only his son Horus could create the respect and recognition he needed in order to be an intact social person in the afterlife, and he longed for Horus to come to him. However, Horus sent a sunbeam to the underworld to tell his father that it would be better for him to stay in the world of the living to advocate for his father and to solidify their dynasty on earth.²⁷ There is a ritual text in which Horus is quoted as saying to his father,

Have patience, have patience, O you who are divine in that illustrious land where you are! I am here in this land of the living, to construct your altars, to establish your mortuary offerings in your house of eternity on the Isle of Flame! . . . You are content in that land as my supporter in the tribunal of the god! I, however, am here as an advocate in the tribunal of men, setting up your boundary stone, holding together your despondent ones, and serving as your image on earth, while your gateway is secured by means of that which I do.²⁸

²⁵ The three terms *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* are so foreign to Western thinking that they are usually transliterated, whereas the three other Egyptian spiritual terms have equivalents close enough to English that they are translated (heart, shadow, name).

²⁶ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 76.

²⁷ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 45–46.

²⁸ As quoted by Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 47. The quotation is apparently Assmann's translation of the hieroglyphs published in Adriaan De Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1935), par. 157–76.

Horus needed to stay in this world in order to appeal to the gods on his father's behalf from the land of the living and to make mortuary offerings to his father. In fact, there were benefits the two could render each other from their two vantage points. Osiris could advocate for Horus in the tribunal of the gods, while Horus could foster Osiris' legacy in the tribunal of men. He served as Osiris' image on earth and helped to keep the lines of communication and assistance between the two worlds open.

This was the *akh* that father and son shared. It enabled them to help one another from the two different realms that they inhabited.

The son was *akh* for his father by bringing him his mortuary offerings and thus confirming his status as transfigured ancestral spirit, and also by assuming his father's position on earth and thereby maintaining his honor, rank, and social status in the community of the living. The father was *akh* for his son by legitimizing him in his earthly position and by protecting his interests in the next-worldly law courts.²⁹

The *akh* seems to have served as a connection between one person in this world and another person in the next. Though it was normally shared by father and son, it was sometimes shared in other relationships.³⁰ And the *akh* of a person in the afterlife could negatively affect a totally unrelated person in this world. “Living individuals beset with problems could appeal to the *akh* of a relative to intercede against other *akhs* believed to be causing their grief or aiding their tormentors.”³¹

Another component of a person that was very important for the afterlife was the “name.” An Egyptian maxim put it this way: “One lives, if his name is mentioned.”³² During the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC) it was customary at certain festivals to call out the names of the

²⁹ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 339.

³⁰ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 339.

³¹ Leonard H. Lesko, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” *CANE* 3:1764.

³² Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 39.

dead from a list. As their names were proclaimed, it was believed that the spirits of these deceased individuals joined with the living in the procession that took place at the festival.³³ And if a name ceased to be mentioned—if it was forgotten or purposely omitted—it meant total annihilation for the person.³⁴ Beginning in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2106–1786 BC) and becoming more common in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC), not only were the names of the dead intoned at festivals, but the statues of the deceased were also placed in the temples of their gods as a way of indicating that the deceased continued to join the living in worshiping the gods. In the first millennium this practice became more common than the building of monumental tombs as a way of maintaining a presence in the life and worship of the living. For a time, it even became *the way of continuing on in the land of the living.*³⁵

The “shadow” and the “heart” do not concern us directly here. But it is worth noting that, as with the Hebrews, the Egyptians saw the heart as the seat of the intellect.³⁶ The physical organ of the heart was handled with special care in the mummification process, and after it had been embalmed it was reinserted into the chest cavity—the only internal organ for which this was done.³⁷ The heart was believed to play a special role in the Judgment of the Dead, in which the deceased had to answer before the tribunal of the gods for his conduct during life. What he confessed to them with his mouth had to be confirmed by his heart, or otherwise he would be condemned.³⁸

It is difficult to summarize Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife because they evolved over

³³ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 231.

³⁴ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 77.

³⁵ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 91.

³⁶ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 76.

³⁷ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 32.

³⁸ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 103.

the long history of ancient Egypt. But one of the commonalities that runs through this long history is the use of magic spells to aid in the advancement and improvement of the existence of the deceased in the afterlife. Collections of spells include the “Pyramid Texts” of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700–2160 BC), intended only for the pharaohs; the “Coffin Texts” of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2106–1786 BC), which was also available to others of the higher social strata; and the “Book of Going Forth by Day” or “The Book of the Dead” of the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC), which was accessible to even broader circles and remained in common use till the Ptolemaic era (323–30 BC). The gradual availability of these spells to the various strata of society seems to have led to a “democratization of death.”³⁹

By the time of the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC), the time most pertinent to our topic, the Book of the Dead makes clear that the initial experience of the dead in the afterlife was a complete inversion of this life. The deceased walked upside down in the underworld and ate excrement and drank urine, rather than nourishing food. The Book of the Dead contains spells for avoiding this awful fate.⁴⁰ And it describes realms that lay beyond this initial stage of the afterlife, some described as a peaceful life under a verdant tree or on a distant shore. The deceased had to know the formula for reaching this better existence. He had to be changed into a bird in order to fly to the distant shore⁴¹ or be ferried there by a ferryman who needed to be awakened or prodded into offering passage. Sometimes the ferry lay disassembled and could only be put together by the deceased naming all the parts of the ferry. Each part had some divine connection, and only when the deceased could name the part and the god connected to it was the

³⁹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 74.

⁴⁰ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 128.

⁴¹ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 130.

ferry assembled.⁴²

Not only did one's posterity help get the deceased ready for the afterlife through the embalmment process and by stocking the tomb with goods needed in the afterlife, they also continued to interact with the dead in the tomb. Mortuary stelae placed in or outside the tomb contained prayers that visitors to the tomb could pray for the deceased or that depicted the deceased enjoying food and drink offerings that his survivors provided for him. Tombs were outfitted with false doors to represent the access point through which such offerings could be received by the dead.⁴³

As in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians wanted to guard against any harm that the malevolent dead might do to them. The magical texts contain spells that the living could use to avert this.⁴⁴ Letters to the dead are also among the evidence discovered in Egypt. In them common people ask their deceased relatives for help or beg them to stop tormenting them. The letters seem to be written by professional scribes, suggesting that necromancy was a common business.⁴⁵ In the letters survivors sometimes asked the deceased to appear to them in a dream to answer their questions. It is theorized that such persons would sleep in the deceased's mortuary chapel in the hopes of receiving such a dream message.⁴⁶ Communication from the dead, though not frequent in Egypt, did occur. There are instances of deceased kings communicating to the living in all three Kingdoms.⁴⁷

The religious reforms of Akhenaten in the 14th century BC had a definite impact on Egypt's

⁴² Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 132–33.

⁴³ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 72–73.

⁴⁴ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 79.

⁴⁵ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 80–81.

⁴⁶ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 81.

⁴⁷ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 81–82.

afterlife beliefs. Though Akhenaten's monotheism was repudiated by later generations, the fact that his sole god, Aten, was the sun god created a distinctly this-world focus to Egyptian afterlife beliefs that was to endure for the remainder of the ancient period. During Akhenaten's Amarna period there was no netherworld, only this physical world under the sun. The deceased still existed, but they only interacted with the revolving sun god and with the living. Whereas in the Old and Middle Kingdoms the dead were conceived of as fellowshipping with the gods, from the Amarna period on depictions of offerings made to the dead became elaborate banquets celebrated in this world between the deceased and his family and friends.⁴⁸

To summarize, it will be important for us to keep these salient features about Egyptian afterlife beliefs in mind as this study proceeds:

1. Egyptian burial practices mimicked the Osiris legend in which the deceased's body and spirit(s) were first dismembered and then reassembled.
2. Life continued for the dead via his *ba*'s daily circuit between the sun and the underworld and via the regular invocation of his name by the living.
3. Social integration of the deceased's *ka* with the spirits and gods of the underworld was crucial to his well-being in the afterlife.
4. At the same time, the connection of the deceased's *akh* with his surviving heir was important for the well-being and progress of both the deceased and the living heir.
5. Over its long history Egypt saw a gradual shift from elaborate tombs exclusively for kings, stocked with all conceivable provisions for the afterlife, to less elaborate, more democratized burials that envisioned the dead having more interaction with the living.
6. Communication between the living and the dead was achieved through spells,

⁴⁸ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 217–18.

necromancy, letters to the dead, dreams, etc.

Although Egyptian religion had distinct differences from Semitic beliefs, it shared many ideas about the afterlife with the Semites of the Fertile Crescent. Egypt's proximity to Israel and its frequent contact with Israel throughout the Old Testament period no doubt meant that Israel was aware of Egypt's afterlife beliefs. Israel's perennially antagonistic relationship with Egypt no doubt also played a role in its afterlife beliefs over against those of Egypt. It will be important for us in the coming chapters to keep in mind Egypt's views on the topic.

The Cult of the Dead in the Levant

We now turn to Israel's more immediate neighbors on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. The evidence here offers even more fascinating glimpses into the cult of the dead, but it must be admitted upfront that the amount of evidence is much smaller in this area than in Egypt or Mesopotamia. This is especially true for the period we are considering, the Israelite monarchy.

Evidence from Ugarit

We begin with Ugarit. The evidence here is from centuries before the Israelite monarchy.⁴⁹ But Christopher Hays feels that since many of the religious ideas of the Ugaritians were inherited by the Syrian and Phoenician states of the first millennium, Israel's political and economic endeavors northward would have brought them into contact with these beliefs.⁵⁰ In addition, both the Ugaritic and Hebrew languages belong to the Northwest Semitic family of languages and have many words that are etymologically related. One of these that relates directly to our

⁴⁹ Ugarit met its demise around 1200 BC.

⁵⁰ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 94.

comparison of afterlife beliefs is the Ugaritic word *rp'u*,⁵¹ which is related to the Hebrew word רַפְאִים. Although both words are often translated as “shade,” referring to the spirits of the deceased, it is clear from the very forms of the two words that the Ugaritic word often occurs in the singular whereas the Hebrew word always occurs in the plural.⁵² In the Ugaritic documents, named individuals are often designated as a *rp'u*, while in the Hebrew Bible the word only occurs in the plural because it is never used to designate an identified individual. Spirits of the deceased exist in canonical Hebrew literature, but they are rarely named or individualized. This fact will be significant in the following chapters. In contrast, the Ugaritic *rp'um* are designated by name, summoned in ritual ceremonies, sacrificed to, and implored for blessings—none of which are done to the רַפְאִים in the Hebrew Bible.

Before the discovery of the Ugaritic documents, the Hebrew word רַפְאִים was often thought to be derived from the root רָפַח (“sink, relax”) and thus to indicate the weakness of the רַפְאִים. But since the discovery of the Ugaritic documents, scholars have tended to view the noun as derived from the verb רָפַא (“heal”), which occurs in Ugaritic as well. In Ugaritic the *rp'um* appear to have been regarded as healers who provided fertility and health.⁵³

Among the ritual texts discovered at Ugarit is *KTU* 1.161. Levine, Tarragon, and Robertson identify it as a rite celebrating the accession of the last Ugaritic king, Ammurapi III,⁵⁴ while

⁵¹ Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joachín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. Translated by W. G. E. Watson. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 731–32.

⁵² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), s. v., רַפְאִים.

⁵³ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 107; Philip Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 129.

⁵⁴ “The Patrons of the Ugaritic Dynasty,” trans. Baruch A. Levine, Jean-Michel de Tarragon, and Anne Robertson (*COS* 1.105:357). The references to *KTU* 1.161 in the following paragraphs are taken from the translation of Levine, Tarragon, and Robertson in *COS*.

Bordreuil and Pardee take it as a funeral rite for Ammurapi's father, Niqmaddu III.⁵⁵ As we'll see, it contains features of both. Lewis speculates that the son may have been the officiant at the ceremony described in the document, thereby fulfilling the role of *pāqidu* (see above).⁵⁶ At its beginning the document recounts the summoning of four gods who have yet to be identified by scholars: ULKN, TRMN, SDN-w-RDN, and TR-'LLMN. Levine, Tarragon and Robertson identify them as deceased divine kings, but the document itself only refers to them as *rp'um*. The next two individuals summoned in the document are known historical kings of Ugarit who are deceased, Ammishtamru and Niqmaddu (II), and the document identifies both of them as kings, not as *rp'um*. Yet all six are clearly being summoned in a manner that was common among the cults of the dead across the ancient Near East. They appear to be summoned to welcome the newly deceased king, Niqmaddu III into the underworld. His throne, his footstool, and his table are addressed next, and tears are requested to be poured out on them.

Next, the sun goddess Shapash (or Šapšu) is invoked and asked to summon the deceased king to follow his lords into the earth/underworld.⁵⁷ She calls on him to descend under SDN-w-RDN, TR-'LLMN, Ammishtamru, and Niqmaddu. Since the sun god/goddess is the common conduit between the land of the living and the land of the dead in both Semitic and Egyptian belief, this is no doubt a reference to the Ugaritic sun goddess conducting the recently deceased king down to the place where other deceased kings and *rp'um* dwell.⁵⁸ Not only was it the sun deity's role to conduct the dead to the underworld in the religions of the ancient Near East, but he/she was also responsible for ensuring that libations and offerings reached the dead, as the

⁵⁵ Pierre Bordreuil and Dennis Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 215.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 32, 34.

⁵⁷ The Ugaritic word *ars* used here can mean both "earth" and "underworld." Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 127.

⁵⁸ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 124.

deity traveled each day through the arc of the sky and descended each night into the underworld.⁵⁹ And that is perhaps why Šapšu's quotation in *KTU* 1:161 is immediately followed by a call for a sevenfold sacrifice. The wordy sevenfold repetition supports the interpretation of the document as a liturgical ritual. After the sevenfold call for sacrifice, one additional sacrifice is mentioned—the sacrifice of a bird. This too will play into a detail we will note later in the chapter.

Finally, blessings are pronounced on the new and final Ugaritic king, Ammurapi III, on his wife Tharyelli, and on the city of Ugarit. This links the laying to rest of the previous king (Niqmaddu III) with a prayer for the success of his heir. All these features of the document support what is known from the better attested beliefs of Mesopotamia and Egypt: that deceased kings went to the underworld to join the fellowship of other deceased kings and of the gods, that sacrifices were made in connection with this transition to the afterlife, and that the heir to a kingdom was blessed when the proper ceremonies were performed for his predecessors and his gods.

KTU 1.161 raises questions about what this fellowship of divine spirits and deceased kings in the afterlife was like and where the dividing line lay between the spirits of deceased kings and *rp'um*. *KTU* 1.161 assigns the title *mlk* to the recently deceased kings. But had the other four individuals addressed at the beginning of the document also been kings of Ugarit in the more distant past? And was there a point at which they received the designation *rp'um*, having reached a higher status in the afterlife? Might all the gods and spirits in the afterlife have been kings or prominent ancestors at some time in the distant past? Lewis points out that none of the gods in the Ugaritic pantheon have the names of eponymous ancestors. He points out that agricultural

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 38.

concerns were more important in determining the Ugaritic pantheon than family connections, so that there was apparently a distinction between the gods of the pantheon and the spirits of deceased kings.⁶⁰ Agricultural concerns were no doubt the reason why Baal, a storm and fertility god, was a prominent deity both at Ugarit and later in Canaan.

But another document, the Ugaritic king list (*KTU* 1.113), seems to draw a strong connection between royalty and divinity in the afterlife. *KTU* 1.113 contains a long list of clearly historical Ugaritic kings, each with the divine determinative *'il* in front of his name.⁶¹ At first scholars questioned whether *'il* was a title for the kings in the list. Brian Schmidt argued that the combination of *'il* and the name of a king meant “the god of N.”⁶² But in 1998 an Akkadian version of the king list (RS 94.2518) came to light which used the Sumero-Akkadian divine determinative *dingir* instead of *'il* in front of the kings’ names, and it helped to sway scholarly opinion toward the interpretation “divine N.”⁶³ The funerary rite and the king list would seem to indicate that the distinction between gods and deceased kings at Ugarit was at best ambiguous.

One other indication of the intertwining of deceased kings and gods in the Ugaritic conception of the afterlife comes at the end of the epic Baal myth (*CTA* 6 VI 44–47). There the sun goddess Šapšu is said to rule over the *rpim*,⁶⁴ *ilnym*, *ilm* and *mtm*.⁶⁵ Even the order of the four terms in the document is interesting. They are listed chiastically with the terms for *rpim* and

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 49.

⁶¹ “Patrons of the Ugaritic Dynasty,” *COS* 1.105:356–57.

⁶² Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 69–70.

⁶³ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 108.

⁶⁴ The word can be transliterated *rp'um* or *rp'im*. The spelling variation occurs in the Ugaritic documents themselves.

⁶⁵ “The Ba‘lu Myth,” trans. Dennis Pardee (*COS* 1.86:273).

*m̄tm*⁶⁶ (“dead”) parallel to one another and interlocking with the two terms for “gods” (*ilnym* and *ilm*).⁶⁷⁶⁸ In the previous two lines (42–43) the goddess is implored to eat an offering and drink a libation of wine that have been presented to her. This would seem to echo the role of the sun god/goddess in the rest of the ancient Near East that associates him/her not only with guiding the dead to the underworld but also as a conduit for offerings made to its denizens.

No funerary rites for commoners have yet come to light at Ugarit, but Lewis sees in the various status titles used in the above documents a social hierarchy that existed in the afterlife, a hierarchy that may have included the lower social strata as well.⁶⁹ Or perhaps the “democratization of death” had not yet developed in the Levant by the time of Ugarit’s demise. However, the evidence from later centuries indicates that it eventually spread at least to the social stratum directly beneath royalty.

Later Evidence from the Levant

Monumental evidence for the cult of the dead in the Levant surfaces in the 10th century BC. The sarcophagus of the Phoenician king Ahiram of Byblos, dating from the early 10th century, depicts women mourning for the deceased king (see Figures 2 and 3). Ahiram is seated on a throne receiving funerary offerings. The size of the throne, the footstool that his feet rest on, and the table in front of him containing the funerary offering are all reminiscent of the same three pieces of furniture mentioned in the funeral rite from Ugarit (*KTU* 1.161).⁷⁰ In Figure 2 below, King Ahiram is at the left end of the long panel seated in front of a table set with funerary

⁶⁶ Etymologically related to Hebrew מִתְמַמָּה.

⁶⁷ Note the similarity of these two words to אֲלֹהִים and אֲלֵיִם in Hebrew.

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 36, 49.

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 51.

⁷⁰ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 129.

offerings and a long line of women mourning for him:

Figure 2. Sarcophagus of Ahiram, King of Byblos.⁷¹

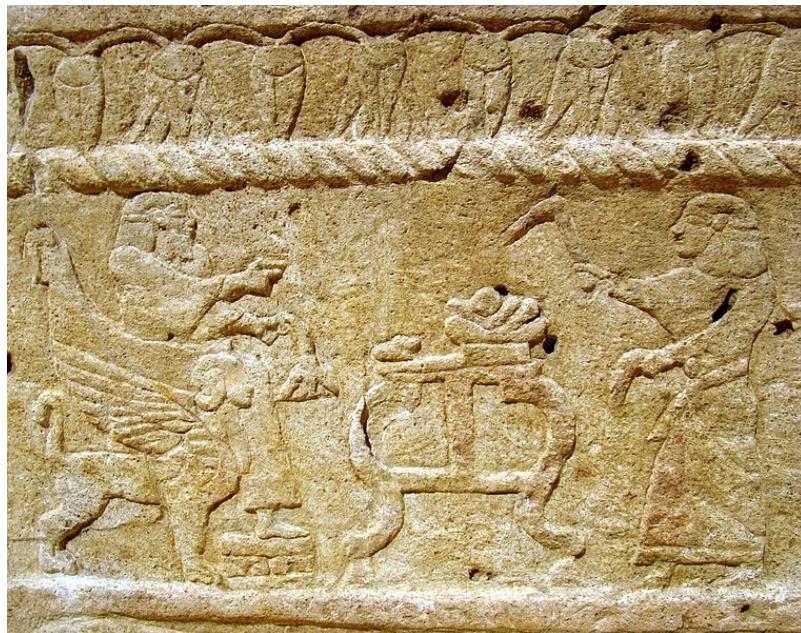


Sarcophagus of Ahiram, King of Biblos. ([Public Domain](#))

⁷¹ This figure and all subsequent figures are in the public domain.

A close-up of the left portion of the sarcophagus panel is in Figure 3 below. This close-up shows King Ahiram raising a cup in his right hand in front of the funerary offerings and the first mourning woman:

Figure 3: Close-up of King Ahiram's Sarcophagus.



A large statue of the god Hadad that originally stood about four meters high was discovered in southern Turkey near the Syrian border in the late 1800s (see Figure 4). It contains a lengthy inscription, parts of which are quite damaged. But two spots which are relatively well preserved provide interesting insights into the offerings made as part of the cult of the dead.⁷² The inscription, commissioned by King Panamuwa I of Sam'al, is written in the Samalian dialect of Aramaic and dates from the early eighth century BC. After describing his commissioning by the gods and his prosperous rule, Panamuwa addresses any of his descendants who would

⁷² "The Hadad Inscription," transl. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *COS* 2.36:156–58. All references to the inscription in the following paragraphs are from Younger's translation of it in *COS*.

succeed him on the throne, telling them to offer sacrifices to Hadad and to recite these words: “May [the de]ad spirit of Panamuwa [eat] with you (i.e. Hadad), and may the dead spirit of Panamuwa dri[nk] with you.” Then he tells his successors to “remember eternally the dead spirit of Panamuwa with [Had]ad.”

Figure 4. Large Statue of Hadad with the Panamuwa Inscription.



In the succeeding section of the inscription which contains curses, Panamuwa warns his descendants who succeed him. If any of them make sacrifices to Hadad but do not commemorate him by saying, “May the dead spirit of Pana[muwa] eat with Hadad, and may the dead spirit of Panamuwa drink with H[adad],” Panamuwa asks that Hadad would not look favorably on the sacrifice nor grant the giver’s request. Rather he asks that Hadad would pour his wrath out on the

offender so that he receives neither food nor sleep, but only terror.⁷³

In the inscription, the word translated “dead spirit” is *nbš/npš*,⁷⁴ a cognate of Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ.

There are a number of things that are intriguing about what this and the next inscription we will examine have to say about the *nbš* of the deceased. They bear witness to a belief in a postmortem existence for the dead. More than that, they express a belief in a communion that exists between the deceased and his god(s). Furthermore, they express a belief that the living have a duty to honor and support the dead and that there are ramifications in the world of the living when these duties are or are not carried out. Finally, before we leave the Hadad inscription, it’s important to point out that Panamuwa requests that his descendants “remember *eternally* the dead spirit of Panamuwa with [Had]ad.” Panamuwa does not seem to be using the term “eternal” lightly. He also uses it at the beginning of the inscription, where he says he has “erected this statue for Hadad in my eternal (*'lmy*)⁷⁵ abode.” The same word occurs in the Katumuwa inscription, which we examine next.

The Katumuwa Stele

Perhaps the most enlightening piece of evidence for the cult of the dead in the Levant during Iron Age II is the Katumuwa Stele. This stele depicts the royal official Katumuwa raising a cup of wine in front of a table set with a mortuary offering. The written text instructs his descendants how they are to make such regular offerings (see Figure 5). Discovered at Zincirli in southeast Turkey in 2008, it is an intact mortuary stele. Not only is the stele in pristine condition,

⁷³ COS 2.36:157.

⁷⁴ Bernd Janowski, “Die lebendige *næpæš*. Das Alte Testament und die Frage nach der ‘Seele,’” in *Der nahe und der ferne Gott*, vol. 5 of *Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments*, ed. Eberhard Bons, Jan Joosten, and Regine Hunziker-Rodewald (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014), 154.

⁷⁵ Cognate of the Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ. For more on this see: Pardee, “New Aramaic Inscription,” 60.

but it was found *in situ*, which also helps in interpreting it. The room in which it was discovered appears to be a mortuary chamber where Katumuwa's survivors were to return annually to present the mortuary offering that he requests in the inscription. The inscription is in a Samalian dialect of Aramaic, similar to the one found on the Hadad statue.⁷⁶

Figure 5. The Katumuwa Stele.



Much of the text is self-explanatory, so I will simply include it here in its entirety and then provide a few comments on those lines that need further clarification. The translation is that of Dennis Pardee.

1. I am KTMW, servant of Panamuwa, who commissioned for myself (this) stele while
2. still living. I placed it in my eternal chamber(?) and established a feast (at)
3. this chamber(?): a bull for Hadad QR/DPD/RL, a ram for NGD/R
4. ŠWD/RN, a ram for Šamš, a ram for Hadad of the Vineyards,

⁷⁶ The entire November 2009 issue of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (BASOR)* is dedicated to this find. See the three major articles referenced below.

5. a ram for Kubaba, and a ram for my ‘soul’ that (will be) in this stele.
6. Henceforth, whoever of my sons or
7. of the sons of anybody (else) should come into possession of
8. this chamber(!?), let him take from
9. the best (produce) of this vine(yard) (as) a (presentation?)-offering
10. year by year. He is also to perform the
11. slaughter (prescribed above) in (proximity to) my ‘soul’
12. and is to apportion
13. for me a leg-cut.⁷⁷

What is interesting in line 1 is that the deceased subject is not a king, but rather someone on the second highest level of society, a royal official. The king he serves, Panamuwa, does not appear to be the same Panamuwa who speaks in the Hadad inscription.⁷⁸ Pardee believes this to be Panamuwa II, who reigned from ca. 743 BC to ca. 733 BC.⁷⁹

The reason for the question mark behind the word “chamber” in lines 2, 3, and 8 is that the word in the inscription (*syr/d*) is an otherwise unattested word whose meaning is uncertain. Pardee translates “chamber” mostly on the basis of context.

The capitalized letters behind Hadad’s name in line 3 form a word that Pardee is uncertain about, but it appears to be an epithet attached to Hadad’s name.⁸⁰ So Pardee simply transliterates it. The same is true of the last word in line 3 and the first word in line 4. The last word in line 3 appears to be the name of a god not yet known to scholars, and the first word in line 4 appears to be an epithet attached to that god’s name. Šamš is, of course, the sun god. And Kubaba in line 5

⁷⁷ The translation is Dennis Pardee’s from his *editio princeps* of the stele: Pardee, “New Aramaic Inscription,” 53–54.

⁷⁸ The Hadad statue and the Katumuwa stele were discovered only seven kilometers from one another. Schloen and Fink, “New Excavations at Zincirli,” 11.

⁷⁹ Pardee, “A New Aramaic Inscription,” 57.

⁸⁰ The reason for the two slashes in this word is because Pardee is uncertain whether the second and second last letters in the word are dalets or reshes.

is the patron goddess of the neighboring kingdom of Carchemish.⁸¹ What is striking in lines 3–5 is that the offering is to be made to five gods⁸² *and* to Katumuwa's soul (*nbš*). It is clear that Katumuwa anticipates that he will be feasting with the gods in the afterlife—even though he assumes that his postmortem soul will be in the stele. Perhaps another thing to note is the sheer number of animals that he requests to be sacrificed on a yearly basis, a bull and five rams—certainly a costly meal in the ancient Near East.

Of significance in lines 6 and 7 is the fact that Katumuwa calls not only on his descendants but also on any other persons who would ever come into possession of this place to make the offering at regular intervals.

Line 9 seems to indicate that there was a vineyard adjoining the room in which the stele was placed. In fact, the archaeological survey of the site revealed an area just east of the room that seems to have been open at the time the stele was set up which may have provided enough room for a small vineyard.⁸³ What is certain from line 9 is that a drink offering of wine was to be included with the meat offering.

Especially intriguing in the wording of line 11 is that the slaughter of the animals was to be performed *bnbšy*. Pardee translates this as “in (proximity to) my ‘soul.’” In his comments he says, “Perhaps . . . the purpose of the idiom *bnbšy* was to express that at least some part of the slaughtering was to be done on the stele itself, so that the blood would come in immediate contact with it and the ‘soul’ dwelling within could imbibe it directly.”⁸⁴ Indeed, the simplest translation of the prepositional phrase here would be “on my soul.” Since Katumuwa envisions

⁸¹ Pardee, “New Aramaic Inscription,” 62.

⁸² Four gods, if the two Hadads mentioned in lines 3 and 4 are the same god in Samalian belief.

⁸³ Pardee, “New Aramaic Inscription,” 65.

⁸⁴ Pardee, “New Aramaic Inscription,” 66.

his soul to be in the stele, he seems to be directing his survivors to kill the sacrificial animals over the stele. What Pardee is suggesting about the imbibing of the blood is not far-fetched, because otherwise there appears to be no reason for Katumuwa to include this detail in his instructions.

In line 13 Katumuwa requests that a leg-cut be given to him, which may imply that the rest of the animal was to be eaten by the people making the offering.⁸⁵ If that was the case, it provides intriguing insights into beliefs about communing with the dead, and by extension with the gods, in the Levant during Iron Age II.

The images carved on the stele reinforce the message about the festive meal requested in the text (see Figure 5). Katumuwa is seated in front of a table set with food (apparently a duck or goose⁸⁶ and loaves of bread) with a goblet of wine in his upraised right hand.⁸⁷ No evidence of Katumuwa's physical remains were discovered near the stele, which has fueled speculation that Katumuwa was cremated, an Indo-European practice that was believed to free the soul from the body.⁸⁸

The kingdom of Sam'al was located on the northern frontier of territory inhabited by Semitic peoples. And although the stele was written in a Semitic language, there is evidence that the people of Sam'al were a mixture of Arameans and Luwians, a people associated with the Hittites.⁸⁹ So there is no guarantee that the beliefs reflected in the stele are exclusively Semitic.

⁸⁵ Ingo Kottsieper, "Sam'alische und aramäische Texte," in *Grab-, Sarg-, Bau- und Votivinschriften*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Daniel Schwemer, *TUAT.NF* 6 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), 322.

⁸⁶ Recall that in the Ugaritic ritual text *KTU* 1.161 a bird offering was called for after the sevenfold sacrifice. Jonathan Greer of Grand Rapids Theological Seminary in a presentation on this feature of the stele at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in San Diego, CA on Nov. 24, 2019 argued that the object on the plate is a boned hind leg of a ram.

⁸⁷ Note the similarity between this detail and the depiction of Ahiram in Figure 3.

⁸⁸ Schloen and Fink, "New Excavations at Zincirli," 10–11.

⁸⁹ Schloen and Fink, "New Excavations at Zincirli," 6–10.

The belief that the soul lives on apart from the body existed among the Hittites long before the first millennium.⁹⁰ Hays raises the possibility that the belief expressed here may come from Egyptian influence as well. Either way, he believes there was plenty of cross pollination at this time and place, so that beliefs expressed here were quite common in the Levant in Iron Age II.⁹¹

Stelae with similarities to this one have been discovered at numerous other sites in the northern Levant. Such banquet mortuary stelae appeared rather suddenly in the late tenth and ninth centuries BC and flourished during the eighth century until they disappeared at the time the area was taken over by the Assyrians in the late eighth century.⁹² Hays points out that the proliferation of such stelae especially among nonroyal elites in the ninth and eighth centuries may indicate that an affluent trading class was helping to assert the power of these small independent kingdoms on the periphery of the Assyrian Empire. As pressure mounted for these kingdoms to remain independent, the people in the second tier of society were needed to keep these petty kingdoms economically strong and to bring in revenue in order to pay tribute to the Empire. As a result, they were allowed to appropriate to themselves certain privileges in the afterlife, i.e. to feast with the gods and to demand from their survivors the food for the feasts, privileges formerly assumed to belong only to royals.⁹³

To summarize, the evidence from the Levant contributes the following to an understanding of afterlife beliefs among Israel's neighbors during Iron Age II: (1) The older Ugaritic religion clearly reflected a belief that it's deceased kings went on to the underworld, where there seems to have been little distinction between kings, *rp'um*, and divinities. (2) Monumental evidence from

⁹⁰ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 128.

⁹¹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 128.

⁹² Eudora J. Struble and Virginia Rimmer Herrmann, "An Eternal Feast at Sam'al: The New Iron Age Mortuary Stele from Zincirli in Context," *BASOR* 356 (Nov 2009): 41.

⁹³ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 128–29.

the 10th and 8th centuries BC portrays deceased elites seated in front of mortuary offerings presented to them by surviving mourners. (3) Two significant 8th century inscriptions (Hadad and Katumuwa) bear witness to a belief that the *nbš/npš* of the deceased lived on in some form after death. (4) These two inscriptions instruct the survivors of the deceased on how to perform certain cultic rites that involve the deceased eating and drinking with gods in the afterlife.

Conclusions

From our survey, it is clear that a belief in life beyond death was extremely common among all peoples in the ancient Near East. These people had strong, specific and sophisticated beliefs about the afterlife. It would have been a strange anomaly if ancient Israelites had been the only people in this milieu to believe that existence ended with physical death. Richard Steiner has said that if the ancient Hebrew could not conceive of a life after death for the *ψῆψις*, “he must have been a rather sheltered soul, oblivious to beliefs and practices found all over the ancient Near East.”⁹⁴

It is also clear that the cult of the dead was an integral part of these afterlife beliefs among Israel’s neighbors. The living were highly concerned about the well-being of the deceased. They saw it as their duty to contribute to the well-being of the deceased so that their dead ancestors would in turn do all they could to ensure that things went well for their survivors in the land of the living.

Yet the collection of books that make up the Old Testament are noticeably restrained in their references to life after death when compared with the rest of ancient Near Eastern writings. At the same time, the Old Testament authors are frequently antagonistic toward the religious

⁹⁴ Richard C. Steiner, *Disembodied Souls: The Nefesh in Israel and Kindred Spirits in the Ancient Near East, with an Appendix on the Katumuwa Inscription* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 9.

practices that their neighbors observed in reference to the dead, practices that sound similar to many of those we have just examined. In the next chapter we will consider Old Testament references that appear to condemn the cult of the dead not only practiced by Israel's neighbors, but often adopted by their own people.

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL OPPOSITION TO THE CULT OF THE DEAD

Prohibitions against and antagonistic comments toward the cult of the dead are sprinkled among the legal, narrative and prophetic (especially Isaianic) literature of the Old Testament. Today these references are usually seen as evidence of Deuteronomistic editors trying to solidify religious authority exclusively in Jerusalem in the seventh century by imposing a monotheistic Yahwism on the kingdom of Judah. Many scholars believe that the cult of the dead was an accepted belief and practice in earlier Israel, and that the reforms of Josiah stigmatized it as a foreign belief and attempted to rid the Judahites of it because it competed with the cult and the oracles of Yahweh for the people's allegiance and guidance.¹ It is not the goal of this dissertation to advocate or to challenge any of the current theories about the composition of the various biblical books. The theories are often based on the idea of an evolutionary development of Israelite religion with monotheism being a rather late development. In these theories many of the biblical statements advocating an exclusive monotheism are assumed to be the result of later redactions of the books in which they are found. Such assumptions become the lens through which the various statements are interpreted. This dissertation will approach the biblical references and allusions to the cult of the dead in a way that is less restrictive in dating the references. A priori assumptions about the dating will as far as possible be avoided, and more focus will be placed on features of the texts such as their genre, rhetoric and vocabulary. It is hoped that this approach will give a fresh hearing to these texts that come from a relatively small, un-influential people group that lived among the “major players” of the ancient Near East, whose

¹ For a cogent summary of recent theories about the cult of the dead in Israel, see Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 135–47. See also Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, 286–87, 292.

beliefs we sketched out in the first chapter.

Legal Prohibitions

The Holiness Code in Leviticus contains three statements condemning the practice of necromancy. The three injunctions stand in close proximity to one another, but interestingly they are not found in successive verses.

“Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 19:31)

“I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people.” (Lev 20:6)

“A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.” (Lev 20:27)

Although the three are interspersed among injunctions that are not related to necromancy, their placement clearly has a rationale behind it. The first verse (19:31) is placed within a list of prohibitions (“Do not . . .”), while the chapter in which the latter two are found (20) is clearly focused on the consequences of the behaviors that were condemned in chapter 19. The second of the two injunctions (20:6) characterizes turning to mediums and spiritists harshly. It refers to it as “whoring after them” (*לִזְנֹת אֶתְהָמִים*). And it pronounces dire consequences that Yahweh will bring upon the perpetrators. He will set his face against them and cut them off from their people. The final injunction (20:27) pronounces what should be done to the mediums and spiritists themselves. They are to be stoned, a punishment that has not been named in Leviticus thus far except at the beginning of the chapter (20:2), where those who burn their children in the fire are condemned to be stoned. The decree against the mediums and spiritists here in 20:27 is set as the

final word in the section.² Chapter 20 contains a long list of crimes for which the death penalty (*מוות יומת*) is to be imposed, most of them sexual offenses (vv. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16). After the list, Yahweh gives some final warnings of a general nature. It's here that necromancy (along with the other sins condemned in the chapter) is identified as a *foreign* practice, one practiced by the nations that Yahweh was driving out of the land, and as a practice that was abhorrent to him (v. 23). He had set Israel apart from the nations (v. 26). The section concludes with the injunction that mediums and spiritists are to be put to death by stoning (v. 27). The placement of the three injunctions against necromancy clearly stand out in the overall section, marking necromancy as particularly abhorrent to Yahweh.

Another significant aspect of the placement of the injunctions is that the second one (20:6) comes directly after a rather long divine indictment against the practice of sacrificing children to Molek (20:1–5). Though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address that practice, it's important to point out that much of the same rhetoric employed against child sacrifice is used in the second and third injunctions against turning to mediums and spiritists. Anyone who engages in it—Israelite or foreigner—is to be put to death by stoning (20:2). Yahweh will set his face against such a person and will cut him off from his people because child sacrifice causes defilement (v. 3). And any member of the community who closes his eyes to such a practice and fails to put the perpetrator to death—Yahweh will also set his face against that person and cut him off from his people; such a thing is prostitution to Molek (vv. 4–5). How absolutely foreign and unthinkable the practice of child sacrifice was is captured well in Yahweh's wording about it in the book of Jeremiah:³ “I did not command it, nor did it enter my mind.”

² Not only is there a *petuhah* after 20:27, but there is a *seder* at the beginning of 21:1, marking it as the beginning of a new Torah section for reading in the synagogue.

³ Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35. The phrase is unique to the book of Jeremiah.

In all three verses that condemn necromancy in Leviticus, the words that are used for “mediums” and “spiritists” are אָבָתִים and יְקֻעַנִים. The occurrences of the former (singular אָוֶב) are usually assigned three possible meanings: (1) spirit of the dead, (2) the medium or necromancer through whom the spirit communicates, and 3) necromancy in general or an apparatus employed to effect necromancy.⁴ Under meaning 1, Clines includes the definition “ancestral spirit” and explains, “referring to the spirit of dead ancestors believed to possess occult knowledge.” He includes the three Leviticus passages that we are considering under this meaning.⁵ If that is correct in these instances, 20:27a is particularly intriguing because the Hebrew could be translated “a man or woman in whom there is an ancestral spirit or familiar spirit is to be put to death.”⁶ Milgrom gives an extensive review of the literature on אָוֶב.⁷ A likely explanation is that it is etymologically related to בָּאֵת. Hays points out that the two words have the same consonantal spelling in the plural (אָבוֹת) and says that the different vowels in the singular could be a result of Canaanite vowel shift from ā to ō or the result of a scribal attempt to keep the two words separate.⁸

The new edition of Gesenius’ Hebrew lexicon prefers the third meaning (apparatus employed for necromancy). It gives the meaning “Opfergrube” (offering pit) based on the Akkadian *apu*, which was a hole or opening in the earth, and on the Hittite *api*, which was a pit

⁴ BDB, s.v. אָוֶב; Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 170–71; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary AB 3A* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1768.

⁵ David J. A. Clines, “אָוֶב,” *DCH* 1:185.

⁶ Hebrew: פִּידְיָה אָוֶב אָז יְקֻעַנִּים מִתְּמַתָּן. The variant פִּידְעָה instead of פִּידְיָה occurs quite frequently in the textual transmission.

⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1768–72.

⁸ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 170.

dug in the earth for offerings which could then be closed again.⁹ Hoffner's study of this phenomenon among numerous people groups in the ancient Near East found that it was a practice commonly done at night in which a pit was dug and food offerings were lowered into it, including especially the blood of sacrificial animals. Through it, spirits appearing in anthropomorphic form were lured up from the grave, and after consultation with them the pit was closed to prevent the spirits from escaping.¹⁰ There is not enough context in the references to אֹב in the Hebrew Bible to determine if any of them could refer to such a pit, but there are a few instances where reference to some sort of apparatus used for necromancy is a possibility. The word occurs in 2 Kgs 23:24 along with a list of cultic objects that Josiah removed ("the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem"). In addition, the medium at Endor in 1 Sam 28:7 is called a בְּעִלָּת-אֹב. If אֹב meant "necromancer" here, the phrase would be rather pleonastic ("mistress of a necromancer"). So perhaps "mistress of necromancy (or of a necromantic apparatus)" is closer to the meaning. Also, in v. 8 of this account what Saul says to the woman could be translated as, "Conjure for me with the apparatus and bring up for me the one I tell you to."¹¹ Most English versions avoid translations that indicate any type of apparatus and tend to translate אֹב as "medium" and less often "spirit."

The word that אֹב is usually paired with, יְعַנֵּי, is clearly related to the verb יַדַּע, and therefore probably has some connection with knowledge. Therefore, it's often translated "familiar spirit."¹² BDB suggests that it's used in the sense of "knowing, wise (acquainted with

⁹ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 18th ed. (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 22.

¹⁰ Harry A. Hoffner, "Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew 'Ôb," *JBL* 86 (1967): 385–401.

¹¹ קְסֻמִּי גַּא לִי בְּאֹב וּבְעִלָּת לִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר אֱלֹהִים.

¹² BDB, s.v. אֹב; Clines, *DCH* 4:113.

secrets of unseen world)" or of "intimate acquaintance," as a way of referring to a soothsayer.

The term only occurs in connection with אָזֶב אָזֶב, on the hand, sometimes occurs without יְדֵעַי.

There is little in its contexts that would distinguish the two from one another.

There is also a prohibition in the Holiness Code that, if it is indeed a reference to a practice connected with the cult of the dead, has significant bearing on the topic of this dissertation.

Leviticus 19:26 states, וְלَا תֹנְחֵשׁ עַל־הַדָּם לֹא תִזְבְּחֵן תְּעֻגָּנָה. Virtually all English translations render the first half of the verse with something like, "Do not eat meat with the blood in it."

Milgrom points out that this does not do justice to the Hebrew, which is clearly saying, "Do not eat over the blood." All the Levitical passages that forbid eating meat with the blood still in it (Lev 17:10, 12, 14; 3:17; 7:26–27) speak of "eating blood," not "eating over the blood."

Milgrom makes the argument that the phrase "eat over the blood" is referring to a cultic meal that was held in connection with divination.¹³ This would make much better sense of the verse, which otherwise shows no connection between the two halves.¹⁴ It makes much better sense if the first half of the verse is forbidding a meal that was preliminary to oracular inquiry: "Do not eat over the blood nor practice divination nor seek omens." This also dovetails with the explanation of אָזֶב given above, where the blood of sacrificial animals was poured out to lure spirits up from the earth for the purpose of obtaining secret information.

Milgrom points out that just such a rite may be described in 1 Sam 14:31–35, where Saul's troops are said to "eat over the blood" after slaughtering animals and pouring their blood out on

¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1684–89, provides copious documentation for such a cultic practice in numerous parts of the ancient Near East and Greece, citing sources from second millennium BC Mesopotamia through medieval rabbinic sources. See also John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 399–400.

¹⁴ Why would a prohibition against divination be juxtaposed to a dietary prohibition?

the ground.¹⁵ Although the text does not explicitly say that the men are performing a cultic rite, they may have been attempting to get advice in their campaign against the Philistines by consulting the ancestral spirits. In any case, they are accused of sinning against the Lord by eating over the blood, and so Saul makes them stop what they are doing (vv. 33–34). Ezekiel (33:25) appears to chide the people of Jerusalem in his day for performing the same rite.¹⁶ So the prohibition in Lev 19:26a could very well be referring to a meal in which an offering of sacrificial blood was poured out and the inquirers ate the sacrificial meat over the blood as a way of communing with the dead and seeking oracular advice from them. The two verses that follow the prohibition in Leviticus (vv. 27–28) appear to be referring to pagan rites connected with mourning the dead: cutting the hair and beard in certain ways and cutting one’s skin in acts of self-mutilation.¹⁷ So it is highly likely that in these verses Yahweh is forbidding practices that were associated with the cult of the dead.

There are two places in Deuteronomy that also seem to make reference to the cult of the dead. The list of practices that Deuteronomy 18:10–11 prohibits includes several that were condemned in Leviticus: child sacrifice, soothsaying (**עָמֹד**), divination (**שְׁנִיחָשֶׁת**), and inquiring of a medium (**אֹוב**) or spiritist (**עֵנִים**). What the latter phrase means is made explicit in this text with the addition at the end of the list, **דַּרְשָׁנָה**, “consulting the dead.” As with the prohibitions in Leviticus, the rhetoric of the section is harsh: Anyone who does these things is detestable to Yahweh, and because of these things Yahweh will drive the previous inhabitants out of the land in front of Israel (v. 12). Also similar to Leviticus, the section begins and ends

¹⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1490–93.

¹⁶ Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 21–48*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 979–80.

¹⁷ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 415–16. Deut 14:1 also supports this interpretation.

(vv. 9 and 14) with assertions that these are *foreign* practices, practices of the peoples that Israel will dispossess. It's not hard to see why the current theories claim that a section like this is the product of exclusive Yahwist ideology trying to root out a common religious practice. The section following this prohibition focuses on how Moses is the proper prophet of Yahweh and how Yahweh will raise up another prophet like him that the people should listen to exclusively (vv. 15–20).

The second possible reference to the cult of the dead in Deuteronomy (26:14) is different from the previous ones in that it is not a command. In it a hypothetical pious Israelite while bringing his third year tithe to the sanctuary says, “I have not eaten any of the sacred portion while I was in mourning, nor have I removed any of it while I was unclean, nor have I offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the LORD my God; I have done everything you commanded me.” The fact that the third protestation (“nor have I offered any of it to the dead”) occurs in a statement that has to do with how the worshipper has handled the sacred tithe indicates that this is not a legal prohibition against offerings to the dead per se. Johnston sees it as evidence that the inclusion of food as a grave offering at the time of burial was not prohibited but that the tithe was not to be used for that purpose. He distinguishes the reference here from the offerings made in the cult of the dead, which were intended to keep the dead appeased so as to avert any harm they might bring to the living.¹⁸ Others interpret it as a stronger statement by this stylized Israelite that he wants to avoid any association with cult of the dead practices.¹⁹ The fact that he uses the generic wording “give (**לְתַת**) to the dead,” rather than more cultic terms such as **לִבְנֵי** (“sacrifice”), makes it difficult to determine which view was intended here. But since the book earlier

¹⁸ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 169–70.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 103, 172; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman), 336.

condemned consulting the dead (Deut 18:11), making offerings to the dead cannot be ruled out as a possibility in this verse.

In summary, the legal references to the cult of the dead include (1) pointed prohibitions against consulting the dead, (2) passionate denunciations of its repulsive nature, (3) proclamation of extreme consequences (e.g. stoning) for those who practice it, and (4) possible prohibitions against offering sacrifices to the dead.

Biblical Narratives that Disparage the Cult of the Dead

I will include in this section the reference to sacrifices made to the dead in Psalm 106:28 even though it is not part of a narrative account per se. Psalm 106 is highly narratival, but it also has clear links to the narrative of Numbers 25, where the Israelites become embroiled with the Moabites and their worship practices shortly before entering Canaan. Though a completely different genre from the legal references that we've just studied, the rhetoric of the Psalm is equally strident. The psalmist recounts numerous specific incidents from Israel's history, from the Exodus to the conquest of the land, in order to build his case that his ancestors have been incorrigibly recalcitrant. Yet Yahweh has had mercy on them time and again. The Psalm is bookended with both praise to Yahweh for saving his people (vv. 1–3 and 43–46) and pleas that he would likewise save the psalmist and his generation (vv. 4–5 and 47). In between, the psalmist hammers away with one example after another of how unfaithful the people have been to their God.

The stanza that describes the apostasy that took place in Moab begins with v. 28: וַיָּמְלֹא לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּעָזֶר בְּעֵדָה זְבַחַי מְתִים. “they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices of the

dead.” The line of poetry seems to have even literary connections²⁰ to the narrative account. Note the highlighted words in vv. 2–3a of the Numbers account below.

<p style="text-align: center;">וְתַקְרָא נָעַם לְעַם לִזְבָּחִי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִאֲכַל הַעַם וַיְשַׁתְּחַווּ לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ:</p>	2
<p style="text-align: center;">וַיִּאָמֶד יְשֻׁרָּאֵל לְבַעַל פָּעֹז</p>	3

Every word in the poetic line is represented in the narrative account except מַתִּים.²¹ And the word that stands in place of it in the narrative account is אֱלֹהִים. This may be what has led some translators to render the phrase זְבָחִי מַתִּים in the Psalms verse as “sacrifices offered to lifeless gods.”²² Lewis, however, points out that the psalmist undoubtedly did not mean “lifeless gods” when using the word מַתִּים. The word has that meaning nowhere else in the Old Testament, and the psalmists have numerous other words for “gods” and “idols” at their disposal. Additionally, the early versions did not see it as referring to “lifeless gods.” Both the Septuagint and the Targum translate with their equivalents of “sacrifices of the dead.” No, Lewis concludes that the psalmist understood the sacrifices to the אֱלֹהִים in the Numbers account to be sacrifices made to deceased ancestors.²³ So it seems quite likely that the author of Psalm 106 is identifying the cultic meal described in Numbers 25 as a meal connected to the cult of the dead.

But the most explicit example from Old Testament narratives of cult of the dead practices occurring in Israel is the one in 1 Sam 28:3–25, the account of how Saul illicitly gets a

²⁰ I.e., it is more than just a poetic recasting of the narrative.

²¹ The word נִפְחָד is a rare word, occurring only five times in the Old Testament. Three of the occurrences are in Num 25:3, 5 and Ps 106:28, and these three are the only times it occurs in *niphal*!

²² E.g., NIV and CSB.

²³ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 167. He also points out how this is similar to the parallel use of the Ugaritic equivalents of אֱלֹהִים and מַתִּים in CTA 6 VI 44–47 (see above).

necromancer (בָּעֵלֶת־אֹוב) to contact the deceased Samuel to get advice from him about how to proceed in his disastrous campaign against the Philistines. The narrative clearly presents necromancy in a disapproving way. It begins by explicitly stating that Saul had removed all the mediums and spiritists from the land (v. 3). But as Johnston points out, there are two previous comments in the book that already paint divination in a negative light.²⁴ In 6:2 the Philistines, who had recently captured the ark of the covenant, solicit their priests to practice divination in order to learn how best to get the ark back to the Israelites since it has brought them nothing but trouble. This adds irony to the account in chapter 28 when Saul resorts to divination himself to find out how to escape further devastation from the Philistines. Also, in 15:23 when Samuel announces to Saul that Yahweh is taking away the kingship from him because of his disobedience, Samuel compares disobedience to Yahweh to “the sin of divination.” Again, this adds to the irony when near the climax of the book Saul attempts to contact Samuel through divination.

Everything about the account underlines the desperate and clandestine nature of Saul’s attempt to get advice from the deceased Samuel. The Philistines have advanced to the north of the land (v. 4). Saul is terror stricken at how far they have penetrated into his kingdom (v. 5). He has exhausted every possibility of legitimately inquiring of Yahweh—dreams, Urim and prophets—but Yahweh is silent. (v. 6). The narrator of 1 Sam has reported multiple times that Yahweh had rejected Saul (15:23, 26) and that the Spirit of Yahweh had departed from him (16:14; 18:12). Now in desperation he seeks a medium. When his attendants tell him there is one

²⁴ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 157.

in Endor, he disguises himself and goes there at night (v. 8).²⁵ The location of Endor appears to be behind enemy lines, which would have made his trip there additionally perilous.²⁶ When he asks the woman to bring up a deceased spirit for him, the woman's response underlines the danger of the situation. She points out to him that Saul has "cut off" the mediums and spiritists from the land. What he was asking her to do was a capital offense, so she would be taking her life in her hands (v. 9). In another touch of irony, Saul swears to her "as Yahweh lives" that she will not be punished for soliciting the advice of a deceased person (v. 10).²⁷

When the woman sees Samuel coming up from the ground, there is something shocking to her about it. She registers no surprise when Saul asks her to bring Samuel up. But the moment she recognizes Samuel she cries out in a loud voice and realizes who Saul is (v. 12). When Saul asks her who it is that she sees, she answers, אֱלֹהִים רָאֵיתִי עַלְיִם מִן־הָאָרֶץ, "I see 'gods' coming up from the earth" (v. 13). The word אֱלֹהִים is pulled forward in the clause, probably for emphasis. Perhaps this is the reason the woman is startled. This is not the ordinary apparition that she's accustomed to seeing in her séances.²⁸ That this is not the normal use of the term אֱלֹהִים for the God of Israel is underlined by the fact that the verb she uses (**עַלְיִם**) is plural.²⁹ Does she perhaps see several beings coming up? As Saul continues their dialogue, he uses the singular to

²⁵ Tropper points out that night was the usual time for contacting the dead in the ancient Near East. It was believed that the gods were sleeping then, and so it was an ideal time for humans to use magical arts to influence things. At night the earth was like the dark underworld so that the summoned dead need not see the light of day. Tropper, *Nekromantie*, 20–21.

²⁶ Ralph W. Klein, *I Samuel*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 271.

²⁷ Klein, *I Samuel*, 271.

²⁸ Or perhaps she has never really brought up an actual spirit before and is startled that this time one has appeared to her.

²⁹ Typical Hebrew usage is for verbs modifying אֱלֹהִים when it refers to the God of Israel to be singular even though the noun technically has a plural ending.

refer to the apparition she is seeing (מה-פָּאַרְוֹ, “what is his form?” v. 14). And the medium then continues by describing a singular figure whom she calls an אִישׁ זָקֵן (“an old man”), who is wearing a robe. It’s intriguing that she seems to be using the term אלְקִים interchangeably with words that refer to a dead man, not unlike what happens in Num 25:2 and Ps 106:28. Again, it’s reminiscent of the parallel use of terms for gods and the dead in the Ugaritic documents. Could her wording be the result of a belief system that had little distinction between gods and the dead as sources of insight and advice from the beyond? Johnston points out that the ethnic background of the medium of Endor is not specified in the account but that the town of Endor was located near the Jezreel Valley, an area that was strongly Canaanite according to Josh 17:11–13.³⁰ The early versions do not back away from reproducing her language with divine terms. The Septuagint, which sometimes uses lesser terms to render אלְקִים when the translators are uncomfortable with a rendering that could be perceived as disrespectful to the God of Israel, has the plural Θεοὺς here, whereas it usually uses the singular with the article (ὁ θεὸς) in instances where it is a proper reference to the God of Israel.³¹ Targum Jonathan has מלְאָכָא דָּבָר, “the Angel of the LORD.”³²

Throughout the history of interpretation, it has been debated whether the prophet Samuel actually appeared that night in Endor from beyond the grave or whether it was a “deceiving spirit” who spoke through the medium to Saul.³³ Neither the characters in the account nor the

³⁰ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 155.

³¹ Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta: Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1979), 559.

³² Pinkhos Churgin, ed., *Targum Jonathan to the Prophets* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1907), 1 Samuel 28:13, accessed in Logos Bible Software.

³³ Steinmann gives a cogent summary of the various arguments that have been advanced over the centuries. Andrew E. Steinmann, *1 Samuel*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 527–34.

narrator say anything that would indicate they question whether it is indeed Samuel. However, it must be admitted that the narrator is not presenting the characters in the account in an approving manner, nor would narrative critics rule out the possibility that he is an unreliable narrator.

Nevertheless, there are subtle hints that what Samuel says—though for the most part they echo things that he has said in the past—does not ring true. He implies that Saul will die at the hands of the Philistines (v. 19), whereas Saul ends up taking his own life (1 Sam 31:4) or, as the Amalekite fugitive from the army reports later, he is assisted in doing so by the Amalekite (2 Sam 1:10). But perhaps the most telling feature of the account that occurs to the discerning reader is that the apparition of Samuel seems to be cooperating with the necromancy, while Samuel during his life condemned necromancy as a sin that was as grievous as Saul’s rebellion (1 Sam 15:23).³⁴ So why would Samuel not—if it truly was Samuel—have testified to this before both Saul and the medium during the séance? Bergen makes the argument that God may have superseded what the medium was doing in the incident and allowed Samuel to return to speak one final time to Saul about the disastrous result of his disobedience.³⁵ However, the accounts of the kings of Israel include a somewhat parallel incident where a “deceiving spirit” comes from Yahweh to entice wicked King Ahab into entering a battle that will end in his death (1 Kgs 22). The prophet Micaiah testifies to the fact that this spirit did indeed come from Yahweh himself, describing the scene in the throne room of Yahweh that he was allowed to witness, in which Yahweh commissioned the spirit for this very purpose (1 Kgs 22:19–22). So the appearance of such a deceiving spirit in the guise of Samuel may have been a possibility in the mind of the author and of early readers of 1 Sam 28 as well. The narrator never says that it was Samuel, only

³⁴ Steinmann, *1 Samuel*, 533.

³⁵ Robert D. Bergen, *1,2 Samuel* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 267.

that Saul “knew” that it was Samuel on the basis of the medium’s description of the apparition (v. 14).

Though many of these aspects of the account and of the incident itself cannot be pursued in this dissertation, for our purposes the following may be said. The author of 1 Samuel is in no way questioning the ability of necromancers to bring the spirits of the deceased into communication with the living. But he is clearly presenting necromancy as a forbidden way of obtaining information from the beyond. The author, or at least the narrator, is clearly bearing witness to a belief in Israel during the monarchical period that the individuality and personality of the deceased does continue to exist beyond the time of their death, but that necromantic attempts to communicate with and obtain information from the deceased is an affront to Yahweh.

The two narrative accounts in the Old Testament that refer to the cult of the dead portray it in a negative light. One portrays the rebellious people of God joining their neighbors, the Moabites, offering sacrifices to the dead. The other portrays Israel’s first king defying his own decree and clearly transgressing the will of Yahweh by consulting the dead for advice. Both accounts strongly imply that these practices are foreign and that they represent a religious point of view that shows little distinction between gods and the deceased. The 1 Samuel account strongly implies that true supernatural powers lie behind these practices. Both accounts explicitly state Yahweh’s anger against those practicing them and show the disastrous consequences of engaging in them.

Prophetic Condemnation

Prophetic literature of course is often confrontational. The literary prophets were active toward the end of the monarchy and afterwards, centuries in which the handwriting was on the wall, so to speak, for Israel and Judah. The prophets’ messages were to a large extent that the

two kingdoms were being dismantled because of the peoples' unfaithfulness to Yahweh. One of the sins that the prophets frequently condemn is divination (דָּבָר).³⁶ Their condemnations of divination often couple it with false prophecy (the kind that claims to be from Yahweh but is not) and with dreams. In this section we will zero in on those prophetic condemnations that refer specifically to consulting the dead. All three explicit references to it come from the prophet Isaiah (8:19; 19:3; 29:4).

The first one comes at a time when Isaiah is addressing a crisis, apparently the Syro-Ephraimite crisis around 736–34 BC.³⁷ Chapter Eight follows on the heels of the confrontation that Isaiah has with King Ahaz of Judah (chapter 7) because the king wants to make an alliance with Assyria rather than trust solely in Yahweh. Aram (Syria) and the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) are about to attack Jerusalem and depose Ahaz because he refuses to join their alliance against Assyria, the aggressive superpower that threatens to take over the whole region. Isaiah delivers several oracles from Yahweh between 7:7 and 8:17, urging Ahaz and the people of Judah to trust in Yahweh and at the same time foretelling that they will not trust in him and that he will send Assyria to overwhelm and punish them. Apparently, the people are rejecting his oracles (8:6, 12) and are turning to necromancers instead (8:19).

This is a time not unlike the end of Saul's reign. Yahweh "is hiding his face from the house of Jacob" (8:17) because they have rejected the advice and leadership of Yahweh. Hays points out how when Yahweh through Isaiah urges Ahaz to ask for a sign (7:10), he says, "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." Hays believes Yahweh is alluding to the fact that he rules over the highest heavens and the deepest

³⁶ Isa 3:2; 44:25; Jer 14:14; 27:9; 29:8; Ezek 13:6, 9, 23; 21:26–28, 34; 22:28; Mic 3:6–7, 11; Zech 10:2.

³⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 198.

depths—including *sheol*—and he, not the necromancers who claimed to bring spirits up from the dead, could offer evidence even from there to substantiate his promise.³⁸ Isaiah insists that, as for himself, he will wait for Yahweh and put his complete trust in him even though he is hiding his face at this time (8:17). And he warns the people: “When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (8:19–20).

The Hebrew of these verses is not without its difficulties. Isaiah 8:19–20 reads,

¹⁹ וְכִי־יָמְרוּ אֱלֵיכֶם דַּרְשׁוּ אֶל־הָאָבוֹת וְאֶל־הַיּוֹנָנִים הַמְצֻפָּאִים וְהַמְּלָאִים קְلֹזָעַם אֶל־אֱלֹהֵי יִזְרֶשׁ
בְּעֵד הַמִּים אֶל־הַמִּתִּים: ²⁰ לְתוֹנָה וְלַתְּעוֹנָה אִם־לֹא יָמְרוּ כַּכְּרָבָר כִּי־הָאָשָׁר אִין־לֹא שָׁר:

Verse 19a is rather straightforward. The only differences from the NIV, which is quoted above, is that the first verb (*יאמְרוּ*) is plural and would better be translated, “When *they tell*,” and the second verb (*דַּרְשׁוּ*) is imperative plural, thus beginning a direct quote, “Consult!” Since the pair *אֶל־הָאָבוֹת וְאֶל־הַיּוֹנָנִים* is familiar to us already from the previous passages we’ve considered, they require no further comment at this time. We will address the participles for “chirping and muttering” later.

Verse 19b poses considerably more problems. The first half looks straightforward at first: “Will not a people consult their God?” The weight of historical interpretation takes *אֶל־הָיִינִי* as “its (i.e. the people’s) God.”³⁹ However, many current exegetes see it as a reference to the cult of the dead. They see *אֶל־אֱלֹהֵי* as parallel to *אֶל־הַמִּתִּים* at the end of the verse. To understand their take on the verse, consider Blenkinsopp’s and Hays’ translations below. It’s important to note that

³⁸ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 280–81.

³⁹ See LXX, Vulgate, Luther, and KJV.

both translators take the first two words of v. 20 as part of the question contained in v. 19b, and they take the question as part of what the advocates of necromancy are saying—not as Isaiah's response to the advocates of necromancy, the way it has usually been understood through most of the centuries.

They will surely say to you, “Consult the spirits of the dead and the ghosts that chirp and mutter, for should not a people consult their divine ancestors, the dead, for instruction and a message on behalf of the living?”⁴⁰

And if they say to you, “Consult the ghosts and familiar spirits that twitter and murmur! Should a people not consult its ancestors—(should it not consult) the dead on behalf of the living—(20) for instruction and testimony?”⁴¹

Though this approach may seem at first to support the thesis of this dissertation, there are numerous things that speak against it. Blenkinsopp and Hays seem to want to take 19b as a line of poetry with the two לְאַלְן phrases as parallel to one another, but nothing else about the half verse seems to show poetic parallelism. BHS typesets this section as prose. It's true that the way the Masoretes have punctuated the verse, it is difficult to determine what the phrase בְּعֵד הַחֲנִים אַל־ relates to—whether to the words before it or after it. But trying to connect it to לְתֹרֶה relates to—whether to the words before it or after it. But trying to connect it to לְתֹרֶה is contrary to the larger context since they are probably echoing the occurrence of the two words together in v. 16, where they can hardly be referring to the instruction and testimony of necromancers and are much more likely to refer to Yahweh's instruction and testimony. The only places תֹּרֶה occurs in the Old Testament are in these two verses of Isaiah, so there are no other contexts to help us in ascertaining its nuances and connotations. But תֹּרֶה has been used three times before this in the book, all of them referring to the instruction of Yahweh (1:10; 2:3;

⁴⁰ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 242.

⁴¹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 271.

5:24). Furthermore, מְלֹא־לַיְלָה has been used four times in the book already, all of them referring to Yahweh—the first two in close conjunction with his תּוֹךְ (1:10; 2:3) and the last two in the nearer context and clearly referring to Yahweh (7:11, 13).

It seems wisest then to take vv. 19b–20 as Isaiah’s response to the advocates of necromancy and to divide the phrases within them the way the Masoretes do by 1) ending the first question with שׁרֵךְ? (note the *zaqeph*, a strong disjunctive accent), “will not a people inquire of their God?” 2) taking the second half of v. 19b as a passionate, apocopated follow-up question, “(Inquire) of the dead on behalf of the living?!” 3) taking the first half of v. 20 as a brusque command, “To (God’s) instruction and testimony!” and 4) taking the second half of v. 20 as a strong warning, “If they do not speak according to this word, they have no dawn.” An alternate possibility for the 20b is to take the אָמֵן־לְךָ as asseverative, “surely.” This helps to account for the רַשְׁךְ at the beginning of the second clause: “Surely according to this word will those speak *who* have no dawn.”⁴² However one takes vv. 19b–20, v. 19a is a clear reference to necromancy in which the prophet condemns it.

There are a couple of other insights into this reference that are valuable for this particular study. Isaiah leads into his condemnation of necromancy by saying that Yahweh is hiding his face from the house of Jacob (8:17). The prophets use this metaphor (Yahweh hiding his face) often to describe Yahweh’s refusal to answer his people when they sin against him.⁴³ As we saw with the account of Saul and the medium of Endor, it was particularly tempting to turn to necromancy when Yahweh was not answering—when he had hidden his face. In the Psalter,

⁴² BDB, s.v. רַשְׁךְ, note 2; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 230 n9; see also Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 242–43; and Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 271.

⁴³ E.g., Isa 54:8; 64:6; Jer 33:5; Ezek 39:23–24; Mic 3:4.

cries to Yahweh are always particularly poignant when the psalmists claim that he has turned his face from them.⁴⁴ Often the psalmists are pleading with him not to hide his face because they are looking for guidance and for answers as to what they should do when they are distraught.⁴⁵ The singer of Ps 143 pleads, “Answer me quickly, LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me. . . . Show me the way I should go” (vv. 7–8). The singer is looking for guidance and direction as to what he should do next. These are the types of pleas that a man like Saul or a man like Isaiah could have been praying in the two instances we have just studied. Isaiah resolutely says that he will wait for Yahweh even though he is hiding his face (8:17) and urgently warns his people not to turn to necromancy for direction at a time like this (8:19). Saul, on the other hand, gives in to the temptation to turn to necromancy for answers when Yahweh refuses to answer him. It will be intriguing when we turn to the Psalms to see that Israel’s worship literature directs the people only to look to Yahweh for guidance and direction—even when he is hiding his face from them—and never brings up necromancy as a possible alternate source of guidance.

The other insight to be gleaned from Isa 8:19 is the way the necromancers (or the spirits they contacted) are described: **הַנְּצָפִים וְהַנְּגִינִים**. The first word is a Pilpel participle from the verb **נְצֹף**. It’s a word that Isaiah, of all the Old Testament writers, seems to be particularly fond of.⁴⁶ He later uses it to describe peoples conquered by Assyria who did not “let a peep out of them” as they were taken (10:14). That reference certainly has a humorous tone to it, and it’s possible that in 8:19 Isaiah is trying to satirize the contrived sounds that the necromancers made.⁴⁷ In 38:14 he quotes Hezekiah using the word to describe how he wept during his illness,

⁴⁴ E.g., Ps 13:2; 44:24–25; 104:29.

⁴⁵ E.g., Ps 69:17–18.

⁴⁶ The word occurs only in the book of Isaiah, and there it occurs four times.

⁴⁷ Segal, *Life after Death*, 129.

comparing it to the mournful chirp of a swallow or crane. There the word is paired with a form of the verb **הָגַע**, as it is in 8:19. In 38:14 it's clear that **הָגַע** expresses the low, mournful sound that doves make.⁴⁸ The remaining instance of **חֹפֶץ** in Isaiah (29:4) does not mention birds at all but again uses the word in connection with necromancers. This section foretells the woe that will come upon Ariel (Jerusalem). She will be brought low and mumble from the ground. The second half of the verse states it this way:

נָשִׁה כָּאֹב מֵאָרֶץ קֹלְקָ וּמַעֲפָר אִמְרָתָה תְּצַפֵּז:

“Your voice will be like a ghost from the ground, and from the dust your speech will twitter.”

Here is an instance where the context makes clear that **בָוָק** means “ghost.” As in 1 Sam 28, Isa 29:4 reflects a belief that spirits called forth in necromancy came up out of the earth. But the verse probably also reflects the kind of sound that the medium made as he or she pretended to serve as the voice of the spirit from the grave. It was probably a weak, high-pitched, birdlike sound. This has parallels with some of the other ancient Near Eastern cultures we surveyed in the first chapter. In the Sumero-Akkadian incantation series *Utukkū lemnuṭu* (5:6), which was mentioned in Chapter Two, the spirits of the deceased were said to “twitter from below.”⁴⁹ Birds figured prominently in Egyptian magic spells as well, which often promised to transform the deceased person into a bird, which symbolized the spirit’s freedom to leave the tomb.⁵⁰

Christopher Hays has argued that the preceding chapter of Isaiah (28), when it refers to the Judahites having made a covenant with death and an agreement with *sheol* (v. 15), is referring to

⁴⁸ **יָגַע בְּיוֹנָה**, “I moan like the dove.” In Isa 8:19 **הָגַע** occurs as a *hiphil* participle.

⁴⁹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 271, n310.

⁵⁰ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 74.

an alliance they made with Egypt in the face of the impending Assyrian threat.⁵¹ Religious ceremonies were part of how alliances were made between ancient Near Eastern nations. Hays proposes that the covenant with death mentioned in Isa 28:15 refers to this alliance, which would have involved the Egyptian goddess of protection, Mut, whose authority extended over the realm of the dead. Isaiah is making a play on the Hebrew word “death” (מ֮תָה) and the goddess’s name (Mut). Along the same lines, Karel van der Toorn has argued that the enigmatic babbling in vv. 10 and 13 of Isaiah 28 (צֹו לְצֹו ... קַו לְקַו) reflects “bird-like twittering and groans” made at séances with the spirits of the underworld.⁵² The beginning of chapter 29 then, following on the heels of 28, is saying that Judah, in consequence of relying on Egypt and its religious practices connected to the cult of the dead, will be besieged (29:3) and brought low (29:4a)—so low and weakened that she will barely twitter or chirp, like necromancers and the spirits they bring up from the ground.

The other of Isaiah’s references to contacting the dead is also connected to Egyptian religious practices. Isaiah 19 is his oracle against Egypt. As he proclaims the destruction that Yahweh will bring upon Egypt, he says in v. 3b:

וְדַרְשָׂיו אֶל־הָאֱלִילִים וְאֶל־הָאֲשָׁרִים וְאֶל־הָאֲבּוֹת וְאֶל־הַיּוֹנִים:

“And they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead, the mediums and spiritists.” The list of four sources the Egyptians will consult is interesting. The first, אֶלְילִים, is usually acknowledged to have the connotation of “worthless” idols,⁵³ although Clines assigns the

⁵¹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 288–318.

⁵² Karel van der Toorn, “Echoes of Judean Necromancy in Isaiah 28,7–22,” *ZAW* 100 (1988): 209–12.

⁵³ Both BDB and HALOT (Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, “אֶלְילִים,” *HALOT* 1:55–56) assign an abstract meaning to אֶלְילִים, “worthlessness,” “vain,” as well as attributing it as a title for pagan gods.

meaning “ancestor image” to אָלִיל without explaining why.⁵⁴ The second, מַטְעָן, is a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible and is usually acknowledged as a loanword from the Akkadian *etemmu*,⁵⁵ the ghost or spirit of the deceased in Mesopotamian religion which, we saw in Chapter Two, was believed to stay near the deceased’s remains and which his survivors were careful to keep appeased so that it did not bring misfortune on them. It is a bit surprising that a word with an Akkadian background surfaces in a verse that describes Egyptian necromancy. The overall section (19:1–15) shows such detailed knowledge of Egypt, even containing numerous words of Egyptian derivation,⁵⁶ that it is unlikely the prophet is confusing Egyptian practices with Mesopotamian ones. Perhaps the appearance of this word here indicates the fluidity of cult of the dead concepts and vocabulary among the cultures of the ancient Near East.⁵⁷

It is also interesting that this pair of words is coupled with our old friends יְקֻנִים and אֲבֹתָה. Hays makes another innovative suggestion about the word אֲבֹתָה. There is an Egyptian word, *ȝbwt*, that has the meanings “family, household, image.” Having such a broad range of meaning would not be unusual for Egyptians. In Egyptian mortuary religion there was virtually no distinction between a deceased family member and an image of him/her.⁵⁸ Because of the word’s similarity to the Hebrew plural אֲבֹתָה, Hays wonders if the Hebrew word could be of Egyptian derivation.⁵⁹ If so, its use in Isa 19:3 is especially fitting. If Hays is on to something, it is intriguing that Isaiah has juxtaposed a word for departed spirit that is of Akkadian derivation

⁵⁴ DCH 1:406–7.

⁵⁵ DCH 1:279; HALOT 1:37.

⁵⁶ Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–37: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 234–35.

⁵⁷ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 357.

⁵⁸ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 106, 109.

⁵⁹ Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 171–74.

(מִנְחָה) and one that is of Egyptian derivation (נְבּוֹת) in a reference to consulting the dead, adding to the circumstantial evidence that Israel during the monarchy was opposing a view of the afterlife that was common across the ancient Near East.

These are the only explicit references to necromancy in the prophets. However, two references toward the end of the book of Isaiah have sometimes been identified as allusions to it. The reference to those who “have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings” to “the idols among the smooth stones of the ravines” (Isa 57:6) has sometimes been said to allude to necromancy because in v. 9 these people are accused of having “descended to the very realm of the dead.”⁶⁰ In Isa 65:3–4 Yahweh castigates his people, “who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil.” Susan Ackerman has argued that the latter phrase is describing spending the night in tombs in the hope of receiving dreams through which the dead might communicate to the person.⁶¹ As we saw in Chapter Two, this was a practice referred to in the Egyptian letters to the dead. Such a practice would no doubt have been avoided by observant Jews in order to avoid the uncleanness that resulted from touching a dead body or a grave (Num 19:16), and so it is no wonder that the prophet would inveigh against it.

In summary, the prophet Isaiah strongly warns against his people’s tendency not to trust wholeheartedly in Yahweh and instead to turn to necromancy for guidance in times of national emergency (8:19–20). He predicts that their urge to trust in Egypt in the face of the impending threat of an Assyrian takeover will result in Judah’s humbling (29:4). And Egypt herself will fall despite her trust in necromancy (19:3). In all three references the prophet is belittling the practice

⁶⁰ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 105–8.

⁶¹ Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 195–202.

of contacting the dead by mocking the chirping and twittering sounds that necromancers made to sound as if it were spirits coming up from the ground.

Israel's Understated References to Post-Mortem Existence

In comparison to the evidence that Israel's neighbors have left behind about their beliefs in post-mortem existence, Israel is noticeably restrained in its literary comments on the topic. Though this has sometimes led to the assertion that ancient Israel did not believe in life after death,⁶² the Old Testament gives ample testimony to Israel's belief in an afterlife. We will briefly survey this evidence before zeroing in on what the Psalms have to say about it. The Old Testament references to afterlife tend to assume a belief in it rather than to expound upon it.

A good example of this would be the phrase “gathered to his people.” This phrase and variants of it are commonly used in reports of deaths in many of the narrative portions of the Old Testament. This seems to imply a belief that the recently deceased person has joined his forebears in the afterlife. It is sometimes claimed that it is simply an idiom that developed from the practice of family burial in which multiple generations were buried together in a family tomb and eventually, after decomposition, reburied in a communal ossuary.⁶³ But several things speak against this. The first two instances of the phrase in the Old Testament are of Abraham (Gen 25:8) and Ishmael (Gen 25:17), neither of whom appear to have been buried with their forebears. The same is said of Isaac (Gen 35:29) and Jacob (49:33), who were buried with their forebears (49:29–31), but the placement of the phrase in the case of Jacob is clearly linked to his death and not to his burial. In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the phrase occurs closely between the reports of their deaths and burials. But in the case of Jacob, the phrase is placed directly after it says he

⁶² E.g., Dermot Cox, “‘As Water split (sic) on the Ground’ (Death in the Old Testament),” *SM* 31 (1982): 7.

⁶³ Eric M. Meyers, “Secondary Burials in Palestine,” *BA* 33 (1970): 17.

“breathed his last” (Gen 49:33), after which a lengthy period transpires before he is buried. The Egyptians embalm his body over a forty-day period and mourn for him seventy days (50:3). His body is then transported to Canaan where the family and their Egyptian retinue mourn for him seven more days (50:10) before he is finally buried in the family tomb at Mamre (50:13). In this instance the author clearly seems to be linking Jacob’s being gathered to his people to his expiring, and not to his burial. The phrase is also used of both Moses and Aaron (e.g. Num 27:13 and Deut 32:50), neither of whom was buried with his family, nor do these verses even mention burial. Certainly the phrase “gathered to his people” could have had its origin in family burial practices and then taken on a transferred, euphemistic meaning, like that of “pass away” in English, but from the way the phrase is used in the Pentateuch it seems unlikely that original hearers and readers of the phrase would have been unmindful of who the “peoples” were to whom the dying person was being gathered. That may be possible for us in our modern, secularized thought world to do, but it is highly unlikely that anyone living in the ancient Near East could have been disengaged from such a thought. Nor does it appear to be the author’s intent in any of the occurrences in the Pentateuch to indicate that burial was in view when the phrase was used. The most likely intent for the phrase is to indicate that the dying person is joining those who have preceded him in death.

The phrase shifts in the historical narratives after the Pentateuch. In Judg 2:10 Joshua and his generation are said to be “gathered to their fathers.” In Kings and Chronicles the phrase commonly used to report the death of the kings is “he lay down with his fathers.”⁶⁴ It usually occurs accompanied by no other word for “died” and is often followed by the phrase “and was

⁶⁴ The phrase in Hebrew (וַיָּשֹׁב עִם־אֲבֹתָיו) is often translated “he slept with his fathers,” perhaps following the lead of the LXX. This imports the idea of death as sleep, which the Hebrew verb does not indicate.

buried.” It first occurs in these books in connection with the death of David (1 Kgs 1:21; 2:10) and is followed by a report that he was buried in the City of David, no doubt a reference to the city of Jerusalem that he had conquered (2 Sam 5:7) and not to Bethlehem, where his “fathers” no doubt were buried. So again, a reference to joining those who had preceded him in death is no doubt in view rather than burial within a family tomb.

It is too much for us to analyze all 37 occurrences of this phrase in Kings and Chronicles, so the following observations by Johnston will need to suffice.⁶⁵ The phrase clearly refers to something that happened at the death of the kings and not at their burial because it is attributed to Ahaz and Manasseh, who were not buried with their ancestors, and it is omitted for Ahaziah and Joash, who were. At the same time there is no correlation to the kings’ piety or lack thereof since it is not stated about the reformer Josiah but is stated for many who “did evil.” It does seem to be used more frequently for kings who died peacefully, whereas the more abrupt “he died” tends to be used for those who died violently. And finally, it’s important to note that although many scholars assume that the place where these kings reunited with their fathers was in *sheol*,⁶⁶ that place is never mentioned in these references.

The idea of joining the deceased when one dies is reflected from another angle in David’s assertion after his and Bathsheba’s child dies in 2 Sam 12:23, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” David had fasted and pleaded with Yahweh for seven days to restore the child’s health, but when the baby dies, he becomes realistic, “Why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again?” He recognizes that there is only one direction that life and death play out in the natural order of things. The dead do not come back to the living; the living go to the dead. James

⁶⁵ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 34–35.

⁶⁶ We will reserve a close look at the concept of *sheol* for our exegetical study of Psalm 16 in the next chapter.

Barr points out how David's comment reveals a belief that his child has an on-going identity ("him/he") that continues after death.⁶⁷ This is all the more striking since he's talking about a newborn child, whose personality has not had a chance to develop. Jacob seems to be thinking in these same terms when he expresses the hope of being reunited with Joseph when he dies, since he believes his son to have perished (Gen 37:35).

The above references imply that those who die join those who predecease them. Yet biblical narratives virtually never describe the place to which the dead go. As we will see in the next chapter, references to *sheol* and descriptions of it are sparse in the Old Testament in comparison to descriptions and tales of the underworld in other ancient Near Eastern literature, such as the Book of the Dead.⁶⁸ No biblical character is ever described as being in *sheol*. Johnston points out that the word is never even brought up when the deaths of the patriarchs, kings, or anyone else are reported. Nor does it ever occur in legal material, including laws that address capital punishment and condemn necromancy.⁶⁹ The only narrative account that speaks of people going down to *sheol* is Num 16:33, where the earth swallows Korah, Dathan and Abiram alive. The only other times the term surfaces in narrative is when characters—usually in anguish—speak of it in fear that it is their impending fate, such as Jacob's gloomy comments on how he will die in sorrow because of losing Joseph. It occurs predominantly in poetry (Psalms), wisdom literature (Job and Proverbs) and prophecy (mainly Isaiah). Even in these genres the only characters described in *sheol* are the anonymous kings of Babylon (Isa 14) and Egypt (Ezek 32). The former is pictured there with other fallen kings and the latter is portrayed as surrounded by the fallen hordes of other ancient Near Eastern nations that were enemies of Israel.

⁶⁷ James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 30–31.

⁶⁸ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 69.

⁶⁹ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 71–72.

Although the Old Testament is not as explicit in making a distinction between the postmortem destination of the righteous and the wicked as the New Testament, references to Yahweh *taking* the faithful when their life is finished, in contrast to their going down to *sheol*, are not uncommon. Enoch is said to have been taken by God (Gen 5:24). As is characteristic of the Old Testament, the place to which he is taken is left unstated. The account of Elijah's taking is more detailed. It is said that Yahweh took him to heaven (2 Kgs 2:1, 11). Yet the way the narrative unfolds, the focus is placed repeatedly on the fact that he is being taken *from* Elisha (2:3, 5, 10) rather than on his destination. Persecuted prophets sometimes plead with Yahweh to take their *nephesh* (1 Kgs 19:4; Jonah 3:4). The Suffering Servant in Isa 53:8 is taken and cut off from the land of the living, and the larger context implies that Yahweh is the agent who does this. This perspective of Yahweh taking the righteous will be significant when we examine Pss 49:15 and 73:24 in Chapters Five and Six, since they have similar wording.

Ecclesiastes 3:21 makes a distinction between what happens to the spirit/breath (**רוּחַ**) of humans and that of animals at the time of death. Although the overall point of the section (vv. 19–21) is that the same thing happens to both—they both return to dust—v. 21 speaks of the human spirit rising upward and the spirit of the animal going down into the earth. Most translations make it sound as if the Teacher is questioning whether the two kinds of spirit go in these opposite directions: “Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”⁷⁰ But the two “ifs” are based on taking the **ה** on the front of two participles (see below) as an interrogative **ה**.

מִי יֹדֵעַ רُוחַ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הַעֲלָה הִיא לְמַעַלָּה וְרוּחַ כְּבָהָמָה כִּיְתָהַ לְמַטָּה לְאָרֶץ:

⁷⁰ NIV. This approach is taken also by the LXX, Vulgate, Luther, ESV, CSB and NASB.

The Masoretes, however, have pointed them as articles rather than as interrogative הָאַس. So the KJV renders the verse, “Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?”⁷¹ The sense then is not that the Teacher is questioning whether this difference is true. He’s simply stating it as an accepted fact and asking his readers whether they can really know the invisible spirit/breath of either kind of being. He makes the same point about man’s flesh returning to the dust at the time of death in 12:7, but there he says that the נֶשֶׁת of man returns to God who gave it. Clearly, he’s alluding to Gen 2:7, where God breathed the breath of life into man. He could merely be referring to man’s breath leaving him at the time of death.⁷² But then why would he raise the possibility of man’s נֶשֶׁת going up and the animals’ going down in 3:21? We will examine this type of musing about what happens after death through use of comparisons when we look at Ps 49, which shares many features of wisdom literature, in Chapter Four. There the sons of Korah compare animal death to human death and then go a step further comparing the death of the arrogant wealthy to what will happen at his own death, as one who trusts in Yahweh.

Much more could be said about passages that until the Enlightenment and the development of the various modern criticisms were traditionally interpreted as referring to a postmortem existence. But many of these (e.g. Isa 26:13–19; Ezek 37:1–14; Hos 6:1–2) involve a discussion of the topic of resurrection,⁷³ which lies beyond the scope of this project. Passages like these are often interpreted by modern exegetes as representing a late, postexilic view of postmortem

⁷¹ Bollhagen advocates this interpretation. James Bollhagen. *Ecclesiastes*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 156–57.

⁷² Indeed, that very point is made with similar language in passages like Ps 104:29 and Job 34:14–15.

⁷³ Luther, for instance, said about Hos 6:2, “He is speaking about Christ’s resurrection. . . . And we will receive it.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 18, *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1975), 30.

existence or as references merely to national resurrection after the collapse of the nation.⁷⁴ Most modern interpreters see Dan 12:2 as the only explicit Old Testament reference to a belief in physical resurrection of the dead, and they date this verse to the Maccabean period, when intense persecution and martyrdom of the Jews robbed them of any hope for vindication in this life with the result that they created in their minds a hope for vindication of the righteous in the afterlife.⁷⁵ Since our study focuses on the monarchical period, we will have to forego such tangents.

Because of the tendency in modern exegesis to late date Old Testament references to a resurrection—and to afterlife in general—many of the implied references to hope for an afterlife are marginalized as the work of later editors or as witness to indistinct, not-yet-developed ideas of an afterlife. As part of his commentary on Isa 26:19, Joseph Blenkinsopp makes this comment,

That Israelite religion is characterized by the absence of belief in a meaningful postmortem existence, in keeping with Mesopotamian ideas and in contrast to ancient Egyptian religion, is part of the conventional wisdom that hardly needs documenting. This *opinio communis* calls for qualification, however. It is arguable, in the first place, that the frequent denial of a meaningful afterlife, especially in Psalms (e.g. Pss 49:10–20; 88:5, 10–12; 115:17), reflects polemic against ancestor cults and necromantic practices rejected by Deuteronomic and Priestly orthodoxy but practiced at all times during the biblical period. It is also arguable that, while the idea of individual resurrection is not clearly attested before the persecution launched by Antiochus IV (Dan 12:2), a less clearly delineated conviction of survival after death was emerging long before that time. We detect something of this in the experience of worship here and there in Psalms (e.g. Ps 73:17, 21–28).⁷⁶

⁷⁴ E.g., Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 49; Gerhard von Rad, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” *TDNT* 2:847–48.

⁷⁵ Assmann, *Death and Salvation*, 414–16; Kathrin Liess, *Der Weg Des Lebens: Psalm 16 und das Lebens- und Todesverständnis der Individualpsalmen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 317; Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. Armin Siedlecki (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 312–16; Michel, “Ich aber bin,” 159–60.

⁷⁶ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 371.

The passages I have looked at in this chapter would seem to belie Blenkinsopp's claim that "Israelite religion is characterized by the absence of belief in a meaningful postmortem existence." Clearly, the Old Testament authors are cautious when speaking about the afterlife. But that caution need not be interpreted as an absence of such a belief. What Blenkinsopp calls an *opinio communis* about such an absence which "hardly needs documenting" is surely an overstatement, but it no doubt represents a consensus among many scholars that would be difficult to take on in a work of this size. Interestingly, Blenkinsopp points to many of the very Psalms passages that we will be studying in the coming chapters as evidence of a "conviction of survival after death" that he says is "less clearly delineated." It will be our goal in the coming chapters to delineate those beliefs more clearly.

Conclusions

The Old Testament's reticence in addressing the topic of the afterlife head-on has usually been interpreted in modern times as evidence of a lack of belief in this area or at least an underdeveloped perspective on it in comparison to Israel's neighbors. The evidence that we have cited in this chapter allows for a different perspective on this issue. As was demonstrated in Chapter Two, belief in postmortem existence and the cult of the dead was an integral part of virtually all cultures in the ancient Near East. Israel would certainly have been an anomaly if it had little or no interest in what lay ahead for those who died or in what stance the living should have toward the dead. To say the least, Israel would seem to have been very uninformed about its neighbors if that were the case, especially since they lived on a small strip of land that was very well traversed by peoples moving back and forth between the two centers of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia, in the early first millennium BC.

As this chapter has demonstrated, though references to afterlife in the Old Testament are

comparatively sparse, they frequently demonstrate an underlying assumption that there is ongoing existence for the dead, that the living will someday join them, and that at the end of life Yahweh takes the faithful—although whereto is seldom explicitly stated. At the same time, the biblical writers sound an infrequent but urgent warning about the cult of the dead. The dead are not to be consulted for guidance nor are they to be honored with cultic offerings. Yahweh is to be his people's sole source for guidance, protection and blessing.

Current theories about Old Testament beliefs in an afterlife have tended to rely on evolutionary assumptions for explaining the sparseness of references to such belief and the antagonistic references to the cult of the dead. The two mentioned in this chapter are (1) that Israel's afterlife beliefs developed from rather simple or non-existent beliefs to more advanced ones and (2) that a developing monotheism gradually edged out earlier polytheistic beliefs that were intertwined with a cult of dead ancestors. The evidence that we have examined in Chapters Two and Three does not necessitate these evolutionary assumptions. The evidence from the cultures around Old Testament Israel makes the first theory highly unlikely. And the second theory leans heavily on a hermeneutic of suspicion—suspicion that the texts from three different genres of the Old Testament are defensively trying to silence a formerly acceptable belief system. This dissertation proposes a different approach that does not assume things that are not in the text. The texts examined in this chapter make clear that ancient Israel had an underlying belief in life beyond death, a belief it shared with the cultures around it. But the reticence with which the authors address the subject and the prohibitions they express against the cult of the dead demonstrate that the latter form of afterlife belief was rejected by writers who wrote in at least three genres of literature. More than that cannot be said without making major assumptions about the development of Israelite history and theology. In its rejection of the cult of the dead,

ancient Israel was unique, and this uniqueness they were adamant to maintain.

In the following chapters we will see how the Psalter also voices these guarded statements about the afterlife, statements that show an underlying belief in continuing postmortem existence but are careful not to speak of a postmortem state that allowed communication with the living or required veneration from them. In Chapter Four we will take a deeper look into the first Psalm that gives voice to this perspective (16). The psalmist will declare exclusive trust in Yahweh and renounce all other sources of guidance, protection and blessing. And as we will see, he asserts a relationship with Yahweh that outlives even death so that he will be with Yahweh forever.

CHAPTER FOUR

A RELATIONSHIP WITH YAHWEH THAT REACHES BEYOND THIS LIFE

PSALM 16

Psalm 16 is situated in the heart of Book I of the Psalter. It is sometimes grouped with Pss 15–24.¹ Others see 15–35 as forming a group.² Psalms 3–14 tend to focus on David's laments over the enemies who are attacking him, while Pss 15 and following shift in focus toward the security that Yahweh provides in the midst of these enemies. Psalm 16 fits nicely between 15 and 17, with which it shares vocabulary and themes. With 15 it shares words such as נִשְׁתַּחֲוֵל “dwell” (15:1 and 16:9) and לֹא יָמֹת “not be shaken” (15:2 and 16:11), as well as the theme of “walking blamelessly/path of life” (15:2 and 16:11). In regard to Ps 17, it is often pointed out that the closing verse (15, “as for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness”) has much in common with the last verse of Ps 16 and traditionally has been interpreted as a reference to the afterlife.³ “When I awake” has been interpreted as referring to the resurrection, and seeing “your (i.e. Yahweh's) face” and “being satisfied” are shared in common by the final verses in both Psalms.

The heading attributes the Psalm to David and calls it a *miktam*. Though there is no consensus on the meaning of the term *miktam*, the following four explanations are typically offered:⁴

¹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50* (Würzburg: Echter, 1993), 109.

² John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1–72* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 214.

³ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 235–36; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 151–52; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 250; Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1892), 5:489–90.

⁴ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 15; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 110; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 32, n2.

1. A “golden poem” or “gem,” supposedly deriving from a poetic word for “gold” (**מִתְכָּה**)
2. A “hidden” or “secret” song, deriving from a root with the same letters (**מִתְכָּה**)
3. An “inscription,” based on the Septuagint rendering of it (**Στηλογραφία**, “stele writing”)
4. An “atonement” piece, based on the Akkadian word *katamu*, which means “to cover” or “to atone for”

Although a case could be made for several of these to be acceptable superscriptions for the Psalm, none of them is inherently connected to the contents of it.

Various explanations of the poetic arrangement of the verses of the Psalm have been proposed. I see it as made up of three stanzas, the first expressing devotion to Yahweh and warning against the cult of the dead (vv. 1–4), the second extolling Yahweh as the psalmist’s source of security and guidance (vv. 5–8), and the third affirming that the psalmist’s relationship with Yahweh extends even beyond death (vv. 9–11). I will give details about the scansion of the various verses under my discussion of the individual stanzas.

My translation is as follows:⁵

- v. 1 A miktam of David
 Guard me, God, for I have taken refuge in you.
- v. 2 I said to Yahweh, “You are my Lord. My good does not lie beyond you.”
- v. 3 (I said) to the holy ones—they who are on earth and are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight—

⁵ In my translations of the Psalms in this dissertation, my goal has been to render the Hebrew as accurately as possible and yet as idiomatically as possible. For instance, with the first word in the body of Ps 16 (**שְׁמַרְנִי**) my aim is to capture all marked features of the word: its meaning (“guard”), its verbal aspect (imperative) and its direct object suffix (“me”). However, in a case like the last phrase in v. 2, (**טוֹבְנִי בְּלֹא־לִקְ**) I have avoided a literalistic translation (“my good is not upon you”). My translation choice (“my good does not lie beyond you”) is an attempt at a more functional equivalent of the phrase and involves more interpretive decisions on my part. In such instances, I will provide evidence in my exegesis to support the choices I have made in my translations of such phrases. In cases that involve text critical issues (e.g., **מִתְכָּה** in v. 2), I will explain the variants, emendations, etc., involved, and my translation will reflect the reading that has the strongest supporting evidence behind it.

- v. 4 “Their pains/idols will increase who run after another (god). I will not pour out their libations of blood, and I will not take their names on my lips.”
- v. 5 Yahweh, my portion and my cup, you lay hold of my lot.
- v. 6 The measuring lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Indeed, my inheritance lies beautiful on me.
- v. 7 I will bless Yahweh who counsels me. Even at night my heart admonishes me.
- v. 8 I have set Yahweh before me always. Since he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
- v. 9 Therefore my mind is glad, and my glory rejoices. Even my flesh will dwell securely.
- v. 10 For you will not abandon me to the grave. You will not allow your pious one to see decay.
- v. 11 You will make known to me a path of life, a satisfying abundance of joys in your presence, pleasures at your right hand forever.

Stanza 1

The scansion of stanza one is so uneven that I will not attempt to put it in chart form here.

The psalmist begins诗ically enough. The first line as laid out in BHS (vv. 1b–2a) is a clear bicolon. Each half contains four stresses, and the thoughts expressed in the two halves are moderately parallel. But vv. 3–4 are so rambling that it is difficult to see any typical poetic parallelism or pattern of stresses. This has led, as we will see in a moment, to the assertion that the text is corrupt or that this section has been altered at some point in the transmission of the text and may betray several layers of editing. I will advocate, mainly on the basis of a lack of Hebrew variants, that the psalmist began in poetic form but very quickly fell out of poetic patterns because he is so passionately expressing his devotion to Yahweh and his people (vv. 2–3) and his extreme aversion to the cult of the dead (v. 4).

The Psalm breathes a spirit of complete devotion to Yahweh and exclusive trust in him.

The tone of exclusive trust is set in the very first half verse. The psalmist pleads with Yahweh to guard him and is bold enough to do so on the basis of the fact that he has taken refuge in him.

The confession of faith חָסִיתִי בְּךָ is extremely common in the Psalter,⁶ but perhaps here it has a special artistic nuance because it is so close in sound to חָסִידֶךָ, which the poet calls himself near the end of the poem (v. 10). The reason he can claim to be a חָסִיד is because he has taken refuge (חָסִיתִי) in Yahweh.

The first word in v. 2 is problematic because the way the Masoretes have pointed it (אַמְרָא) it appears to be the second person feminine singular form of the perfect of אָמַר. Since there is no feminine entity in the context about whom the poet could be speaking, the current reading is probably either a unique feature implemented by the author or the result of an error in transmission. Zenger speculates that the Masoretes pointed it as feminine thinking it refers to Israel as a woman/female servant of God.⁷ The Targum translates pleonastically, “You, my soul, have said.”⁸ But the Septuagint renders it as first person singular,⁹ and other early versions like Jerome’s Psalterium iuxta LXX and the Peshitta seem to follow its lead.¹⁰ Dahood and Rendsburg claim it’s an instance of Phoenician orthography¹¹ since “in Phoenician scribal practice final vowels were not indicated by *matres lectionis*, e.g., 1csg perfect verbs were written

⁶ The phrase and variations of it occur in Pss 2:12; 5:12; 7:2; 11:1; 25:20; 31:2, 20; 34:9, 23; 37:40; 57:2; 64:11; 71:1; 118:8, 9; 141:8; 144:2.

⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 110.

⁸ מלילת אנה נפשי. Stephen A. Kaufman, ed., *Targum Psalms* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union), Psalm 16:2, accessed in Logos Bible Software.

⁹ εἰπα

¹⁰ Liess, *Weg Des Lebens*, 36.

¹¹ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50*, AB 16 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 87; Gary Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 29.

ccct.” Evidence for northern scribal influence in this regard does occasionally surface in the Old Testament. For example, 1 Kgs 8:48, Ezek 16:59, Ps 140:13, Job 42:2 contain examples where a clearly first-person singular perfect verb form occurs without a final *yod* in the *ketiv* while in each case the corresponding *qere* reading contains the *yod*. However, it seems unlikely that either the author or copyists would have followed northern orthography in Ps 16:2 since the normal first person singular form occurs both in v. 1 (חִזְיָה) and in v. 8 (שִׁזְיָה). In addition, first-person professions of allegiance to Yahweh are not infrequent in Davidic Psalms.¹² It seems quite clear, when all things are considered, that the psalmist’s intent here was “I said.”

Gunkel called vv. 2b–4 “eine der schlimmsten Cruces interpretum in den Psalmen.”¹³ One need only glance at the BHS apparatus for these verses to see that there have been many takes on the various phrases, starting with the early versions and culminating in modern emendations. Not only is the Hebrew difficult to understand, but it is almost impossible to discover any poetic scansion in these verses. The rest of the Psalm displays a regular pattern of bicolon, ending with a tricolon in the final verse (11). This has led some exegetes to declare the text of these verses corrupt or to claim it is the result of several layers of reworking of the original text.¹⁴ I will advocate that it is an intact text and that sense can be made of the Hebrew as we have it if we understand that the author is becoming passionate about his profession of Yahweh as the only God and is adamantly rejecting any other source of advice, protection and blessing in the spiritual realm.

¹² E.g., אַמְرָתִי לֵיהּ אֶלְيָאָתָה in Ps 140:7. See also 31:15; 142:6.

¹³ As quoted in Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 33.

¹⁴ Oswald Loretz, “Die postmortale (himmlische) Theoxenie der *npš* ‘Seele, Totenseele’ in ugaritisch-biblischer Sicht nach Psalm 16, 10–11,” *UF* 38 (2006): 454–65; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 172. See Loretz for the various attempts over the past centuries to explain how the text arose and what it means.

First let's consider some of the attempts in both ancient and modern times to make sense of the text. I've translated the first phrase, טוֹבָתִי בֶּל־עַלְיךָ, “My good does not lie beyond you.” The Septuagint has τῶν ἀγαθῶν μου οὐ χρείαν ἔχεις, “you have no need of my good things.” Apparently, the translator understood the phrase as a profession that Yahweh had no need of the author's goodness. Liess¹⁵ says the modern emendation בֶּל־בֶּל עַלְיךָ¹⁶ which she translates “mein Glück ist nicht außer dir,” is based on the readings of the Targum (בר מינך) and “my good is not given except from you”), Psalterium iuxta hebr. (*bene mihi non est sine te*) and Symmachus (ἀγαθόν μοι οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνευ σου). S. R. Driver suggested the emendation טוֹבָתִי בְּלֵה־עַלְיךָ, “my good is completely upon you,” assuming that the ב of בְּלֵה was originally a ב and the ה disappeared in the transmission of the text. Julius Wellhausen suggested a more extensive emendation by connecting the phrase to the first word of the next verse and producing the phrase בְּלֵיעַל כָּל־קָדוֹשִׁים “Nichtsnutzig sind alle Heiligen,” i.e., “worthless are all the holy ones.” After pursuing these and more possibilities in greater depth, Liess comes to the conclusion that there really is no need to make such interpretive moves. She points out that the preposition על has a somewhat rarer, but certainly possible meaning, “über – hinaus.” She advocates translating the phrase “Gutes für mich gibt es nicht über dich hinaus,” or—freer—“Mein Gutes ist nur bei dir.”¹⁷ BDB recommends a similar rendering in English under meaning II. 2., which they say “expresses excess.” They suggest translating the phrase in v. 2b “my welfare is not *beyond* thee, i.e. does not

¹⁵ In this paragraph I simply report the findings of Liess' exhaustive study of the ancient variants and modern emendation suggestions. See her thorough lists of which modern exegetes follow each of these interpretations: Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 38–40.

¹⁶ The second word is the compound preposition בֶּל עַל, “apart from, except, without,” literally “not unto,” with the second masculine singular suffix.

¹⁷ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 40.

lie outside thee.”¹⁸ This may well have been what the early versions were trying to capture idiomatically with their various renderings. As we will see also in the next two verses, there are no variants among the Hebrew manuscripts of vv. 2b–4. The attempts already by the ancient translators to be interpretive with the phrases in this section are, I believe, not the result of a corrupt or edited text but the result of a certain amount of cryptic intent in the author’s language. We will see instances in the remainder of this “crux” which do not seem to be the result of a faulty text. My suggested solution to the problem will be that the author is becoming passionate in his expressions of complete trust in Yahweh and especially in his denunciation of any other source of divine aid in this section. As a result, his diction is not as smooth as in the remainder of the Psalm.

There has been significant discussion in scholarly literature about who the קדושים הם are in v. 3. The four main proposals have been (1) foreign deities, (2) the deified dead, (3) Levitical priests and (4) living worshippers of Yahweh in general. There is significant overlap between referents 1 and 2 since, as we’ve seen in the beliefs of the Levant, there was a continuum between the deceased and deities in the early first millennium. Commentators such as Dahood and Craigie side with meaning 1,¹⁹ while others, such as Spronk, give a more nuanced version of meaning 2.²⁰ He sees the reference to קדושים as witness to a belief that these beings are in the underworld, but whether they are chthonic deities or simply the deceased is in his view difficult to sort out. He sees in the wording evidence of Canaanite conceptions of the afterlife where there was little distinction between the royal dead and lower deities. Milgrom advocates the

¹⁸ BDB, s.v. שׁוֹרֵד.

¹⁹ Dahood, *Psalms I*, 87–88; Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 157.

²⁰ Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1986), 336.

interpretation that the קדושים are clearly deified dead and, as we will see in his interpretation of v. 4, he strongly argues that the practices condemned there are part of the cult of the dead in which the deceased were summoned from the earth and joined the living in a cultic meal.²¹

Kraus advocates interpretation 3, that it is a reference to Levitical priests.²² He reasons that the condemnations voiced in v. 4 would most naturally be spoken by a priest because they were responsible for offering sacrifices and would be insistent on not performing cultic rituals to anyone but Yahweh. The plural form קדושים is indeed attributed with some frequency to the priests and Levites in the Old Testament,²³ but more prevalent is its attribution to the worshipping community in general.²⁴ So the fourth meaning, the traditional interpretation of its usage here, is preferred by Johnston²⁵ and Liess.²⁶ Though the term can be used in the Old Testament for the priests and even for heavenly beings that surround Yahweh,²⁷ in the closest Psalmic context to 16:3 (Ps 34:9–11), קדושים clearly refers to living human beings who fear Yahweh. Note the specific parallels between Ps 16:1–3 and Ps 34:9–11: The man who *takes refuge in Yahweh* is blessed (34:9). Yahweh’s holy ones who fear him *lack nothing* (34:10). They lack no *good thing* (34:11).

Delitzsch adds another enlightening insight to the beginning of v. 3. The ה preposition that precedes קדושים, he says, is coordinate with the one in v. 2 and thus dependent on the verb of

²¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1492.

²² Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 236–37.

²³ E.g., Lev 21:6; 2 Chr 35:2.

²⁴ Lev 19:2; 20:26; Num 15:40; 16:3; Deut 33:3; Ps 34:10.

²⁵ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 171–73.

²⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 138–40.

²⁷ Ps 89:6–8.

speaking in v. 2 (**תְּמַנָּךְ**).²⁸ Many translations today render it with something like “as for,”²⁹ but it would be more natural to take it the same way as the one that immediately precedes it. That’s the way I have rendered it in my translation, and I believe it makes a significant impact on how one interprets the overall section (vv. 2b–4). Let me elucidate by laying out the section like this:

<u>address</u>	<u>addressee</u>	<u>Statement</u>
v. 2. I said	to Yahweh,	“You are my Lord. My good does not lie beyond you.”
v. 3. (I said)	to the holy ones—they who are on earth and are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight—	
v. 4		“Their pains/idols will increase who run after another (god). I will not pour out their libations of blood, and I will not take their names on my lips.”

Those who understand the **תְּמַנָּךְ** to be spirit beings—gods or the deceased—tend to take **צְדֻקָּה** in the relative clause as a reference to the underworld.³⁰ The Ugaritic equivalent of the word (*ars*) does indeed often refer to the underworld,³¹ and scholars who are zealous to find parallels to biblical words and phrases in other ancient Near Eastern cultures are quick to point to this as support for their interpretation.³² But as Liess argues cogently, in those instances where **צְדֻקָּה** is used in the Old Testament to indicate the place of the dead, it always has a modifying word or phrase to indicate this, for instance, **נִשְׁיָה צְדֻקָּה** (“land of oblivion,” Ps 88:13).³³ Since no

²⁸ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 135, 138.

²⁹ E.g., ESV, CSB, RSV.

³⁰ E.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1778; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 336.

³¹ Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, *Dictionary of Ugaritic*, 102–4; Hays, *Covenant with Death*, 127.

³² E.g., Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 336.

³³ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 141–42; see also Ezek 31:14, 16, 18; Job 10:21.

such indicator is attached to **גּוֹשִׁים** in Ps 16:3, there is nothing in the context to indicate that “underworld” is intended here. The same could be said for **קְדוּשִׁים** at the beginning of the verse. The verse contains no cues that it is referring to anyone but living people in the physical world. Questions are sometimes raised about the seemingly unusual phrasing in the relative clause **אֲשֶׁר-**
בָּאָרֶץ הַמֹּה with its prepositional phrase up front and the pronoun at the end. But Liess points out that it is not unusual for a pronoun to be at the end of such a clause.³⁴ **בָּאָרֶץ** appears to be at the beginning of the clause for emphasis—to stress that these holy ones are on earth/in the land. The pronoun at the end of the clause is not superfluous but points back to “the holy ones.” I have tried to capture this in my translation, “to the holy ones—they who are on earth.”

It seems most natural to take the remainder of v. 3 as part of the relative clause. The uniqueness of the construction **וְאַתֶּן יְהִי כָּל־חֶפְצֵיכֶם** has led to a number of emendations in the half verse. Most of them seem to be prompted by the Septuagint, which translates the entire verse: τοῖς ἀγίοις τοῖς ἐν τῇ γῇ αὐτοῦ ἐθαυμάστωσεν πάντα τὰ θελήματα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτοῖς.³⁵ The translation does not reflect the 1 of MT and reflects **וְאַתֶּן** as a transitive verb. It’s clear that the translator interpreted Yahweh as the subject of the sentence and has added the possessive pronoun to **τῇ γῇ** and **τὰ θελήματα** so that the Septuagint reading could be rendered, “For the saints who are in his land, he has made glorious all his desires in them.” This is no doubt why BHS suggests the emendations **חֶפְצֵךְ** and **וְאַתֶּן** for **וְאַתֶּן יְהִי** or **קְדוּשִׁים** for **חֶפְצֵיכֶם**.

However, Liess points out that 4QCatena^a, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, supports the

³⁴ Compare Gen 7:2; 17:12; Num 17:5; Deut 17:15; 20:15; 1 Kgs 9:20; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 43.

³⁵ Rahlf, *Septuagint*, 2:12.

Masoretic reading, especially the *yods* at the ends of אֱלֹהִים and חָפְצִי.³⁶ As a result, she recommends sticking with MT.³⁷ The uniqueness of a construct noun governing a nominal sentence, such as the Masoretic reading reflects, is not an impossibility in Hebrew grammar.³⁸ So it is perfectly permissible to take אֱלֹהִים as an additional descriptor of קָדוֹשִׁים within the relative clause and translate the half verse as I have, “and are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight.” Furthermore, when the adjective אֱלֹהִים occurs as a substantive in the plural, it virtually always refers to noble human beings.³⁹ In the singular it occasionally refers to a divinity,⁴⁰ but in the plural virtually never.⁴¹

To recap v. 3 then, the evidence supports the interpretation that the singer is addressing living, human saints. The נ at the beginning of the verse is parallel to the one in v. 2 and governed by the verb of speaking there. In the relative clause, the psalmist is specifying that these holy ones are in the land or on the earth, i.e. that they are in this life. In the second half of the verse he specifies that they are the ones he considers majestic or noble, and all his delight is in them. From what we learned in Chapters One and Two, his wording may well reflect a mindset that is opposed to putting confidence in deceased “holy ones.” The author is becoming verbose in this part of the poem as he clarifies who he means by the holy ones. He seems to be growing passionate as he is about to denounce any associations with the cult of the dead. As will

³⁶ The line in 4QCatena^a reads: לְקָדוֹשִׁים אֲשֶׁר [בָּא] רַץ הָ[מָה וְאָדִי] רֵ[י] כֹּל חָפְצִי בָּם.

³⁷ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 71.

³⁸ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. Emil Kautzsch, trans. Arthur E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), § 130d; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005), § 129p; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), § 9.3a and 9.6.

³⁹ E.g., Judg 5:13, 25; Nah 2:6; 3:18; Jer 14:3; 25:34, 35, 36; Zech 11:2; 2 Chr 23:20; Neh 3:5; 10:30.

⁴⁰ E.g., Isa 10:34; 33:21.

⁴¹ The one exception is 1 Sam 4:8, where the Philistines attribute it to their gods.

become clear in v. 4, he wants to warn the living saints not to participate in practices of the cult. In this way vv. 3–4 serve as an integral part of the poet’s theme—that Yahweh is to be the sole source of protection and blessing in this life and beyond.

The quotation of what the psalmist is telling the holy ones then, in my reading of the Psalm, begins with v. 4. And it starts with a pun. **עַזְבוֹתָם** is from **עַזְבָּת**, which BDB defines as “hurt, injury, pain,”⁴² but it sounds as if it could be from **בָּצָבָעַ**,⁴³ one of numerous words in Hebrew for “idol.” The latter is masculine, and the plural ending with suffix, if the author had intended that, would be **מִצְבָּעָם**. So the sentence definitely begins with “their pains will increase,” but the psalmist probably wants the reader/singer of the Psalm to also think, “Their idols/gods will increase . . .”⁴⁴ Liess shows how the early versions are evenly split between these two translation options.⁴⁵ She believes “pains” fits the overall context of vv. 2–4 better because it contrasts with the “good” mentioned in v. 2 but thinks that the early versions that went with “idols” did so because of what is said in the remainder of v. 4.⁴⁶

The next pair of words (**מֵהֶרְךָ**) are also responsible for vv. 2b–4 being labeled a crux. The first question that springs to mind is, “Who is the ‘other’ (**מֵהֶרְךָ**)?” Most commentators⁴⁷ and translations⁴⁸ today take it as referring to another god/gods, no doubt because of what the

⁴² BDB, s.v. **מֵצָבָע**.

⁴³ BDB, s.v. **בָּצָבָע**.

⁴⁴ Paul R. Raabe, “Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 218.

⁴⁵ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 52. The early versions that render the word with something like “pains” are the Septuagint, the Psalterium iuxta LXX, the Syriac, Aquila, and Symmachus. Those that interpret it as “idols” are the Psalterium iuxta hebr., the Targum, Theodotion and the fifth column of Origen’s Hexapla.

⁴⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 53.

⁴⁷ E.g., Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 220; deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 177, 179–80; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 109, 111.

⁴⁸ E.g., NIV, ESV, CSB, NASB.

psalmist says in the rest of the verse about not pouring out “their” libations or taking “their” names on his lips. Perhaps the reason that the entity/entities are left so unspecified is because of what the psalmist says at the end of the verse: he will not take their names on his lips. He appears to be so averse to doing so that he does not even add a substantive like **אֶל**, so as to avoid affirming that such an entity is divine. In v. 1 he has addressed Yahweh as **אֶל**, and in v. 2 he has named Yahweh as his Lord and declared that he has no source of good except him. Again the emendations in BHS betray modern attempts to lessen the crypticness and choppiness⁴⁹ of this section of the Psalm. The first suggested emendation (**אֶחָרִים יִרְאֵי**) is no doubt an attempt to make **אֶחָר** plural so that it agrees with the plural suffixes later in the verse. This impulse is natural since the plural **אֶלְهִים אֶחָרִים** is a frequent combination in prohibitions against foreign gods in the Old Testament⁵⁰ and the **וּ** at the beginning of the following word is an attractive piece of evidence to point to if one wants to defend the reading **אֶחָרִים**. But once again, no variants are found in the Hebrew manuscripts. And the danger of emendation is that it tends to adjust the text in the direction of the exegete’s interpretation, whereas interpretation should be determined on the basis of the text. Emending this text in order to make **אֶחָר** plural is unnecessary since Hebrew poetry often changes person and number with little warning. Exodus 34:14 in its strong warning against idolatry has the singular **אֶל אֶחָר**. And in Isa 42:8 and 48:11 Yahweh voices his vehement opposition to idolatry by saying he will not yield his glory to “another” (**אֶחָר**) without dignifying it with a stated **אֶל** or **אֶלְהִים**.

⁴⁹ Note the lack of a connective between the first two-word phrase of the verse (**רַבּוּ שְׁעָבוֹתֶם**) and the second two-word phrase (**אֶחָרִים וְאֶתְנָרִים**).

⁵⁰ BDB, s.v. **אֶחָר**, counts this combination 63 times in the Old Testament.

There has been an equal amount of puzzling over the verb in this phrase (וְנִרְאֶה). Another emendation suggested in BHS for the phrase is א' הָמִירָה based on Jer 2:11, הַיּוֹם גָּוֵי אֱלֹהִים, “Has a nation changed gods?” If one were to follow this emendation, it would lead to a different point than can be defended on the basis of the transmission of the Hebrew text. No doubt part of the reason for skepticism about MT here is that the verb is pointed as a *qal* form whereas the most common verb by far with the root letters מְהֻרָּה is the one that means “hasten,” which occurs only in the *piel* (predominantly) and the *niphal*.⁵¹ The early versions consistently translated the occurrence here as “hasten.”⁵² However, the lexicons identify the instance here as a denominative verb from the noun מְהֻרָּה, the price paid for acquiring a wife.⁵³ Such a verb does occur, as evidenced clearly in Exod 22:15. There it is speaking about a man acquiring a wife by the payment of a bride-price. The problem with identifying the term in this sense here in Ps 16 is that when the Old Testament speaks of Yahweh’s relationship with his people in terms of husband and wife, it is Yahweh who is consistently portrayed in the husband’s role and his people in the wife’s role.⁵⁴ Likewise, Old Testament metaphors for Israel seeking other gods such as “whoring after” reflect the analogous roles. It is always the people who “whore after” other gods and are thus portrayed in the role of the female.⁵⁵ They do not woo or acquire other gods the way men do wives. As a result, I have compromised and translated the phrase with the less descript “run after another (god).” However, a case could be made for rendering it in a way that reflects more

⁵¹ BDB, s.v. מְהֻרָּה.

⁵² See Liess’ overview of this, *Weg des Lebens*, 56.

⁵³ BDB, s.v. מְהֻרָּה; HALOT, 554; DCH, 167.

⁵⁴ E.g., Isa 54:5; Jer 3:14; 31:32.

⁵⁵ E.g., Exod 34:15–16; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17.

explicitly the pursuit of a spouse. Liess translates it “umwerben” (“court, woo, solicit”).⁵⁶

While the psalmist warns about the dangers of pursuing another god in the first four words of v. 4, he turns to himself as an example of avoiding such danger in the rest of the verse. He insists first of all that he will not pour out their libations of blood (בְּלֹא פִּיכַד נָסְכִי הָמִם מִקְרָם). While the sprinkling and pouring of blood was quite common in prescribed Israelite sacrifices,⁵⁷ such ritual actions are never designated with the term “libation” (נָסֵךְ). When actual libations to Yahweh are prescribed and the liquid for them is specified, it is normally wine.⁵⁸ When the noun is combined with the cognate verb נָסַךְ, it is usually describing illicit sacrifices to other gods.⁵⁹ And the noun is never used in connection with the word “blood” except here in Ps 16:4. So exegetes have puzzled over what exactly it’s describing. Zenger⁶⁰ makes such unlikely suggestions as that these libations were performed by violent people who had blood on their hands⁶¹ or that they were done in connection with child sacrifice.⁶² Almost a century before him Briggs had interpreted it similarly claiming the מִן in front of נָסֵךְ was causal since it never designates material when the substance is blood.⁶³ This of course overlooks the fact that bloodshed due to violence is usually expressed with the plural נָסִים.⁶⁴ In my translation I have

⁵⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 57.

⁵⁷ Exod 29:16, 20; Lev 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, 13; 7:2; 8:19, 24; 9:12, 18; 17:6; Num 18:17.

⁵⁸ Exod 29:40; Lev 23:13; Num 15:5, 7.

⁵⁹ Jer 7:18; 19:13; 32:29; 44:17, 18, 19, 25; Ezek 20:28.

⁶⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 111.

⁶¹ He adduces Isa 1:15 and Ps 50:13 in support.

⁶² Here he adduces Isa 57:5–6 and Ps 106:37–38.

⁶³ He translates “I will not offer their drink offerings, because of bloodshed.” Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 1:117, 125.

⁶⁴ BDB, s.v. נָסֵךְ.

chosen to interpret the phrase נָסְכִי לְבַד מֵאֶת “their libations of blood,” taking the מֵאֶת as designating the liquid used in the libation. Part of my reason for doing so is because I know of no other way that Hebrew could express the idea “their libations of blood” than with the phraseology found here. If the author had placed the two nouns in a construct relationship and attached the pronominal suffix to the word לְבַד (מֵאֶת נָסְכִי), he would have been indicating that these people were pouring out their own blood as a libation. If, as I describe in the next paragraph, the reference is to pouring out the blood of slaughtered animals, I know of no way in Hebrew that one could express it except as it stands here in the text. I have come across no exegete who has analyzed this pair of words from that angle. It is also intriguing that the word לְבַד can mean “molten image,” so that here too we may have a play on words.⁶⁵

The phrase certainly is unique in the Old Testament. Nowhere else does it speak of the offering of libations composed of blood. In addition, Liess, whose study of these verses is exhaustive, shows that references to libations of blood in other ancient Near Eastern literature are rare.⁶⁶ So the most likely explanation of what the phrase is referring to is Milgrom’s identification of it as a reference to the practice of “eating over the blood,”⁶⁷ which we looked at in chapter 2. His conclusions about how this phrase describes a necromantic meal in which the dead were summoned for counsel in Lev 19:26a make it much more cohesive with 19:26b, “and do not practice divination or seek omens.” His identification of 1 Sam 14:31–35, where Saul’s men slaughtered animals and ate over the blood in an apparent attempt to receive necromantic counsel is a likely example of this ritual. Here the author of Ps 16 appears to be insisting that he

⁶⁵ BDB, s.v. לְבַד. Isa 48:5 uses both לְבַד and בָּזָב for “idol.”

⁶⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 149.

⁶⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1777–78.

will not participate in such a ritual after making his pledge of undivided allegiance to Yahweh. The fact that his very next statement is that he will not take the names of certain entities on his lips also seems to support this interpretation. As we saw in Chapter One, the invocation of the dead and offerings made to them went hand in hand in cult of the dead practices.

I agree with Milgrom's identification of Ps 16:4 as a reference to the cult of the dead. Where I disagree with him and others⁶⁸ is on identifying v. 3 as a reference to the cult. As I argue above, the word קָדְשֵׁי is not likely to refer to the dead, and the word יְהִוָּה is certainly not referring to the underworld. On the other hand, the refusal of this firm Yahwist in v. 4 to participate in a blood ritual that is coupled with the invocation of what appears to be spirit entities (more on this in a moment) fits with what we know about the cult of the dead in the Levant in the early first millennium.

The final renunciation of the author, “and I will not take their names on my lips,” contains echoes of three prohibitions against taking the names of other gods on one’s lips. In the first one, Exod 23:13, Yahweh commands, “Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.” In the second, Deut 18:20, he declares, “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.” Finally, in Hos 2:19 Yahweh speaks to Israel as his bride and foretells, “I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked.” An interesting verbal link between the Exodus and Hosea passages and Mesopotamian documents that reference the invocation of the dead is that the words for “invoke” (יֹאמֶר) and “name” (וְשַׁם) are etymologically related to the Akkadian phrase for “invocation of the dead”

⁶⁸ E.g., Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 336–37.

(*šuma zakāru*).⁶⁹ In Chapter Two we saw how vital the invocation was in the cult. The similarity in phraseology that the three Old Testament prohibitions share with Ps 16:4b is no doubt why most exegetes today see the unnamed entity/entities in v. 4 as referring to other gods. However, because of the blurred distinction between gods and deceased ancestors in early first millennium Levant, which we also saw in Chapter Two, more and more exegetes are interpreting v. 4 as a reference to the cult of the dead.⁷⁰

To sum up our conclusions about this first stanza of Ps 16, the psalmist implores Yahweh for protection (v. 1). He makes his plea on the basis of the fact that he takes exclusive refuge in Yahweh. He confesses that any good that he has comes only from Yahweh (v. 2). But he also addresses the holy ones who are in the land. He adds the relative clause to clarify that he is speaking to Yahweh's saints who are in the land of the living, and he expresses their noble character in his eyes (v. 3). My reading of v. 3 is that the psalmist is becoming quite wordy in this section because he is passionate regarding the point he is about to make. As in the Psalms in general, he is focused on the worship of Yahweh by living believers. His urgent warning to them to avoid the practices of the cult of the dead (v. 4) is intended to guard against false notions about the afterlife, especially rituals that supposedly give living worshippers access to the guidance of the dead. He warns that the pains—and parasonantly the idols—of those who run after other gods will increase. He does not call these entities “gods.” He merely speaks of them as “another.” He is adamant that he will not perform the blood rituals that supposedly lure these entities from the spirit world. And he will not take their names on his lips—will not even dignify them by using any of the Hebrew terms for “god.” In this way he avoids the very danger he is

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 32.

⁷⁰ For lists of exegetes in recent decades who have seen this section as a reference to the cult of the dead, see Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 147–48, and Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1777.

warning his hearers away from, albeit in a rather verbose, cryptic manner.

Stanza 2

Stanza 2 of the Psalm, in my reading of it, resumes the regular scansion that the psalmist began with, but that he abandoned so quickly as he grew passionate in his plea for exclusive devotion to Yahweh. The first poetic line of the Psalm (vv. 1b and 2a) appears to be a bicolon, each half of which contains nine syllables and four stresses, according to the Masoretes. In vv. 5–8, which in my reading of the Psalm form stanza 2, the scansion is as follows:

<u>verse</u>	<u>stresses</u>
5	3+3
6	3+3
7	4+3
8	4+3

Here the poet is leaving behind the disturbing thought of anyone—especially himself—participating in the cult of the dead. And he returns to contemplating the bliss that can come from only one person—Yahweh. He begins the stanza with the tetragrammaton, and he will repeat it twice (vv. 7 and 8) in the stanza. Note that not only does the psalmist begin the stanza with the name of Yahweh, but it comes immediately after he says that he will not take the other spiritual entities' names on his lips. This speaks for the integrity of vv. 3–4 within the overall Psalm, rather than viewing them as a later insertion.

What is striking in vv. 5–6 is the plethora of terms associated with the distribution of the land (**בְּנֵה, חֶבְלִים, גָּזָר, חַלְקָה**) at the time of the conquest of Canaan. Here are some examples of how these terms occur in the narrative accounts of the apportionment of the land: Josh 14:4 reports that the Levites were not given a **חַלְקָה** (“portion”) in the land. In Josh 15:13 Joshua gives

Caleb a קָלַק in Judah. In Num 26:55–56 the land is to be divided (*niphal* of קָלַק) by גּוֹרֵל (“lot”).

Through the casting of the גּוֹרֵל,⁷¹ each tribe will be apportioned his נְחִלָה (“property, inheritance”). Numbers 18:21 says the נְחִלָה of the Levites consists of the tithes. According to Deut 4:21 God is giving Israel this good land as a נְחִלָה. Joshua 13:23 summarizes the extent of the נְחִלָה of the tribe of Reuben. And finally, Josh 17:5 describes where the “measuring lines fell” for Manasseh (הַמְנֻשָה תַבְלִי־וַיַּפְלוּ, the same subject-verb combination as in Ps 16:6). It’s clear that the composer of Psalm 16 wants these associations to come to the minds of worshippers who sing this Psalm.

Of course, the psalmist is using these terms in a metaphorical sense. Yahweh, not a piece of land, is his portion and his possession. Because this language is so close to the way the Hexateuch speaks of the Levites’ inheritance in the land, Kraus believes the Psalm to have been written by a Levite and intended for singing by the Levites.⁷² He points out how Num 18:20, Deut 10:9 and Josh 13:14 assure the priest and Levite that Yahweh is their קָלַק and their נְחִלָה. But the additional feature of the “cup” (כֹּסֶף) would seem to indicate that the author has in mind not just the Levite’s physical portion, i.e. temple service and the tithe, but rather the singer’s “lot” in the sense of “well-being” or “destiny.” Psalm 11:6 uses the phrase מִנְתַּח כֹּסֶף (“the portion of their cup”),⁷³ to describe the consequences that Yahweh will visit upon the wicked because of their violence against the faithful. It is used to describe the outcome for the wicked

⁷¹ The Hebrew of this phrase is vivid: עַל־פִי הַגּוֹרֵל, “upon the mouth of the lot.” Whatever the lot “said” determined how the land would be divided.

⁷² Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 238.

⁷³ Note the similarity of this phrase to what is stated in Ps 16:5, מִנְתַּח־קָלַק וְכֹסֶף.

elsewhere in the Psalter⁷⁴ as well as in the prophets.⁷⁵ However, when applied to the faithful it describes abundant blessings⁷⁶ and salvation.⁷⁷ This seems to indicate that in the language of the Psalter כָּס has more the nuance of “ultimate well-being” or “spiritual destiny,” rather than “physical circumstances.” So, although these two verses allude to the situation of the Levites, they do not seem to restrict the application only to them. The wording is broad enough to be applicable to all temple worshippers.

Yet it is interesting to see that the psalmist is couching his point in physical terms. Just as he focused on the saints on earth/in the land in v. 3, so he is focused on things as tangible as possessions, cups, lots that are cast, and measuring lines for marking out property. Poetry is effective when it has vivid imagery—tangible, visible things that capture the imagination of readers and singers. The psalmist’s point is that Yahweh has made the lot of his תְּמִימָן secure and pleasant. One of the few text critical issues in this stanza concerns the word תְּמִימָן in v. 5. Though the Masoretic pointing seems to indicate that it is a second masculine singular imperfect form of a verb תְּמִימָן in the *hiphil*, no such Hebrew verb has yet been identified.⁷⁸ Since the Septuagint renders it with a participle (ἀποκαθιστῶν), the most likely explanation is that it is a *qal* participle of the verb תְּמִימָן (“grasp, lay hold of”)⁷⁹ in an unusual doubly *plene* spelling.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁴ Ps 75:9.

⁷⁵ E.g., Isa 51:17, 22.

⁷⁶ Ps 23:5.

⁷⁷ Ps 116:13.

⁷⁸ GKC § 50e; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 61.

⁷⁹ BDB, s.v. תְּמִימָן.

⁸⁰ תְּמִימָן. The participial form תְּמִימָן, with one *mater* (י), is attested in Amos 1:5, 8. In Ps 16, note that the form קְדוֹשָׁים is *plene* in v. 3.

psalmist is expressing his confidence that, as Yahweh controls the outcome when lots are cast,⁸¹ so he controls the believer's entire well-being and destiny.

After extolling the delightful and beautiful lot that Yahweh has established for him (v. 6), the psalmist responds to Yahweh by blessing him (v. 7a). In the relative clause attached to the tetragrammaton here, he highlights how Yahweh counsels him. Since a goal of the cult of the dead was to obtain advice from them, it's significant that the psalmist mentions this role for Yahweh—and only for Yahweh. The second half of v. 7 seems to spotlight an important dimension of this counsel, that it occurs even at night. Joüon-Muraoka labels the plural לילות a plural of composition, an expression indicating the various parts that a night is composed of.⁸² As we have seen in our survey of the cult of the dead in both Mesopotamia and Egypt as well as in the biblical account of Saul and the medium of Endor, nighttime was believed to be the time for consulting the dead in the ancient Near East. So it is unlikely that the psalmist would specify the hours of the night here by accident.

What's worth exploring in more detail is the connection between the two halves of v. 7—how Yahweh's counseling of the psalmist is related to his “kidneys admonishing him at night.” In Hebrew thought, the kidneys (קֶלְיוֹת) are typically the seat of the emotions.⁸³ Grief and pain are often pictured in poetry as the kidneys being pierced.⁸⁴ They are frequently paired with the heart (לב), which the Hebrews thought of as the intellect, and Yahweh is often said to test this pair of intellect and emotions.⁸⁵ But scholars have pointed out that the Hebrews also thought of

⁸¹ Prov 16:33.

⁸² Joüon, 136b.

⁸³ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 65.

⁸⁴ Ps 73:21; Job 16:13; Lam 3:13.

⁸⁵ Pss 7:9; 26:2; Jer 11:20; 17:10; 20:12.

the kidneys as the seat of the conscience.⁸⁶ The kidneys of the righteous interface with Yahweh and chime in with his just decrees.⁸⁷ The wicked’s kidneys on the other hand, though they may talk as if they are close to Yahweh, are far from him, that is, they are not in tune with him.⁸⁸ The kidneys play an important role in the relationship of the righteous to Yahweh. They are the first thing the psalmist mentions Yahweh creating in the poignant description of his formation in the womb in Ps 139:13–16. The righteous perceive their intimate relationship with Yahweh through the kidneys in Hebrew thought, and it is this moral voice through which he counsels them.

Again we find interesting parallel expressions and beliefs in other ancient near Eastern cultures. Ugaritic has a parallel phrase to “my kidneys admonish me,” which employs a cognate verb, *ywsrnn ggnh*.⁸⁹ Spronk translates it, “his gullet instructed him.”⁹⁰ In Chapter One we looked at the Egyptian practice of spending the night in tombs and soliciting dreams from the deceased as a way of getting messages from them. Such ancient Near Eastern beliefs seem to underlie the forbidden practice of spending the night among the graves keeping secret vigil in Isa 65:4. Eliphaz may also reflect this belief in his eerie description of a spirit coming to him at night whispering a message to him as he lies in bed in Job 4:12–21. His visceral description of his bones trembling and his hair standing on end sounds like a reaction of his קליות to a voice from beyond. For the author of Ps 16, Yahweh is the only one who counsels him—even at night.

BHS points out a variant to the verb יָקַרְנִי. In two Hebrew manuscripts the verb is singular

⁸⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 198; Wolff, *Anthropology*, 65–66.

⁸⁷ Prov 23:16 says literally, “My kidneys will rejoice when your lips speak what is right.”

⁸⁸ Jer 12:2.

⁸⁹ KTU 1.16 IV 26. “The Kirta Epic,” transl. Dennis Pardee, *COS* 1:342. Pardee translates the phrase, “his inner self instructed him.”

⁹⁰ Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 334–35.

(יִסְרָאֵל). Depending on how it is pointed, the form could be either *piel* perfect (יִפְרַגֵּי, “he has admonished me”), as it is in Ps 118:18, or it could be *piel* imperative (יִפְרַגְנִי, “admonish me!”), as it is in Jer 10:24. In either case, Yahweh would be the subject, making the second half of the verse more parallel to the first. Since the verb in the first half of the verse is perfect (יִצְצַחֲנִי), the option of the perfect here in the second half of the verse is attractive. Though this leaves בְּלִיּוֹתִי without a grammatical role in the second half of the verse, in Hebrew poetry prepositions are often omitted. The half verse could then be translated idiomatically, “Even at night he has admonished me in my heart.” Since the second half of a line of Hebrew poetry often brings specificity or intensity to what was stated in the first half, this would bring even more focus to Yahweh as the psalmist’s counselor. The specificity of Yahweh admonishing the psalmist at night, then, might be added in a tacitly exclusionary way—implying that Yahweh is his only counselor, even at the time that others seek alternate counselors from the spirit world. Though this is only a possibility, I bring it up as a potential interpretation of the line because to my knowledge this has not been considered before. If my supposition is correct, it adds another piece of evidence to the theory that overall the Psalm is advocating Yahweh as the only source of blessing, security and advice rather than the multiplicity of such sources advocated in the cult of the dead.

The exclusivity of the psalmist’s focus on Yahweh is reinforced in the first half of v. 8, “I have set Yahweh before me always.” Location-wise Yahweh is directly in front of him. Time-wise Yahweh is *always* in front of him. The wording of the second half of the verse is compressed, קַיְמִינִי בְּלִאָמֹת. A literal translation would be “for from my right hand I will not be shaken.” However, practically all interpreters take it as two clauses. The Masoretes place a

rebia mugraš, a rather strong disjunctive accent, over יְמִימָנֶם, setting the first two words apart from the last two. BHS suggests inserting the word אֵיתָ here. The Septuagint does something similar, making the first two words a separate clause, ὅτι ἐκ δεξιῶν μού ἔστιν, “because he is at my right.” We will have more to say about what it means that Yahweh is at the psalmist’s right hand when we study Ps 73:23.

“I will not be shaken,” the second clause in v. 8b, is a common phrase in the Psalter. It is often spoken by or about the righteous and occasionally by the unrighteous in arrogance.⁹¹ Another commonplace in the Psalter is the assertion that with Yahweh’s aid the world and Mount Zion will not be shaken.⁹² This phrase also creates an interesting link between Pss 15 and 16 that gives insight to the collation of the Psalms. Psalm 15 begins with a question about who can dwell on Yahweh’s holy mountain. The psalmist then enumerates a list of impeccable character traits that such a person must possess. And finally, the Psalm concludes with the statement, “Whoever does these things will never be shaken.” No doubt the collator follows this Psalm up with 16 as a further statement of what it takes to never be shaken. Because Yahweh is at his right hand the singer of Ps 16 will never be shaken. For this reason and others, Christians have since the time of Pentecost interpreted Psalm 16 as messianic.⁹³ More on this later.

In summary, the psalmist returns his exclusive focus to Yahweh in stanza 2. Using vocabulary from the conquest narratives, he turns Israel’s possession of the land into a metaphor to describe Yahweh as his prized “possession.” Yahweh is his inheritance, his cup of destiny, and the one who controls what happens when his lot is cast (v. 5). Yahweh has made his situation

⁹¹ Pss 10:6; 15:5; 16:8; 21:8; 30:7; 62:3, 7; 112:6.

⁹² Pss 46:6; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; 125:1.

⁹³ Acts 2:25–31.

delightful and beautiful (v. 6). Therefore he blesses Yahweh, who alone counsels him—even at night, when practitioners of the cult of the dead seek guidance from them (v. 7). He has made Yahweh his sole focus, a place Yahweh will hold forever. Since Yahweh is at his right hand, he will never be shaken (v. 8).

Stanza 3

Like stanza 2, the final stanza of the Psalm displays good poetic scansion. The first two lines are bicolon, and the final line is a tricolon, perhaps lengthened to signal the poem's conclusion.

<u>Verse</u>	<u>stresses</u>
9	5+3
10	4+4
11	3+3+3

The stanza begins with “therefore” (**ונִכְרָת**). The psalmist is drawing a conclusion on the basis of everything he has said about Yahweh being his all. Everything he has said in vv. 3–8, with the exception of v. 5b, has been either in the third or first person. Now in stanza 3 he returns to addressing Yahweh in second person (vv. 10–11) as he had begun in stanza 1 (vv. 1–2). But first he must state his response to what Yahweh is for him (v. 9): “Therefore my mind is glad, and my glory rejoices.”

לֶב, as mentioned earlier, is better translated “mind” than “heart,” since the Hebrews saw it as the seat of the intellect. The noun that it is paired with in v. 9a requires more discussion. The history of the transmission of the text shows variants here, probably because copyists and translators were uncomfortable with the psalmist having his own **כָּבוֹד** (“glory”), a characteristic

so often attributed to Yahweh. Several Hebrew manuscripts have כְּבָדִי, which leads BHS to suggest the vowels כְּבָדַי, “my liver.” Those who rely heavily on etymologically related words in Ugaritic to define Hebrew words point out that the Ugaritic words *lb* (“heart”) and *kbd* (“liver”) sometimes occur as poetic partners in contexts of rejoicing, and so they advocate translating “liver” because of the role of internal organs in expressing emotions in Northwest Semitic cultures.⁹⁴ Liess points out that most of the early versions render the word with their equivalent of “glory,” except the Septuagint, which has ἡ γλῶσσά μου.⁹⁵ She theorizes that the Septuagint translator made this interpretive move because of the frequent references to how joy is expressed in Psalms through the mouth (63:6; 109:30), the tongue (51:16; 126:2) and the lips (71:23; 119:171).⁹⁶ She points out that the Septuagint normally translates the word כְּבָדֶל with δόξα. Several more pages could be written on the various interpretations that have been suggested for this word over the centuries, but again there seems to be no compelling reason to depart from MT. The same word (כְּבָדֶל), pointed the same way and with the same meaning, occurs in MT of Pss 7:6; 30:13; 57:9 and 108:2. Perhaps the most that can be said about its meaning in these contexts is that it’s referring to the nonphysical aspect of a person. All of these instances except Ps 7:6 are in contexts where the psalmist is expressing his wholehearted praise of Yahweh. John McKay has probably captured it best when he wrote that the psalmist’s כְּבָדֶל is “something like a faculty of joyous praise that is God-given and is exercised in reaction to God’s vivifying and glorifying activity.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Dahood, *Psalms I*, XXXIII, 90; Loretz, “Die postmortale Theoxenie,” 459.

⁹⁵ The one early version that follows the Septuagint is Jerome’s *Psalterium iuxta LXX (lingua mea)*.

⁹⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 66–67.

⁹⁷ John W. McKay, “My Glory—A Mantle of Praise,” *SJT* 31 (1978): 172.

One intriguing aspect of v. 9a is that, although it is only a half verse, it contains two quick parallel statements, a parallelism within a parallelism, so to speak. This seems to quicken the pace of the song—or perhaps better stated—quicken the heartbeat of the singer as his song nears its climax.

The second half of the verse provides a parallel that is distinctly physical: “Even my flesh will dwell securely.” Over the past century the traditional Christian interpretation of vv. 9–11 as referring to the physical resurrection has been the subject of intense skepticism. Leading exegetes have called Peter’s interpretation of these verses at Pentecost (Acts 2:25–31) as a prophecy of Christ’s resurrection a *reinterpretation* of the Psalm verses, not something originally intended by them.⁹⁸ The form critics of the early 20th century, such as Hermann Gunkel, insisted that the idea of an afterlife in a Psalm like 16 was a foreign concept later imposed on it and that Ps 16 spoke only of God rescuing the psalmist from current mortal danger.⁹⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel wrote,

Since the thanksgiving psalm praises Yahweh for having already pulled the unfortunate person out of Sheol, it is evidently no question here of salvation into another life after death, but of deliverance from imminent danger of death into health and happiness and freedom on this earth.¹⁰⁰

Expressions like those in Pss 16.10; 17.15; 49.16; 73.23ff. must be understood against this background. Here also the intention is to express assurance that Yahweh will never fail his pious ones, but will save them from mortal peril and deliver them from an evil and sudden death—till they die, some time, ‘old and full of days.’¹⁰¹

The form critics saw in Ps 16 features of lament and thanksgiving Psalms, the former which plead with Yahweh for rescue from mortal danger and the latter which, after describing

⁹⁸ E.g., John Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, vol. 1 of *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 233–34.

⁹⁹ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 132, 214.

¹⁰⁰ Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1:240.

¹⁰¹ Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1:241.

such rescue, thank Yahweh for it. In their attempts to associate 16 with these genres, they claimed that its author was asking Yahweh for protection from mortal danger and thus was not expressing faith in life after death.¹⁰² Twentieth century commentators followed this line of interpretation and assumed that the author of Psalm 16 was facing imminent death.¹⁰³ Kraus pointed to the psalmist's plea for protection in v. 1 as evidence that his life was in danger.¹⁰⁴ But recent commentators have been more skeptical about whether the psalmist was facing mortal danger when he wrote the Psalm.¹⁰⁵ Other psalms that plead for protection with terms like שָׁמַרְנִי specify what danger they desire Yahweh to rescue them from.¹⁰⁶ There is no mention of violent enemies, serious illness, or impending death in Ps 16. As a result, though the Psalm shows features of what the form critics called lament and thanksgiving Psalms, the term that is sometimes settled on for this one is a Psalm of trust.¹⁰⁷ Liess points out how even the particles sprinkled throughout the psalm reflect a spirit of calm confidence.¹⁰⁸ The נָא at the beginning of v. 9b is an example: "Even my flesh will dwell securely." The same particle appears at the beginning of vv. 6b and 7b, where the psalmist is also confidently augmenting his point.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Christoph Barth, *Die Errettung Vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag A. G. Zollikon, 1947), 154–55.

¹⁰³ E.g., Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 158.

¹⁰⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 240.

¹⁰⁵ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 109; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 332–33, 340.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., from wicked men (Ps 17:8–9; 140:5) and from traps laid for them (Ps 141:9).

¹⁰⁷ Christoph Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, trans. R. A. Wilson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966), 67; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 340.

¹⁰⁸ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 341.

¹⁰⁹ See the point made above about v. 7b where the psalmist is specifying the fact that Yahweh is counseling him *at night*. So here too, the psalmist is augmenting the point he made in v. 9a—that his mind and heart are joyful. Even his physical body can rest secure. Other particles that he uses in the Psalm to assert this calm confidence include the strong negative נֹא (2x in v. 10, Yahweh *will not* abandon him to the grave and *will not* let his pious one see decay), the poetic negative בְּלֹא (4x in vv. 2, 4, and 8), and the adverbs יְמִינָה ("always") and חַצֵּב ("forever").

Bernd Janowski points out that much of the Psalm has a physical, spatial focus. Already in v. 1 the phrase **בָּהִיא יְהֹוָה**, he says, “has an unmistakable spatial connotation.”¹¹⁰ Yahweh is a place into which the psalmist flees for refuge. The saints are specified as being in the land/on earth (v. 3). Yahweh is equated with all the terminology concerning the conquest of the land (vv. 5–6). The psalmist has set Yahweh in front of himself (v. 8). And now the psalmist says that his flesh will “dwell” (**יַשֵּׁב**) securely (v. 9b). Notice the specificity of “dwell.” His flesh will inhabit a location. All of this spatial talk will play into the final image that the psalmist leaves us with. I point this out here because the psalmist clearly gives no indication that he fears imminent physical danger. Instead, the Psalm breathes a spirit of calm, grounded security about an existence that shows no signs of interruption—spiritual or physical.

He advances the thought further in v. 10: “For you will not abandon me to the grave.” He’s substantiating (**וְ**) the conclusion (**לֹא**) he stated in v. 9. The negative particle (**אַל**) is the strong one. The verb, likewise, is a strong one. BDB lists this occurrence under meaning 2.e. “forsake, abandon.” Abandoning is a purposeful act. The verb puts the focus on Yahweh more than on the psalmist’s **לֹא**. Yahweh will not do something as heinous as forsaking the psalmist to *sheol*. Yahweh will not leave the psalmist bereft of his presence.

Sheol is, of course, a significant concept for a dissertation like this one. First of all, some general comments: The term is always anarthrous, i.e. it’s a proper name.¹¹¹ It occurs 66 times in the Old Testament, 58 of them in poetry.¹¹² Sixty-six occurrences in a corpus as large as the Old

¹¹⁰ Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 300.

¹¹¹ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 71.

¹¹² Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 335.

Testament is a noticeably small number when one considers the interest shown in death and the afterlife in the other ancient Near Eastern cultures that we looked at in Chapter Two. Death is a significant issue in the Old Testament too, but the ratio of references to it in comparison to references to the subsequent state of the dead is also significant. The Hebrew root מְוִתָּה occurs in some form exactly 1000 times in the Hebrew Bible, but the terms for the abode of the dead (לְאַשְׁרַׁיְלָהּ and its synonyms) only occur about 100 times.¹¹³ The lexicons tend to favor the translation “underworld.”¹¹⁴ Given the centrality of this feature of ancient Near Eastern afterlife beliefs, it’s not surprising that this is the current consensus view of Hebrew לְאַשְׁרַׁיְלָהּ. Most scholars today think that Israel’s view of the afterlife was similar to that of their neighbors—that all the dead went to a dismal underworld—and that the idea of the faithful going to a place of bliss while the wicked went to a place of punishment was a much later evolutionary development in Israel’s afterlife beliefs.¹¹⁵

However, there are several features of the word that set it apart from the underworld conceptions of Israel’s neighbors. For instance, its etymology is puzzling. None of the Semitic languages around Israel have an etymologically related word. Numerous attempts have been made to explain its etymology, but no consensus has emerged. The most likely suggestion is that it is related to the verb לְאַשְׁרַׁיְלָהּ (“ask”) and that its origin is somehow connected to necromantic inquiry.¹¹⁶ Scholars once thought that they would find an earlier Semitic god behind the term and thus be able to show that Israel’s view of the afterlife was derived from Semitic polytheism, but

¹¹³ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 72.

¹¹⁴ BDB, s.v. לְאַשְׁרַׁיְלָהּ; DCH 8:206–07; HALOT 4:1368–70.

¹¹⁵ Segal, *Life after Death*, 136.

¹¹⁶ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 77–78.

evidence for this has been sparse, and the little bit of evidence that has been put forward has not been convincing.¹¹⁷ Johnston draws two interesting conclusions from the uniqueness of the Hebrew term שָׁאֹל:

In the Old Testament, Sheol is never divinized, and barely even personified. While prophetic texts and epigraphic discoveries reveal the continued appeal of other gods in Israel, the use of the term Sheol suggests that these did not generally include the divinized underworld. *Perhaps therefore a practical monotheism was earlier and more widespread than many scholars allow* (emphasis mine).¹¹⁸

If Johnston's conclusion is correct, there is little reason to believe that Israelite beliefs about the dead evolved from the polytheistic conception of the cult of the dead. Johnston draws one more conclusion about it:

Whether intentional or accidental, this [use of Sheol] allowed the Israelites and their writers to invest the term with their own religious outlook, without the conceptual baggage that other shared terms might carry. The linguistic distinctiveness permitted a clearer expression of theological distinctiveness.¹¹⁹

Before we proceed to comparisons with the underworlds of Israel's neighbors, let's look at how the Old Testament describes it. Waltke offers a good summary of the biblical references:

The frequent prepositions with [Sheol] show that it is the grave below the earth. The biblical poets use rich and varied figures to depict it. Sheol has a "mouth" (Ps. 141:7), which it "enlarges" (Isa. 5:14), and it is "never satisfied" (Prov. 27:20; 30:16). It is so powerful that none escapes its "grip" (Ps. 89:48[49]; Song 8:6), but some are redeemed from it (Ps. 49:15[16]; Prov. 25:14; Hos. 13:14). It is like a prison with "cords" (2 Sam. 22:6) and a land that has "gates" (Isa. 38:10) with "bars" (Job 17:16). Here corruption is "the father," and the worm "the mother and sister" (Job 17:13ff.). It is "a land" of no return to this life (Job 7:9); an abode where socioeconomic distinctions cease. Rich and poor (Job 3:18–19), righteous and wicked (3:17) lie together. It is a land of silence (Ps. 94:17), darkness (13:3[4]), weakness, and oblivion (88:11–19[12–20]). The destructive nature of this realm is intensified by the addition of "Abaddon" (Prov. 15:11; 27:20). One errs in using this figurative language to build a doctrine of the intermediate state. On the other hand, these vivid and powerful figures transform the grave from a six-foot pit to a metaphorical and transcendent realm distinct from life on top of the earth inhabited by living mortals and from

¹¹⁷ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 78–79.

¹¹⁸ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 79.

¹¹⁹ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 79.

heaven inhabited by the immortal God and his court. Those who descend there will never again participate in salvation history or join the holy throng at the earthly temple (Ps. 6:5[6]; Isa. 38:18). Like the Jordan River and Mount Zion, the grave symbolizes eternal realities that transcend their physical space.¹²⁰

Some of the commonalities that שָׂאָל shares with the Mesopotamian and Egyptian concepts of the underworld are that it is subterranean, dark, restrictive, and—many contend—the common destination of all the dead.¹²¹ That שָׂאָל is underground is clearly the depiction in the Old Testament because the references often speak of the dead going down into it.¹²² Since the Hebrews practiced in-ground burial this perspective was natural, and there have been those who have advocated a close relationship between the concept of שָׂאָל and the grave. Laird Harris, for instance, was largely responsible for שָׂאָל being translated “grave” in most of its occurrences in the editions of the NIV before the 2011 edition.¹²³ The nature of in-ground burial could also be responsible for descriptions of שָׂאָל being dark¹²⁴ and consisting of constrictions like “cords”¹²⁵ and “gates.”¹²⁶ The early Hebrews, emerging from Northwest Semitic culture could well have borrowed such imagery from their parent culture for their poetic descriptions of the state of the dead without espousing their underworld beliefs. But perhaps the aspect that needs to be examined most closely here is the contention that שָׂאָל was the destination of all the dead. As we will see in the next chapter on Ps 49, there are Old Testament references that imply an alternate

¹²⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 116.

¹²¹ Theodore Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the,” *ABD* 2:102–3.

¹²² E.g., Num 16:30; Job 7:9; Isa 57:9; Amos 9:2.

¹²³ R. Laird Harris, “Why Hebrew She’ol was translated ‘Grave,’” in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 58–71.

¹²⁴ E.g., Job 17:13; Pss 88:13; 143:3.

¹²⁵ E.g., 2 Sam 22:6.

¹²⁶ E.g., Isa 38:10.

postmortem destiny for the pious in contrast to the impious.

Philip Johnston and James Barr have argued that 'שָׁאֹל' was not necessarily envisioned by the ancient Hebrews as the destination of all the dead.¹²⁷ Its 66 occurrences are found predominantly in psalmodic, wisdom and prophetic literature, i.e. in poetry. In most of these instances, 'שָׁאֹל' is mentioned as the destiny of the wicked or is mentioned by the faithful who are suffering and who fear this is an indication that their final destiny will be a miserable one. In Johnston's counting, about half of these instances specify that it is the wicked who are headed for 'שָׁאֹל'.¹²⁸ Examples of believers who express fear that their earthly sorrows seem to be an indication of impending divine punishment include Hezekiah, Job and Heman the Ezrahite.¹²⁹ However, there are a couple of references which are hard to see as anything but reflections of a belief that all humanity is destined for 'שָׁאֹל', e.g. Ps 89:48–49 and Eccl 9:7–10. A more general designation for the state of all the dead cannot be ruled out in the poetic references.

In the few instances where it occurs in narrative, 'שָׁאֹל' is almost always found in quotations by people who are speaking either in anger about their enemies or in despair about themselves. For instance, in 1 Kgs 2:6, 9 David threatens the deaths of his general Joab, who has fallen out of favor, and Shimei, who had called down curses on him, and speaks of bringing their gray heads down to 'שָׁאֹל'. Both could be read as the vindictive wishes of an old man. Jacob in Gen 37:35 and 42:38 fears that he will go down to 'שָׁאֹל' in sorrow after the loss of his son Joseph, an instance where a faithful Israelite fears that his postmortem destiny will be miserable because

¹²⁷ Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 29; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 80–83.

¹²⁸ E.g., Isa 5:14; Pss 9:17; 31:17; 141:7; Job 21:13.

¹²⁹ Isa 38:10; Job 17:13–16; Ps 88:4.

bad things have already started happening in his life. These examples are emotional cries of aging men that should not be viewed as dispassionate, objective descriptions of afterlife beliefs. It is striking that none of the faithful persons in the Old Testament are presented in any way as going to שָׂאָל at the time of their death. As a matter of fact, the only narrative that describes historical personages going to שָׂאָל is the account of the rebels Korah, Dathan, and Abiram when the earth swallows them up (Num 16:30, 33).

Whereas Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature frequently portrays individuals in the underworld, there are virtually no depictions of named biblical characters in שָׂאָל in the entire Old Testament. The only exceptions are the highly stylized descriptions of kings of Israel's enemy nations in שָׂאָל in Isa 14 and Ezek 31 and 32. The portrayal of the king of Babylon in Isa 14 is especially pertinent to our comparison of Hebrew conceptions of שָׂאָל and other ancient Near Eastern conceptions of an underworld. In 14:9–15 the king of Babylon is portrayed as entering שָׂאָל. All the denizens of שָׂאָל are astir to greet him. The deceased kings of the nations rise from their thrones and taunt him because he's been stripped of his pomp and is now weak like them. They mock him for his bed of maggots and his blanket of worms. He had boasted that he would ascend the heavens, but now he has been brought down to the depths of שָׂאָל. The scene has interesting similarities to the Ugaritic royal funerary ritual we examined in Chapter Two.¹³⁰ There the *rp'um* and deceased Ugaritic kings are summoned to greet the most recently deceased king as he enters the underworld. It's noteworthy that the etymologically related Hebrew word רְפָאִים is used to describe the spirits of the deceased kings in the Isaiah account (v.

¹³⁰ KTU 1.161 as found in COS 1:357–58.

9).¹³¹ This is one of only eight occurrences of the word in the Old Testament and seems to indicate that Isaiah knew in detail what the Semitic peoples of the Levant believed about the state of their deceased kings. The fact that this scene is described as a “taunt” (**לָשׁוֹן מִנְחָה**, v. 4)¹³² would seem to indicate that the prophet is mocking the king of Babylon, who is receiving the exact treatment that his own religion described as waiting for him after death. The fact that the Old Testament never describes faithful Israelites undergoing this fate is powerful testimony that Israelites did not share the underworld beliefs of their neighbors, though they knew of them.

Returning to Ps 16:10 then, it’s interesting that the psalmist is expressing confidence that Yahweh will not abandon him to **שָׂאָל**. Though the references to **שָׂאָל** are vivid and ominous in Hebrew poetry, they are not presented in a deterministic way as if this place/state is inescapable. As we will see in the following chapter, at least one other psalmist expresses confidence that Yahweh can and will take his **שֶׁפֶט** out of the hand of **שָׂאָל** (Ps 49:16). And such language is not limited to just a couple of psalmists. The prophet Hosea uses similar language, albeit in a transferred sense, when he speaks of Yahweh redeeming (**גַּדֵּל, פֶּרֶח**) the people of Israel from the hand of **שָׂאָל** (Hos 13:14), i.e. from extinction.¹³³ So **שָׂאָל** is not conceived of as the ultimate destiny of all. As we have also seen, vv. 9b and 10a need not be interpreted as an expression of confidence that Yahweh will rescue the psalmist in an isolated incident from impending death—indeed, there is nothing in the Psalm that would seem to indicate that is the case. So exactly what

¹³¹ We will take a closer look at **רְפָאִים** in the Old Testament when we examine its occurrence in Ps 88:10.

¹³² “Taunt” is the way the word is translated by NIV, ESV and NASB.

¹³³ Hos 13:14 offers an important perspective on the ancient Israelite conception of **שָׂאָל**. There it is used twice, both times in parallel with **מִתְנַחַת**. Yahweh personifies the state of death and taunts it. After stating that he will redeem his people from **שָׂאָל / מִתְנַחַת**, he taunts, “Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”

does the psalmist mean by נַפְשׁוֹ in v. 10a? Is he speaking about the physical grave? Or is he speaking about the state of being dead? Fortunately, the parallelism of Hebrew poetry can often help to clarify questions like these. Psalmists often add greater specificity in the parallel statement in the second half of the verse. And v. 10 seems to be a good example of just that.

Many commentators over the past century have taken נַחַשׁ to mean “pit.”¹³⁴ In doing so they seem to be following BDB’s lead in deriving the noun from the verb נִחַשׁ, “sink down.”¹³⁵ This take on the vocable leads either to the conclusion that the half verse is referring to the deceased being in a grave or being in the ancient Near Eastern underworld. In either case, the interpretation is that it’s referring to a *location/place*. Waltke and Houston make a compelling argument for interpreting it as a *state* or *condition* instead.¹³⁶ They show how many of the instances of the noun נַחַשׁ in the Psalter, including the one here, are most likely not related to נִיחַשׁ, but to נָחַשׁ, “go to ruin.”¹³⁷ Using the analogy of the noun נַחֲלָה, which can be either of two homonyms—one derived from נִיחַשׁ and meaning “quietness/rest,” the other derived from נָחַשׁ and meaning “descent/descending”—they show how the early versions tend to see the Psalter references to נַחַשׁ as “decay”¹³⁸ rather than “pit.” Furthermore, they show that when the verb “see” (נִרְאֶה) is used in similar phrases, it’s in the sense of “experience” or “endure,”¹³⁹ whereas

¹³⁴ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 154, 158; Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50*; deClasse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 178, 181; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 233; Weiser, *Psalms: A Commentary*, 171.

¹³⁵ BDB, s.v. נַחַשׁ.

¹³⁶ Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, 323–24, n76.

¹³⁷ BDB, s.v. נָחַשׁ.

¹³⁸ The Septuagint usually translates it διαφθορά (“destruction, ruin”).

¹³⁹ E.g., “see death” (Ps 89:49), “see trouble (Ps 90:15; Jer 44:17), “see sorrow” (Jer 20:18), “see famine” (Jer 5:12), “see affliction” (Lam 3:1).

on the other hand, when Old Testament poets speak of going to a place such as a pit, grave or *sheol*, they will normally use a verb of motion (“descend, fall into,” etc.).¹⁴⁰ So there is nothing in the verbal or grammatical formulation of v. 10b to indicate that the author is speaking about the potential of being sent to a place like the ancient Near Eastern underworld.

As a result, I advocate interpreting v. 10 as describing a condition that the psalmist is confident Yahweh will spare him from. It’s clear that he is not asking for rescue from imminent death. At the same time, in his adamant refusal to be associated in any way with the cult of the dead voiced early in the Psalm, he is surely not describing here a spirit realm that is anything like what his opponents believe to exist. He is simply voicing a confidence that Yahweh will not let him endure a state or condition that would separate him from the God whose relationship with him is essential to his being. I do not rule out the meaning “grave” for לְאֹולֶּה in this verse,¹⁴¹ but the idea of “underworld” seems to be the very antithesis of what the Psalm as a whole is about. For that reason, I have also avoided the term “realm of the dead,” which implies a place that the dying individual goes to join those who have died previously, a concept not implied by the context of the Psalm. Unfortunately, there are not many options in English for capturing the idea of the “state of being dead.” I’ve settled for the translation “the grave” because the definite article helps to capture the abstract concept of “being dead” (“the grave” as opposed to “a grave”). The psalmist simply wants to be with Yahweh and is professing a belief that not even physical death can interrupt his relationship with Yahweh.

Finally, it’s important to note the use of the term לְאֹולֶּה to indicate the psalmist’s confidence

¹⁴⁰ E.g., “descend to *sheol* (Job 21:13), “fall into a pit (Pss 7:16; 57:7).

¹⁴¹ Although it is noteworthy that in poetry לְאֹולֶּה is never used in parallel with קְבָרָה, the usual word for “grave.”

that Yahweh will not abandon him to death. So as to avoid an extended debate about whether later western or Christian views about body/soul duality has been imposed on this verse, it's probably best simply to point out that נָפְשׁ here in v. 10a is parallel to תִּדְבֹּר ("pious, devoted one") in v. 10b. Rather than indicating that his "spirit" or "soul" will not be abandoned to לֵאָוֶל by Yahweh, the psalmist is indicating that *he*—in his relationship to Yahweh—will not be abandoned to לֵאָוֶל. The use of תִּדְבֹּר is significant in a number of ways. Not only is it a relational term. Liess points out how the suffix shifts from first person (נִפְנִים, "my self")¹⁴² to second person (תִּדְבֹּר, "your pious one"), showing a subtle shift from the psalmist's perspective to Yahweh's in order to highlight the "Gegenseitigkeit der Gottesbeziehung."¹⁴³ But it also shows that the psalmist does not have in focus a perilous situation, which terms like "your poor one" or "your afflicted one" would imply, but rather his relationship with Yahweh.

While v. 10 is stated negatively, v. 11 articulates in a positive way what life with Yahweh entails. The state of death cannot and will not sever the psalmist's relationship with him. And so what that relationship consists of is Yahweh making known to the psalmist the path of life. It consists of a satiety of joys in his presence (literally "face," אַתְּ פָנֵיךְ).¹⁴⁴ It consists of pleasures at his right hand forever. It's interesting that the last two phrases speak anthropomorphically of Yahweh's face and his right hand, two of the most visually reassuring aspects of the human body. Bernd Janowski is struck by the spatial terms that occur throughout the psalm and that

¹⁴² Many of the recent commentators recommend translating נִפְנִים here as "me." Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 225; Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, 227, 233; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 110; Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, 323.

¹⁴³ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 17.

¹⁴⁴ The אֶתְךָ is clearly the preposition meaning "with, in" and not the direct object marker. This wording (אתך) is also used to indicate being in Yahweh's presence in Pss 21:7 and 140:14. It's interesting that the preposition אֶתְךָ is also used in describing Enoch's walking with God in Gen 5:22, 24.

culminate in metaphorical references to Yahweh as the place of refuge.¹⁴⁵ The psalmist signals this already in the first verse when he addresses Yahweh and professes, “In you I take refuge.” A refuge is a physical place into which one flees. The many comparisons of Yahweh to the inherited land in the center of the Psalm continue this spatial motif. The play on words of נָעֲמִים (“pleasant places”) in v. 6 and the alternate plural נְעָמֹת (“pleasures”) in v. 11 are signals of the singer’s shift in focus from the physical land to Yahweh as delightful dwelling place. In v. 8 Yahweh is at “my right hand,” and in the final phrase of the Psalm the psalmist professes to Yahweh that he will be “at your right hand.” He envisions himself staring Yahweh in the face and feeling the reassuring grip of his right hand. This physical/spatial motif adds a tone of grounded confidence to the Psalm as it gradually shifts in focus from Yahweh’s physical, earthly blessings to Yahweh himself. It’s striking then, that with all this vivid imagery drawn from spatial and physical features there is virtually nothing in the context of the Psalm that supports taking אֶחָד in the sense of a physical place rather than as a state or condition. This too seems to indicate the psalmist is avoiding speaking of afterlife in terms of the cult of the dead.

And finally, this condition of being with Yahweh will be “forever” (נצח).¹⁴⁶ Note that this time reference is placed at the very end of the Psalm, as its final word. It’s significant that the three crucial verses for an afterlife discussion (9–11) are preceded by a time reference (תמיד, “always,” v. 8) and conclude with a time reference (נצח, “forever,” v. 11), the latter significantly placed at the very end of the Psalm. The tense/aspect of the verbs in this section is also significant. The verb that תמיד modifies is perfect: The psalmist *has* set Yahweh always before

¹⁴⁵ Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 300.

¹⁴⁶ Brug points out that whereas עזלם can refer either to the future or the past, נצח refers only to the future. Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 208.

him. As a result, his heart *is* glad and his glory rejoices.¹⁴⁷ But his flesh *will* rest securely because Yahweh *will* not abandon him to the grave and *will* not allow his pious one to see decay. Yahweh *will* make known to him the path of life. . . . The last four actions described in the Psalm are all presented as future events in a confession that does not appear to be made when the psalmist is in extremis. There is no indication that the psalmist is merely stating confidence that Yahweh will protect him from an early or violent death. He is simply sparing him from death. How Yahweh will do this appears not to be something the psalmist feels the needs to expound on. As Weiser says, “The psalmist simply wants to state *that* he will be spared from death, not *how* he will be spared from death.”¹⁴⁸ But the wording of the Psalm leaves no doubt that the psalmist sees this existence with Yahweh as an eternal state. The same is clearly the intent in Ps 21:4 and 6 where it is stated that the king will be in Yahweh’s presence (אָחֵת־פָּנִים) forever. There the terms for “forever” are heaped up. Yahweh has given the king life/length of days “forever and ever” (עַזְלָמָה וְעַד) and will give him blessings and joy “forever” (לְעוֹד) in his presence.

Conclusion

The evidence adduced suggests that the author of Psalm 16 wrote it to assert his belief that life with Yahweh continues beyond death. To make his point, he begins by countering popular afterlife beliefs that serve as an introductory foil to the chief purpose of the Psalm. He counters those beliefs that involved rituals in which the living invoked the dead and offered sacrifices to them. The composer adamantly rejects these worship practices and affirms his exclusive

¹⁴⁷ Joüon-Muraoka points out that the first verb here (נִמְשַׁׁךְ) is stative qatal and very likely has a present meaning. In such cases, when followed by a wayyiqtol form as here (גָּמַנְתִּי), “both forms have the same frequentative present value.” Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005), §118p.

¹⁴⁸ Weiser, *Psalms: A Commentary*, 177.

devotion to Yahweh as his only source for blessing, guidance and confidence in this life and beyond it. Because he is so opposed to cult of the dead practices, he only alludes to them. Though we cannot be absolutely certain, the libations of blood that he references in v. 4 are likely the pouring out of blood on the ground over which a meal was eaten in the belief that it lured spirits from the afterlife to participate in a meal with the living in which the living consulted them for advice. The psalmist is adamant that he will not even speak the names of these spiritual entities. He also alludes to the nighttime séances that were common in the cult of the dead through which the living solicited advice from the dead (v. 7).

In contrast, he will only seek protection from Yahweh (v. 1). He acknowledges that all the good that he enjoys comes exclusively through Yahweh's blessing (v. 2). In vivid metaphors he uses the terms traditionally attached to the promised land (**בְּנֵה, חֶבְלִים, גָּזָר, חַלְקָה**) to describe the security Yahweh provides for him (vv. 5–6). Yahweh advises (v. 7) and leads him by the hand always, so that he is not shaken (v. 8). Therefore, his mind and his heart are joyful, and even his flesh is secure (v. 9) because Yahweh will not abandon him to death and decay (v. 10). His relationship with Yahweh will continue, and he will experience abundant joys and pleasures in Yahweh's visible (**אֲתֹת־פְּנֵיכֶךָ**) and tactile (**בְּפִיְמָנֶיךָ**) presence forever (v. 11).

It's my hope that this interpretation lends a fresh perspective from which to consider the Psalm. Because this study is limited to examining the Psalm's interpretation from two time frames—the way ancient Israelites would have read the Psalm and the modern interpretation of it over the past century—this study was not able to consider the intervening periods of interpretation, especially early Christian interpretation, medieval interpretation, or interpretation from the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. What this study will allow is a fresh consideration of whether the psalmist was expressing a belief in postmortem existence.

Interpretation over the last century has tended to see the final three verses as simply an affirmation by the psalmist that Yahweh will not permit him to die in some present, life-threatening situation. As the study has amply shown, there is no internal evidence that the psalmist was concerned with impending mortal danger at the time of composition. The suggestions that this study has made open the way for considering the possibility that this Psalm is indeed expressing—albeit in a guarded way—a belief that an ancient Israelite did indeed continue to live beyond death. This study proposes that the indistinct nature of this profession of belief in postmortem existence is because of the prevailing beliefs about such an existence that conflicted with the psalmist's own. In opposition to the prevailing view that presented many sources (gods as well as deceased persons) of oracular advice, blessing and security, the psalmist brackets out all other spirit beings and voices his exclusive trust in Yahweh.

My sincere hope is that this study might create renewed impetus to consider the Psalm's interpretation during the various intervening periods of history keeping in mind that its original intent was quite likely to address concerns about afterlife beliefs. My findings would seem to indicate that subsequent interpretations of the Psalm in the intervening periods which saw in it references to afterlife beliefs are not reinterpretations of it but rather elaborations on it.

CHAPTER FIVE

DEATH: A GULF THAT ONLY YAHWEH CAN BRIDGE

PSALM 49

Psalm 49 also contains significant references to life beyond death. It is one of the Psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah and the last one in the collection of eight (42–49) that forms a group at the beginning of Book II of the Psalter. There are four others attributed to the Sons of Korah near the end of Book III (84, 85, 87, and 88). A prominent feature of these twelve Psalms that has intrigued scholars is the frequent occurrence of *sheol* and other terms they believe to be references to the underworld. Mitchell points out that if one includes Pss 86 and 89, which are intertwined with the second group of Korah Psalms, the Sons of Korah corpus contains a third of the Psalms references to *sheol*, two-thirds of Psalms references to the “grave” and over a quarter of the references to the “dungeon-pit.” It also contains the only Psalms references to the “shades” (Ps 88:11), the “depths” (88:7), and “Abaddon” (88:12).¹ Though the majority of these occur only in Pss 49 and 88, Mitchell points out these are the last two Psalms in the Korah collections and it appears that the collections build toward the topic of the afterlife.²

The lead-in to Ps 49 at the end of 48 has an oddity that is important for us to look at in this particular study. Psalm 48 ends with the phrase עַל־מִזְבֵּחַ. It seems out of place there because the subject of death has not been treated in the Psalm, and it has been suggested that the phrase may have originally been part of the heading of Ps 49 but got displaced from it.³ Among the reasons

¹ We will be taking a separate look at Ps 88 in Chapter Seven.

² David C. Mitchell, “‘God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol’: The Psalms of the Sons of Korah,” *JSOT* 30, no. 3 (March 2006): 376.

³ E.g., Paul R. Raabe, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 70.

that speak for its originally having been part of the heading of Ps 49 are that it begins with **על**, which is often the beginning of a musical direction in the headings, and another Psalm attributed to the Sons of Korah, Ps 46, has a similarly worded musical direction in its heading (**על-עַל מִזְבֵּחַ**). However, if it is removed from 48, that Psalm ends rather abruptly: “For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will lead us.” The phrase **על-מִזְבֵּחַ** could be parallel to “for ever and ever” in the first half of the verse and specify that the psalmist’s relationship with God will endure even beyond (**על**) death. We will take a closer look at that possibility in our exegesis of Ps 49.

Not only do the Sons of Korah Psalms have a higher than average number of references to death and *sheol*, but they also speak of tumultuous events that cause upheaval in the earth, sometimes physical upheaval in the surface of the earth (46:3, 4, 7b), sometimes military upheaval (46:7a, 10; 48:5–8). Mitchell cannot help seeing a connection between these references and the incident where the ancestor of the Sons of Korah was swallowed up by the earth and went down to *sheol* (Num 16:30–33).⁴ Most recent commentators, however, identify the genre of Ps 49 as wisdom poetry and so date it to the postexilic period, as they do most wisdom literature,⁵ rather than seeing any connections to pre-exilic events—or as they would say, pre-exilic traditions. It’s true that Ps 49 shares considerable vocabulary and motifs with wisdom literature. It focuses on the contrasts of rich and poor, wise and fool. It reflects on the end of life as motivation for how to live one’s life before death, or conversely stated, it considers the connection between man’s doing and his destiny, another characteristic of wisdom literature.

Although the psalmist repeatedly emphasizes that the earthly life of all people is followed

⁴ Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul,” 368–69.

⁵ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 439; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 299–300; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 373.

by death, he clearly makes room for an alternate eventual destiny for himself and the righteous. Unlike Ps 16, he does not speak in veiled language out of opposition to something like the cult of the dead. His language when he addresses the alternate destiny for the faithful is admittedly puzzling, but that is due to the fact that he has chosen a riddle as his mode for making his point, as he clearly states in his introduction (v. 5). No human being can escape death. But Yahweh can do what no human being can do. He can snatch the faithful from the hand of *sheol*.

Outline of Psalm 49

Heading and Introduction (vv. 1–5)

Stanza 1: No one can buy his way out of death (vv. 6–12)

Refrain (v. 13)

Stanza 2: But God will buy me free from *sheol* (vv. 14–20)

Refrain (v. 21)

Translation⁶ and Scansion

- v. 1 For the director of music, by the Sons of Korah, a psalm
- v. 2 Hear this, all peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of this world, (2+3)
- v. 3 each and every son of man, rich and poor together. (3+3)
- v. 4 My mouth will speak pieces of wisdom, and the meditation of my heart bits of understanding. (3+3)
- v. 5 I will incline my ear to a proverb. I will expound my riddle with a lyre. (3+3)
- v. 6 Why should I be afraid in evil days, when the iniquity of those at my heels surrounds me? (4+3)
- v. 7 The ones who trust in their wealth and in the abundance of their riches boast. (2+3)

⁶ See Chapter Four, footnote 5 for a brief description of my rationale for the way I translate.

- v. 8 A man will certainly not redeem a brother; he will not give to God a ransom for him, (4+3)
- v. 9 (for the ransom for their life is expensive and ceases forever) (3+2)
- v. 10 so that he lives yet forever and will not see decay. (2+3)
- v. 11 For he sees that the wise die; together the fool and the brute perish, and they leave their wealth to others. (4+4+3)
- v. 12 Their inner thought is that their houses will be forever, their dwelling places from generation to generation. They have proclaimed their names over lands. (3+3+4)
- v. 13 But man does not endure in honor. He is like the animals, which are cut off/silenced. (3+3)
- v. 14 This is their way. Stupidity is theirs. But those who come after them are pleased with what they say. Selah. (4+4)
- v. 15 Like sheep they are appointed for the grave. Death will pasture them, and the upright will rule over them in the morning. And their form is for the grave to consume apart from their lofty abode. (5+4+5)
- v. 16 Surely God will redeem my life from the hand of *sheol*, for he will take me. (4+3)
- v. 17 Do not fear when a man grows rich, when the wealth of his house increases, (3+3)
- v. 18 for he will take nothing when he dies. His wealth will not go down after him. (5+3)
- v. 19 Although he blesses his soul while he is alive, “And let them praise you, for it (my soul) is doing well for you,” (3+3)
- v. 20 it (his soul) will go to the generation of his fathers. They will not see light forever. (3+3)
- v. 21 A man who is held in honor but does not understand is like the animals, which are cut off/silenced. (4+3)

Heading and Introduction

The heading of Ps 49 is quite conventional and requires little explanation except for the

issue of **על-מִוָּת** in the previous verse (48:15). It begins with the dedication to the director of music (**לְמַנְצֵחַ**), which appears in the headings of over a third of the Psalms, always in the first position. The second item is the attribution to the Sons of Korah. And finally it is categorized as a **מִזְמֹר**, the most generic designation when identifying type of psalm.

Concerning the question of whether **על-מִוָּת** (48:15) was originally part of the heading of 49, it is generally agreed that phrases beginning with **על** in the headings are most likely musical directions for the performance of the Psalms.⁷ There are two other Psalm headings that contain similar phrases. The one at the head of Ps 9 contains the combination **עלמות לְפָנָן**.⁸ The NIV translates the phrase, “To the tune of ‘The Death of the Son.’” Psalm 46, another Korahite Psalm, has **על-עלמות**, the noun here being the plural of **עלמה**, “young woman.”⁹ Both of these heading items, when compared to the contents of their respective Psalms, are good examples of how the meaning of these liturgical directions do not appear to be related to the content of the Psalm to which they are attached. If **על-מִוָּת** was originally part of the heading of Ps 49, it is unlikely that it was there to describe the content of the Psalm, which is primarily about death. Secondly, for those Psalms that contain an **על** phrase in their headings, the phrase never precedes the dedication to the choirmaster (**לְמַנְצֵחַ**). When these two items occur in the heading, the latter always precedes the former.¹⁰ So it is highly unlikely that the **על-מִוָּת** at the end of Ps 48 has become detached from the heading of 49 simply because of confusion by copyists over where

⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 30.

⁸ Although the BHS reading contains no *maqqef* in the first word, the apparatus indicates that many manuscripts do contain a *maqqef*.

⁹ BDB, s.v. **עלמה**.

¹⁰ Mitchell, “God Will Redeem,” 379, n48.

one Psalm ends and the other begins. And finally, its location at the end of Ps 48 makes it a *lectio difficilior*, which supports the likelihood of it being the original reading there. The Septuagint translator appears to have interpreted it as עַל מִזְבֵּחַ, as if it were a plural of עַל־מִזְבֵּחַ. He translates it as εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας. However, the plural of מִזְבֵּחַ is עַל־מִזְבְּחֹת. This would seem to be evidence that the translator did not want to ignore the text but was puzzled by its meaning here and tried to accommodate it to the first half of the verse (עַל־מִזְבְּחֹת וְעַל).

Mitchell has suggested that it does belong with Ps 48 and that it is part of the reason the collator of Book II placed Ps 49 after Ps 48. He sees 48:15b as somewhat of a springboard into 49, which then probes the idea that there is an alternate destiny for the faithful that lies beyond death. He translates 48:15b as “[God] will lead us over death” and points out the similarity between that and 49:16, “Surely God will redeem me from the hand of *sheol*; he will take me.” He believes these two Sons of Korah Psalms share a “plucking up” theme.¹¹ He takes עַל in a locative sense, that the faithful “will be caught up into the air by God and carried over the gaping Death-Pit.”¹³

But could it be used in a more temporal sense? The first half of 48:15 seems to be temporally focused, the parallel phrase being (עַל־מִזְבְּחֹת). If v. 15b is also temporally focused, the psalmist would be concluding by affirming that God will be our God for ever (v. 15a) and will guide us even beyond death (v. 15b), a more balanced line of poetry and one which makes a point similar to Ps 16, that the believer’s relationship with Yahweh transcends even death. The

¹¹ BDB, s.v. עַל.

¹² Mitchell, “God will Redeem,” 377–80.

¹³ Mitchell, “God will Redeem,” 379.

preposition עַל can be used in temporal contexts to indicate something “beyond” a certain point in time.¹⁴ Since the weight of evidence favors עַל-מִות being part of Ps 48 and not part of the heading of Ps 49, it would appear that the composer of 48, since he’s slipping in the idea of death at the climax of his Psalm and not elaborating upon it, assumes that the singers of his Psalm believe that there is existence beyond death. It would also seem that the collator of Book II recognizes this same belief and placed Ps 49 directly after it to offer a meditation upon this possibility. Although death is the unavoidable outcome of life in this world for all people, for those who have a relationship with Yahweh there is an existence even beyond death.

The poetry of the introduction of Ps 49 (vv. 2–5) is standard parallelism with half-lines of virtually equal length. A couple of vocables merit discussion. The word חַלְוָה in v. 2 is a relatively rare one that occurs only in poetry. In most of its other occurrences it appears to focus on the fleeting character of this life.¹⁵ Here it seems to indicate location because it’s linked to the word יַשְׁבֵּי and is parallel to the word הַעֲמִים in the first half of the verse. So the translation “passing world” is sometimes suggested.¹⁶ The fact that the poet does not use the more typical לְאָרֶץ or תְּבָל is significant. De Meyer suggests that the psalmist is beginning to hint at the answer to his riddle already with this vocable choice.¹⁷ This world and this life are fleeting. So he is raising in the minds of singers of his Psalm the question of what comes after it.

¹⁴ In Lev 15:25, for instance, the phrase עַל-נְקֻתָּה means “beyond the time of her menstrual impurity,” and in Isa 32:10 the phrase יְמִים עַל-שָׁנָה refers to a number of days beyond a year. BDB, s.v. עַל.

¹⁵ Pss 39:6; 89:48; Job 11:17. Ps 17:14 has so many text critical issues that it’s difficult to determine its meaning there.

¹⁶ F. de Meyer, de Meyer, “The Science of Literature Method of Prof. M. Weiss in Confrontation with Form Criticism, Exemplified on the Basis of Ps. 49,” *Bijdr* 40, no.2 (1979): 156; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 69.

¹⁷ De Meyer, “Science of Literature,” 160.

There is a tendency among exegetes to see in the phrase גַם־בְּנֵי אֶלְמָן גַם־בְּנֵי־אִישׁ in v. 3 a distinction between the lowly and the highborn.¹⁸ One could reach this conclusion when considering that the phrase is parallel to “the rich and the humble” in the second half of the verse. One could even see a chiasm in the order of the pairs in the two half verses. Brug points out that the parallelism of the two pairs in this verse supports the interpretation of “both high and low” in the first half-verse, but not where it is used elsewhere.¹⁹ And it is no doubt a stretch to see such specificity in the vocables themselves or to claim, as deClaissé-Walford suggests, that there is an echo of נָמָתָן from Gen 2:7 in מָתָן, and thus a connotation of humbleness in its use here. It seems more likely that the psalmist is calling on “each and every person” to listen to his riddle, because each and every person will be affected by what he has to say about death and its aftermath.

The psalmist’s call to the people to listen to what he has to say is a typical beginning in wisdom poetry.²⁰ The vocabulary is also typical of wisdom literature (e.g., תְבוּנוֹת, חֲכָמוֹת, in v. 4).²¹ The beginning of v. 5, “I will incline my ear to a proverb,” implies that what he is about to say has been revealed to him by inspiration from Yahweh.²² It is not something that can be known just from observing what happens in the mortal world. Many of the things he has to say about death in the body of the Psalm can be concluded from observation. But his poem also contains things that cannot be known just from observation of the natural world. And so the last

¹⁸ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 441, 443; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 301, 303; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 478, 481; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 69–70. Kraus goes the farthest, translating the phrase, “you simple people as well as you lords’ sons.”

¹⁹ E.g., Ps 62:10. Brug, *Commentary on Psalms*, 481–82.

²⁰ Compare Ps 78:1–2; Prov 5:1; 8:6f.; 22:17.

²¹ Prov 2:2; 3:13; 5:1.

²² Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 482.

thing he has to say about the content of his poem before he launches into it is that it is a “riddle” (*רָדִיל*), something that must be puzzled over and cannot be understood until secret information is revealed about it. That’s why he says he will “open” it.

Stanza 1: No One Can Buy His Way Out of Death (vv. 6–12)

The psalmist begins the body of the Psalm with a focus on himself. “Why should *I* be afraid in evil days, when the iniquity of those on *my* heels surrounds *me*?” He singles himself out in contrast to the evil-doers, who he is about to equate with the rich. So from the beginning of the body of the Psalm proper he is setting a distance between himself and those who trust in riches for the outcome of their lives. BDB and DCH identify **עֲקֵבִי** in v. 6 as a unique adjective/noun related to the common noun **עַקְבָּה** (“heel”), this one meaning “overreacher”²³ or “supplanter.”²⁴ HALOT and BHS follow Origen’s lead and suggest analyzing it as a participial form (**עֲקֵבִי**) of the denominative verb from the same root.²⁵ HALOT gives as the meaning of the verb, “to seize someone by the heel, to betray.”²⁶ The unusual third masculine singular imperfect form **יִסְוֶבֶנִי** at the end of the verse is explained as a plene spelling by the Masoretes in the Masora Parva, and BHS again notes that Origen appears to read a different form—third person plural (“they surround me”).²⁷ Despite the questions of spelling and pointing on these two words, the meaning is clear: the psalmist finds himself surrounded by evildoers, but he has nothing to fear.

The Hebrew of v. 7 is straightforward. The evildoers put their trust in their wealth, and they

²³ BDB, s.v. **עֲקֵבִי**.

²⁴ DCH, 6:541.

²⁵ BHS, s.v. **עֲקֵבִי**, says the second column of Origen’s Hexapla reads the word as ακοββατι.

²⁶ HALOT, 2:872.

²⁷ τσοββουνι = **יִסְוֶבֶנִי**.

boast in the abundance of their riches. The choice of verbs here is significant. Psalmists often exhort their hearers to put their “trust” exclusively in Yahweh.²⁸ “Boasting in Yahweh” is more common in the prophets, but it too occurs in Psalms.²⁹ Here, instead, the psalmist’s antagonists are putting their hope in and boasting in their riches. Already we see a clear distinction between the faithful and the wicked, which is so common in psalmodic and wisdom literature.

Verses 8–10 comprise one of those sections, like Ps 16:2–4, that are difficult to interpret. Yet it is essential to understanding what this Psalm has to say about the afterlife. Here it is not a matter of grammatical difficulties or a perceived need for emendations. It simply seems that the author is wording his point in riddle language (remember **נִזְנַן** in v. 5), a form of communication that makes the reader/hearer puzzle over it for a while before it yields its payload.³⁰ *BHS* suggests taking the first word in v. 8 (**נָא**) as the adverb **נָא** (“surely”), which it says occurs in a few Hebrew manuscripts. Gesenius’ lexicon takes **נָא** as a different word, an interjection meaning “wehe, ach!”³¹ But the Septuagint takes it as the simple, common Hebrew noun **נָא** and renders it ἀδελφός. Again, I advocate staying with the simplest understanding of the Masoretic text and taking the word as “brother,” pulled forward in the sentence for emphasis. The verse is then translated: “A brother a man will certainly not redeem; he will not give to God his (i.e. the brother’s) ransom.” The first half of the verse has very similar wording to Num 18:15, where Yahweh tells Aaron that every firstborn belongs to Aaron except the firstborn of humans and of unclean animals. These are to be redeemed at the price of five shekels, while the firstborn of

²⁸ E.g., Pss 9:11; 22:5–6; 26:1; 62:9; 115:9; 146:3.

²⁹ E.g., Isa 41:16; 45:25; Jer 4:2; Pss 34:3; 105:3.

³⁰ For a thorough look at how the intricate structure of the Psalm reveals a number of interrelated riddles and solutions within it, see Leo G. Perdue, “The Riddles of Psalm 49,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 533–42.

³¹ Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch*, 32.

clean animals are to be sacrificed. The wording of our Psalm verse is close enough to the Numbers verse that it may be an echo of it. If that's the case, the psalmist is making a point that stands in stark contrast to the legal injunction. When it comes to death there is no price large enough that can be offered to God³² to exempt a human being from it.

BHS points out that the early versions appear to have read the first word in v. 9 as the noun or adjective form of the root **נָקַר** with a conjunctive waw.³³ The Masoretes have pointed it as the third person masculine singular imperfect form of the verb with a conjunctive waw. Different vowel pointing of the letters makes little difference in the meaning of the verse. We will again follow the Masoretes. A simple translation of v. 9 is, “And the ransom for their life is expensive and ceases forever.” The puzzling thing in this verse, of course, is: What did the psalmist intend as the subject of the verb **נִכְלֵל** (“ceases”)? The most immediate option in the context is “ransom.” If that is the subject, then the second half of the line is saying that any ransom offered will never be enough. If one takes the subject from the previous verse, i.e. the brother, it means that his life will end permanently. Let’s leave v. 9 for a moment and go on to v. 10.

This verse begins with **וְיִצְחַק**, a conjunctive waw plus the jussive **יִצְחַק**. A simple translation is, “And let him live yet forever. He will not see the decay.” If one takes **נִכְלֵל** in the previous verse to be describing the end of the person’s life, v. 10 seems to be saying the exact opposite of 9. The solution offered by most recent exegetes³⁴ has been to see v. 9 as a parenthesis added to explain

³² Note that Ps 49, as is common in Book II, does not use the name Yahweh but only the term **אֱלֹהִים** (vv. 8 and 16) to refer to God.

³³ The *BHS* apparatus note indicates that the Septuagint has καὶ τὴν τιμὴν here, which suggests a *Vorlage* of **נָקַר** (the noun **נָקַר**, “preciousness,” + a conjunctive waw) and the Syriac has *jkjr hw*, which suggests a *Vorlage* of **נָקַר** (the adjective, “precious,” + a conjunctive waw).

³⁴ e.g. Brug, *Commentary on Psalms*, 483, 485; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 356–57; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 301; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 478.

v. 8 more fully, and then to take v. 10 as a resumption of the thought in v. 8. Verses 8 and 10 are then saying, “A man will certainly not redeem a brother; he will not give a ransom to God for him . . . so that he may live yet forever and³⁵ not see decay.” A conjunctive waw with a jussive verb form in the middle of a sentence (like יְנַצֵּח) can often serve as a final or consecutive clause.³⁶ Verse 10 would then serve as a continuation and consequence of what is said in v. 8, “so that he may live . . .” If this line of interpretation is correct, v. 10 is then raising a hypothetical situation—that the man for whom a satisfactory ransom is paid to God (if that were possible) could live on forever and never die. Verse 9 is then a parenthetical comment on v. 8b, describing why a man could not give a ransom to God for his brother—because such a ransom is far too expensive and would never be enough. This solves the problem of v. 10a contradicting v. 9b and also supports the interpretation that “ransom” is the subject of לִבְנָה in v. 9. Since this provides a cohesive way of interpreting the text of vv. 8–10 as we have it, there is no need to follow *BHS*’ desperate measure of suggesting that the whole of v. 9 might be a gloss. There is no basis for this in the manuscript evidence, including among the versions. Nor is there any need to propose emendations for לִבְנָה, as do *HALOT* and *DCH*.³⁷ They propose a verb נִבְנֵה, for which they suggest the meaning “live.”³⁸ This would give a more parallel meaning to vv. 9b and 10a, but such a verb cannot be substantiated anywhere else in the Old Testament. This emendation, again, is more an attempt to “fix” the text than to derive meaning from it.

Raabe sees no reason to take v. 9 parenthetically. He sees v. 9a as a concessive clause that

³⁵ Several Hebrew manuscripts have a waw before נִצְחָה in v. 10.

³⁶ GKC, § 165, 166.

³⁷ *HALOT*, 1:292, 316; *DCH*, 3:162, 227.

³⁸ *HALOT* and *DCH* seem to be influenced by the noun נִבְנֵה, which we looked at in v. 2 of the Psalm. There we saw that the noun connotes the transience of life, and so would be an odd choice to couple with לְעוֹלָם here.

begins a new sentence: “Though the ransom money for their life be considered valuable, it/he will cease forever.” He believes v. 9b is intended to be polysemous—both the ransom and the man’s life will fail. He then sees the beginning of v. 10 as a taunt: “Let him continue to live forever (if he can)!” and takes v. 10b as an unmarked question, “Will he not see the pit?”³⁹ The irony and sarcasm that this solution suggests fit well with the psalmist’s statement that the insight he intends to share is a riddle. However, I side with the majority interpretation and see v. 9 as a parenthesis. What the author is doing in the first half of the Psalm is emphasizing that absolutely no one can avoid death. And in vv. 8–10 he is saying that even a fellow human being cannot offer God a ransom for another so that that other person could avoid death. In the process of these three verses, however, he raises a hypothetical situation in v. 10 (“so that he may live forever and not see death”) that will be important later in the Psalm as he unfolds his riddle.

The threefold use of the root נָפַד in vv. 8–9 is also significant. Not only is the idea of ransoming the firstborn through a payment a major concern in the Pentateuch,⁴⁰ the verb surfaces again at a significant place in the Psalm (v. 16). The psalmist is both harkening back to a significant issue in Israel’s salvation history as well as setting the stage for his statement in v. 16 with his hypothetical musing about living forever in v. 10. For the final phrase in v. 10, I have chosen to translate, “and not see decay.” For my reasons in choosing “decay” rather than “pit” for נָפַד, see my comments in Chapter Three where virtually the same wording occurs in Ps 16:10. The wording of 49:10 also plays a significant role in preparing the hearer/reader for what’s coming near the end of the Psalm. The end and climax of the Psalm (v. 20b) has very similar wording to v. 10, but it actually predicts the opposite fate for the decadent rich: “He will

³⁹ Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 71–72.

⁴⁰ Exod 13:13, 15; 34:20; Lev 27:27; Num 3:46, 48, 49, 51; 18:15, 16, 17.

not see light forever” (v. 20b).

The Hebrew of v. 11 is straightforward: “For he sees that the wise die; together the fool and the brute perish, and they leave their wealth to others.” Here the vocabulary of wisdom literature is abundant. **כָּסֵיל** (“fool”)⁴¹ and **בָּעֵר** (“brute”)⁴² are very characteristic of wisdom literature. And the noting of similarity between the wise and the fool is also characteristic of wisdom literature.⁴³ The psalmist injects a touch of humor by connecting the fool and the brute closely together with the word **לְגַם**⁴⁴ and then immediately following it with the statement that they will leave their wealth to others. “Brute” clearly implies the beastly qualities of the fool, and beasts are not normally thought of as having wealth. The leaving of one’s wealth to others is also a *topos* of wisdom literature.⁴⁴

The early versions read the first word of v. 12 (**קְבָרֶת**) as **קְבָרָם** (“their grave”).⁴⁵ Many current commentators⁴⁶ and translations⁴⁷ follow their lead. This interpretation of the text gives the impression that the psalmist is indicating the location of the deceased forever after their death. Hossfeld sees it as an echo of the Egyptian idea that the grave is the dwelling place of the deceased.⁴⁸ Those who go this interpretive route tend to see the third phrase of the verse as expressing a concessive thought: “Their graves will be their houses forever . . . although they

⁴¹ Ps 92:7; 94:8; Prov 1:22; 10:23; 12:23; 15:2, 14; 18:2.

⁴² Ps 73:22; 92:7; Prov. 12:1; 30:2.

⁴³ E.g., Eccl 2:16; 6:8.

⁴⁴ Eccl 2:18, 21; 6:2.

⁴⁵ BHS, 1131.

⁴⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 356, 357, 359; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 441; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 301, 305–6; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 479;

⁴⁷ E.g., NIV, ESV, CSB.

⁴⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 305–6.

named lands after themselves.” They named whole lands after themselves, but the only plot of ground that will be theirs in the end is their grave.

That idea is lacking in the Masoretic reading. The same form (**קְרָבָם**) occurs in Ps 5:10, and there it clearly means “their inner being.” This inner being (**קְרָבָה**) is often said to have thoughts (Pss 64:7; 62:5) that it expresses (Isa 16:11; Ps 103:1).⁴⁹ There are a number of translations and commentators who interpret the beginning of 49:12 this way.⁵⁰ Their translation tends to come out as the KJV does: “Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever.” It is significant that **מְקֹדֶשׁ** is singular and **בָּתִים** is plural. One would expect that there should be agreement in number between the two if one is going to translate the former with “grave,” although that is not always consistent in Hebrew poetry. If one sticks to the consonantal text and the Masoretic reading of it, there is much less reason to understand the psalmist as indicating a *place* to which the dead go where they remain forever. The composers of the three main psalms we are considering in this study (16, 49, and 73) seem to share this common perspective of death and the afterlife as a state or condition rather than thinking of the deceased in a location. We saw it in Chapter Four when we considered the word **נַחַשׁ** in Ps 16:10, and we will see it again in the next chapter on Ps 73. It is not that these poets are making doctrinal statements about the afterlife. But they are clearly wording their comments about it in a way that shows a common point of view, a view that is noticeably different from Mesopotamian and Egyptian views, which tended to focus on the place that the deceased were believed to occupy. The psalmists speak of

⁴⁹ In Ps 64:7 the **קְרָבָה** devises plans; in Ps 62:5 it curses; in Isa 16:11 it murmurs for conquered peoples; and in Ps 103:1 it blesses Yahweh.

⁵⁰ KJV, NASB, EHV. Brug, *Commentary on Psalms*, 484–85. Goldingay offers both translations and interpretations (MT and LXX) in his commentary. John Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, vol. 2 of *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 96, 102.

death and *sheol* as more of a state or condition rather than indicating a place that the dead occupy. This will be important to consider when we come to v. 16, which could otherwise be seen to be in conflict with where v. 12 says the dead remain. If this interpretation of קָרְבָּם is followed, then the three phrases in v. 12 may be going from the more specific to the broader—*their houses, the places where they lived, the lands they claimed by putting their names on them.*

Refrain (vv. 13 and 21)

Both stanzas of the Psalm (vv. 6–12 and 14–20) end with a refrain which varies slightly in its two occurrences. Although some of the evidence suggests that the differences may have resulted from the transmission of the text, I will argue that the psalmist varies the second one slightly to advance his point.

It is no doubt a poetic touch that the psalmist begins v. 13 with מִלְּאָךְ, following the previous verse, which ended with מִלְּאָךְ. Here we might hear an echo of Gen 3:19. Because of Adam's sin he would return to מִלְּאָךְ. Though man claims much honor for himself and even claims lands by placing his name on them, he does not last long. The choice of the verb לִין is no doubt significant since when not used figuratively, as it is here, it means "to spend the night." In the cosmic scheme of things, man does not last even one night. This is the feature of the refrain that is different in v. 21. The Septuagint has οὐ συνῆκεν ("does not understand") here, just as it does in v. 21. The Hebrew has בְּלִילֵין in v. 13 and בְּלֹא־יִבְנֶן in v. 21. There are some Hebrew manuscripts that have בְּלַיְלֵין and בְּלַיְלָן in v. 21 too, which might suggest an attempt by copyists to make the two occurrences of the refrain uniform. As to which reading is the original, I will argue in my exegesis of the second stanza that the psalmist tips his hand in the second half of the Psalm as to the solution to his riddle. While in the first half he insists that all humanity shares the same

fate—death—in the second half he reveals that there is a bifurcation in their ultimate postmortem destiny. Though all can see (v. 11) that every human being is destined for death, what cannot be seen by all is that Yahweh will take some out of the hand of *sheol* (v. 16) while others will go to the generation of their fathers where they will not see light forever (v. 20). This cannot be grasped by man with his intellectual powers, and so the psalmist changes this phrase in the refrain that follows the second stanza.

Not only does this change the meaning of the refrain in the second instance and reinforce what has just been revealed in the stanza, but there is also an interesting sound shift in which the ב at the front of the negative in the first instance (בַּשׁוֹל) is buried within the verb in the second instance (יִבְשׁוֹל) and the ל at the end of the negative in v. 13 and in the middle of the verb there (יִלְשָׁלֵל) is switched to the beginning of the negative (אֲלֵל) in v. 21. Thus there is an interplay of sounds that highlights the shift in point from the shortness of man's existence to the limitation of his intellect.

The second half-verse of the refrain is the same in both instances. The fate of human beings is compared to that of the beasts. They are *cut off* (גָּזַר). This word could be a double entendre.⁵¹ The way the Masoretes pointed it makes it appear to be the *niphal* perfect of הָמַר II, “be cut off, destroyed, ruined.”⁵² But the exact same letters could be pointed גָּזַל, which is the *niphal* perfect of מָלַל, “be made silent.”⁵³ Whether cut off or made silent, in a culture where some said that the dead could be contacted for guidance and blessing, this would be an indictment of such a belief.

⁵¹ Timothy Saleska, *Psalms 1–50*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, forthcoming).

⁵² BDB, s.v. הָמַר.

⁵³ BDB, s.v. מָלַל.

The prominent members of society who had died could not be contacted by the living. They were cut off and silent. The Septuagint translator apparently saw this final word of the refrain as a redundancy, repeating the idea that man “is like” (**לְמַנְשֵׁל**) the beasts. He translates the latter παρασυνεβλήθη, a synonym of the word he uses to translate **מִנְחָה**: ώμοιώθη.⁵⁴ Although there is a homonym of **מִנְחָה** II (**מִנְחָה** I, “be like, resemble”), it does not occur in the *niphal*.⁵⁵ So it is highly unlikely that that is the verb intended here. In addition, that analysis of the final word of the Psalm makes it end on an unnecessarily repetitive and unpoetic note. The Septuagint version when translated literally says, “He is like the senseless beasts, and he is like them.”⁵⁶

Stanza 2: But God Will Buy Me Free from *Sheol* (vv. 14–20)

The second stanza begins, “This is their way. Stupidity is theirs.” The idea of one’s life as a “way” or “path” is so prevalent in the Psalms that it needs no comment here. While the psalmist distinguished between the wise and the foolish in stanza 1 (v. 11), here he characterizes the way of the common man (**מִנְחָה**) as foolish.⁵⁷ The second half of v. 14 is one of those cryptically worded phrases that has led to numerous suggestions for emendation. Literally the Masoretic text reads, “And after them with their mouth they are pleased.” The first word, **אַחֲרֵיכֶם**, is understood by many recent commentators as referring to “their end” or “their fate.”⁵⁸ They arrive at this interpretation either on the basis of the Targum reading, **וּבְסֻוֹפָה**, for which *BHS* suggests

⁵⁴ T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 531.

⁵⁵ BDB, s.v. **מִנְחָה**.

⁵⁶ παρασυνεβλήθη τοῖς κτήνεσιν τοῖς ἀνοήτοις καὶ ώμοιώθη αὐτοῖς.

⁵⁷ Note the cognates **כָּסֵל** (“fool”), which occurred in v. 11, and **כָּסֵל** (“stupidity, folly”), which occurs here in v. 14.

⁵⁸ E.g., Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 301.

the *Vorlage* אֶלְעָרִים (“their end”),⁵⁹ or on the basis of the term אֶרְחֹות (“paths”) as used in Job 8:13, where it has the sense of “fate.” Those who take it this way are following *BHS*’ emendation נַאֲרָחוֹת.⁶⁰ Others take it as simply pointing to people who come after these fools—whether the “after” indicates people who follow them during their lifetime or who follow their advice after their death.⁶¹ If it’s referring to those who follow in the footsteps of these fools after their death, the word could be a play on the word לְאֶחָרִים in v. 11. Though the fools who trusted in their wealth died and had to leave their wealth to others, those very people still delight in the fools’ philosophy even though they saw them die and forfeit everything.

The other variant that merits mention is that the verb of the clause, יַרְצֵו, appears to have been understood by some of the early versions as “they will run” (יַרְצָו).⁶² If that is the case, v. 14b might make more sense with the beginning of the verse, which speaks about a way or path. Then someone is running after someone else on the path of fools. However, בְּפִיחָם does not seem to fit with a point that involves running on a path. Often this Hebrew word when combined with a pronominal suffix is used metonymically for what a person says.⁶³ Again I advocate hewing as closely to the Masoretic text as possible. Even though the goals of those who put their trust in wealth are proven foolish by death (vv. 12–13), those who follow them still put their trust in what the rich fools said. A freer translation of v. 14 may capture the point better: “This is their path. They’re foolish. Yet those who come after them accept favorably what they said.”

⁵⁹ deClasse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 441; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 96.

⁶⁰ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 479.

⁶¹ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 484; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 356; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 74.

⁶² *BHS* cites Aquila, Jerome, and Origen’s transliteration of the Hebrew in Greek letters.

⁶³ See Isa 29:13 and Ps 73:9.

Verse 15 is the most difficult verse in the Psalm. It is often said to be corrupt.⁶⁴ The fact that the *BHS* apparatus notes go up to the letter k shows that there have been many attempts to make sense of it. However, many of the apparatus notes for this verse are merely emendations suggested by modern exegetes that have no manuscript evidence to support them. Several of them are attempts to see evidence for belief in a subterranean abode of the dead in the verse, which is nowhere to be found in the Masoretic text. And finally, the Septuagint reading of the verse follows the Masoretic text word for word, in all but one instance reflecting the pointing of the Masoretes. In so doing the Septuagint translator was able to give a rather smooth rendering of the Hebrew. His translation does not bear the marks of a fractured or incomprehensible *Vorlage*. As a result, I will not pursue every emendation that has been suggested, but will focus on those aspects of the verse that indicate this psalmist, like the composer of Psalm 16, was speaking of death as a condition rather than focusing on a physical location for the dead.

The verse begins by comparing the fools who are dying to sheep. This continues the imagery contained in the refrain (v. 13), where humans were compared to animals. The הַ on the front of אָוֶלְשׁ indicates the fate to which they are headed. The verb נִתֵּשׁ is usually identified as the third person plural *qal* perfect form of נִתֵּשׁ. However, the pointing and accented syllable differ from the four instances where the usual perfect form is found (נִתֵּשׁ).⁶⁵ The lexicons suggest an alternate root for it for that reason, נִתְחַשׁ, a byform of נִתֵּשׁ, which accounts for the *dagesh* in the form here in v. 15. BDB assigns the meaning “set, appoint” to it and translates the phrase,

⁶⁴ E.g., *BHS*, 1131; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 480.

⁶⁵ Exod 33:4; Isa 22:7; Pss 3:7; 140:6. The form that occurs here, with *dagesh* in the *tav* and the accent on the last syllable, occurs one other place, Ps. 73:9.

“they have been appointed like a flock for *Sheol*.⁶⁶ *DCH* assigns the meaning “set oneself, head (towards).”⁶⁷ All three lexicons and *BHS*, however, suggest the emendation שָׁמַךְ, from שִׁמְךְ (“sink down”),⁶⁸ perhaps because of 20th century exegetes’ tendency to want to find references in the Hebrew Bible that bear witness to a belief in an underworld similar to that of Israel’s neighbors. What is interesting is that the Septuagint, written in the language of the Greeks, who had such an underworld belief, clearly does not render the phrase in a way that would indicate a physical descent into *sheol* (ώς πρόβατα ἐν ᾅδῃ ἔθεντο, “like sheep they placed themselves in hades”).⁶⁹ The second clause in the verse continues the imagery. Death is personified as a shepherd who tends or pastures the deceased. Since death is personified in this phrase and it appears to be parallel to שָׁמַךְ in the first phrase, I have translated the latter “the grave.” See my reasons for this translation choice in my comments on Ps 16:10 in the previous chapter. Although the parallelism in the first two phrases of 49:15 is not as even as those in Hos 13:14, it’s important to take the latter passage into account when considering the relationship of שָׁמַךְ to מֵת in Ps 49:15. Hosea 13:14 is clearly using the two terms synonymously, and its parallelism is very tight:

מֵיד שָׁאול אֶפְרָאֵם מִמְּנֹת אֲגָלָם אָהִי לְבָרִיךְ מֵת אֲהִי קָטְבָה שָׁאול

“I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death.
Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?”

Here Yahweh is speaking of death and the grave in a metaphorical sense, of the extermination of

⁶⁶ BDB, s.v. שָׁמַךְ.

⁶⁷ DCH, 8:580.

⁶⁸ BDB, s.v. שָׁמַךְ; BHS, 1131; DCH, 8:580; HALOT, 4:1486.

⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Muraoka does not cite this instance of τίθημι in his Septuagint lexicon. It is difficult to determine the intended nuance of this occurrence of the verb, which has such a broad semantic field. Muraoka’s meaning II. 5. “to destine or consign to a certain fate or unfavourable treatment” is a possibility. What I wish to emphasize here is that the Greek gives no indication of the deceased going down to a subterranean place.

the people of Israel, not of the death of an individual person. He is personifying death and the grave by addressing them in a taunting manner with the two questions. The promise of his deliverance in the first phrase bears a striking resemblance to what the author of Ps 49 is going to say in the very next verse (16), where he asserts that God will redeem (יִפְרַח) him from the hand (יד) of שָׂאֹל. This shows that שָׂאֹל could be used synonymously with the personified concept of death in ancient Israel. And since it is parallel to the personified concept of death in Ps 49:15 and in v. 16 the psalmist is going to speak of God redeeming him from the *hand* of שָׂאֹל (just as Yahweh does in the Hosea passage), I have translated שָׂאֹל as “the grave” in all three places where it occurs in Ps 49:15–16.

Verse 15 is not only verbally and grammatically challenging. Its meter or lack thereof seems to have puzzled the Masoretes. By far the longest verse in the Psalm, it has been assigned no *atnach* by them. The strongest disjunctive accent they’ve assigned is the *ole wejored* on עַם. The clause that follows it presents a new thought. “The upright will rule over them in the morning.” Perhaps because of this shift in topic, *BHS* proposes emendations for every word in this clause. The emendations produce several different ways to render it, such as, “and they will go down with the upright into the grave” or “their flesh will go down to rot.”⁷⁰ Again, these seem to reflect 20th century attempts to read the idea of descent to an underworld into the verse where no manuscripts or early versions support the multiple emendations. The Septuagint strongly supports the Masoretic reading (καὶ κατακυριεύσουσιν αὐτῶν οἱ εὐθεῖς τὸ πρωί). That the ancient translator’s rendering and the Hebrew vowel pointing recorded in the medieval period coincide speaks strongly for the integrity of the text as we have it. Raabe has a thorough

⁷⁰ Because of the number of them, I will let the reader look at the proposed emendations in *BHS* rather than reproducing all of them here.

discussion of the various interpretational possibilities that have been proposed for this clause.⁷¹

Let me share just a couple of his insights that support the reading of the Masoretes. It's highly unlikely that the Masoretes were mistaken in their pointing of the verb יְרַאֲנָה. They are clearly identifying it as a form of רָאֵן (“rule over”) and not רָאֵן (“go down”), as suggested by the emendations. An imperfect of רָאֵן occurs in v. 18, where it is pointed properly by the Masoretes. Also, the verb רָאֵן never occurs with the preposition בְּ to express accompaniment (“to descend along with others”) as the one emendation suggests. The combination of רָאֵן with מִעּ or תְּנָשֵׁן is the way that idea is expressed.⁷²

Those exegetes who do not rely on emendation render the phrase similar to the way I have in my translation, “And the upright will rule over them in the morning.”⁷³ However, not all of these exegetes are agreed on what “the morning” is referring to. Goldingay, for instance, believes it’s referring to a reversal of fortune for the upright in this life.⁷⁴ It’s true that in the Psalter the morning is often associated with intervention on Yahweh’s part to turn the fortunes of his oppressed people into triumph in this life.⁷⁵ But here the context is not the oppression of his people by the wealthy but rather the temptation for them to be misled by the attitude of the wealthy toward wealth. In a Psalm that is so focused on death, it’s highly unlikely that this clause would be slipped into the middle of a verse like this one if it were focused on ultimate justice

⁷¹ Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 74–75.

⁷² Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 76.

⁷³ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 484; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 356; deClasse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 442; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 103; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 74. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 301, and Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 479, follow the emendations and interpret the clause as referring to descent to the underworld.

⁷⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 104.

⁷⁵ Pss 30:6; 46:6; 90:14; 143:8.

being realized in this life. No, as we will see in the remainder of the Psalm, the psalmist is clearly moving toward describing a divergence between the ultimate postmortem destiny of the foolish rich and the psalmist. The verb (וַיְהִי) is waw-consecutive imperfect, which in prose normally designates past action. But the grammarians point out that this form can indicate a future event when following an imperfect that describes a future event, as it does here.⁷⁶ The Septuagint supports this interpretation (καὶ κατακυριεύσοντι). So the psalmist is clearly referring to something that will happen after death, especially since the statement is coordinated with the preceding phrase about personified death pasturing the dead. The psalmist perhaps uses the term “morning” because he is harkening back to the word זָהָר in v. 13, where he asserts that man does not even last a night, and he perhaps alludes to it again in v. 20, where he asserts that those who trust in their wealth will never see the light of day. By contrast, he is saying that for the upright a morning will dawn.

As we saw in our study of Ps 16, the end of the following Psalm (17:15) has a reference to waking up and being satisfied with seeing Yahweh’s face, which in the history of interpretation has often been seen as a reference to resurrection on the day of judgment.⁷⁷ So this reference to the morning as the time when the upright will rule over those who trusted in wealth is interpreted by some current exegetes as a reference to the resurrection.⁷⁸ Raabe points to two references in the minor prophets that speak of the righteous trampling the wicked on the day of judgment, Joel 4:13 and Mal 3:21.⁷⁹ Though the former uses the verb שָׁמַר in this sense, there does not seem to

⁷⁶ GKC §111w; Joüon §118s; Waltke-O’Connor §33.3.1d.

⁷⁷ See footnote 3 in Chapter Four.

⁷⁸ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 487; Saleska, *Psalms 1–50*, 7, 10.

⁷⁹ Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 74.

be any hint of the upright inflicting physical harm on the deceased wealthy here in Ps 49:15. But it does sound a note of postmortem triumph for those who do not trust in wealth during this life. In the following verse the psalmist will have more to say about his postmortem hope.

Verse 15 up to this point has puzzled modern exegetes. That's clear from the many emendations that the *BHS* apparatus contains. But it is only the last five words that seem to have caused confusion for ancient and medieval exegetes. The word נצִיר מ has a *qere* reading in the Masoretic tradition (נצּוֹרָם). The *kethiv* reading seems to represent the word צִיר ("image, shape, figure").⁸⁰ This is a rare word. Its only other certain occurrence is in the plural in Is 45:16, where it refers to "idols." The *qere* would seem to represent the word צִיר. Although there are many homonyms with this spelling, the most common one is the noun meaning "rock." Of the early versions, *BHS* points out that the Syriac reads *wšwrthwn*, which would seem to indicate that that translator read the word as צִירָה, נצְרָתָם being a word related to צִיר and also meaning "form, shape."⁸¹ The Septuagint has something totally different, which makes it difficult to determine its *Vorlage*: καὶ ἡ βοήθεια αὐτῶν ("and their help"). Since the *kethiv* and Syriac appear to be in agreement, I have gone with "form." Aside from a few manuscripts with variants for the next word, לְכַלּוֹת (i.e. לְכַלּוֹת), there is no reason to read it any differently than the Masoretes did, as a *piel* infinitive construct of בָּלֵה with the meaning "wear out (trans.), consume away,"⁸² with שָׁאֹל serving as its subject. The first three words, then, produce the coherent meaning "their form is for the grave to consume," i.e. their bodily form will decompose. The Septuagint apparently sees

⁸⁰ BDB, s.v. צִיר; HALOT, 3:1024.

⁸¹ BDB, s.v. צִיר; HALOT, 3:1017.

⁸² BDB, s.v. בָּלֵה.

the נִמְנָה on the front of the next word as a נִמְנָה of separation and renders it ḥek. The noun itself (זָבֵל) is usually used for the exalted houses of gods.⁸³ Here the psalmist is no doubt using it to describe the mansions of the wealthy, which he had first referred to v. 12. The preposition at the end of the verse is no doubt a לְ of possession. The third masculine singular suffix, according to my interpretation, refers back to the wealthy deceased. Although these people have been referred to in the plural throughout the rest of the verse, it is not unusual for Hebrew poets to switch from plural to singular rather quickly and arbitrarily. These last two words then indicate that the decomposition of those who trusted in wealth happens at a distance from their expensive houses. Another possibility is that the suffix refers back to the יְמִין at the beginning of the clause. Some commentators see the suffix as referring to a personified שָׂאול.⁸⁴ In this view, שָׂאול destroys the forms of those who trusted in wealth from *his* lofty abode.

Kraus finds the second half of v. 15 so difficult to comprehend that he stops translating after the word יְמִין and says “a logically based reconstruction of the second part of v. [15] is impossible.”⁸⁵ DeClaissé-Walford dismisses out of hand that the reference to the upright ruling in the morning could express a hope of life after death for the faithful. She can only see such references as a promise of rescue from oppression for the faithful in this life.⁸⁶ Such commentators seem to be unwilling to countenance the idea of faithful Israelites believing in an alternate postmortem destiny different from that of those who do not trust in Yahweh—at least, at the time of the writing of Psalms like this one. But that seems to be the exact direction this

⁸³ 1 Kgs 8:13; 2 Chr 6:2; Isa 63:15; Hab 3:11.

⁸⁴ Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 70, 77.

⁸⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 480.

⁸⁶ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 445.

psalmist is going in as he leads up to v. 16: “Surely God will redeem my life from the hand of *sheol*, for he will take me.”

At first glance, the verse seems to stand in such contrast to the rest of the Psalm, with its emphasis on the inevitability of death, that exegetes in the early twentieth century claimed it was a gloss or a later addition by someone reworking the original *Grundpsalm*.⁸⁷ Markus Witte showed at the turn of the twenty-first century that all attempts to identify developmental literary layers within the Psalm have failed and, because v. 16 is so integral to the overall point and composition of the Psalm and yet so unique, it actually is a high point in the Psalm.⁸⁸ Those who see no warrant in either form or content for taking v. 16 as anything but part of the original composition propose two interpretations for the rescue being described in it: (1) a rescue from imminent death (cf. v. 6), or (2) in contrast to vv. 8–10, a rescue out of death itself.⁸⁹

Due to the resumption of the verb פָּרַע in v. 16, it is likely that the psalmist is returning to the subject he addressed in vv. 8–10. If, as I advocated there, he is broaching the hypothetical possibility of living on forever in those verses, he is at the very least implying in this verse that God is able to accomplish such a ransom for the faithful.⁹⁰ It is significant that vv. 8 and 16 are the only verses in the Psalm that refer to God.⁹¹ In v. 16 אֶלְيָהִים is subject and appears in an emphatic position in front of the verb. It is amplified by the preceding interjection אָלָא, which

⁸⁷ Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1906), 1:411; Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 132, 214.

⁸⁸ Markus Witte, “‘Aber Gott Wird Meine Seele Erlösen’: Tod Und Leben Nach Psalm XLIX” *VT* 50, no. 4 (2000): 547–49.

⁸⁹ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 483–84; Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 316.

⁹⁰ Since three forms of the root פָּרַע occur in vv. 8–9, it is highly likely that the author is harkening back to those verses when he uses the verb again in v. 16.

⁹¹ The lack of the proper name Yahweh in Ps 49 is no doubt due to the fact that Book II of the Psalter makes almost exclusive use of the name אֱלֹהִים when referring to the Deity.

introduces an amazing turn of events. What no one else is able to do, God can do. The relationship between God and the psalmist is highlighted by the uniqueness of the terms used to refer to the two. **נָפְשִׁי** appears here after its initial occurrence in v. 9, and it comes directly after the verb, just as **אֲלֹהִים** comes directly before it. The fact that God is the subject and the author's **נָפְשָׁה** is the direct object highlights Yahweh as the doer in the relationship and the psalmist as the recipient of what Yahweh does ("ransom"). The fact that the psalmist uses a juridical/financial term to describe what Yahweh does for his faithful one no doubt stems from the Psalm's focus on wealth.⁹² In addition, it's striking that at this point the psalmist's focus changes abruptly from the self-confident wealthy to himself. Not since v. 6 has he referred to himself. Now he suddenly shifts from the wealthy to himself, and the contrast produced by this shift helps him to highlight the fact that for him there is an alternate postmortem destiny.⁹³

Although the Masoretes have placed the *atnah* for this verse under **וְאֶל**, the meter of the verse seems to indicate that **מֵיד־שָׁאוֹל** belongs with the second colon, indicating perhaps that the poet intended it to modify **יְקַחְנֵי**.⁹⁴ It is not unusual in biblical Hebrew for a portion of a **כִּי** clause to be pulled forward and placed in front of the conjunction for emphasis,⁹⁵ and that may be the case here with **מֵיד־שָׁאוֹל**. If so, it seems that the psalmist is amplifying the uniqueness of his situation compared to that of the arrogant rich. Yahweh will take him out of the very grip of *sheol*. On the other hand, the exact same prepositional phrase occurs with the verb **פָּרַח** in the

⁹² cf. Exod 21:30.

⁹³ Saleska, *Psalms 1–50*, 12.

⁹⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 480. Note the larger space that *BHS* places between **נָפְשִׁי** and **מֵיד־שָׁאוֹל**, giving the verse a symmetrical 3:3 meter. A glance at vv. 16–21 shows that all these verses share a similar symmetry of meter.

⁹⁵ cf. Ps 128:2.

very similarly worded Hos 13:14.⁹⁶ Kathrin Liess wonders if it is placed between the two verbal clauses of v. 16 so that it can be understood as going with both verbs: Yahweh will redeem me from the hand of *sheol*, and he will also take me out of it.⁹⁷ She follows Joüon-Muraoka's lead⁹⁸ in seeing the יְהִי as affirmative ("gewiß"):

Ja, Gott wird loskaufen mein(e) Leben(skraft),
aus der Hand der Unterwelt, gewiß! wird er mich nehmen.⁹⁹

When the whole of the Psalm is taken into account, it does not appear that v. 16 can be referring to a rescue from an imminent danger of death. The psalmist is concerned about the final outcome for those who boast of their wealth and about his own final outcome. As with Ps 16, Ps 49 shows little, if any, concern on the psalmist's part that he is in imminent danger. Rather he is speaking of an ultimate rescue from death and *sheol* that will bring him justice after living in a world that seems to favor the wealthy. Psalm 49's perspective differs somewhat from that of Ps 16 in that the psalmist implies that he will indeed experience *sheol*, but God will take him out of it, an expression that leads Christian exegetes to see in it a reference to resurrection.¹⁰⁰

It has often been claimed that the use of the verb נָקַל in v. 16 harkens back to the taking up of Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 9–11),¹⁰¹ but there are three things that speak against finding a link here: (1) the general nature of the verb נָקַל, (2) the lack of references in the rest of the Old Testament to the two taking up events, and (3) the different nature of the taking that the psalmist is obviously speaking of here. (Neither Enoch nor Elijah were taken up out of

⁹⁶ מֵיד שָׁאֹל אֶפְרַתִּים

⁹⁷ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 374.

⁹⁸ Joüon, § 164b.

⁹⁹ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 373.

¹⁰⁰ e.g., Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 488.

¹⁰¹ e.g., Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 306.

sheol.) A closer parallel is found in Ps 73:24, as we will see in the next chapter.

Psalm 49:16 clearly speaks of an alternate destiny for the believer in contrast to that of the unbeliever. The abrupt entry of the verse's point into the flow of the Psalm can be accounted for by interpreting it as the revelatory moment in the psalmist's riddle. What no one else can do—what no amount of wealth can buy—*Yahweh can do*.¹⁰² This is the amazing secret that the psalmist was preparing his listeners for in the introduction (vv. 2–5).¹⁰³ At the same time, the psalmist is, like the composer of Ps 16, very restrained in his statement of faith about what happens after death. He only states that God will take him out of the grip of לִאָשׁוֹן. He does not mention where God will take him or how he will do it. He does not mention others who will meet him there in the afterlife. The reference, like the Enoch account, does not mention where God will take him. Both there (Gen 5:24) and in the Psalm verse (49:16), the statements are worded so tersely that the reader cannot help but wonder where God took/will take the referent. The Elijah account, by contrast, does say that he was taken up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:1, 11). As we will see in the next chapter, the only Psalm reference that explicitly states the belief that Yahweh will take the psalmist to glory/heaven is Ps 73:24–25. As in Ps 16, this psalmist too avoids focusing the worshipper's attention on the place to which one goes after death and instead focuses on the state or condition of the deceased believer in relation to Yahweh.

Verse 17 begins with, “Do not fear.” The psalmist had addressed the question of fear at the beginning of the first stanza (v. 6). However, there he had simply asked the question, “Why should I fear?” He was musing about whether or not he should fear. The entirety of the verse suggested that he was being pursued by wicked men (“in evil days, when the iniquity of those at

¹⁰² de Meyer, "Science of Literature," 166; Johnston, *Shades*, 203; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 78.

¹⁰³ Johann Jakob Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben im Alten Testamente* (Bern: Franck, 1940), 17.

my heels surround me”). One could get the impression from that verse alone that the danger the psalmist was facing was being oppressed by the wealthy. But as stanza 1 unfolded it became clear that he was not concerned about being oppressed by the rich, but rather about being misled by their worldview that money was the solution to all of life’s problems. In the intervening verses he has made it clear that the problem with this viewpoint is that in death a person is robbed of that solution. In v. 16 he revealed the answer to the riddle he had spoken of in the introduction (v. 5), the solution to the problem of death. Yahweh can pay the ransom needed to redeem his life. Yahweh can bridge the gulf that death poses. So now, as he begins the denouement of the Psalm, his question (“Why should I fear?”) shifts to a command (“Do not fear!”).

In v. 18 he sums up why his reader/hearer should not fear. When the rich person dies, he will take nothing with him. Note that the strong negative נֹלֵט is in a prominent, emphatic position in its clause. As a result, I have translated the combination of it and הַכָּל as “nothing.” Though a more wooden translation of the clause would be “for he will not take it all when he dies,” that would give the impression that the psalmist is saying the rich person can take some of it with him. That is clearly contrary to the overall context, and so “nothing” captures the import of the two words better. The second half of v. 18 clearly denotes a spatial direction in which the arrogant rich go after death (“go down”), but this would not necessarily be a concession to the common ancient Near Eastern belief that all the dead go to a common underworld. In-ground burial could account for the choice of vocable, or it may simply be an example of cultural appropriation, where a wording was taken over from common usage in Israel’s cultural milieu without espousing the beliefs that lay behind it.

The וְ at the beginning of v. 19 is concessive (“although”). It introduces the rich person’s

attitude about himself, which stands in contrast to what he'll be facing at the time of his death (v. 20). **בָּשָׂר** stands at the beginning of the clause for emphasis. "His soul he blesses while he is alive." Although some commentators and translators interpret this phrase as simply saying that the rich person blesses *himself*,¹⁰⁴ Raabe points out that there is more to it than that. Old Testament writers frequently use the *hithpael* of **בָּרַךְ** to express the idea of blessing oneself.¹⁰⁵ Raabe suggests that what the psalmist is saying is that the rich person has replaced Yahweh with himself, with his **בָּשָׂר**. In the Psalter the psalmists frequently bless Yahweh,¹⁰⁶ and in many of these the psalmist calls on his **בָּשָׂר** to bless him. Here the arrogant rich person blesses his **בָּשָׂר** instead of Yahweh. The consensus among the commentators is that the second half of v. 19 is a self-glorifying quote made by the rich person about himself: "And let them praise you, for it (my soul) is doing well for you." Raabe points out that the quote is a parody of the common exclamation of praise, "Praise Yahweh for he is good."¹⁰⁷ Though many commentators take **תִּתְפֹּחֵב** as second person masculine singular imperfect *hiphil*, Hebrew style would not use the prepositional phrase that follows it (**לְ** or **לִ**, as it is here in pause) to express the reflexive idea, "do good to yourself." It is more likely that it is third person feminine singular with **בָּשָׂר** as subject. All the occurrences of the *hiphil* form of this verb with the preposition **לְ** state that the subject does good to another individual.¹⁰⁸ None of them use the preposition to indicate that the subject does good to himself. Also, in most of these occurrences the author or speaker is saying

¹⁰⁴ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 104; CSB; ESV.

¹⁰⁵ E.g., Deut 29:18; Isa 65:16; Jer 4:2.

¹⁰⁶ Pss 16:7; 26:12; 28:6; 34:2; 63:5; 103:1, 2, 22; 104:1, 35; 115:18; 134:1, 2; 135:19, 20; 145:2, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 78. Pss 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Gen 12:16; Exod 1:20; Num 10:29, 32; Josh 24:20; Judg 17:13; 1 Sam 25:31; Ps 125:4.

that *Yahweh* does good to some individual, and here we have the author praising his נָפְךָ for doing good to someone, i.e. himself, again implying that the rich person makes his נָפְךָ his god.

The variants cited by *BHS* for v. 19 indicate that the early versions did not recognize this distinction. But the first word in v. 20 (תִּבְוֹא) supports this interpretation. Although the subject could again be second person masculine singular, that would not agree with the suffix on אָבוֹתֵינוּ, nor does it fit the flow of the context for the psalmist to say directly to the rich person at this point, “You will go.” It is much more likely that v. 20a is saying, “It (his soul) will go to the generation of his fathers.”¹⁰⁹ This reflects the belief expressed so often in historical narrative that deceased persons were gathered to their fathers or to their people. What is intriguing is that here the נָפְךָ of the deceased is said to go to the fathers. Although a thorough study of the word נָפְךָ in this regard is beyond the scope of this work, I would be remiss if I did not refer back to the instances found in the Northwest Semitic inscriptions, primarily the Katumuwa Inscription, that I cited in Chapter Two, which bear witness to the fact that in the Semitic world of the first millennium BC the נָפְךָ or *nbš* was believed to live on after death with those who had predeceased the person and with the gods. With that evidence and the evidence here, it’s puzzling that prominent current scholars still question whether ancient Israel believed in an ongoing life for a person’s spirit after death.¹¹⁰ Because of the complex nature of this subject due

¹⁰⁹ Brug, *Psalms 1–72*, 489; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 307; Raabe, *Psalm Structures*, 7. I have chosen to translate the word זֶרֶד as “generation” here because in v. 12 that is clearly its meaning. There the psalmist is speaking of something that gets handed down “from generation to generation” (לִזְרֵד זֶרֶד). See my further discussion of the word זֶרֶד in Chapter Five where I treat the occurrence of it in Ps 73:15. The word can mean a “circle” of people who share a common characteristic or perspective.

¹¹⁰ See Robert Alter’s explanation for not using the word “soul” for any of the occurrences of נָפְךָ in his recently published Bible translation in the following interview: Avi Steinberg, “After More Than Two Decades of Work, a New Hebrew Bible to Rival the King James,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2018, accessed March 30, 2020.

to the influence of Greek ideas about body/soul duality on the early centuries of the Christian church, the issue requires a study of its own. Perhaps the evidence produced here will serve as incentive for a restudy of the subject in future years.

For the purposes of this study I can only point out that the second half of v. 20 adds another intriguing impetus for such a study: “Until forever they will not see light.” The wording mimics what is said about the fate of miscarried persons in Ps 58:9; Job 3:16 and Eccl 6:4f. They never see light either. The psalmist here seems to be contrasting the fate of the arrogant rich with what he says in his hypothetical musing about living forever in v. 10. There he wondered about the possibility of living forever and not seeing decay. The fact that the last four words of these two verses are so parallel, yet end with an opposite outcome (see below), is a final piece of evidence that the psalmist sees two different outcomes for the arrogant rich and himself.

לֹא יְרַא אֶת־שְׁחָתָה 49:10

עַד־זֵאת לֹא יְרַא אֶת־אֹור 49:20

In the first one, he speculates that those for whom a proper ransom is paid will never see decay. Note the strong negative **לֹא**. A more wooden translation would be, “will not see decay forever.” In the latter the same words for “not” and “forever” are used to assert that the arrogant rich will not see light forever.

The second stanza is closed off with a variation of the refrain that came at the end of the first stanza (v. 13). See the notes on it above. The words that have been varied in the middle of this final refrain (**וְלֹא יִבּוּן**) reflect the fact that in the second stanza the psalmist has revealed the answer to his riddle. Anyone who “does not understand” these revealed truths about the differing destinies of those who trust in wealth and those who trust in Yahweh are like the animals who are cut off/silenced.

Conclusion

Like Ps 16, Ps 49 is rather reserved in its statements of belief in postmortem existence. The psalmist's reasons for these reserved expressions are clearly not as directly related to the cult of the dead as those in Ps 16 appear to be. The composer of Ps 49 tells us in the introduction that he is opening up (**חַפְּצָנָה**) a riddle for his hearers. He gradually reveals his views on the afterlife after first posing the problem of the person who places his trust in wealth rather than in God. As he unravels the false confidence that such a worldview displays, he shows that he has a much more valuable treasure that cannot be ended by death. Though no human being could produce the ransom sum that would be due to God so that he might live forever, he is confident that God himself will pay the ransom amount needed to free him from the grip of the grave. Though all people are subject to death, there is an escape for him. God will take him out of the hand of **אֹולֶּה שָׁמֶן**.

In this, the Psalm differs from 16. There the psalmist professed that God would not abandon his **בָּנֶשׁ** to **אֹולֶּה שָׁמֶן**. Here the psalmist admits that he, like all humans is subject to death. But Yahweh will snatch him out of it. Those who have exchanged trust in Yahweh with trust in wealth, however, will face a different ultimate destiny, one in which they will never see light. They may delude themselves into thinking that their houses are forever and that their legacies will continue for generation after generation. But they are like the cattle. They will be cut off and silenced. This final statement at the end of the two refrains faintly alludes to and counters the cult of the dead, which promised continued connection to the living and the ability to communicate with them from the afterlife. The psalmist asserts that the fate of those who do not trust in Yahweh is separation, darkness and silence. The faithful, on the other hand, will triumph over them in the morning and not see decay. Again, as in Psalm 16, this psalmist promises nothing

about fellowship with those who predeceased him but focuses only on a continued postmortem existence with God.

CHAPTER SIX

YAHWEH, MY PORTION FOREVER

PSALM 73

Unlike Pss 16 and 49, there is no mention of לְזַמֵּן in Ps 73—or even of death. Yet it is clear in the final stanza of the Psalm that the psalmist is speaking about life after death. For him death is hardly a consideration. His relationship with Yahweh will continue undisturbed by his passage from this life to the next. Yet the Psalm shares many themes and motifs with the earlier two. Even more than the composer of Ps 49, this psalmist feels the temptation to put his trust in the physical assets of this world. He intensely envies the rich and healthy and is jealous because everything seems to go so well for them despite their defiance of Yahweh. The comparison of foolish humans to animals is a common motif in both Psalms. As with Ps 49, 73 points ahead to the ultimate destruction of the wicked. At the same time, as in Ps 16, God is always with the psalmist, at his right hand, advising him, even “disciplining his kidneys.” In the end he comes to his senses and confesses that having Yahweh is infinitely better than having wealth or physical well-being. The language of “portion” occurs again to describe how God is his treasured possession. As in Ps 49, the psalmist’s destiny differs from that of the arrogant rich. God will “take” him, although again the place to which he will take the psalmist is vague. As with the other two Psalms, the psalmist’s location in his postmortem life does not seem to be of concern. The fact that he will be with God is his all-consuming interest. Again there is no mention of or even allusion to others sharing this postmortem existence. In Yawhistic monotheism what is important when it comes to postmortem existence is the one-on-one relationship between Yahweh and the individual believer. It’s significant that in all three Psalms it is the author/narrator—the “I”—who will be rescued by Yahweh and brought into his presence. It is

also worth noting that the concept of forever is prominent in all three Psalms' portrayals of postmortem life with Yahweh.

Of the three Psalms that we've looked at so far, this is the one that 20th century exegetes most often agreed expressed belief in life beyond death. Von Rad wrote, "Here the OT belief in the hereafter finds its purest formulation."¹ Janowski in the early 21st century wrote, "Here the idea of eternal life finds a certain high point within the literature of the Old Testament."² Of course the tendency among 20th century exegetes was to late date references that express a developed set of beliefs about life beyond death. This, among other things, led them to date Ps 73 as postexilic. Michel proposed that the psalmist's expression of hope for a life after death was a new idea that was so revolutionary he intentionally worded it subtly so that those who found the idea of an afterlife too hard to grasp would read it as expressing Yahweh's presence with the believer on this side of the grave while those who were, like him, enlightened in the sanctuary (v. 17) could see it as expressing faith in a postmortem existence.³ Zenger adopted this point of view, though he questioned whether Michel's assertion that this was done intentionally was going too far.⁴ Liess adopted this explanation too and argued that the author of Ps 73 came to this realization because of the crisis he went through as he contemplated why there is such disparity between what we do and how things go for us in this life. She advocated that the idea of an afterlife in which the believer finally experiences justice for his faithfulness was a new theological discovery that the author of Ps 73 made as a result of contemplating theodicy. From this she extrapolated that Ps 16 cannot be referring to the afterlife because its author had clearly

¹ von Rad, "Life and Death in the Old Testament," *TDNT* 2:848.

² Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 319.

³ Michel, "Ich aber bin," 172–73.

⁴ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 233.

not gone through such a struggle and its contents seem to indicate that it is earlier—from a time before the author of Ps 73 made his discovery.⁵ The evidence I’ve put forward in this dissertation thus far would seem to support the explanation that a belief in life after death was an inherent part of Israel’s religion from early on but that the distinctiveness of their beliefs in this regard in contrast to their neighbors’ caused them to choose their words cautiously when addressing the subject. The diversity of references to a belief in an afterlife that we saw in the various genres of Old Testament literature in Chapter Three would seem to suggest that such a belief was widespread and rather consistent among the various writers. The subject of dating lies beyond the scope of this work.⁶

But perhaps one other thing should be said about the three Psalms we are looking at in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Psalm 73 is attributed to Asaph, the name of a musician that the chronicler says was appointed by David.⁷ The majority of scholars today view the headings as later additions that preserve little if any reliable information about the composition of the Psalms. However, it’s intriguing that the three Psalms we’ve considered so far are attributed to three different authors, all of whom the historical narratives place in the early first millennium BC,⁸ and that they are distributed one in each of the first three books of the Psalter. Even aside from the headings, we’ve seen nothing in the first two, nor will we see anything in this one, that would indicate they are by the same author. And since each one has a different main purpose for writing his Psalm, it is interesting that the three share the same perspective on afterlife. Each is focused

⁵ Liess, *Weg Des Lebens*, 395.

⁶ For a thorough discussion of the thematic and linguistic arguments that play into the dating of Ps 73, see Armin Schmitt, *Entriickung—Aufnahme—Himmelfahrt: Untersuchungen zu einem Vorstellungsbereich im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1976), 302–9.

⁷ 1 Chr 15:16–19.

⁸ Ps 16 is attributed to David, Ps 49 is attributed to the sons of Korah, and Ps 73 is attributed to Asaph.

exclusively on being with Yahweh. Yahweh is the one who will rescue them from death and/or bring them to this blessed state. And this blessed existence will last forever. This seems to be a belief shared by all three, expressed similarly despite the diverse main purposes of the three poems, and none of the three fleshes out a description of what lies beyond except with general words about pleasures (in 16 and 73). There is a coherence that exists among these psalmodic articulations of afterlife belief.

Psalm 73 is often categorized as a wisdom Psalm because it shares characteristics of wisdom literature, such as the composer drawing attention to his own analysis of the world as he goes about examining it, trying to find some correlation between how people live their lives and how things go for them in life. He uses typical wisdom topoi such as comparing foolish humans who lack trust in Yahweh to animals. But the composition also shares characteristics of other types of Psalms, such as laments, Psalms of thanks and Psalms of trust, in many ways making it unique.⁹ It does not have quite the knotty problems that make it so hard to interpret key sections of the other two, such as 16:2b–4 and 49:15. Yet the Hebrew is challenging in its own way. The meter is much more uniform throughout than the previous two Psalms studied. Kraus claims that virtually all the verses are 3+3, with the exception of vv. 2 (4+3), 25 (2+3), and 28 (4+4+2).¹⁰ We'll see that it is not quite that consistent, but it is significantly more uniform than 16 and 49.

Zenger points out that the Psalm divides nicely into three sections, each of which begins with the interjection ֤ך: (1) presentation of the dilemma (vv. 1–12), (2) attempts by the psalmist to resolve the dilemma (vv. 13–17), and (3) God's solution to the dilemma (vv. 18–28). I'll be following this division in my treatment of the Psalm. Since the first stanza of this Psalm does not

⁹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary* (CC, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 84; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 343.

¹⁰Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 84. Kraus says the meter of v. 28 is 3+3+3, but it is clearly 4+4+2.

have as much bearing on its confession about the afterlife, my exegesis of it will be more cursory.

Translation¹¹ and Scansion

- v. 1 A psalm by Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure of heart. (4+2)
- v. 2 But I—my feet had almost slipped. My steps nearly made me fall. (4+3)
- v. 3 For I envied the boastful when I saw the well-being of the wicked. (2+3)
- v. 4 For they have no pains. Their bodies are healthy and fat. (4+3)
- v. 5 They do not share in the trouble of mortals, nor are they plagued along with mankind. (3+3)
- v. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace, and they wrap themselves with violence like a garment. (3+3)
- v. 7 Their eyes go out from fat, and the imaginations of their heart overreach. (3+3)
- v. 8 They mock and speak wickedly. Oppression from on high they speak. (3+3)
- v. 9 Their mouths are set in the heavens, and their tongues swagger on the earth. (3+3)
- v. 10 Therefore their people turn to them, and full waters are drained into them. (4+4)
- v. 11 And they say, “How does God know?” and “Is there knowledge in the Most High?” (4+3)
- v. 12 Look! These are the wicked. And always at ease, they increase in strength. (3+3)
- v. 13 Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. (3+3)
- v. 14 I have been plagued all day long and rebuked every morning. (3+2)
- v. 15 If I had said, “I will talk like this,” see, I would have acted treacherously with the generation of your children. (3+4)

¹¹ See Chapter Four, footnote 5 for a brief description of my rationale for the way I translate.

- v. 16 So I considered how to comprehend this. It was a problem in my eyes, (3+3)
- v. 17 until I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their destiny. (2+2)
- v. 18 Surely you place them on slippery ground. You cause them to fall into ruins. (4+2)
- v. 19 How they have gone to waste in an instant. They are completely consumed by calamity. (4+3)
- v. 20 Like a dream from which one awakens, Lord, when you rouse yourself, you will despise their image. (3+3)
- v. 21 When my mind was embittered and I was piercing my heart with envy, (3+2)
- v. 22 and I was a brute and did not know, I was a beast with you. (3+3)
- v. 23 But I am always with you. You have taken hold of my right hand. (3+2)
- v. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me to glory. (2+3)
- v. 25 Whom do I have in heaven but you? And with you, I desire nothing on earth. (2+3)
- v. 26 My flesh and my heart fail; the rock of my heart and my portion is God forever. (3+4)
- v. 27 For look! Those who depart from you will perish. You annihilate everyone who whores away from you. (4+3)
- v. 28 But as for me, it is good for me to be near God. I have placed in the Lord Yahweh my refuge, to recount all your works. (4+4+2)

Stanza 1: The Dilemma (vv. 1–12)

The psalmist begins with the word בָּטַח. In so doing he signals us from the beginning that the dilemma he is about to present will have a positive ending. Although he's going to explore a very disturbing issue, he comes to the conclusion that though he has questioned God, in the end it's clear that God is good. It's intriguing that he says God is good to *Israel*. The entire Psalm is going to be very personal, and he could have started by saying, "God is good to me." But what

he has learned is a larger truth, one that applies to all his people. He qualifies “Israel,” however, in v. 1b: God is good “to those who are pure of heart.” He’s going to reveal in a moment how impure his heart has been, and no doubt his intention is for his poem to teach worshippers the dangers of impure motives. The *BHS* editors suggest emending לִישָׁר אֶל to לִישָׁרְאֵל (“to the upright of God”), no doubt to make it more parallel to לְבָרִי לְבָב. But since there is nothing in the history of the transmission of the text to suggest such a reading, we again have an example of why it’s important to stick to the received text. Since the second half of a poetic line in Hebrew often brings greater clarity to the first half rather than just repeating the idea, the psalmist is probably making a similar point to the one that Paul makes in Rom 9:6f. Not all Israel would perceive that God is good, only those with the purest of hearts. Those with impure hearts would say, “God is bad to Israel.”

In v. 2 he uses the vivid imagery of misstepping and tumbling to illustrate what nearly happened to him. The two verb forms each have *qere* readings that seem to capture the poet’s intent. The pointing נָטַע, which the consonantal letters of the *kethiv* seem to suggest, would be the *qal* passive participle of נָתַע. With the *qere* reading the Masoretes indicate that it was pronounced נָטַעַ ([“my feet] stretched out,” third plural perfect *qal*). The ending on the *kethiv* of the second verb (שָׁפֹךְ) makes it look like a third feminine singular form, whether *qal*, or as the Masoretes have pointed it, *pual*. It could be third feminine singular if its governing noun were singular. נָשָׁא is feminine, and if it were pointed אָשָׁוֵרִי נָשָׁא, the subject and consonantal verb form would be in agreement. But the Masoretes understood the subject to be plural, and accordingly the *qere* reading marks it as third person plural perfect *pual* שָׁפֹךְוּ, “my steps have almost been poured out”). Any of these readings is possible, but the point is the same in any case: “My feet

had almost slipped; my steps nearly made me fall.” It’s a vivid, poetic way of describing the mental, attitudinal fall the psalmist had nearly suffered.

In v. 3 the psalmist launches into what the problem was for him. Unlike the author of Ps 49, who was in danger of being misled to put his trust in wealth like the arrogant rich around him, this psalmist does not feel tempted to trust in riches but rather feels an intense envy toward the healthy, wealthy wicked. He sees that things go well for them, and later on he says his soul is embittered toward them as a result (v. 21).

A word about verb forms in the Psalm is in place at this point. Hebrew poetry does not display the consistency in verb form usage that prose does. No explanation for this lack of consistency has won scholarly consensus. Verse 3 contains the common phenomenon of having a perfect verb form (**יָמַת**) in the first half of the verse paralleled by an imperfect one (**הָרַא**) in the second half with no clear indication as to why the psalmist varies the tense-aspect. The theory that Hebrew once had a prefix conjugation that expressed past action has been put forward and is a likely explanation for the frequent pairing of perfect and imperfect forms in the Psalms, but although it has won some acceptance, it is still debated.¹² Whereas Hebrew prose tends to be narrative and thus relates successive events, Hebrew poetry is focused on parallel equivalents. As John Cook says, “The relationship between predicates in successive lines (i.e., parallel stichs) in poetry is one of equivalency—that is, they refer to the self-same event—in contrast to prose narrative, in which successive predicates refer to successive events.”¹³ As a result, the poet, whose template is artistic restatement, finds a certain beauty in expressing a

¹² For a thorough discussion of the historical and comparative data from the other Semitic languages in the ancient Near East that support the theory, see John A. Cook, *Time and the Biblical Hebrew Verb: The Expression of Tense, Aspect, and Modality in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 93–120. For the pros and cons of the theory, see Waltke-O’Connor §31.1.

¹³ Cook, *Biblical Hebrew Verb*, 300.

point in alternate forms as well as alternate vocables. The verbs of v. 3 display such artistic counter-balance not just in the choice of alternate forms but in bookending the verse by placing the verbs at the beginning and end of the line. The pairing of perfect and imperfect verb forms is especially frequent in Psalm 73.¹⁴ As a result, context has sometimes led me to be freer in my use of English tense in the translation of the verbs in this Psalm (in v. 3, “envied” and “saw”).¹⁵

According to the Masoretic text, v. 4 says, “For there are no pains at their death, and their bodies are fat.” But there’s a unique text critical question that raises the possibility that it’s not a reference to death at all. The word מַזְנָה is consistently found in the Masoretic tradition as well as supported by the early versions.¹⁶ However, with different word division it could originally have been two words (מַזְנָה וְלֹא) with the first word belonging to the first half line and the second word belonging to the second half line. This reading offers a more balanced poetic line: “For they have no pains. Their bodies are healthy and fat.” Not only are the two half lines more synonymous, but v. 4a then follows more naturally from what was said in 3b (“when I saw the well-being of the wicked”). Verse 4 starts with an explanatory נִגְשָׁה signaling that the psalmist wants to describe this well-being that the wicked enjoy. It would be unusual for him to mention death at this spot in the poem since he’s expanding on the well-being of the wicked. But not only does the proposed reading reflect better poetic parallelism and smoother flow of thought from verse to verse. The meter of the line with the emendation is 4+3, which is much more common in the poem than MT’s 4+2 here.¹⁷ In addition, נִגְשָׁה is found at the end of several lines and half lines

¹⁴ This pairing occurs in vv. 3, 6, 9, 18, 22 and 27.

¹⁵ See also vv. 16 and 17.

¹⁶ The Septuagint renders it τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτῶν.

¹⁷ Only vv. 1 and 18 have a 4+2 meter.

in the Psalm.¹⁸ So it appears to be a typical feature of this particular psalmist. The reading, “they have no pains at their death,” would also seem to contradict what the psalmist says in v. 19 about the wicked being finished off by terrors. Nevertheless, a case could be made that v. 4 is saying the wicked do not fear death or that they tend to die painlessly. Both would be exaggerated generalizations, especially in view of the trepidation that was common in the ancient Near East toward death and the dead and in view of the danger of early mortality in the ancient world. But the psalmist seems prone to exaggeration in this stanza. As he identified in vv. 2–3, his problem is jealousy, an emotion that often prompts exaggerated comments. Jealousy combined with self-pity (vv. 13–14) could easily lie behind a comment like this one in v. 4 that even in death the wicked have it easy. The recent commentators and translations are split over the two possibilities raised by this text critical question.¹⁹ My own take on it is that here we have an example where internal evidence supports the emendation even over a uniformly transmitted text.

Verse 5 continues the exaggeration. The psalmist characterizes the wicked as if they had none of the problems common to mankind. Later on (v. 15) he himself is going to discredit the overstatements that he heaps up as this stanza climaxes. Verses 6–10 present as many text critical conundrums as Pss 16:2b–4 and 49:15, as the apparatus in *BHS* illustrates. But because these verses do not have bearing on the Psalm’s later reference to afterlife, we cannot take up the space that would be required to look at them exegetically. However, a few comments about the touches the psalmist employs in this section are worth noting. The vivid imagery of pride being a necklace and violence being a garment in v. 6 emphasizes the perverse nature of these two

¹⁸ Verses 6 and 10 end with יְמֻלָּה, as well as v. 18a.

¹⁹ In favor of MT are John Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73–150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 12; Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*. WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 227–28; deClasse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 585–86; CSB; EHV; ESV. In favor of the emendation are Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 82–83; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 221, 223; NIV; RSV.

qualities which are so repugnant to God.²⁰ Verse 7a has the mystifying statement, “Their eyes go out from fat.” Though many follow the Septuagint translator who evidently read עֲזָנוּמָו (“their iniquity”) instead of עֵינָמָו (“their eyes),²¹ I side with those who follow the Masoretic text and interpret this as saying the wicked are so filled with material possessions (“fat”) that it is almost as if their eyes were bulging.²² Or perhaps it’s intended for visual effect—that they are so fat that their eyes seem to be bulging out from overeating. And yet their eyes are still looking for more. Their greedy imaginations keep going farther still, ever wanting more (v. 7b). They mock others and speak wickedly, threatening to oppress them from their superior position (v. 8).

Verse 9 makes a point that will be important for understanding a later verse (v. 25). The wicked speak so arrogantly that it’s as if their mouths were in the heavens, and yet at the same time their tongues swagger²³ about on the earth. In v. 25 the psalmist will address Yahweh and say, “Whom have I in the heavens but you? And with you, I desire nothing on earth.” Whereas the wicked in their arrogance act as if they can lay claim to the heavens and the earth, the psalmist professes that the only thing that matters to him—whether in the heavens or on the earth—is to have Yahweh as his possession. The heavens are frequently pointed to in the Psalter as the abode of Yahweh.²⁴ The author of Ps 73 explicitly says that these wicked people are defying Yahweh. In v. 11 they ask, “How does God know?” and “Is there knowledge in the Most

²⁰ Zenger points out how Yahweh inveighs against pride in the prophets (Isa 13:19; 16:6; Jer 13:9, 17; Ezek 7:20, 24) and how not only the prophets identify violence as the “prime concept” in their “social critique,” but how it is identified as the reason for God sending the flood (Gen 6:11, 13). Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 228.

²¹ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 82, 84; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 221, 223; NIV.

²² Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 12–13; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 586; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 398; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 227–28; CSB; ESV; RSV.

²³ Brug recommends “strut” for this unusual *qal* form of the common verb for “walk” containing a נ (נַלְעָתָן) in order to capture the arrogance with which the wicked do this. Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 12–13.

²⁴ Pss 2:4; 11:4; 14:2; 33:13; 115:3.

High?” To anyone who speaks as audaciously as the wicked do here, Ps 2:4 says, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the LORD scoffs at them.” Though they may mock him in this life, he will bring destruction on them in the end (vv. 18–20). In Amos 9:2 Yahweh calls such scoundrels to account and says that whether they dig down into שָׁאֹל or climb up into the heavens, he will get them.

Verse 10 is the most difficult of all to interpret. I have simply followed how most of the current commentators interpret it, that people gravitate toward such scoffers and “soak in” what they say.²⁵ The thought is similar to the one we heard in Ps 49:14 where, even though the arrogant wealthy were going down a foolish path, those who followed after them delighted in their words. The psalmist sums up the stanza in v. 12 by highlighting the contradiction that, though the wicked are always at ease, they are constantly growing in strength. BDB tags the use of לִיל as “wealth,”²⁶ but the word’s many connotations may be at play here: “wealth, strength, influence, etc.”

Stanza 2: Attempts by the Psalmist to Resolve the Dilemma (vv. 13–17)

Stanza 2 begins in marked contrast to stanza one. There the psalmist began with the exclamation אַתָּה טוֹב (“surely good”) in reference to God. Now he exclaims אַתָּה רֵיק (“surely in vain”) with reference to himself. The reference to washing his hands in innocence in the second half of the opening verse (13b) alludes to the oath of cleansing that is described in Deut 21:6f, where men washed their hands while taking an oath that they were not guilty of shedding

²⁵ Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 12–14; deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 586–87; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 221, 223; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 83–84; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 227–29.

²⁶ BDB, s.v. לִיל.

someone's blood.²⁷ This ritual is alluded to elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Pss 24:4; 26:6; Isa 1:16; Matt 27:24). The psalmist is asserting not just with words but with ritual that he has done nothing to deserve the suffering that he describes in the following verse. He does not specify what illnesses or injustices he has suffered in v. 14, but his assertion that it has gone on all day long and every morning²⁸ again sound like an exaggerated complaint. The word תָּזְכִּרְתִּי in the second half of the verse is pointed by the Masoretes as the noun תָּזְכִּרְתָּה with the first person singular pronominal suffix ("my rebuke"). Some exegetes advocate an emendation here, reading the verb form הָזְכִּרְתִּי (first person singular perfect *hophal* of כָּחַ, "I am rebuked"),²⁹ which would be more parallel to the verbal construction in the first half of the verse, but the Septuagint renders it with the noun ὅλεγχός, thus supporting the MT reading. Either way, it comes out best in English "I have been rebuked."

In v. 15 the psalmist shows the first glimpses of coming to his senses. "If I had said, 'I will talk like this,' see, I would have acted treacherously with the generation of your children." With "the generation of your children" the psalmist is identifying the people who stand in strong contrast to the arrogant and godless people he has been describing. His focus is returning to the "Israel" to whom, he asserted in the first verse, God is so good. While he has given us readers a look into his complaining heart in vv. 2–14, he now signals us that his complaints are not the point of his Psalm but the very antithesis of it. He states that if he had merely composed a Psalm of complaint against God, he would have done harm to the generation of God's children. Complaining against God was not only detrimental to him. It would have been treacherous to his

²⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 88.

²⁸ The נ here is used distributively to indicate "morning after morning" (GKC § 123c).

²⁹ E.g., Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 83–84.

fellow believers. Complaining about our lot in life not only drags us down. It drags down our fellow believers.

The phrase “generation of your children” is important. It is generally agreed that the idea that lies behind the word דָוֶר is “circle” and that, like its cognates in the other Semitic languages of the ancient Near East, it tends to refer to a circle of people either in location (“assembly”) or time period (“generation”).³⁰ Freedman and Lundbom point out, “In the Canaanite pantheon, El was the head of a *dor* consisting of lesser gods who together with him co-inhabited the heavens.”³¹ Interestingly, in the Psalms the word דָוֶר is not infrequently used to describe Yahweh’s circle, the circle of living believers who worship him (Pss 14:5; 24:6; 73:15; 112:2). In these passages the circle of Yahweh often appears in contrast to the wicked who oppose him. It is like the assembly of the righteous (צְדִיקִים) which stands in such stark contrast to the way of the wicked in Ps 1. In Ps 49:20 we heard that the arrogant wealthy will go to the דָוֶר of their fathers. There we saw how that psalmist was reaching the climax of his distinction between the ultimate destiny of the arrogant wealthy and himself as a worshiper of God. That same distinction will become clearer and clearer from this point on in Ps 73 as well.

The consecutive *waw* on the front of what looks like a cohortative verb form at the beginning of v. 16 (נַאֲמַשׁ בָה), Gesenius says, occurs frequently in later books of the Old Testament.³² Cohortative forms are of course more frequent in Psalms and especially in this

³⁰ David Noel Freedman and Jack Lundbom, “דָוֶר,” *TDOT* 3:169–76.

³¹ Freedman and Lundbom, *TDOT* 3:175.

³² GKC § 49e.

one.³³ Waw-consecutive imperfect seems to be what is intended with נִאֵלְשָׁבָה (“I considered”).

The *qere* reading (אַתָּה) for the *kethiv* (אַתְּ) is no doubt there because עַמְלָל is usually masculine, though it can also be feminine.³⁴ With this verse the psalmist is simply expressing his exasperation at trying to comprehend why things go well for the wicked while life is often miserable for the faithful.

Verse 17 is a pivotal verse in the Psalm. The psalmist claims here that he achieved a moment of clarity on this very issue when he entered the sanctuary of God. The questions that arise with this verse are: “Where did this happen?” What is the “sanctuary of God?” And how did he achieve insight in it? Those who point to the temple in Jerusalem note that the Hebrew is plural (עֲקָדִים) and sometimes appears to refer to the complex of buildings that made up the temple (Ps 68:35; Jer 51:51; Ezek 21:7).³⁵ Others see it as a mystical experience that need not have happened in the temple structures but could have happened to the psalmist anywhere—that he experienced a mystical immersion into the thoughts of God and received a revelation about what would happen to the wicked.³⁶ Those who prefer this interpretation point to Wisdom 2:22 where μυστήρια θεοῦ is used in the sense of those truths of God that are hidden from the wicked. There does not seem to be a connection between these two references, however, since the Septuagint uses the term τὸ ὄγιαστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ to render אַל עֲקָדִים here in Ps 73. Dahood offers an interesting interpretation. He sees it as referring to heaven.³⁷ This interpretation works

³³ Note אָסְפָרָה in v. 15 and אָבִינָה in v. 17. Joūon, §114b, says of cohortative forms, “the volitive nuance is often very weak and does not always need to be translated.”

³⁴ BDB, s.v. עַמְלָל. It’s feminine in Eccl 10:15, for instance.

³⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 89; Othmar Keel, *Schöne, Schwierige Welt - Leben Mit Klagen Und Loben* (Berlin: Evangelische Haupt-Bibelgesellschaft, 1991), 40–41.

³⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 231–32; Michel, “Ich aber bin,” 163f.

³⁷ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100*, AB 17 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 192.

well with the verbs in the verse, which are imperfect and cohortative. He translates it as a continuation of v. 16, “. . . until I should enter God’s sanctuary and perceive their final destiny.”³⁸ The psalmist will not understand these things until he enters heaven. Only then will he understand the final destiny of the wicked.

These latter two suggestions are intriguing, but there’s really nothing in the context that would support them as describing a mystical experience or heaven. The firmest approach to a reference like this one is to take the words in their simple meaning. Whenever the psalmist entered the sanctuary courts, he got a different perspective on those things that outside the sanctuary seemed like conundrums of life. “Out there” there seemed to be no correlation between how people lived their lives and how things went for them. Trying to figure it out by observation using his reasoning faculties only created frustration (v. 16). But when he entered the sanctuary, it became clear to him. Othmar Keel makes a good argument that psalmists tend to describe entry into the temple as a festive, corporate experience, not an individual, contemplative experience.³⁹ Psalmists often speak of joining the throng to enter the temple (Pss 42:5; 55:15; 122). They emphasize that only the righteous can enter through the temple gates (Pss 118:19–20; 24:3–6). It was a corporate experience of praise and thanksgiving (Pss 100; 116:14, 18–19; Isa 38:18–20). If the author of Ps 73 had entered the sanctuary with the righteous and had sung only his complaints (vv. 2–14), it would have been treachery against the circle (**נַעֲמָה**) of Yahweh’s children (v. 15). He very likely has the circle—the assembly—of worshippers in mind as he speaks of entering the sanctuary in v. 17.

A very common *topos* in expressions of praise in the Psalter is that of having one’s feet

³⁸ Dahood, *Psalms II*, 187.

³⁹ Keel, *Schöne, Schwierige Welt*, 41.

firmly planted. Psalmists speak of Yahweh having placed their feet on level ground (Pss 26:12; 27:11; 143:10), of Yahweh placing their feet on a firm foundation (31:9; 40:3), of never being shaken (Pss 15:5; 16:8; 21:8; 62:3, 7; 112:6), of Yahweh keeping the faithful from slipping (Pss 66:9; 116:8; 140:5). I propose that this is what the composer of Ps 73 realized when he entered the sanctuary. At the beginning of the next stanza (v. 18) the first thing he mentions as he describes the revelation that occurred to him in the sanctuary is that the wicked are on slippery ground (**תַּחַת־קָרְבָּן**). He appears to be returning to the point he made in v. 2. His feet had almost slipped. He had nearly misstepped and fallen. But now he had come to the realization that God is good to Israel—to the circle of his children who are pure in heart. He is not unfair to them, as observation of the wicked in this life would suggest. In the end the wicked will fall (vv. 18–20). But the faithful will continue their firm walk heavenward with Yahweh gripping their right hand and guiding them (vv. 23–25). So when gathered for corporate worship, the faithful should not complain, but proclaim Yahweh’s great deeds (v. 28c). To my knowledge this is a new take on v. 17. But it is a key point in understanding what these Psalms that we are considering have to say about the afterlife. There is a distinction in the Psalter between the living, worshipping community and the arrogant rich. The latter often have a life of ease while the former often suffer. But in corporate worship the faithful celebrate the great deeds of their faithful God. They know that the wicked will be cut off from their blessings at the time of death, while they themselves will go on in existence in the secure presence of Yahweh, as the final stanza of this Psalm will affirm.

Stanza 3: God’s Solution to the Dilemma (vv. 18–28)

Like the other two stanzas, this one begins with the interjection **תָּאֹהֶן**. Each time it has an exclamatory sense. With the first one (v. 1) the psalmist exclaims how good God is to the faithful

in Israel. With the second one (v. 13) he expresses the despair he felt when he mistakenly thought his faithfulness was being repaid with suffering. With this final one (v. 18) he marvels at the insight he gained in the sanctuary, that the arrogant rich face a disastrous end while he faces a wonderful destiny in the presence of Yahweh. The second word of the stanza hones in immediately on the precarious position of the arrogant. They are **בְּחַלְקֹות** (“on slippery places/slippery ground”). Whereas he is going to describe himself as being in the firm grip of God on into eternity, the arrogant rich are on slippery ground. Part of the boldness of this statement is that he says God himself is the one who is going to place them (**שָׁנֵת**, second person masculine singular imperfect of **שִׁנַּת**) on the slippery ground. The fact that he uses **חַלְקֹות**, a homonym of the word he will use later to describe God, (**חַלְקִי**, “my portion,” v. 26), can hardly be an accident. The psalmist is contrasting the flimsy fate of the arrogant rich with the eternal security he has in God. You’ll recall that **חַלְקִי** played a prominent role in Ps 16 (v. 5), where the psalmist used this precious term for the promise of the land at the time of the conquest in order to show his security in Yahweh. The second verb (**הַפְלִתָּם**, second person masculine singular perfect *hiphil* of **פָּלַל**) makes it even clearer that it is God who will cause this to happen. Its modifier (**לִמְשׁוֹאֹת**, “into ruins”) is admittedly indistinct. This is true of what all three verses (18–20) have to say about the fate of the wicked. Not only is the word **שָׁאֹל** conspicuous by its absence, but the psalmist seems purposely to avoid any terminology that would point to a place that the wicked will go after death. As with the previous two Psalms we looked at, this one seems to focus more on the postmortem state of the wicked rather than to describe a place that they are

consigned to.⁴⁰

Verse 19 would seem to be too drastic a description of what happens to the wicked if it's simply describing a Job-like calamity that will strike them in this life. Few experience such an extreme turn of fate on this side of the grave. The fact that the destruction described in the first half-verse happens in an instant (**כִּגְעָם**) would seem to fit best with the abrupt end that death brings. And the combination of two verbs in the second half-verse (**כִּסְפֵּו תִּמְלַא**, “they’re finished, done for”) that signal such finality must be describing an absolute end. On the other hand, the variety of meanings that the lexicons give for the word **בָּלָהֹת** (“terror, dreadful event, calamity, destruction, sudden terror, horror”)⁴¹ makes it difficult to ascertain what the psalmist is saying the wicked are completely consumed by and makes it difficult to say definitively that he is describing the moment of death.

However, the next verse (20) seems to speak of a drastic change of state. Using the illustration of a person waking up from a dream, the psalmist calls on the Lord to treat the wicked like the images one sees in a bad dream and to dismiss them within moments of waking up. Again, the *BHS* apparatus shows that there have been numerous attempts to “fix” a text that has been perceived as in need of fixing, but none of the suggestions contained there have sufficient manuscript evidence to back them up, nor is MT lacking much in the way of coherence. The only really questionable word in the verse is **בְּעִיר**. The Septuagint saw it simply as the preposition **בְּ** (“in”) combined with the noun **עִיר** (“city”).⁴² But this does not seem to fit

⁴⁰ Of course, if, as Michel conjectures, the psalmist is purposely being vague so that those who do not yet believe in an afterlife could see this as something that happens to the wicked in this life, that could also explain the very general description of the fate being referred to here.

⁴¹ BDB, s.v. **בָּלָהֹת**; HALOT, 1:132.

⁴² ἐν τῇ πόλει.

the context of the verse. Many have analyzed it as the *hiphil* infinitive construct of עַזֵּר (“rouse oneself, awake”), a contraction of בְּקַעֲשֵׂר (“when awaking”).⁴³ This would make it a parallel counterpart to זִיְקָנָה (“from awakening”) in the first half of the verse. Similar poetic imagery is found in Job 20:8, where Zophar speaks of the wicked as a dream that flies away and is banished like a vision of the night. The question could be raised about whether the psalmist would speak of God as waking up, as if he had been sleeping. However, if this is the vocable that the psalmist intended, it could quite likely refer to God rousing himself to action.⁴⁴ After all, v. 18 had spoken quite explicitly about God actively causing the destruction of the wicked. Therefore, I’ve translated the half-verse, “When you rouse yourself, you will despise their image.”

In v. 21 the psalmist again expresses the bitter envy he had when he considered the well-being of the arrogant wealthy (vv. 2–14). Liess points out that earlier exegetes thought this was evidence that vv. 21–22 had been displaced from their original position since the psalmist had already discussed his bitter envy in stanzas 1 and 2 and had now moved on to other topics. She disagrees. She makes a good argument for why the psalmist returns to this subject after reporting that he has reached the turning point in his thinking in v. 17. He wants to juxtapose his earlier foolish point of view with the wonderful situation he now realizes he has with God in order to give the latter prominence.⁴⁵ The *hithpael* (צִבְּרָתָה, “was embittered”) and *hithpoel* (נִצְבָּא, “I was piercing myself”) imperfects capture the ongoing nature of these two attitudes, and these reflexive verb forms capture well the fact that the psalmist was doing this to himself. He was

⁴³ BDB, s.v. בְּקַעֲשֵׂר; BHS, 1155; deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 588; GKC § 53q; Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 399; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 222; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 227, 229.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ps 35:23.

⁴⁵ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 355, n47.

creating his own misery. **לְבָבִי** (“my mind”) and **פֶּלַיּוֹתִי** (“my emotions”) express the fact that he suffered this misery in both his intellect and his emotions.⁴⁶ **בָּעֵר** (“brute”) and **בָּהֲמוֹת** (“beast”) in v. 22 are common terms used in wisdom literature whenever an author is highlighting the stupidity of a person. What is intriguing here is that, whereas wisdom poets typically use these terms to denigrate the wicked,⁴⁷ the psalmist here attributes this beastly character to himself. While calling a foolish human a **בָּעֵר** is not uncommon in wisdom literature, its parallel in v. 22b (**בָּהֲמוֹת**) is unusual in that it’s plural, the plural perhaps to add intensity.⁴⁸ One cannot help but think of the creature mentioned in Job 40:15.⁴⁹ Goldingay, following the common suggestion that the beast there refers to the hippopotamus or crocodile, translates it here as “monster.”⁵⁰ Although that may be too much of an exaggeration, the variants found in the history of transmission of the text seem to indicate a tendency to tone it down. The Septuagint, for instance, has κτηνώδης, “beastly,”⁵¹ and several Hebrew manuscripts have **כַּבְהַמָּה** (“like the beast”), which may be influenced by the refrain we saw in Ps 49 (vv. 13 and 21). **בָּהֲמוֹת** is definitely the *lectio difficilior*, and as such should be retained. The psalmist is making an exaggerated comment about himself, no doubt to show how out of line he had been in his thinking over against Yahweh.

⁴⁶ Because the two words are paired here, I have translated **לְבָבִי** as “mind” to bring out the contrast of intellect and emotions that exists in the pair. Elsewhere in the Psalm I have translated it with the more common rendering “heart.” It’s interesting that this pair occurs especially in Psalms contexts where Yahweh is testing and refining the believer. Challenges and discipline to both the mind and the heart are key for growth in faith and character. Cf. Pss 7:10 and 26:2. The two words also occur in Ps 16, although not as a pair (vv. 7, 9). There the psalmist’s **כְּלִיוֹתִים** are disciplined but his **לְבָבִי** is glad.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ps 49:11; Prov 12:1; 30:2; and especially Ps 92:7, where the wording is virtually the same as here in 73:22a and where the psalmist says that such fools will be destroyed forever (92:8).

⁴⁸ Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 17; Dahood, *Psalms II*, 194.

⁴⁹ There the plural form of the noun is used even though the verbs describing it clearly indicate that it’s being used of a singular creature.

⁵⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 412.

⁵¹ Muraoka, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 416.

Zenger makes the observation that the psalmist is using these two beastly words to describe himself exactly at the moment when he launches into the idea of being with God. Even when he was exhibiting his animal-like foolishness, he was with God.⁵² As a matter of fact, Zenger says, it was precisely because he was with God that he faced this crisis.

When his “heart” and his “kidneys” . . . rose in this crisis, it was in fact a form of suffering because of his God, a passionate confrontation with the question: “Who is God?” Therefore the formulation in v. 22 is paradoxical: even when I did not understand and was like a “dumb ox” . . .—even then I was with you.⁵³

The believer cannot come to a deep understanding of who Yahweh is or what Yahweh has done for him unless he has been subjected to such challenges as the fallen, sinful world presents.

Then the psalmist does a stutter-start to introduce what is certainly the climax of his poem. Verse 23 begins the same way as v. 22 (**וְאַנִי**). He’s focused on himself, and though he’s just admitted that he’s been a beast when he’s been with Yahweh, something tangential occurs to him: he’s *with Yahweh*. He picks up the last word of v. 22 also (**עִמָךְ**) and creates a new clause, inserting “always” between “I” and “with you”: **וְאַנִי תָמִיד עִמָךְ**. What he realizes is that he is *always* with Yahweh. The idea of Yahweh being with his believers is extremely common in the Old Testament, especially for prominent people like the patriarchs, Joseph, Samuel, and David.⁵⁴ But the way he expresses it (“*I am with you*”) is actually the opposite of traditional Old Testament language for expressing the believer’s relationship with Yahweh. Yahweh is usually said to be with the believer.⁵⁵ Here in vv. 23–24 the psalmist is making clear that Yahweh is the leader in the relationship and that he is merely accompanying Yahweh.

⁵² Note the use of the perfect **הָיָה**. At the same time as he was a beast, he was also with God.

⁵³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 233.

⁵⁴ Gen 21:22; 26:28; 28:15; 31:3, 5, 42; 39:2, 3; 1 Sam 3:19; 16:18; 2 Chr 1:1; Ps 46:8; Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10; 41:10; 43:5.

⁵⁵ E.g. Ps 23:4.

The next phrase, “You have taken hold of my right hand,” is a common motif not only in the Old Testament⁵⁶ but also in other ancient Near Eastern literature and art. Although most of the perspectives on the afterlife that we have seen thus far in the Psalms differ significantly from the afterlife beliefs of Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors, here we have one that the ancient Israelites clearly shared with their neighbors. The Pyramid Texts of the 3rd millennium BC name various gods who take Pharaohs by the hand to lead them to heaven.⁵⁷ One says, “Grasp the King by his hand and take the King to the sky, that he may not die on earth among men.”⁵⁸

Below is a depiction on a Babylonian cylinder seal from the Ur III period (ca. 2000 BC) in which a supplicant is led by the hand by what appears to be a goddess into the presence of an enthroned god.⁵⁹

Figure 6: Babylonian Cylinder Seal from the Ur III Period.



⁵⁶ Pss 63:9; 139:10; Isa 41:10, 13; 42:6; 45:1; Jer 31:32.

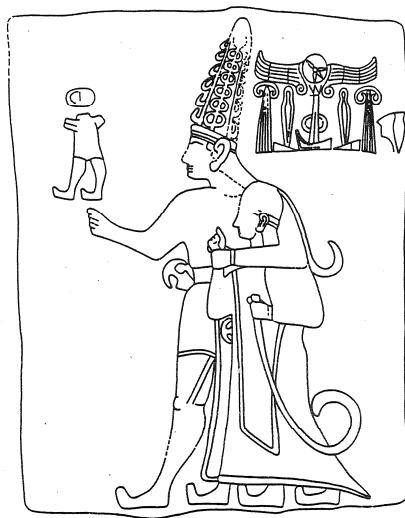
⁵⁷ Keel, *Schöne, Schwierige Welt*, 42.

⁵⁸ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 363.

⁵⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 235 (Sketch by Hildi Keel-Leu); Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 364.

In the Hittite sphere, a cliff relief in Yazilikaya from the 13th century BC portrays the protector god Sarrumma, depicted as unusually tall and wearing a huge mitre, holding King Tudkhaliyas IV by the right hand and leading him.⁶⁰

Figure 7: Hittite Cliff Relief (13th century BC).

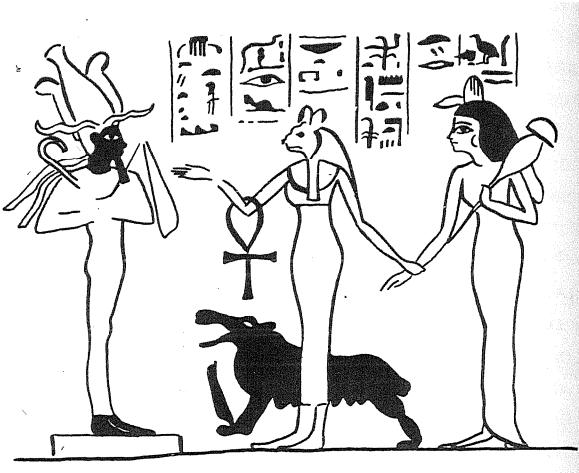


In the following drawing from a funerary papyrus found in Deir el-Bahari, Egypt (ca. 1100 BC) the goddess Isis holds the right hand of a deceased woman and leads her past the power of death, depicted as a snarling animal, and into the presence of Osiris.⁶¹

Figure 8: Funeral Papyrus from Deir el-Bahari.

⁶⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 234; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 364.

⁶¹ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 234 (Sketch by Hildi Keel-Leu).



Not all these ancient Near Eastern depictions of gods grasping the hand of humans imply that they are taking the person beyond this life. Some of them portray the god leading the person in this life. Isaiah 45 says this very clearly about Yahweh grasping the hand of Cyrus in order to lead him in conquest. This passage is well known for its overlap with the larger ancient Near Eastern culture. The Cyrus Cylinder says it was Marduk who took the Persian king by the hand to secure his universal hegemony.⁶²

The reference to Yahweh grasping the psalmist's hand in Ps 73:23b clearly does refer to something that has happened to the psalmist in this life. In the overall context of the Psalm, it alludes back to the psalmist's comment that he had nearly slipped and fallen (v. 2) and that God places the wicked on slippery ground (v. 18). In contrast to the destiny of the wicked, Yahweh has grasped the psalmist firmly by the hand so that he does not slip and fall. The context of vv. 23b–24 shows a temporal progression:⁶³ Yahweh *has* grasped the psalmist by the hand, he *is* leading him with his counsel, and afterward he *will* take him into glory. It is justifiable to interpret the last two verbs this way, even though both of them are imperfect, because the adverb

⁶² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2002), 249; Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 363.

⁶³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 234.

“afterward” in v. 24b indicates something that will take place after the “leading with your counsel.” The fact that Yahweh is the subject of each verb indicates that he is the initiator, the doer in the relationship, and that the psalmist is the recipient of Yahweh’s gracious action. The flow of past action, current action and future action expresses nicely the smooth flow and development of the relationship which began in this life and will continue on into the afterlife. It is interesting that v. 24 makes no reference to intervening death, but as we will see in v. 26 the psalmist is not leaving death out of the picture.

It is intriguing that in the middle component of this three-phrase progression the psalmist speaks to Yahweh and confesses that he is guiding the psalmist “with your counsel” (**בְּמִצְעָדֶךָ**). The same Hebrew root was used in Ps 16:7, where I raised the possibility that this is mentioned because the cult of the dead relied on guidance from the summoned spirits of the dead. The reference there seems to imply that Yahweh is the psalmist’s only source for counsel—even at night, when the séances occurred. So it is intriguing that the author of Ps 73 makes a similar comment. Once Yahweh has grasped a person’s hand in this life, he is the spiritual advisor who continues to guide that person with his counsel.

Verse 24b presents a problem that needs to be dealt with if, as I assert, it refers to postmortem existence. The word **בְּמַחְלֵךְ** could be an adverb or a preposition.⁶⁴ If it’s a preposition, the following word, **כִּבְזֹךְ**, could be its object. But if the two words were a prepositional phrase, the question would immediately arise, “What would the psalmist be referring to with ‘after glory?’” It seems best to take it adverbially because, as Kraus points out, it probably stands in

⁶⁴ BDB, s.v. **בְּמַחְלֵךְ**.

contrast to אַחֲרִיתָה, the “afterward” or outcome for the wicked, in v. 17.⁶⁵ The Masoretes too took אַחֲר as an adverb, giving it the relatively strong disjunctive accent *rebia mugraš*, which separates it from כְּבָד. Of course, if one takes it as an adverb, the question then immediately arises, “What is the relationship of כְּבָד to תְּקִהְנִי?” Because כְּבָד can be either masculine or feminine,⁶⁶ it could be the subject of the verb, which would then be third person feminine singular. But again, one is faced with the question, “What would the phrase ‘glory will receive me’ mean?” Could it be along the lines of what Peter says in Acts 3:21 about Jesus, ὃν δεῖ οὐρανὸν μὲν δέξασθαι (“whom heaven must receive”)? There is no parallel occurrence of these vocables together elsewhere in the Old Testament. And the fact that the two preceding verbs are second masculine singular makes it natural to assume that the same subject is intended for תְּקִהְנִי. Much more likely is what often happens in the Psalms, where prepositions are assumed on nouns that otherwise have no indicator of their grammatical role within the sentence.⁶⁷ If such is the case here, however, yet another question presents itself. “Which preposition is best to supply in English?” *To* glory? *With* glory? The Septuagint translates the colon, μετὰ δόξης προσελάβου με, (“with glory you took me”).⁶⁸ The question arises too: “Glory” in what sense? Many exegetes take כְּבָד in the sense of “honor” or “dignity,” that Yahweh will take the psalmist “with honor” or “in a dignified way.”⁶⁹ Johnston prefers this route because he says the term “is never elsewhere a

⁶⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 6–150*, 90.

⁶⁶ BDB, s.v. כְּבָד.

⁶⁷ Johnston, *Shades*, 205.

⁶⁸ μετά can, of course, mean “after,” but only when followed by the accusative. Here it is followed by the genitive, in which case the preposition usually means “with.”

⁶⁹ BDB, s.v. כְּבָד, meaning 3; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 234; Michel, “Ich aber bin,” 169–70. While recent commentators (also Goldingay, Tanner, and Tate) tend to take it in this sense, current English translations tend to take it as referring to a destination (“into glory” NIV; “to glory” ESV, NASB; “up in glory” CSB).

synonym for the afterlife, unlike ‘glory’ in Christian theology.”⁷⁰ It’s true that the term **כָּבוֹד** is not used in the Psalter as a designation for the afterlife. However, with no modifiers attached to **כָּבוֹד**, it’s difficult to rule out that it’s a reference to God’s glory. Since in this section the psalmist is addressing Yahweh and in the previous phrase he says, “You guide me with *your* counsel,” it seems natural that he would have Yahweh’s glory in mind when he speaks about Yahweh taking him. If it is a reference to Yahweh’s glory, the psalmist in his climax (vv. 23–26) is saying something similar to what the author of Ps 16 says at the climax of his Psalm (vv. 9–11)—that he will be in Yahweh’s glorious presence forever.

Actually, the implication of afterlife seems to lie more in the verb itself (**לְקַחֵנִי**). Many commentators take it in the sense of “you will take me to yourself” or “you will receive me.”⁷¹ The verb was used that way in Ps 49:16, where it also lacked specificity as to where the psalmist believed Yahweh would take him. In both cases the lack of directional specificity is striking. Both psalmists seem to be concerned only with the fact that Yahweh would take them to himself. The verb form here in 73:24 (**לְקַחֵנִי**, second person singular) is almost the same as the one in 49:16 (**לְקַחֵנִי**, third person singular), but the difference in person is significant. The writer of Ps 49 never addresses Yahweh. He is simply unfolding his riddle to his reader. He is describing what will happen to him when Yahweh snatches him out of the hand of **שָׁאָל**. Psalm 73, like Ps 16, differs from Ps 49 in that at crucial moments those psalmists address Yahweh. The writer of Ps 16 does so in vv. 1, 2, 5, 10 and 11. The other verses are addressed to his fellow worshippers. The writer of Ps 73 is clearly making a confession to his fellow worshippers of Yahweh in the

⁷⁰ Johnston, *Shades*, 205.

⁷¹ deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 588; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 222; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 227.

first stanza, trying to teach them what he has learned from his experience. Most of it is in third person, describing the wicked. But in stanza 2 first person predominates. Yet in the middle of the second stanza (v. 15) the psalmist subtly begins to address Yahweh in second person (“*your children*”). Stanza 3 is predominantly a monologue addressed to Yahweh. What is significant here is that both Pss 16 and 73 are addressed both to Yahweh and to the psalmists’ fellow worshippers. For these authors, worship is both proclamation to living fellow believers as well as prayer to Yahweh. Their address can switch in an instant from their fellow believers to Yahweh (and back again in the case of Ps 16). Worship for them is a conversation that goes on among the community of living believers and with Yahweh, and when the individual believer turns to address the spirit world, it is to Yahweh alone that he turns. Not only are no angelic or deceased spirits addressed or referred to, but the conversation becomes intensely personal, between the psalmist (“I”) and Yahweh only.⁷² Psalm 49 differs in this respect that the psalmist is only professing to his fellow believers a truth about his ultimate destiny (v. 16) which Yahweh has revealed to him (v. 5). Yet in both 49 and 73 a very personal and individual confidence is expressed that “God/you will take me.”

Another significant difference between the references to God taking the psalmists in 49 and 73 is that 49:16 says that God will take the psalmist out of the hand of לְאַשְׁׁפֵּן. Whereas Ps 49 makes frequent reference to death, Ps 73 makes no explicit mention of death, only two possible allusions to it in v. 23 (**רֹאֶשׁ**)⁷³ and v. 26, where the psalmist speaks of his mind and his flesh failing. For the writer of Ps 73, life with Yahweh is such an on-going existence into eternity

⁷² An interesting further study would be to do a survey of the Psalter to see how many times the individual psalmist speaks one-on-one to Yahweh and how many times the psalmist speaks on behalf the worshiping community (“we/us”). My guess is the former is much more common than the latter.

⁷³ Johnston, *Shades*, 205, points out that the word **רֹאֶשׁ** in v. 23 likely alludes to death because what else could it be referring to except “after death?”

(לְעוֹלָם, v. 26) that he apparently feels no need to mention death as intervening. Whether in the now or in the “afterward,” the psalmist is with Yahweh. As was pointed out in Chapter Four, parallels have frequently been pointed out between these two Psalm references to being taken by God and the narrative accounts of Enoch and Elijah being taken by God at the end of their earthly sojourns. As was pointed out there, connections between the two narrative accounts and the two psalmodic references are tenuous. But there is one connection between Ps 73:24–25 and the Elijah account that is noteworthy. The Elijah account specifically says that he was taken up “to heaven” (2 Kgs 2:1, 11).

As was pointed out in our discussion of קָבָד in 73:24, it cannot be said definitively that with this word the psalmist is speaking of being brought into the glory of God in the afterlife. However, it’s intriguing that the very next verse (25) begins with a reference to heaven. The psalmist muses with the question, “Whom do I have in heaven but you?” Heaven is frequently described as the abode of God in the Psalter.⁷⁴ Psalm 113:4 says that his קָבָד is above the heavens.⁷⁵ בְּשָׁמַיִם is part of a merism here in v. 25.⁷⁶ The first half of the verse speaks of בְּשָׁמַיִם, and the second half speaks of בָּאָרֶץ. The two together are a Hebrew way of indicating the entire universe.⁷⁷ The psalmist used the same merism in v. 9, where he described the wicked as audaciously laying claim to heaven and earth with their mouths. They spoke arrogantly, defying the God who dwells in heaven (v. 11). The revelation he received in the sanctuary indicated that in the end (לְאַחֲרִיתָם, v. 17) they would get neither heaven nor earth, but only destruction (vv.

⁷⁴ Pss 2:4; 11:4; 14:2; 33:13; 113:4–5; 115:3.

⁷⁵ See also Ps 8:2.

⁷⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 235.

⁷⁷ As in, for instance, Gen 1:1.

18–20). Now, when he proclaims his own “afterward” (**נַאֲפָר**), he returns to this merism. But it is not he who can lay claim to the heavens and the earth. No, it is Yahweh who possesses them, and the only thing that matters to the psalmist is his connection to Yahweh. Yet the two parts of v. 25 are worded interestingly. The first half is a question, “Whom do I have in heaven but you?” Like most current English translations,⁷⁸ I have added the words “but you” to the question in order to capture the intent of the Hebrew. The middle term in v. 25 (**בְּנִמְלֹאת**) seems to be strategically placed between the two cola of the verse in order to be part of both.⁷⁹ The Masoretes have placed the *atnah* under the word before it but have placed the *rebia mugraš*, a relatively strong disjunctive accent, over it to set it apart to a certain degree from the second colon, to which it technically belongs. Therefore, it is probably best to represent it twice in translation in order to capture this nuance: “Whom do I have in heaven *but you?* And *with you*, I desire nothing on earth.” The central position of **בְּנִמְלֹאת** in v. 25 takes on even more significance when one considers that this is the third time the word occurs in these climactic verses.⁸⁰ It is almost a mantra for the psalmist: “I am with you.”

Without including **בְּנִמְלֹאת** in the first colon of v. 25, one could get the wrong impression: Whom do I have in heaven? I.e. no one. The Psalter clearly states that God is in heaven and rules from heaven.⁸¹ So the psalmist is certainly not implying that there is no one in heaven. The answer to his question is emphatically: Yahweh. The second half of the verse is worded as a negative statement, and it too is worded rather cryptically (“and with you I do not desire on

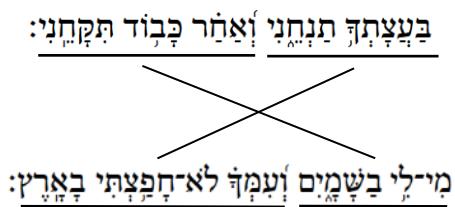
⁷⁸ E.g., CSB; ESV; NASB; NIV; RSV.

⁷⁹ See Michel’s cogent analysis of this in Michel, “Ich aber bin,” 176.

⁸⁰ It occurs at the end of v. 22, in the middle of v. 23, and again in the middle of v. 25.

⁸¹ Pss 2:4; 11:4; 14:2; 33:13; 115:3.

earth”). Virtually all current commentators and translations fill out the meaning by adding an indefinite object to the verb, i.e. “desire nothing/no one on earth.”⁸² Whereas the question in the first half of the verse focuses implicitly, yet strongly, on Yahweh as the psalmist’s prize in heaven, the second half of the verse is negatively focused ruling out anything besides Yahweh as being desirable on earth. It emphasizes that everything on the earth pales into insignificance in comparison to Yahweh. The rhetoric of combining the question and the negative statement points the reader heavenward. I would suggest that the poetry of vv. 24–25 forms a chiasm. The first half of v. 24 speaks of the guidance Yahweh gives the psalmist in this life (“you guide me with your counsel”), while the second half expresses the psalmist’s hope for the afterlife (“and afterward you will take me to glory/with glory/gloriously”). Conversely v. 25 begins with a rhetorical question focusing on Yahweh in his heavenly abode (“Whom have I in heaven but you?”) and ends with a declaration of the limited value of anything in the psalmist’s current abode if it were not for Yahweh (“and with you I desire nothing on earth”).



As we have seen with so many of the expressions of hope for an afterlife with Yahweh in this study thus far, the place in which this afterlife will exist is downplayed also in these verses. It is only implied that it’s in heaven, the place where Yahweh dwells. As in Pss 16 and 49, the psalmist here is focused exclusively on being with Yahweh. It is the state or condition of postmortem existence that all three of the psalmists express hope for. The location for such an

⁸² CSB; ESV; NASB; NIV; RSV; Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 17; deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 588; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 2212; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 83; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 228. Instead of the negative, the Septuagint has the interrogative pronoun *tí* to make the second half of v. 25 a question like the first half, “And with you, what do I desire on earth?”

existence they leave out of consideration—or at least downplay. In addition, with the chiasm that exists between these two verses the psalmist artistically shows the intertwining of both the relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist as well as the interrelationship of this life and the afterlife. When the believer has Yahweh, it does not really matter which world he finds himself in. And there is nothing and no one in either world that matter to him except Yahweh.

Though the psalmist does not mention death explicitly, it is no doubt what he's referring to in poetic language in v. 26: "My flesh and my heart fail; the rock of my heart and my portion is God forever." Liess points out how unique the wording of the first phrase is. The Old Testament sometimes speaks of the disintegration of the flesh,⁸³ but nowhere else of the heart perishing.⁸⁴ לְבָב is used frequently by the psalmist,⁸⁵ and since for the Hebrews it signified the intellect rather than the emotions, he clearly means the disintegration of the mind at the time of death. Yet he can say that God is the rock of his heart/mind and his portion forever.

צַוָּר is an extremely frequent designation for Yahweh in the Psalter.⁸⁶ Here it stands in contrast to the חֲלֹקָות ("slippery ground," v. 18) on which he has set the arrogant wealthy. The pointing of v. 26 is unusual in that it has no *atnach*. The *ole wejored* on וְלִבְבֵי is however an even stronger disjunctive accent than *atnach*. The Masoretes may have placed this accent there to highlight the asyndeton between the two halves of the verse. If the psalmist consciously intended asyndeton here, it highlights the contrast between the passing nature of man's heart and flesh and God's eternal, unshakable being: "My flesh and my heart fail. The rock of my heart and my

⁸³ E.g., Prov 5:11; Job 33:21.

⁸⁴ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 385–86.

⁸⁵ vv. 1, 7, 13, 21 and 26 (2x).

⁸⁶ Pss 18:3, 47; 19:15; 28:1; 31:3; 62:3, 7, 8; 71:3; 73:26; 78:35; 89:27; 92:16; 95:1; 144:1.

portion is God forever.” Though man’s heart (intellect) fails, that heart continues to stand on the rock of Yahweh forever.

The word **חַלְקִי** is also used to refer to Yahweh in Pss 16:5 and 142:6. It is clearly a play on the Hexateuch’s references to the apportionment of the land at the time of the conquest and especially to Yahweh being the portion of the Levites.⁸⁷ See the comments on **חַלְקִי** in Ps 16:5 in Chapter Four. As was pointed out in v. 18, the word **חַלְקִי** here is also a play on words with the word **בָּחֲלֻקָּות** (“on slippery ground”). While the fate of the arrogant wealthy is precarious, the portion of the faithful is rock solid and eternal.

Jenni argues that **לְעוֹלָם** here cannot necessarily be intended to express the idea of immortality because unless the context makes the unlimited nature of the usage clear, the word often merely has the meaning of a long, indefinite period of time.⁸⁸ It is true that the word seems to have the sense of “always,” rather than “forever,” in its occurrence in v. 12. However, here in v. 26 it’s attributed to the word **חַלְקִי** which, as we have seen, points to the irrevocable gift of a portion of land in Israelite culture. It was a possession handed on from generation to generation, not one that ended at the time of death. The word **עוֹלָם** is very common especially in the Psalter, often coupled with the word **בָּעֵד** to emphasize that it means “forever,” and not just “always.”⁸⁹ It is sometimes used specifically to refer to life that is forever.⁹⁰ As we will see in the next chapter, even in those Psalms that speak about the dead being silent, the psalmists will speak about

⁸⁷ Num 18:20; Deut 10:9; 12:12.

⁸⁸ Ernst Jenni, “Das Wort ‘ōlām im Alten Testament,” *ZAW* 65 (1953): 20.

⁸⁹ Pss 10:16; 21:5; 45:7; 48:15; 52:10; 89:38; 104:5; 111:8; 148:6.

⁹⁰ Pss 21:5; 133:3.

praising Yahweh forever.⁹¹ It's significant that all three of the Psalms we have considered that express hope for continued existence after death speak of it in terms of "forever."⁹² Since Yahweh is an eternal God,⁹³ he is an inheritance that never ends. Zenger says, "Since YHWH is [the psalmist's] portion in the land and the source of his life, YHWH has incorporated him into this, his 'eternal' divinity—and in this way gives the petitioner's heart a profound unshakability."⁹⁴

Liess sees the intensely personal confession made in vv. 23–26 as the center of the Psalm.⁹⁵ The six explicit second person references addressed to Yahweh are evenly matched by six first person references in vv. 23–25. In v. 26 the psalmist seems to turn now to his fellow worshippers to profess to them that Yahweh is his eternal security because he switches to third person when referring to him. There are four first person suffixes early in the verse, and the third person reference to Yahweh comes at the end and climax of the verse. Liess also points out that this section is framed by time references, **בַּמְתָּרָה** at the beginning of the section to assert how Yahweh is always with him during this life and **לְעוֹלָם** to indicate that this relationship will go on into eternity.⁹⁶ It is striking that this same kind of framing with time references is found at the climax of Ps 16 as well. There the psalmist also begins with **בַּמְתָּרָה** (v. 8) to express how Yahweh is always with him in this life and ends with **בְּרוּךְ** (v. 11) to express how he will be enjoying the presence of Yahweh forever. In both cases the psalmist saves the word for "forever" to be the

⁹¹ Pss 30:13; 115:18. See also Ps 52:11.

⁹² Pss 16:11; 49:10; 73:26. 49:10 uses the term **בְּרוּךְ** when hypothetically raising the possibility of living on after death.

⁹³ Ps 90:2.

⁹⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2, 236*.

⁹⁵ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 356.

⁹⁶ Liess, *Weg des Lebens*, 386.

final word in the climactic profession of belief in an existence beyond death.

Verse 27 begins similarly to v. 12 (הַהֲ). There the psalmist pointed to how well things seem to go for the wicked on the outside. Here he shows how disastrously it turns out for them in the long run. The term יְאָבִדּוּ is reminiscent of the end of Ps 1 (“but the way of the wicked will perish,” v. 6). In the second half of the verse he minces no words, as he also did not in v. 18, that it is Yahweh who will bring about their end. But it is not undeserved since they have committed adulteries against him. Although the context does not indicate it, הַנִּזְבֵּן is a *topos* in the Old Testament for spiritual abandonment of Yahweh.⁹⁷ The arrogant wealthy referred to in this Psalm have clearly committed such an egregious crime by their blasphemous comments against Yahweh in vv. 9 and 11. That the outcome for the psalmist is in diametric contrast to that of the wicked, as it was in Ps 49, is again highlighted by the beginning of v. 28: “As for me, it is good for me to be near God.” The psalmist is again emphasizing the importance of proximity to Yahweh. The language (לִידּוֹב) echoes the first verse, only this time it’s personal (“good for me,” rather than “good for Israel”). He has made Yahweh⁹⁸ his refuge and pledges himself to recount all of Yahweh’s works. Rather than trusting in his health or in his wealth or in his own boastfulness, he trusts completely in Yahweh, and it is what Yahweh has done for him that he now wants to proclaim before others.

Conclusion

While sharing many of the same perspectives about postmortem existence as Pss 16 and

⁹⁷ E.g., Exod 34:15, 16; Lev 17:7; 20:5; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33; 1 Chr 5:25; Ezek 6:9; 20:30; Hos 2:7; 4:15.

⁹⁸ Note this is the only occurrence of the tetragrammaton in the Psalm. אֱלֹהִים occurs throughout the rest of the Psalm no doubt because that is the preferred name used in the rest of the Psalms of Asaph in Book III.

49, the singer of Ps 73 approaches the subject from yet another angle. Whereas the composer of Ps 16 voices his belief in an afterlife in opposition to those who practiced the cult of the dead, and whereas the composer of Ps 49 voices his afterlife belief as the antithesis of those who trust in physical wealth in this life for security, the composer of Ps 73 professes his afterlife belief in relief at almost having lost it because of his envy of the health, wealth, and boastfulness of those who defy Yahweh in this life. As in Ps 49, he draws a sharp distinction between the ultimate destiny of those who defy God and of himself, who has come to realize that being with Yahweh is all that matters for security and well-being. As does the singer of Ps 49, he professes that this is something that has been revealed to him (v. 17). Though he lambastes those who blasphemously defy God, he professes that the problem really lay with him. His exaggerated former perspectives on the well-being of the wicked were not so much evidence of God's unfairness as his own embittered jealousy (v. 21). He admits that he was thinking like a stupid animal before launching into the beauty of what was revealed to him about his final destiny (vv. 23–26).

His profession of faith in an afterlife with Yahweh displays many parallels with that of the composer of Ps 16. Both professions are framed with time references, the first one (**בְּמִינֵּה**) expressing how Yahweh is always with the psalmist already in this life and the final one (**בְּצָלָם**, **לְעוֹלָם**) describing how the psalmist will be with Yahweh forever. In between, the psalmists speak of how Yahweh has them by the right hand. Both psalmists speak of Yahweh as their counselor. He is their portion and will be their delight. In common with Ps 49, the composer of Ps 73 speaks of Yahweh taking him afterward. Whereas the author of Ps 49 speaks often of death and says that Yahweh will snatch him out of the hand of **שָׂאָל**, the author of Ps 73 only alludes to death. For him there is little difference between existence with Yahweh in this life and the

continued existence with him in the afterlife. All three psalmists tend to avoid terminology that would indicate a location for the afterlife and rather speak of it as a state or condition that they hope to experience in relationship with Yahweh. Though the author of Ps 73 clearly wants to teach his fellow worshippers about this profound revelation he has received concerning his final destiny, he focuses more and more exclusively on speaking with Yahweh at the climax of the Psalm, making clear that such a profession needs to be shared with fellow worshippers and yet is an intensely personal one addressed directly to Yahweh himself. The two of them have a relationship that transcends death. Yahweh is the psalmist's portion forever.

It is this expression of Yahweh being the psalmist's portion forever that serves as the pinnacle of his profession of faith. The word “portion” (*קֶלֶב*) has been transformed by the psalmist (as it was by the author of Ps 16) from a locational term to a personal term. Whereas in the conquest narratives it refers to the perpetual inheritance of a piece of land, in Ps 73 Yahweh is the psalmist's portion. It is “nearness to God” (v. 28), being “with him” (vv. 23–25) that gives the psalmist life-meaning, confidence, and hope for an endless future. His discovery, made in Yahweh's presence in the sanctuary (v. 17), was “I am always with you” (v. 23). Whether in this life or in the glorious afterward (v. 24–25), it is all the same for him. By contrast, when it comes to the afterward (*אַחֲרֵי*, v. 17) of those who defy Yahweh, they are on “slippery ground” (*נָזְלָקֹת*, v. 19). They are “far from Yahweh” (v. 27) and will perish suddenly, “completely consumed by calamity” (v. 19). For the psalmist, his *קֶלֶב* is Yahweh, the Rock (v. 26). For him afterlife—like this life—is a state or condition that derives all its significance from the personal presence of Yahweh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SILENCE OF THE DEAD

Since the three Psalms that we have studied in the foregoing chapters profess a belief in a continuing postmortem life with Yahweh, how does one reconcile Psalms statements that seem to speak of death as an end of existence? In this chapter we will examine four Psalms references that have often been brought forward and interpreted as statements that death marks the end of existence. The four (6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13; 115:17) either imply or state that the dead do not praise Yahweh, and two of them (30:10; 115:17) speak of the silence of the dead. The form critics of the early 20th century assumed that these four Psalms reflected a central belief in Israel that death marks the end of a person's existence. Therefore, they interpreted the three Psalms we have just examined in light of this assumption and concluded that they are referring to deliverance from impending mortal danger so that the psalmists who composed them could continue their relationship with Yahweh in this life. For them the Psalter contained no evidence of a belief in life after death.¹

Later scholars interpreted the “silence of the dead” passages differently, claiming that there was a time in Israel’s history when Yahweh’s authority was not viewed as extending over the realm of the dead so that those who died were out of Yahweh’s purview and thus unable to voice any praises to him.² The way they saw it, ancient Israelites did during certain periods believe in a continuing existence in *sheol* but their relationship with Yahweh was completely severed by death and thus they could bring no praise to Yahweh.

In this chapter I will show how the contexts of these passages do not have the idea of an

¹ Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, 131–33; Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1:240–41.

² Michel, “Ich aber bin,” 157–59; Segal, *Life after Death*, 138; Weiser, *Psalms: A Commentary*, 131.

underworld like that of Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors in view nor do they speak of an end of existence at death. The common observation that they make is that death brings about silence, not the end of existence. Since a major aspect of the cult of the dead was the belief that the dead could speak to the living, it would be natural for the writers of worship songs to Yahweh to speak of the dead being silent. And because worship of Yahweh involved the living gathering together to sing Yahweh's praises and to proclaim his marvelous deeds to one another, it would not be surprising for them to contrast the joyful, audible praises of living believers with the silence of the dead. The first three passages we will look at (Pss 6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13) are dealing with situations in which the psalmist is/was in mortal danger, and so he pleads with Yahweh not to take him out of the worshiping community. The final instance (Ps 115:17) raises the point for different reasons. He is not in mortal danger but is drawing contrasts between lifeless idols, which cannot speak to their worshippers, and the living God, who can speak. And so he is spurring on his living fellow worshippers to do what those who have breath in their lungs are designed to do by their Creator: praise Yahweh.

Psalm 6:6

Scholars today classify Ps 6 only in very general terms as an individual prayer for help.³ Like many Psalms it contains a fervent plea for deliverance while not revealing many details of what the crisis is from which the psalmist is asking deliverance. In v. 6 he is giving a reason why Yahweh should deliver him from death:

כִּי אֵין בָּמוֹת זְכַרְךָ בְּשָׁאֹל מִי יוֹקֶה־לְךָ:

For in death there is no memorializing you; in the grave who will praise you?

³ E.g., deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 101.

זכור is often understood by scholars as meaning “remembrance of you.”⁴ A translation like “in death there is no remembrance of you,” at least in today’s English, gives the misleading idea that with death comes the loss of memory. The context of the poetic line does not support such an interpretation. The second half of v. 6 says, “In *sheol* who will praise you?” זכר in the first half thus seems to be referring to an audible proclamation in praise of Yahweh. The root זכר often has this sense, especially in *hiphil*. It denotes the mention of Yahweh by a speaker in which he calls to mind in his hearers either Yahweh himself,⁵ Yahweh’s characteristics,⁶ or Yahweh’s deeds.⁷ It is used especially to indicate the invocation of his name.⁸ As a matter of fact, the noun זכר is frequently used as almost a synonym of Yahweh’s מושׁעַ.⁹ That these various uses of the root זכר refer to public invocation of Yahweh and proclamation of his deeds in corporate worship is likely. In 1 Chr 16:4 David appoints specific Levites who are to “invoke” (לְהִזְכִּיר) and “praise Yahweh” (לְהִזְדֹּות לֵיהָנָה) before the ark of the covenant, which he has just brought to Jerusalem. Here in Ps 6:6 the same two roots are used synonymously. This is no doubt why *HALOT* places the occurrence of the word זכר in Ps 6:6 under its meaning 2, “the mention and invocation of God in liturgies.”¹⁰ The use of the noun זכר here denotes the audible mention of Yahweh’s name in worship and is not being used to assert that the dead are unable to remember him. It appears

⁴ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 103; DCH 3:111; Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch*, 302; CSB; ESV; KJV; RSV.

⁵ Isa 62:6.

⁶ Ps 71:16; Isa 63:7.

⁷ Isa 12:4.

⁸ Ps 20:8; Isa 26:13; Amos 6:10.

⁹ Exod 3:15; Hos 12:6; Isa 26:8 Ps 135:13.

¹⁰ HALOT 1:271.

that the Septuagint translator understood זְבָרֵץ in a similar way when he translated it with a participle, ὁ μνημονεύων σου.¹¹ The verb זְבַר in the *hiphil* can also be used with the word מַשְׁׁל to denote the invocation of other gods.¹² As we saw in Chapter Two, it probably has etymological connections to the Akkadian phrase, *šuma zakāru*, which refers to the invocation of deities in the cult of the dead. As we saw in Chapter Four, that is also what the author of Ps 16 likely had in mind when he alluded to not taking the names of other deities (or of the dead) on his lips in 16:4. All of this seems to point to זְבָרֵץ in Ps 6:6 as an audible addressing of Yahweh and/or proclamation of his praiseworthy deeds in a worship context among the living.

It is also noteworthy in this verse that the word אֹלֶאָשׁ is parallel to מִתְּהֻנָּה—even more so that both are the object of the preposition בְּ, underlining the fact that they are being used synonymously. Our argument in all of the previous chapters that אֹלֶאָשׁ is describing a condition rather than a location seems to suit this verse well. It is in the state of being dead that the deceased are unable to invoke or praise Yahweh. It is noteworthy too that this is the first occurrence of אֹלֶאָשׁ in the Psalter, setting somewhat of a precedent for how it is to be understood from this point on in the collection. It appears to be used as a synonymous parallel to מִתְּהֻנָּה in four other Psalms: 18:6; 49:15; 89:49; and 116:3. These five occurrences make up more than a fourth of the occurrences of אֹלֶאָשׁ in the Psalter.¹³

Here Ps 6:6 provides a clear statement that the dead are unable to join the living in the

¹¹ The entire phrase in LXX reads: ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ ὁ μνημονεύων σου, “there is no one who makes mention of you in death.” Muraoka places it under meaning 2 in his LXX lexicon: “to call to somebody else’s mind, make mention of.” GELS 465. The *BHS* apparatus suggests that the LXX translator probably read זְבָרֵץ.

¹² Exod 23:13; Josh 23:7; Hos 2:19.

¹³ Five of sixteen occurrences

audible proclamation of Yahweh in public worship. The psalmist is pleading with Yahweh that he would rescue him from whatever dire situation he is in. What the danger is he does not mention explicitly. But he is clearly in danger of dying, and one of the reasons he gives Yahweh for the need to rescue him is that if he dies he will no longer be able to join the throng of worshippers who give Yahweh the praise that is due him. There is no indication in the verse of what was often asserted about it in the 20th century—that death completely separated the believer from Yahweh¹⁴ or that there was no belief in a life after death in ancient Israel.

Psalm 30:10

Psalm 30 is similar to Ps 6. The psalmist has undergone a life-threatening situation, but in this case it is clearer than in Ps 6 that Yahweh has indeed delivered him from it (vv. 2, 4). So this one is classified as a Psalm of thanksgiving.¹⁵ As is characteristic of thanksgiving Psalms, the psalmist walks the reader through the mortal danger he has experienced as well as his cries to Yahweh for deliverance and Yahweh's praiseworthy deliverance of him. It is in the section where he rehearses his cries for rescue that we find the pertinent verse (10):

מַה־בָּאֵעַ בְּקָרְבִּי בְּרֹתֶךָ אֲלֵשֶׁת בַּיּוֹתֶךָ עַפְרֶת בַּיָּגֶד אַמְתָּהֶךָ:

What gain is there in my being silenced, in my going down to decay?

Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?

The third word in the verse, **בְּקָרְבִּי**, is often analyzed as being from **בָּקַר** and thus meaning “in my blood,” i.e. “in my death.”¹⁶ But there is nothing in the rest of the Psalm that indicates danger of a bloody death for the psalmist. Rather, illness seems to have been what endangered his life.

¹⁴ Weiser, *Psalm: A Commentary*, 131.

¹⁵ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 289.

¹⁶ ESV; Goldingay, *Psalm 1–41*, 431; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen I*, 188; Kraus, *Psalm 1–59*, 353.

In v. 3 he says that Yahweh has healed him. *DCH* suggests the alternate pointing for the word בְּדַמִּי or בְּדַמֵּי, both of which are *qal* infinitive construct forms with first person singular suffix of קָמָם (“be silent,” here “in my silence”).¹⁷ There are several contextual clues that support this reading. The very next word is also an infinitive construct with the בְּ preposition and the first person singular suffix (בְּרַקְעִי, “if I go down”) and, if the alternate reading בְּדַמִּי is correct, describes more explicitly what the previous infinitive is referring to. The entire half verse would then be translated, “What gain is there in my being silent, in my going down to decay?”

The final verse of the Psalm (v. 13) also seems to support this reading. The psalmist concludes by saying that since Yahweh has turned his situation from despair into rejoicing his soul may now sing praises to Yahweh and not be silent (וְלَا יַקְמֶה). The fact that the verb קָמָם (“be silent”) is used here as the psalmist is summing up makes it likely that it is the vocable he intended in v. 10. What he’s saying in his conclusion is, though he was in danger of being silenced, now he will continue to praise Yahweh audibly. Note too, he is saying that he will now praise Yahweh his God *forever*. As we saw in the professions of belief in an unending continuance of life with Yahweh in Pss 16:9–11 and 73:23–26, this Psalm ends with an assertion that the psalmist’s praise of Yahweh will go on forever. We will see this yet again at the end of Ps 115.

But returning to v. 10 of Ps 30, there is yet one other thing to point out in the second half of the verse. The psalmist echoes the question in the first half of the verse with two other pointed questions: “Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” The use of the vocable עַפְרֵן in the first question clearly harkens back to Yahweh’s judgment on man in Gen 3:19 (“for

¹⁷ *DCH* 2:451. NIV also seems to follow this reading (“What is gained if I am silenced?”).

dust you are, and to dust you will return”). The psalmist is clearly speaking of the state of the dead from a “this world” perspective with the use of פָּעַל. The only thing that would remain if he died and decomposed—as far as the living could observe—is dust, and that dust is unable to make audible praises. The second question in this half of the verse is also worded very pointedly. The dust, which clearly is the subject of the final verb in the verse (יִגְבַּח), cannot tell of Yahweh’s faithfulness. Here we have a beautiful pair of verbs that describe the two aspects of public worship in the realm of the living: audible praise of Yahweh and articulate proclamation of his deeds to fellow worshippers. This verse so succinctly makes the point that if the believer were to die, his death would bring no benefit to Yahweh because as a decomposed body he would be unable to join in the audible praises of the worshipping congregation or to proclaim to his fellow believers the wonderful things that Yahweh does for them.

As in Ps 6:6, the composer of Ps 30:10 uses rhetorical questions to make the point that the dead are unable to praise Yahweh together with the living, worshipping congregation. There is nothing in the context of the Psalm, as there was nothing in the context of Ps 6 to indicate that the psalmist is saying death brings an absolute end of existence to believers in Yahweh or that death brings the deceased to a place where they are separated from Yahweh and unable to praise him. Psalm 30:10 is stating even more explicitly than Ps 6:6 that it is the physical remains (פָּעַל) of the deceased that are unable to praise Yahweh or to proclaim his faithfulness.

Psalm 88:11–13

Psalm 88 defies categorization. Whereas Psalms of thanksgiving and even Psalms of lament tend—after their many complaints—to end on a positive note, Ps 88 pours forth its

sorrow and ends in overwhelming despair.¹⁸ The verses that we will explore have been identified by those who study the Psalm's structure to play a central theological role in this unique composition.¹⁹ The psalmist cries out to Yahweh three times in the poem (vv. 2, 10 and 14), essentially dividing it into three parts.²⁰ The second, and thus central, of the three sections, bookended by the cries in vv. 10 and 14 is a set of three pairs of rhetorical questions similar to those we saw in the previous two Psalm verses we examined. The author here, however, is much more expansive. He puts forth no less than six questions in his appeal to Yahweh not to let him die, but to allow him to remain in the land of the living so that he may testify to the wonderful, loving, and faithful deeds of Yahweh. Because of this extended use of rhetorical questions, this instance points even more than the other two to the fact that the psalmist is focused on the land of the living: If only Yahweh would let him continue in this life!

11 הַלְאָתִים פָּעַשְׁתָּה־פָּלָא אַמְּדָרְפָּאִים יַקְוָמוּ יְזֹדוֹךְ סָלהָ:

12 הַיִּסְפֵּר בְּקָבֵר חֹסֶךְ אַמְּנוּנָתְךָ בְּאַבְּזָזָן:

13 הַיִּנְדַּע בְּתַשְׁךְ פָּלָאךְ אַצְּדָקָתְךָ בְּאָרֶץ נְשִׂיחָה:

Will you perform wonders for the dead? Or will ghosts rise and praise you? Selah
 Will your lovingkindness be recounted in the grave? Your faithfulness in destruction?
 Will your wonders be made known in the darkness? And your righteousness in the land of forgetteness?

¹⁸ Beat Weber, “‘JHWH, Gott meiner Rettung!’ Beobachtungen und Erwägungen zur Struktur von Psalm lxxxviii,” *VT* 58, no. 4–5 (2008): 605.

¹⁹ Weber, “Gott meiner Rettung,” 598; Ernst Wendland, “Darkness Is My Closest Friend’ (Ps 88:18b): Reflections on the Saddest Psalm in the Psalter.” *VeE* 37, no. 1 (March 2016): 3.

²⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms* 42–89, 644; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 391–92.

The first pair of questions begins with the correlative interrogative particles וְאֵת . . . וְאֵת (“Will . . . ? Or will . . . ?”).²¹ The prepositional phrase “for the dead” stands forward in the first clause, no doubt for emphasis. It’s the possibility of his becoming one of the dead that the psalmist is protesting. Yahweh had often done wonders (**אֲלֹהִים**) to rescue his people from death in the past.²² But there was no evidence of him ever working wonders for those who had already died. The import of this first rhetorical question is clear: the psalmist is pleading with Yahweh to do a wonder for him now while he still hangs on to life.

The second question (“Will ghosts rise and praise you?”) reflects what happens after Yahweh does wonders for his people—they rise up and praise him. But if Yahweh were to do wonders for the dead, would they rise and praise him? The implied answer is clearly, “No.” It’s noteworthy that the psalmist uses the term **רַפְאִים** here. As we saw in chapter One, its cognates in other ancient Semitic languages occur often to designate spirits of the dead.²³ Its correlation to and contrasts with the Ugaritic word *rp'u* (plural *rp'um*) are especially intriguing. Both in Ugaritic and in Hebrew it is used exclusively for spirits of the deceased, not of the living.²⁴ One fundamental difference that we saw in Chapter One was that in Ugaritic it often occurs in the singular and refers to named individuals whose fate and activities in the underworld are described in some detail, while in the Hebrew Bible **רַפְאִים** occurs only in the plural and is never used for named individuals. In addition, the biblical authors use it rarely. The word occurs a mere eight times in the Old Testament and only in the poetry of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and

²¹ BDB, s.v. **וְאֵת**.

²² Exod 15:11; Isa 25:1; Pss 77:12, 15; 78:12. In all of these cases the word **אֲלֹהִים** is a collective singular.

²³ Mark S. Smith, “Rephaim,” *ABD* 5:674–76.

²⁴ Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, *Dictionary of Ugaritic*, 731–32; BDB, s.v. **רַפְאִים**.

Isaiah.²⁵ Here in Ps 88:11 is the only time it occurs in the Psalter. Given the number of times that the Old Testament addresses the subject of death,²⁶ this is indeed a minute number of occurrences. The biblical authors are clearly using the term sparingly.

Its use here may indicate that the psalmist has the cult of the dead in mind. As we saw in the Ugaritic document *KTU* 1.161, it was the *rp’um* who were summoned, addressed and sacrificed to in the cultic rites.²⁷ The fact that the author of Ps 88 uses the word רַפְאִים as his parallel term to “the dead” (רַפָּה) in v. 11 supports this possibility since cognates of these two terms were used for the members of the community of the deceased who lived with the gods in Ugaritic literature.²⁸ It’s interesting that the psalmist is using these parallel terms in Ps 88:11 in a pair of questions that clearly imply negative answers: “No, Yahweh will not perform wonders for the dead, nor will their ghosts rise and praise him.” If the psalmist was aware of the cult of the dead—and so much of Old Testament literature seems to show an awareness of it—the wording could allude to the cult. The choice of verbs in the second half of the verse might reflect aspects of the cult too, such as the rising (יָקַם) of the dead and their proclamation of things divine (יֹלֶךְ). Of course the verb יָקַם could simply indicate standing up from a lying position²⁹ and not coming up from a purported realm of the dead. However, the psalmist’s use of the verb יֹלֶךְ seems to imply audible praises that are made in the world of the living because he clearly is questioning whether the dead make them. He appears to be thinking along the same lines as the

²⁵ Job 26:5; Ps 8:10; Prov 2:18; 8:18; 21:16; Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19.

²⁶ As we saw in Chapter Four (p. 108), for example, the Hebrew root נִימָן occurs in its various forms exactly 1,000 times in the Old Testament.

²⁷ *COS* 1.105:357–58.

²⁸ See *CTA* 6 vi 44–47 in *COS* 1.86:273 and comments on it in Chapter Two.

²⁹ BDB, s.v. מִלְכָה.

author of Ps 30:10. That psalmist used the same verb (**תְּזַלֵּל**) questioning whether the dust could produce such praises and then paralleled that verb with another verb of speaking (**תְּגַבֵּחַ**). Psalm 6:6 also uses the verb “praise” (**תָּהֲזִבֶּה**). The very fact that these psalmists are raising the question about whether the dead can produce articulate, understandable speech may itself be an indication that they are raising this question in contrast to the inarticulate “chirping and muttering” that Isaiah mocked the necromancers for in 8:19 and which Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources also seem to attribute to them.³⁰ To sum up, the rhetorical questions in Ps 88:11, which call for negative answers, seem to indicate that just as Yahweh does not do wonders for those who are deceased so the deceased do not stand up and do what the living do, i.e., praise Yahweh for his wonders.

For my translation of **רֹפֵא מֶלֶךְ** I have chosen the word “ghost.” My intent is to capture the psalmist’s use of a religious term that reflects beliefs that he himself likely did not share. Many 21st century Christians do not believe in ghosts, i.e., that the spirits of the dead remain here on earth haunting the places they once inhabited, but they can still use the term in phrases such as, “He thought he saw a ghost.” Such a statement does not indicate that a Christian speaker believes in ghosts. It is just a concept, believed by others, that he must acknowledge. Likewise, the author of Ps 88 seems to be using a term that is foreign to the vocabulary of the Psalter and yet is not unfamiliar to worshippers of Yahweh. The fact that he is using it in a rhetorical question that raises a hypothetical situation that the author clearly believes will not happen seems to support this interpretation.

The **תְּלַזֵּל** at the end of v. 11 sets it apart to a certain extent from the following two verses

³⁰ See my treatment of this in Chapter Three.

(12–13). While v. 11 is addressed directly to Yahweh, vv. 12–13 are worded in a more indirect manner with the use of passive verbs: “Will your lovingkindness be recounted in the grave? Your faithfulness in destruction? Will your wonders be made known in the darkness? Your righteousness in the land of forgottenness?” Now that he has raised in v. 11 the question of whether the dead will rise and praise Yahweh, the psalmist continues in v. 12 by explaining what he means by “praise.” It is a recounting (**יִשְׁפַּר**) of Yahweh’s characteristics (, **אָמֵן**, **תְּדַבֵּר**, **תְּמִימָה**) and his deeds (**תְּמִלָּפֶת**). That’s what praise is for those who believe in Yahweh. It is proclamation of what Yahweh is like and of what he does for his people.

Verses 12–13 at first blush might seem to indicate a location where this proclamation should hypothetically be made. The four **בְּ** prepositions in vv. 12–13 introduce nouns that some exegetes have identified as references to a realm of the dead.³¹ **הַבָּקָר** of course, need not be understood as anything but the grave in which the dead body lies. **אַבְדָּנוֹן**, on the other hand, with its derivation from **בָּדַע** (“perish”), could simply be an abstract noun indicating “destruction, decomposition.”³² The lexicons see it almost as a proper name³³ and as a place.³⁴ The modern English translators follow their lead by capitalizing it.³⁵ However, it differs from **אַיָּשׁ**, which consistently functions as a proper name.³⁶ The latter never in all of its 66 occurrences has the

³¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 648; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 392.

³² Goldingay (*Psalms 42–89*, 654) points out that Job 31:12 shows there was a recognized link between the noun and the verb. I would add that the Masoretic pointing of the noun even shows a link between it and the *piel* form of the verb, which gives it the meaning “destroy.” (Note the *piel* vowel pattern on the noun: schwa, *patakh*, *dagesh forte*.)

³³ BDB, s.v. **אַבְדָּנוֹן**; DCH, 1:101.

³⁴ BDB, s.v. **אַבְדָּנוֹן**; DCH, 1:101; HALOT, 1:3. HALOT defines it as “place of destruction, **underworld**” (bold original).

³⁵ CSB, ESV, NASB, and RSV have “Abaddon.” NIV has “Destruction.”

³⁶ See Chapter Four, footnote 113.

article. Of its six occurrences in the Old Testament, גָּדוֹלָה has the definite article twice, including in this instance. The Septuagint usually translates it with ἀπόλεια (“destruction”) and consistently gives it the definite article only in the two instances where the Hebrew has the definite article. I would argue that it denotes the abstract sense of “destruction” and in a few of its occurrences could be understood as personification,³⁷ but in none of the occurrences is it necessarily a place name. As we saw in the case of הַנֶּשֶׁבֶת earlier in this study, it could simply designate the state or condition of decomposition. It’s worth noting that the context of these three lines (vv. 11–13) seems to call for the term לִוְיָהּ, but the psalmist avoids using it even though he used it earlier in v. 4. Could he be avoiding it here in case it might lead some of his hearers to make the false assumption that he is speaking of an underworld location such as Israel’s neighbors believed in?

In the third instance of the preposition, the בְּ has the object הַנֶּשֶׁבֶת (“darkness”), which could describe an underworld, but could just as well describe the physical grave, which the psalmist has just explicitly mentioned in the previous verse. It’s the fourth and final object of the preposition נֶשֶׁבֶת אֶרְצָה (“land of oblivion”) that provides the firmest support for an underworld interpretation of these verses. Unfortunately, the phrase occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. נִשְׁבֵּת is a *hapax legomenon*, but is no doubt connected to the verb נִשְׁבַּת (“forget”).³⁸ The verse as a whole does at first seem to speak of a place where the dead experience a cessation of cognition. The simplest translation of the verb in the verse (עָזַבְתָּ), a *niphal* imperfect, is “will

³⁷ In the two clear cases where it is personified, it is parallel to נִשְׁבָּת (no article, Job 28:22) and לִוְיָהּ (Prov 27:20).

³⁸ BDB, s.v. נִשְׁבֵּת; HALOT, 2:728–29; DCH, 5:776–77.

be known.” So a translation of the whole verse could be, “Will your wonders be known in the darkness? Your righteousness in the land of oblivion?” The negative answer implied by the first rhetorical question would seem to indicate that the psalmist is saying that Yahweh’s wonders will not be known in the darkness. However, **עַל** in the *niphal* can also mean “be made known.” Both BDB and *DCH* offer this as a possible translation for this very instance,³⁹ and since the previous two verses are speaking hypothetically of the dead proclaiming Yahweh’s characteristics and deeds, the foregoing context would support this meaning. In addition, it is not completely clear that the phrase **אָלֵץ נִשְׁיָה** is implying that the dead forget. In v. 6 the psalmist speaks of Yahweh “not remembering” (**לֹא זָכַר**) the dead. There the verb **זָכַר** is probably used in the sense of “to think about with the intention of intervening to deliver.” BDB places this occurrence under its meaning II. 1. a. “remember individuals, with kindness, granting requests, protecting, delivering etc.”⁴⁰ Other instances BDB places under this meaning are passages like Gen 8:1, where God remembers Noah in the midst of the flood, and Gen 30:22, where he remembers Rachel in her infertility and allows her to conceive. The parallel phrase to “you do not remember [the dead] any longer” in Ps 88:6 is “and they are cut off from your hand.” This would seem to indicate that the psalmist is saying that the dead are cut off from Yahweh’s loving care, which he so often demonstrates during their earthly lives. In v. 13 *HALOT* takes the word **נִשְׁיָה** not in the sense of the dead forgetting, but of Yahweh forgetting the dead. Its definition of the word **נִשְׁיָה** is “forgetting,” but for the phrase **אָלֵץ נִשְׁיָה** it gives “the land forgotten by Yahweh.”⁴¹ So, to sum up, it is unlikely that Ps 88:13 refers to a ceasing of cognition at the time

³⁹ BDB, s.v. **עַל**; *DCH*, 4:107.

⁴⁰ BDB, s.v. **זָכַר**.

⁴¹ *HALOT*, 2:729.

of death. That's why I have translated the phrase נֶגֶד הָרָא “in the land of forgottenness.” And calling it a “land” does not necessarily mean the poet has a place in mind. Poetry can use such wording to describe a state or condition.

Though it is understandable how some exegetes could take 88:6 and 13 as referring to a complete severance of the dead from Yahweh’s power and care, the bulk of the passages we have considered in this study would not support such an interpretation. Psalm 88:11–13 too can be understood to describe how the dead are unable to join in the praise and proclamation of Yahweh that the living give to him. It does not require an interpretation in which the psalmist is professing a belief that death is the end of existence or that death severs one from any continuing relationship with Yahweh. Von Rad puts it this way:

Jahweh’s sphere of authority in no way ended at the boundaries of the realm of death (Am. ix. 2; Ps. cxxxix. 8); but the dead stood outside the cult and its sphere of life. Properly, this was what constituted their being dead. In death there is no proclamation and no praise (Ps. lxxxviii.12 [11]; Is. xxxviii.18).⁴²

What he means by “the cult” is public worship of Yahweh among the living. Being cut off from that is what makes the author of Ps 88’s contemplation of impending death so gloomy. Von Rad continues,

In addition, in [Israel] the dead were without the sacral dignity which they widely enjoyed elsewhere, for Jahwism passionately set its face against all survivals of the cult of the dead and all inquiry of them. Attention has been rightly drawn to the strange lack of significance which the dead had for the life of ancient Israel. Looked at from the world of the living, whose center and source was the cult, they were in a state of extreme and irreparable uncleanness.⁴³

In considering how this Psalm relates to all the other Psalm evidence we have looked at so far, it is important to keep in mind that this is the most despondent expression in the entire

⁴² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1:389.

⁴³ von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:389.

Psalter. If any of the songs in the Psalter is affected by a despairing point of view, it is this one. If any psalmist appears to despair of hope for the future, it is this one. If any psalmist were going to deny the prospect of continued life with Yahweh, it is this one. And yet, in the depths of this central part of his song, there are clear indications that he does have hope for the future.

Wendland points out that in the center of his rhetorical questions the psalmist appeals to Yahweh's covenantal faithfulness.⁴⁴ Yahweh's two characteristics of lovingkindness (**רַחֲם**) and faithfulness (**מִתְּאָמֵן**) are juxtaposed in the center of v. 12, bookended by terms for the grave (**רֶבֶשׁ**) and destruction (**בְּשֻׁבְעָה**). Wendland points out that the collator of Book III of the Psalter seems to have noticed this glimmer of hope and followed up on it by placing Ps 89 directly after 88 because it begins by doubly extolling these very two characteristics of Yahweh:⁴⁵

¹ I will sing of the LORD's great love (**רַחֲם**) forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness (**מִתְּאָמֵן**) known through all generations.

² I will declare that your love (**רַחֲם**) stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness (**מִתְּאָמֵן**) in heaven itself. (Ps 89:1–2)

It's clear that the collator of Book III, after leading the reader through the most despondent of Psalms, wants to follow it up immediately with reassuring words of hope. He is clearly picking up on the few words of hope that are in Ps 88 and building on them.

There are other indications of hope in the overall landscape of Ps 88 too. The Psalm begins with the address, "Yahweh, God of my salvation" (v. 2). The psalmist believes that Yahweh is his salvation. He addresses Yahweh, explicitly using his covenantal name in the vocative together with the three references to crying out which demarcate the three parts of the Psalm (vv.

⁴⁴ Wendland, "Darkness," 4.

⁴⁵ Wendland, "Darkness," 3.

2, 10, and 14). The last of these has one final poignant touch that expresses the psalmist's confidence in Yahweh despite the bleakness of his overall prayer. At the end of the rhetorical questions in vv. 11–13, after he has asked whether Yahweh's righteousness will be made known in the land of forgottenness, he continues in the next verse (14), "But as for me, to you, Yahweh, I have cried for help." The juxtaposition of the first two words of the verse are intriguing (**אָנִי**
בַּךְ). Despite all the despair that pours from his soul as he expresses his feeling of abandonment—darkness being his only remaining friend—yet he is able to begin the final section of the Psalm with phrase "me to you." It's reminiscent of the repetition of **אָנִי** and **בְּךָ** in the climactic verses of Ps 73, where we saw that the psalmist's realization that he was always with Yahweh was the turning point in his spiritual outlook.

It is true that Ps 88:11–13 is the strongest piece of evidence supporting a theory that there was a time in ancient Israel when its worship composers believed that death was the end or at least that death separated the believer from his God. But there are many features of this Psalm that can be taken in the opposite way—that the psalmist is simply expressing how death separates the individual from the worship of the living community of faith. First and foremost, it must be remembered that Ps 88 is an unusually desperate expression of faith. Like no other Psalm, this one reveals a worshipper whose hope for the future is hanging by a thread. The fact that he continues to cling to Yahweh, the God of the covenant, and appeal to him on the basis of his lovingkindness and faithfulness bears witness to a hope that all is not yet lost. The fact that the psalmist is using rhetorical questions that plead with Yahweh to let him remain in the state or condition of the living is simply following the device used in other psalms, e.g., 6 and 30. The fact that the psalmist uses them in an extended manner—six questions!—shows the vehemence with which he pleads not to be separated from the living congregation of worshippers.

Perhaps now is the time to make some concluding observations about the use of rhetorical questions in the Psalms sections we have considered in this chapter. It is important to note that there are no *statements* in the Psalter that indicate a belief that death was the end of existence or that death was the end of a relationship with Yahweh. All three of the sections that we have examined in this chapter are worded as questions—rhetorical questions that suggest negative answers. And the questions are not about whether there is life beyond death. The questions are all about whether the dead praise Yahweh or proclaim his faithfulness. There is little if any evidence from the context of these three sections that the psalmists are speaking of the dead from any perspective except from that of the living. As far as the psalmists can observe, the dead cannot do what the living do, that is, praise Yahweh and proclaim his saving deeds to others.⁴⁶ The Psalter as a whole is a collection of liturgical poetry designed for living worshippers to use in praising Yahweh and proclaiming his characteristics and deeds. The three sets of rhetorical questions that we have examined thus far are only there to mark the contrast between the state or condition of the dead and that of the living, breathing, speaking worshipers of Yahweh. The final verse that we will consider next does make a statement about this, rather than asking a question. But again, the point of that statement will be not that death marks the end, but that it is the living who audibly praise Yahweh and proclaim his characteristics and deeds.

Psalm 115:17

Psalm 115 is a good example of a Psalm that is designed for corporate worship. When the psalmist speaks in first person, he does so using the plural (“we”).⁴⁷ And it is clear from the way various groups within the worshipping congregation are addressed and from the stereotyped

⁴⁶ Brug, *Psalms 73–150*, 127.

⁴⁷ Vv. 1, 3, 12, and 18.

phrases they are called upon to repeat that the Psalm is designed for antiphonal singing.⁴⁸

Although it shows characteristics of various types of Psalms, Ps 115 can be categorized only as a liturgical temple song.⁴⁹ As he reaches the conclusion of his song, the psalmist emphasizes that it is living believers who praise Yahweh (v. 18). To highlight this, in the second last verse (17) he says that it is not the dead who praise Yahweh. It is this verse that we need to take a closer look at.

לֹא הַפְתִּים יְהִלְוֵדָה וְלֹא כָּל־יָרְקֵן דָוָמָה:

It is not the dead who praise Yahweh, i.e. not all who go down to silence.

While the three previous Psalms references we looked at word their point as a question, this one simply states it as a fact: “The dead do not praise Yahweh.” The second half of the verse is worded not so much as a restatement of the first half, but clarifies the aspect of the dead that the psalmist has in mind: “All those who go down to silence do not praise him.” It’s the fact that the dead are silent that the psalmist wants to draw into focus.

Current exegetes want to see a reference to a spatial realm of the dead in these words.

DeClaissé-Walford writes,

The phrases may refer to those who have already gone down to the shadowy death-realm of the ancient Israelite belief system. From there (from Sheol), praising God was not possible; only in the realm of the living could humankind commune with and praise God.⁵⁰

The immediate context of the Psalm does not support this interpretation. In the preceding verses (15–16) the psalmist says, “May you be blessed by the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind.” The psalmist

⁴⁸ Vv. 9–13.

⁴⁹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 202; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 378.

⁵⁰ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 857.

clearly has in view two places: heaven and earth. There is nothing in the Psalm that would indicate that he has in mind a three-part universe made up of heaven, earth, and an underworld.

His reason for bringing up the silence of the dead may derive from the larger context of the Psalm. Verses 4–8 comprise an indictment of the idols of the nations. There the psalmist points out how these man-made statues have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear, noses but do not smell, hands but do not feel, feet but do not walk—and they do not utter a word with their throats. It's interesting that in this list the psalmist begins with the idols' speechless mouths and ends the list with the fact that they cannot utter a syllable from their throats. The references to their inability to speak form an inclusio for the list. Then he says in v. 8 that those who make such idols and trust in them will be like them. He's inferring that believers in such non-gods will be as senseless and impotent as they are. They will be just as lifeless. Because of this, exegetes sometimes suggest that the dead referred to in verse 17 are the lifeless idols.⁵¹ A better case can be made from the context for identifying the dead as the believers in the lifeless idols. Because they will become like them (v. 8), when they die they will be silent, like their gods, and unable to praise Yahweh.

It seems clear from the use of the participle (**וַיָּמֹת**, “those who go down”), though, that the psalmist is zeroing in on the moment of death—the death of everyone (**לֻכָּה**)—at which they become mute. Verse 17 clearly stands in contrast to what the psalmist says in verse 18, “But we will bless the LORD from now and until forever.” The “we” (**וְאֶנוּ**) clearly stands in contrast to the **מֵתִים** (“the dead”) in v. 17. The psalmist is clearly contrasting dead people with living people, and he is saying that it is the living who praise the Lord, not the dead. It is interesting

⁵¹ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 857.

that he uses the verb “bless” (**בָּרַךְ**) in v. 18 to express how the worshipping congregation praises Yahweh rather than the more conventional word for praise (**הִלֵּל**) that he uses in v. 17. But this may be due to the fact that he has used the former five times in vv. 12–15. And it is a very common verb to use in conjunction with the tetragrammaton in the Psalter, especially when the praise involves proclaiming the name of Yahweh.⁵²

The phrase “from now and until forever” (**מִעֱתָה וְעַד-עוֹלָם**) in v. 18 is probably intended by the psalmist first and foremost to express how the living congregation will continue to praise Yahweh on into the distant future, because in v. 14 he expressed the wish that Yahweh would increase the worshipping congregation, implying that Yahweh would add generation upon generation to it. His focus on the small and large (**הַקְטָנִים עַמְּהַגְּדָלִים**) within the congregation in v. 13 and his express wish that Yahweh would increase both “you” (plural) and “your children” indicates this. But the fact that this is the final verse in the Psalm could also be taken—and perhaps was intended as a possible take away—that “we” who believe in Yahweh will bless him now and forever, implying that one’s relationship with Yahweh as well as one’s praising of him will continue into eternity. It is at least worthwhile to consider such a possibility since so many of the sections of the Psalter that we have considered in this study end with a reference to eternity. Psalm 30 ended with an assertion that Yahweh would not silence the psalmist but that the psalmist would praise Yahweh forever (30:13). Two of the Psalms that affirmed an ongoing existence with Yahweh after death ended with assertions that this existence would go on forever (16:9–11; 73:23–26). And the third such Psalm, although not ending with such an assertion, implied such a hypothetical possibility (49:10). It’s intriguing that this final instance for our

⁵² Pss 16:7; 26:12; 34:2; 63:5; 103:2, 20, 21, 22; 104:1, 35; 115:18; 134:1, 2; 135:19, 20; 145:2, 10.

consideration also ends with a reference to praising Yahweh forever.

Conclusion

The four “silence of the dead” passages in the Psalter are clearly not stating that death is the end of existence. All four are instead uniform in commenting on death as the end of one’s ability to praise Yahweh—praise, that is, as the psalmists know it from what they’ve experienced in earthly corporate worship. It’s intriguing that all three of the passages that involve rhetorical questions (6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13) define what the living do in worship as 1) praise of Yahweh and 2) proclamation of Yahweh’s characteristics and deeds to others. These are two inherent aspects of human worship in this life. They involve audible words of praise directed to Yahweh, and though the words are directed to him, they are expressed for the benefit of fellow worshipers who hear them.

The three previous Psalms that we studied focus only on Yahweh and being with him in the afterlife. No reference is made to other believers who have gone on before to be with Yahweh. We argued in the previous chapters, especially in the one on Ps 16, that this was done in contrast to the religions around Israel which focused so heavily on an assembly of spirits in the afterlife—human as well as divine—with whom living worshippers could communicate. The emphasis on the silence of the dead in the four passages that we have considered in this chapter dovetails with this feature of Yahwism, that there was only one person in the spirit world from whom one could receive counsel, encouragement, and blessing. There was great comfort from being part of the worshipping community of the living because there Yahweh’s faithfulness and his saving deeds were proclaimed. There was also great dread of being separated from it. That is no doubt why the composers of Pss 6, 30, and 88 plead so fervently with Yahweh not to separate them from the worshipping community through death. However, they, like the composers of Pss 16, 49, and 73,

also bear witness to a calm assurance that with Yahweh their future is secure. Even the author of Ps 88 can express a certain confidence in Yahweh's יְהֹוָה and אֱלֹהִים. Coupled with this, the composers of Pss 6, 30, 88, and 115 feel a certain longing—in the case of 115 even an exuberance—to remain part of that living, worshipping community that can proclaim Yahweh's wonders.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the seven Psalms references we have examined display a coherent point of view about postmortem existence. The ancient Hebrew psalmists who composed them believed that they would continue to live on with Yahweh into eternity. Their professions of trust concerning this destiny, however, are couched in terms that reflect the distinctiveness of their faith from that of the neighboring cultures around them. Whereas the cultures around them looked forward to a postmortem existence that was problematic because the complex interaction of the community of the dead with the community of the living required individuals on both sides of the grave to fulfill certain obligations for those on the other side to insure their well-being, the Psalms references express a belief that death separated one from the community of the living and brought him into a state of bliss in Yahweh's presence where all needs were satisfied and where he was unencumbered by interdependence on others. The four Psalms that question the ability of the dead to worship Yahweh display a longing on the part of the psalmists to remain in this life because here they knew the importance and the joy of worshipping Yahweh. They are hesitant to be cut off from that experience because they understand the importance of proclaiming Yahweh's great deeds and his praises in the land of the living. On the other hand, the three psalmists that we examined in Chapters Four, Five, and Six express a confidence that death need not be feared. It is not the end of existence, for Yahweh will rescue them from the grave and bless them with joy in his visible and tactile presence.

In Chapter Two we surveyed the postmortem beliefs of Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors, beliefs that were dominated by the cult of the dead. In Mesopotamia the cult was practiced in order to avert any harm that could be done to the living by unhappy spirits in the

afterlife. The cult involved invocation of the dead and the offering of food and drink to them. This showed respect for the departed and also indicated to the living that the designated survivor (*the pāqidu*) deserved respect in the community of the living. A development of the cult was necromancy, through which the deceased could seek advice and support in decision making from the dead.

In Egypt, the social order was highly dependent on Egyptians' view of care for the dead. Much of its economy and social structure developed from its beliefs about the afterlife. Through its long history its concern for the care of deceased kings gradually became more and more democratized so that other social strata were also viewed as needing this care. Egypt's complex view of the multiple spirits of the deceased focused not just on the social interaction of the dead with the rest of the dead and with the gods, but also on social interaction with the living. The living were to help the deceased make progress in the afterlife, while the deceased were also needed to help their living heirs make progress in the land of the living. As a result, communication between the living and the dead through spells, necromancy, letters to the dead, and dreams were essential.

Israel's more immediate, Semitic neighbors in the Levant also practiced the cult of the dead. The Ugaritians, who predate the Israelite monarchy, believed that their kings went to an underworld where there was little distinction between the spirits of the deceased (*rp 'um*) and gods. Later Iron Age II monuments in the Levant, which are contemporary with the Israelite monarchy, give evidence of kings and royal officials feasting with the gods in the afterlife and soliciting offerings from the living for the well-being of their spirits (*nbš/npš*).

In contrast, we saw in Chapter Three that ancient Hebrew literature has a distinctly different view of postmortem existence. Not only does it condemn practices like the cult of the

dead, but its references to what happens to the individual after death is muted in comparison to what the written testimony of its neighbors' beliefs contains. We looked at what the various genres of Old Testament literature had to say about the subject. The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy contain legal prohibitions against consulting the dead and offering sacrifices to them. We focused especially on Lev 19:26, the second half of which forbids practicing divination. We pointed out how the first half of the verse is often misunderstood as a prohibition against eating meat with blood in it, whereas it really forbids "eating over the blood," a practice performed in the cult of the dead that is important to understand when exegeting an important Psalm reference to Israel's beliefs about postmortem existence, Ps 16, especially its cryptic references in v. 4 to pouring out libations of blood and the invocation of certain unnamed entities.

In examining the Old Testament's narratives that refer to the cult of the dead, we especially looked at the account of Saul and the medium of Endor in 1 Sam 28:3–25. It is the most detailed account of how the forbidden Canaanite practice of contacting the dead for advice was illicitly practiced in Israel in the time of the monarchy. The account contains glimpses of the beliefs that were common among Israel's Semitic neighbors in the Levant, such as the commingling of the spirits of the deceased with those of the gods and the belief that such spirits were called up from a subterranean realm of the dead. We also examined the prophet Isaiah's condemnations of necromancy, focusing especially on the one in Isa 8:19–20 which contains touches of Egyptian and Mesopotamian beliefs about the birdlike sounds that the dead were believed to produce through the mediums. Also in Chapter Three we examined the understated wording of the many references found throughout the Old Testament to postmortem existence, such as the oft repeated "he was gathered to his people" and David's lament over his dead child in 2 Sam 12:23, "I will

go to him, but he will not return to me,” which subtly bear witness to a belief in continued existence together with deceased relatives.

The first Psalm we examined in our study (Ps 16 in Chapter Four) proved to be a pivotal piece of evidence in establishing our thesis. We saw that scholars in the early 21st century are becoming increasingly convinced that the first stanza of the Psalm contains an allusion to the cult of the dead. The psalmist adamantly insists that he will not participate in the invocation of certain unnamed spiritual entities nor offer their libations of blood (v. 4). This verse shows the aversion that Old Testament authors had toward the cult of the dead. As Israel was not to take the names of pagan gods on their lips, so the psalmist will not take the names of these entities on his lips nor participate in the necromantic meals that required the pouring out of blood to lure spirits up from the underworld. The author of Ps 16 insists that he will only rely on Yahweh for protection (v. 1), advice (v. 7), and blessing (vv. 5–6)—benefits that were sought by Israel’s neighbors via the cult of the dead.

The Psalm climaxes with a profession of belief that the author will be rescued from the corruption of death and be brought into the visible and tactile presence of Yahweh to enjoy pleasures with him forever (vv. 9–11). The wording of v. 10 is significant. The psalmist confidently asserts that Yahweh will not abandon him to לְאַשְׁׁפֵּן. The context of the Psalm shows no evidence of the term being used here in the sense of an undifferentiated subterranean location to which all the dead are consigned, like the underworld of many of Israel’s neighbors. Rather, its parallel in v. 10 is נַפְשִׁׁי, a word that, though it is often translated “pit” and viewed as a synonym for “realm of the dead,” is describing the decay that the dead experience. Both its usage in the Old Testament and its translation throughout in the Septuagint indicate that its use here in v. 10 is to indicate the state or condition of being dead rather than a physical location to which

the spirit of the deceased goes. Our study of the word נֶשֶׁת in this chapter indicates that the Old Testament authors do not primarily use the term to indicate an underworld to which all the dead are consigned after this life. It can be used to refer to such a place, as it is in the taunt of the King of Babylon in Isa 14:9–15, where the king is mocked for being sent to his belief system’s gloomy underworld after his arrogant life in this world. But in such instances the word merely gives evidence that Israel knew about such a conception in their neighbors’ belief systems but did not necessarily accept it within their own. The fact that no Israelite person in the Hebrew Bible is ever said to go to this kind of underworld or is ever portrayed as being in such a place is evidence that their belief system did not share such a concept. The word נֶשֶׁת in Ps 16:10 is used in the sense of “the grave.” The psalmist ends his poem after asserting that Yahweh will not abandon him to the grave by describing a pleasurable state of being with Yahweh forever. The context of Ps 16 shows no evidence of being a prayer for delivery from imminent death, as it is sometimes claimed to be. Rather, the entirety of it is a statement of confidence that Yahweh is the only source of protection, guidance, and blessing for the psalmist. In the first stanza of the Psalm, he repudiates the alternate views of afterlife belief that he is aware of, and in the last stanza he affirms his belief in an eternal, pleasurable postmortem existence with Yahweh.

The next Psalm that we considered in its entirety, Ps 49, looks at postmortem destiny from a different angle. The psalmist emphasizes that death is unavoidable. Both rich and poor, wise and foolish are subject to it. Humans are like the animals in this respect. The Psalm’s refrain says that humans when they die are cut off/silenced (נִמְתַּן). This final word of the refrain appears to be a double entendre that emphasizes how the dead are cut off from the living and are silenced. Despite these comments that seem to carry such a note of finality, the psalmist, who labels his composition a “riddle,” continually interweaves hints that there is a different ultimate destiny for

the believer than there is for the arrogant wicked. In vv. 8–10, while asserting that no one can redeem the life of another, he raises the hypothetical possibility of living forever and not seeing decay. Then in the second stanza of the Psalm, after personifying the grave (**שָׂאֹל**) as a shepherd that pastures the dead, he asserts that the upright will rule over those whom the grave consumes (v. 15). The verse is worded rather cryptically, but it is followed by a bold statement in which the psalmist returns to the verb “redeem:” “Surely God will redeem my life from the hand of **שָׂאֹל**, for he will take me” (v. 16). After hinting about this unexpected turn in vv. 8–10, the psalmist reveals the solution to his riddle here in v. 16. Though all people are subject to death, the ultimate destiny for those who trust in Yahweh is rescue from the grip of **שָׂאֹל**. Those who trust in wealth will go to the circle of their fathers, where they will never see light (v. 20), but those who trust in Yahweh will experience an alternate existence. They “will not see decay (**תַּחַשׁ**) forever” (v. 10). The author of Ps 49, like most of the expressions we have examined in this study, shows reserve in his statement of afterlife belief. For instance, he does not state where God will take him after rescuing him from the hand of **שָׂאֹל**. But he is clearly articulating faith in a life beyond death.

The third Psalm we studied, Ps 73, approaches the subject of postmortem existence from yet another angle. The psalmist confesses that he had been disillusioned because of his perception that everything went well for the arrogant wealthy. But when he enters the sanctuary of God, he comes to the realization that his existence far surpasses that of the wicked. Because the wicked are far from Yahweh (v. 27), they are on slippery ground (v. 18). Yahweh will cause them suddenly to fall into terrors (v. 19). The psalmist, on the other hand, is always with Yahweh. Yahweh has grasped him by the hand (v. 23), guides him with his counsel (v. 24a), and will finally take him to himself gloriously (v. 24b). These are similar spiritual/psychological

goals that those who practiced the cult of the dead sought from the spirits of the departed—protection, guidance, and blessing. Like the composer of Ps 49, the composer of Ps 73 believes that in the end Yahweh will take him to himself. As with Ps 49, no mention is made of a place to which Yahweh will take him. The psalmist is concerned simply about being with Yahweh. The thing that is unique about this author's profession of belief in continued existence with Yahweh is that he makes no explicit reference to dying. For him life with Yahweh is an ongoing continuum. The only thing that matters is being with Yahweh, whether in this life or in the beyond. Yahweh is his “portion,” a motif the Psalm shares with Ps 16. The vocabulary of physical location (**קֶן**, the perpetual “inheritance” of a section of the land granted to an Israelite family) has been transformed into a way of expressing one’s eternal closeness and relationship with Yahweh.

The fact that these three Psalms express confidence in continued postmortem existence from such different perspectives and yet display a common set of assumptions about the postmortem destiny of believers in Yahweh indicate that their authors shared a common set of afterlife beliefs that could serve as a starting point from which to address various issues that believers faced in life. The author of Ps 16 is asserting his afterlife beliefs over against the competing belief system, the cult of the dead. The author of Ps 49 points out that redemption from death and the grave by Yahweh is what gives life enduring value over against the temporary security that wealth offers. And the author of Psalm 73 teaches his fellow believers that jealousy of the proud and boastful only leads to a bitter existence that is destined to come crashing down to a violent end while walking in step with Yahweh means a rock solid existence that goes on forever.

Finally, we examined the four Psalms passages that refer to the silence of the dead (Pss 6:6;

30:10; 88:11–13; 115:17). Far from reflecting a time when Israel believed in no afterlife or to a time when death was believed to bring complete separation from Yahweh because he had no power over the realm of the dead, as has often been asserted over the last hundred years, we saw that all four of these passages are focused on how death brings separation from the worshipping community of the living (not from Yahweh!). Psalm 6:6 has sometimes been misunderstood as stating that with death comes the loss of memory, but we saw how the word זֶכַר does not indicate the ability to remember, but rather refers to the invoking of a deity and the proclamation of his characteristics and deeds, as is confirmed in the second half of this verse. The psalmist is concerned that if death overtakes him, he will be unable to proclaim Yahweh among the living. Psalm 30:10 makes the same point, only even more explicitly. The psalmist asks what benefit there would have been in his being silenced in death. He clearly is referring to what the dead are like from the perspective of the living and is not reflecting any belief in an underworld location to which the dead go. He asks what benefit there would be in his being silenced (*בְּדִמֵי*) in death, in entering into the state of decomposition (*בְּרֹקֶת אֶל-שְׁחָת*). Physically speaking the dead are reduced to “dust” (*עָפָר*), and with his penetrating series of rhetorical questions he makes it obvious that such dust is unable to praise Yahweh or to proclaim his characteristics. He sees it as beneficial that he remain in the world of the living so that he may continue to proclaim Yahweh’s characteristics and deeds to the living. The verse nowhere asserts death as the end or death as separation from Yahweh.

Psalm 88:11–13 provides in some ways the strongest evidence for a belief that death marks an end. This author too, who also uses rhetorical questions to make his point, pleads with Yahweh not to end his life, and thus his ability to praise Yahweh. These verses, at first blush, seem to indicate a place to which the dead go (*אָרֶץ נֶשֶׁה אֶבֶדֶן*) where Yahweh does not do

wonders for them, nor can they praise him. But the Psalm also contains evidence of the author using terminology that could allude to the cult of the dead (*רְפָאִים יְקֻמּוּ*), happenings that he is clearly stating do not take place. Like the previous two Psalms references, this section also shows a strong desire for remaining in the world of the living so that the psalmist may proclaim the gracious characteristics and deeds of Yahweh to the living. So even this most despondent of Psalms need not be interpreted as expressing a belief that death marks the end of existence, but only that the psalmist is begging for the opportunity to remain in the land of the living so that he might continue to proclaim the praises and wonders of Yahweh.

While the three foregoing Psalms sections are worded in the form of rhetorical questions, the final reference to the silence of the dead (Ps 115:17) is expressed in the form of a statement that the dead do not praise Yahweh, i.e. “all who go down to silence.” The psalmist states it this way in contrast to his point that it is the living who praise Yahweh (v. 18). The context of this verse too indicates that the psalmist is not making a statement about what happens after death. He is simply affirming that it is an obligation for those who are alive to praise Yahweh.

Our study has shown that there is no lack of coherence between the three Psalms which affirm a continued postmortem existence with Yahweh and the four which state that the dead do not praise Yahweh. The former are stated as individual professions of faith that the psalmist will continue his relationship with Yahweh beyond this mortal life. Just as Yahweh has protected, guided and blessed these psalmists in this life, so he will continue to be their refuge and source of blessing after death. Given the cult of the dead which was so prevalent throughout the ancient Near East and was clearly a threat to Yahwism in the monarchical period of Israel’s history, it is no wonder that the psalmists make no references to joining in the afterlife those who predeceased them. Nor do they make any reference to what the deceased may be doing in their afterlife

existence. And certainly, they leave no hint anywhere in the Psalter of contacting the dead or seeking their counsel and aid.

The dead, in the view of the psalmists, are silent. They cannot speak to the living, nor can they join in the praise and proclamation that is so inherent to worship of Yahweh in the land of the living. The Psalm verses that express this perspective about the dead are clearly not commenting on what the condition of the dead may be in the afterlife. All four verses are stated in contexts where the psalmist is making the point that it is only the living who audibly praise Yahweh and proclaim his characteristics and deeds so that others may hear such things and have reason to put their confidence and trust in Yahweh.

Although much of ancient Near Eastern literature that deals with death and the afterlife focuses on a place to which the dead go, this clearly is downplayed in biblical literature and especially in the Psalms. None of the Psalms that we have investigated, even when using the word נֶלְעָשָׂה, seem to be referring to a place—a location—to which the spirits of the dead go. With the possible exception of Psalm 88, they are focused more on death as a condition or state, one that for the believer is a “being with Yahweh.” In doing so the psalmists seem to be avoiding ideas that were inherent to the cult of the dead and instead chose to characterize life beyond death in terms that did not look to those who were already dead as potential sources for security, guidance, and blessing. For them Yahweh was the only source for security, guidance, and blessing. The portrait that the psalmists paint of life beyond this life is one of a secure, harmonious existence into eternity shared by the individual and Yahweh.

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