Zion for his sanctuary (see Ps 78:67–68; cf. 132:13), but there is no need to exclude his care and protection of Zion (note v 5c and Yahweh's "love" for the righteous in Ps 146:8–9). The "dwellings of Jacob" may refer to other towns and cities in Israel: "Though Yahweh himself built and beautified these towns, he did not choose them as the site of his revelation; this perogative was Jerusalem's" (Dahood, II, 299). However, we should not exclude reference to other sanctuaries and temples in Israel; see Kraus (II, 767), who leans heavily on the "tent of Joseph" rejected by Yahweh in Ps 78:67–68, which refers to the sanctuary at Shiloh; note Ps 78:60. See also Anderson (II, 620), who notes that the "contrast seems to be between Zion as a religious centre, and other cities . . . of a similar significance," and who also notes the possibility of an allusion to the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, depending upon the date of the psalm.

Kraus (II, 768) is probably correct to conclude that the language in vv 2–3 and 7 reflects the singing and dancing which marked entry processions of worshipers coming to the chosen city at festival time (cf. Ps 122; 2 Sam 6; see Excursus: "Songs of Ascents" in Allen, 219–21). The verb in v 2, דבר, "say/speak/declare," can be understood as "sing" (noted by Kraus, II, 768, citing Judg 5:12; Ps 18:1); thus the "glorious things" about Zion are sung, I suppose, by the singers and dancers in v 7, who include in the "glorious things" the affirmation: "All my springs are in you!" "Springs" or "fountains" is a metaphor for the source of life and blessing (see Ps 36:10; Isa 12:3; Joel 3:18, Heb 4:18; cf. Isa 41:18; Hos 13:15; note also the river of Zion in Ps 46:5). V 7 seems to call up the vision of joyful people singing and dancing in a procession into Zion, or perhaps around the walls of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 48:13; see Craigie's comments, 355).

Explanation

If I have read the psalm in an acceptable way, it is a declaration of God's intention to make Zion the spiritual metropolis of the world. A speaker sets forth the love of Yahweh for Zion, "his foundation upon holy mountains," in vv 1b–3, which is said to be the "City of God" (3b). Weiser (581) uses his imagination to depict the context of the psalm: "The poet stands on the top of Mount Zion absorbed in thought. What he sees and what he thinks takes shape in his mind under the impression of the festive mood that surges round about him everywhere, and becomes a song of praise glorifying Jerusalem, the Holy City of God." The praise of Zion stops in vv 3–5b and Yahweh speaks of his intention for the peoples of the world in regard to Zion. The speaker in vv 4–5b seems to be God (probably in the voice of a prophet), while another voice is heard in vv 6–7, unless these lines represent a return to the speaker in vv 1b–3. Yahweh is visualized as proclaiming that Gentile peoples will be among those who will "know" him and are to be given birthrights in Zion.

"Know" is used in the sense of those who have been brought into a special relationship with God (cf. "many nations will be joined to [לוה] Yahweh" in Zech 2:15 [11]). The verb "know" is used of Yahweh's special relationship with Israel in Amos 3:2: "You only have I known out of all families of the earth" (cf. Deut 10:15; Jer 1:5; Gen 18:19; Exod 33:12, 17; cf. also Pss 9:11; 36:11; 79:6; 79:6, 91:14). Those who "know" Yahweh, and who are "known" by him, belong to his legitimate people. It is Yahweh's intention to make peoples from nations far and wide

to be citizens of Zion, joining with those native to the city: "It is a bold picture—Yahweh taking inventory of the peoples of the world, all of them . . . , and giving every one a birth certificate marked 'Zion'" (Durham, 350). The reader is invited to think that the testimony of the singers in v 7 includes the foreigners in vv 4–6. The song of the singers in v 7, "All my springs are in you," is a response to the "glorious things" of Zion in v 3, now expanded to include the "one great family of God" (cf. Weiser, 584).

The vision of Ps 87 lives on in Judaism and in Christianity. The latter developed, especially with Paul of Tarsus, the concept of the inclusion of the Gentiles as an integral component of its understanding of the work of Christ and the polity of the church. The Gentiles are "fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers in the promise of Christ Jesus throughout the gospel . . . the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (Eph 3:3–9, RSV). The speaker in Heb 12 declares that "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven" (vv 22–23, RSV).

The mother-role of Zion is used by Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "The Jerusalem above . . . she is our mother" (Gal 4:26). The "redeemed from the earth" will stand with the triumphant Lamb on Mount Zion, with the name of the Lamb and his Father's name on their foreheads; they will number 144,000, but are only the firstfruits for God and the Lamb of a great harvest, of a "great multitude which no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev 14:1–5; 7:9). Their song of victory and salvation confirms the vision of Ps 87.

A Bitter Prayer of Distress (88:1–19)

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Translation

1 A song;[a] a Korahite psalm.[b] For the leader:[c]
according to *mahalath-leannoth.*[d]
A *maskil*[e] of Heman the Ezrahite.[f]

2(1) *O Yahweh, the God of my salvation:* (3+2+2)
daily I cry out for help,[a]
nightly (I am) before you.[b]

3(2) *Let my prayer come to your attention;*[a] (3+3)
bend your ear to my cry (of distress)![b]
4(3) *For my soul is sated with troubles,* (3+3)
and my life is brought near to Sheol.
5(4) *I am reckoned with those going to the Pit;*[a] (3+3)
I have become like a strong man without strength;[b]
6(5) *"set free"*[a] *among the dead;* (2+4+3+3)
like the slain,[b] *who lie in a (common) grave,*[c]
whom you remember no longer,
those[d] *who are cut off from your hand.*
7(6) *You have put me at the bottom of the Pit,*[a] (3+2)
(down) in the utter darkness[b] *of the depths.*
8(7) *Your wrath has come down*[a] *on me;* (3+3)
you have squashed (me)[b] *with all your waves.*
9(8) *You have caused my close friends*[a] *to stay away from me;* (3+3+3)
you have made me repulsive[b] *to them;*
(I am) closed in[c] *and I cannot get out;*
10(9) *my eye*[a] *has grown weak from suffering.*[b] (3+3+3)
I have called to you, O Yahweh, every day;
I have stretched out my palms to you.
11(10) *Do you do wonders*[a] *for the dead?* (3+3)
Do even the Rephaim[b] *rise up (and) praise you?* SELAH.
12(11) *Is your loyal-love declared in the grave?* (3+2)
Your faithfulness in Abaddon?
13(12) *Are your wonders known in the darkness?* (3+3)
Your righteousness[a] *in the Land of Forgetfulness?*
14(13) *As for me, I have cried for help to you, O Yahweh,* (4+3)
and in the morning my prayer has been before you.[a]
15(14) *Why, O Yahweh, do you spurn me?* (4+3)
Why do you hide your face from me?
16(15) *I have been afflicted and nearly dead*[a] *since boyhood;*[b] (4+3)
having borne your terrors, I despair of life.[c]
17(16) *Your wrath*[a] *has swept over me;* (3+2)
your terrors have annihilated me.[b]
18(17) *They swirl around me all day like water;* (3+3)
they close in on me from all sides.[a]
19(18) *You have caused lover and companion to stay away from me;* (4+2)
(caused to stay away from me) my close friends—
darkness![a]

Notes

1.a. See n. 65:1.c.
1.b. See n. 85:1.b.
1.c. See n. 51:1.a.
1.d. The meaning of *mahalath-leannoth* is uncertain, but it is often assumed to be a tune or chanting pattern to be used with the psalm. The word *mahalath* is used in Ps 53:1 (see n. 53:1.b.), but *mahalath-leannoth* appears only here. Mowinckel (*PIW*, II, 210) suggests that *mahalath* is equal to "song" or "playing instrument" (probably a "reed-pipe") and suggests the reference is to the flute or "flute playing," which he argues would indicate a psalm of lament (reed pipes/flutes were played at

lamentation ceremonies; see Jer 48:36; Matt 9:23). However, he argues that in 88:1 the על־מחלת means "in connection with (properly 'over') illness" and relates to purification from illness (cf. מַחֲלֶה, masc "sickness," and מַחֲלָה, fem "sickness"). He takes *leannoth* (212) as "for penance" (properly "to humiliate/abase"; a piel inf. const. from ענה) and argues that it indicates that the psalm was used as a psalm of penitence and lamentation, probably in rituals associated with purification from illness. Goulder (*The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 202) suggests that *mahalath* was derived from חלל, "to pierce," and referred to holes in the ground or apertures to pits (cf. Isa 2:19). He relates this to his theory of the festal rites at Dan, which included the taking of a priest or prophet as representative of the people to a pit or cave outside the city to cry out to Yahweh in laments and pleas during the days of the festival (198). He notes, of course, the pit-language of Ps 88, with references to water, darkness, and the distress of being in such frightening places. He thinks it likely that *mahalath* was originally the pit-cave at Dan where one of the streams of water disappears underground for some distance outside the southwest corner of the ramparts of the city. In this case, the meaning of the expression *mahalath-leannoth* would have been something like the Pit of Lament. However, Goulder says that when Ps 88 was transferred to the Jerusalem community, *mahalath* was probably taken as "appeasement"; thus "about appeasement of affliction" (Leslie, 397, reads as "for self-abasement") and could, of course, have continued to give expression to rites of affliction and lamentation. Eerdmans (138, 412, 416) notes that in Assyrian incantation texts for healing, the name of the patient had to be mentioned when they were recited, and he supposes that such is the case in the use of Pss 53 and 88. The על־מחלת . . . לענות would mean "on account of the sickness of . . . ," with the name of the sufferer added in each case. In the case of Ps 88, "On account of the sickness of . . . to humble oneself (or for contrition)." The confession of contrition would, supposedly, make the prayer more acceptable to God. The theories are interesting, but assured conclusions are nonexistent.

1.e. See 52:1–2.c. The term probably indicates a well-written poem which gives powerful expression to its subject matter.

1.f. A person named Heman is mentioned in 1 Chr 2:6 as being one of the sons of Zerah, along with Zimri, Ethan, Calcol, and Dara. Zerah is a descendent of Judah. In 1 Kgs 5:11 [4:31], Heman is mentioned with Ethan the Ezrahite (note Ps 89:1) as one of the famous wise men of Solomon's reign. Heman is referred to as the king's seer in 1 Chr 25:5 and is mentioned along with Ethan in 1 Chr 15:17, 19 as among the Korahite Levitical singers. He is also called a singer in 1 Chr 6:18–23 [6:33–38] and his ancestry is traced back to Korah. Thus linkage is made between Heman and the Korahites to which Ps 88 is assigned. It is not certain, of course, that all the references to Heman and Ethan are to the same persons. The references to Heman (Ps 88:1) and Ethan (Ps 89:1) as Ezrahites are mysteries, as no direct connection between the Ezrahites and the Korahites is known elsewhere. The suggestion has been made to consider אזרחי ("Ezrahite") as a patronymic equivalent to זרחי ("Zerahite") and to identify Heman as in 1 Chr 2:6, which would make him a member of one of the clans of Judah. But Heman, Asaph, and Ethan are listed as Levitical singers in 1 Chr 15:17, 19, and Ethan is said to be an Ezrahite in 1 Kgs 5:11 [4:31]. There seems to be no real answer to all this confusion. We are probably dealing with more than one Heman in the traditions.

Dahood (II, 302) represents another approach and follows W. L. Albright to argue that Ezrahite means "native-born," thus, "Heman the native-born" (also in 89:1), proposing that אזרחי originally meant an "aborigine" and then "from a pre-Israelite family" (note the noun אזרח, "a native," as in Lev 23:42; Num 15:13; Exod 12:19, 48; Josh 8:33). See W. L. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1956] 127, 210).

The inscription is probably a double one, perhaps derived from two different sources, possibly indicating that a Heman psalm has been taken into a Korahite collection, regardless of the lineage of Heman. Goulder (203) may be correct to conclude that "Ezrahite" has been added to Heman in the title of Ps 88 from "Ethan the Ezrahite" in the title of Ps 89. Since Heman is reckoned as a colleague of Ethan, a link with the Korahite psalms was provided for Ps 89 by also designating Heman in 88:1 as an Ezrahite. Thus relationship between Ethan and Heman as Ezrahites draws together Pss 88 and 89, and both Heman and Ethan are identified as Korahites (note 1 Kgs 5:11 [4:31]; 1 Chr 6:33–38), though Ethan is from the line of Merari in 1 Chr 6:44 and is possibly the same as Jeduthun (see 1 Chr 25:1; 2 Chr 5:12; and cf. 1 Chr 15:17, 19).

2.a. The text is often changed to אלהי שועתי יומם צעקתי, "my God, I call for help by day / I cry out in the night before you" (note RSV; cf. v 14). Sometimes צָעַקְתִּי ("I cry/have cried") is changed to צַעֲקָתִי ("my cry"): "my cry in the night is constantly before you" (Gunkel, 382). It is possible to read the יום as "on the day when" or "when" (e.g., in Pss 56:4; 78:42; cf. 102:3; 18:1 which has ביום; see Delitzsch, III, 25): "when I cry before you in the night." Goulder (*The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 201, 204) adopts this approach and reads: "On the day that I have cried by night before thee, let my prayer

enter . . . ," assuming that 2b is a clause whose main sentence follows in v 3. This fits his theory that the psalm is a prayer of a representative of the community who prays through the night in a penitential rite, perhaps intended to be a prayer at dawn. Kraus (II, 771–72) reads vv 1–2 as: "O Yahweh, God of my salvation, / at daytime I cry to you, / at night I stand before you. / May my prayer come before you! / Incline your ear to my lamentations!"—a self-description of the speaker, who wants to declare that the prayer is that of one who holds on unceasingly to trust in Yahweh: "The darkest of all Old Testament psalms stands under the certitude: You are the 'God of my salvation'" (774). This is a possible reading which avoids emendation, but it seems to me that v 2 should be read as complaint rather than as a statement of confidence. LXX reads: "I have cried by day and in the night before you," which seems in keeping with the idea of incessant prayer, as in v 14. I assume that יום is equivalent to בימם (cf. Pss 18:1; 102:3) or the adverb ימם ("daily"), and that the statement means: "I have cried out for help before you day and night."

2.b. Dahood (II, 302) argues that נגדך ("before you") should be understood here as "to you" (adopted by Haddix, *Lamentation as Personal Experience,* 120).

3.a. It is possible to read this statement as an affirmation: "my prayer will come before you" (Kraus, Schmidt, Haag, "Psalm 88," 150). The לפניך ("to your face/presence") has the force of "to your attention" (cf. Gen 6:13; Lam 1:22; Jonah 1:2).

3.b. LXX adds κύριε, "O Yahweh," which gives the colons better balance.

5.a. The participle may mean "those about to go to the pit"— expected imminent action.

5.b. The expression אין איל is a hapax, found only here in MT. איל is frequently taken as an Aramaic loan word, "help" (see BDB; Briggs, II, 248; Gunkel, 382) and is read as such in LXX and Syr, followed by NEB ("like a man beyond help"). However, the word probably means "strength" (see KB; Dahood, II, 303; KJV; RSV, etc.). NJV combines the two readings very nicely: "a helpless man." The גבר indicates a strong, vigorous man.

6.a. The usual meaning of חפשי is "free" (e.g., Exod 21:2, 5; Deut 15:12, 13, 18; Job 3:19; Isa 58:6. KJV translates literally as "free among the dead," but RSV goes to "forsaken." NEB has "abandoned," so also NJV with the note "lit. 'released.'" LXX supports "free" with ἐλεύθερος, and Symm has ἀφεὶς ἐλεύθερος ("one set free"). Nevertheless, proposals for textual changes have been prolific (for surveys, see Grelot, *VT* 14 [1964] 256–63; Haag, "Psalm 88," 151, n. 6; Jacquet, 675, n. 6a). One major alternative is to assume that חפשי means "cot/couch/bed," utilizing the meaning of חפש in Ezek 27:20 and understanding it as "bed/couch."

Attempts have been made to strengthen this understanding from the usage of בבית החפשית ("in the separate house"), referring to a king's case of leprosy and separation from the normal community (cf. 2 Chr 26:21) in 2 Kgs 15:5. Dahood (II, 304) argues that this is equal to Ugaritic *ḫptt* in UT 51.8.7–8: *wrd bt ḫptt arṣ* which he reads as "and go down to the nether house of cots," citing also the motif of Sheol as a place of beds in such texts as Ps 139:8; Job 17:13; Prov 7:27. Dahood translates: "In Death is my cot"; Haag is similar.

However, this approach is beset with difficulties. The meaning of the Ugaritic *ḫptt* is uncertain and is variously rendered as "filthy" or "uncleanness" or as "netherworld" (Anderson, II, 625). The meaning of חפש in Ezek 27:20 (בבגדי־חפש) is usually taken as something like "saddle-cloths" and probably has nothing to do with "cot" or "bed." The expressions in 2 Kgs 15:5 // 2 Chr 26:21 may refer to the king's "house of freedom" rather than separation to some sort of unclean place. The king is free from the normal burdens (cf. 1 Sam 17:25) of royal functions. REB translates 2 Kgs 15:5 as "he was relieved of all duties and lived in his palace." Thus it seems better to retain the sense of "free" in Ps 88:6. I have, however, understood it in an ironic sense: "relieved of duties among the dead!"—equal to the strong man without strength in 5b and those who lie in the grave.

6.b. Some Greek texts have ἐρριμμένοι, indicating משלכים, "cast out ones," added to the text, but the extra word does not seem to help much: "Free among the dead / like the slain ones who are cast out / (like) those who lie in the grave." Cf. Jer 14:16.

6.c. The word קבר is the typical word for "grave," but in this context it seems to refer to the common grave(s) of those slain and buried without proper attention (cf. Isa 14:19; Ezek 32:20–32).

6.d. Lit., "and those . . ." The conjunction seems to be explicative, "even" or "specifically," and explanatory.

7.a. Lit., "the pit of the lowest (places)." Cf. Lam 3:55; Pss 63:10; 86:13; Ezek 26:20; 31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24; Isa 44:23. The translation above is that of NJV.

7.b. LXX has ἐν σκοτεινοῖς καὶ ἐν σκιᾷ θανάτου, "in dark places, even in the shadow of death," which assumes ובצלמות for במצלות, "in deep places." The "deep places" (or "bottom") appears especially with reference to the sea (note Exod 15:5; Neh 9:11; cf. מצולה in Job 41:23; Pss 68:23; 69:3, 16; 107:24; Jonah 2:4; Mic 7:19; Zech 10:11). V 7b is lit., "in the dark (places) in the depths." The plural

may indicate intensity ("utter darkness"), ב on במצלות may be the result of failure to recognize an enclitic *mem* on the preceding word: במחשכים מצלות, "in the darkness of the deep places." See n. 19.a. for מחשך as "darkness."

8.a. The verb סמך normally means "support/lean on," but here it appears to be as in Ezek 24:2, "to lean on aggressively/attack."

8.b. Assuming piel perf. from ענה, II, "bow down/afflict," with the suffix assumed from עלי ("on me") in the first colon. LXX has "you have brought upon me all your waves," probably assuming אנית לי from אנה, III, "meet/encounter," in piel, "cause to meet" or "allow to meet" (see *BHS,* Gunkel, Kraus). Delitzsch (III, 25–26) argues for כל־משבריך ("all your waves/billows") as an adverbial accusative with the verb ענה (in piel) used in the sense of "to bow down/press down," here used of turning or directing the waves down on the afflicted one like a cataract. In any case, the sense seems to be that the speaker has been crushed beneath the "waves" of God.

9.a. Or, "my companions," sometimes read as "my acquaintances," but the pual participle of ידע expresses more than the English "acquaintance."

9.b. Lit., "you have made (set) me an abomination to them."

9.c. The expression probably should be read as equivalent to כלא אני or נכלאתי, with the versions, "I have been imprisoned." However, an indefininte "one" from the suffix in the previous colon (שתני) may be assumed and no pronoun need appear: "Imprisoned, I cannot escape" (Dahood, II, 305; also Haddix, *Lamentation as Personal Experience,* 115).

10.a. The noun is singular, "my eye," probably influenced by the דאבה, "languish," taken as simple perf. 3rd pers. fem. sing. The plural or dual is often read (with LXX), but the singular may refer to the appearance of the suffering person (so Haddix, *Lamentation as Personal Experience,* 115, citing Lev 13:55). Indeed, it is probably synecdoche here for the body or the whole person.

10.b. The word עני refers to "affliction," "poverty," and the like; e.g., Gen 16:11; 29:32; Exod 3:7; Job 10:15; 36:8, 15, 21; Pss 9:14; 25:18; 31:8; 44:25; Lam 1:9.

11.a. The sing. "wonder" is collective.

11.b. Usually translated as "the shades" (RSV) or "the dead" (KJV). The exact meaning of the word רפאים is uncertain, except to say that it "clearly suggests the inhabitants of Sheol" (Anderson, II, 628). The word is frequently understood as "shadowy replicas" of persons who have died, the diminished selfhoods which survive death, and taken as derived from the Heb. root רפה, "sink/relax," so that the noun denotes "the powerless ones" (cf. Isa 14:9–10). On the other hand, the word may be from רפא, "heal," and denote "healers," as in Ugaritic (K. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986] 51–52). A major problem arises in both Phoenician and Hebrew sources in that two different usages of Rephaim appear. (1) They appear as a pre-Israelite people (e.g., Deut 2:10–11; 2:20; 3:11; Josh 12:4; 13:12; 17:15; 18:16; Deut 14:5; 15:20)—located in association with the Jordan or in the south of Jerusalem. (2) They appear as the dead (e.g., Isa 14:9; 26:14; 26:19; Prov 2:18; 21:16; cf. 9:18). How are the two related? The key to this matter probably lies in Ugaritic usage (see S. B. Parker, *IDBSup,* 739; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel,* 161–96, 227–29), where *rp'um* is a name for the privileged dead, royal ancestors, who live as the dead, but sometimes in the roles of warriors and healers, who have superior power; functioning like lower deities of the underworld. The *rp'um* may come up from the netherworld on occasion, as in a new year festival, and the living ruler may be counted among the *rp'um* (Spronk, 196; KTU 1.15.3.2–4 and 1.108.23–24). In KTU 1.161, the ancient kings of Ugarit are invited to a banquet for the dead ancestors, in order to bless the reigning royal family. The kings are called *rp'um,* and indicates why Keret in KTU 1.15.3.2–4, 13–15 is given a status among the *rp'um*: "he is in fact being blessed with ancestral apotheosis" (J. F. Healey, "The Last of the Rephaim," in *Back to the Sources: Biblical and Near Eastern Studies,* ed. K. J. Cathecart and J. F. Healey [Dublin: Glendale Press, 1989] 38). Healey (39) concludes that the Ugaritic *rp'um* are the ancestral spirits of royal families and, perhaps, associated heroic figures.

Thus it is understandable that legendary peoples of the past may have been known as *rephaim,* "healers," after their posthumous status as the mighty among the dead. The meaning of the term as "healers" should not be pressed too hard, but it is rather clear that the word is related to רפא rather than to רפה ("be weak"). In time, the term tended to lose its reference to privileged status and become a general term for the dead, who are considered generally in the OT to be weak and powerless. For example, the kingly status of the dead is mocked in Isa 14:9–10, where deceased kings still sit on thrones in the netherworld, but declare to an incoming tyrant: "You have become weak (חלה) like us." The mighty רפאים are as weak (or "sick," the common meaning for חלה) as the ordinary dead, or even worse, as those whose dead bodies received no proper respect or burial (Isa 14:18–20). In the Isaiah passage, the mighty "healers" (of disease—a function of kings—and of a country; cf. 2 Chr 7:14) and

the like are denied the status of the elite among the dead, since they have all become weak, living with maggots and worms. Thus I take the sense in Ps 88:11 to retain an element of the old idea of the *rephaim* as the elite, the heroic ones, among the dead, which the strong אם construction tends to support: "Do *even* the Rephaim rise (and) praise you?" Perhaps the strong "healers" among the dead should be able to do what the ordinary dead cannot, but they are as weak as all the dead.

13.a. "Righteousness" is equal to "righteous acts," equal to "acts of putting things right." See *Explanation* of Ps 71.

14.a. The translation is similar to that of NJV. The verb קדם means "to be in front" or "to meet," or "to confront" if in hostility. NAB paraphrases: "with my morning prayer I wait upon you."

16.a. MT's גוע has the meaning of "dying" or "near to death/about to die." LXX has καὶ ἐν κόποις, and ויגע, "in trouble/suffering/weariness," possibly reflecting וַיָּגֵעַ, "weary/weak/spent" (cf. Deut 25:18; 2 Sam 17:2; Eccl 1:8; Kraus, II, 773, who translates *todkrank*, "sick unto death/dangerously ill").

16.b. Dahood (II, 306) reads "groaning" for "from my youth" (assuming an enclitic *mem* and taking the root as נער, (cf. KB, 622) "to roar" or "to growl," like a lion.

16.c. The word אפונה occurs only here and appears to be from פון which seems to denote "perplexity/embarrassment/benumbness." LXX has ἐξηπορήθην, "be in great difficulty/doubt/despair." The suggestion is made frequently (e.g., BDB, 806) to read אפונה from פוג, "grow numb/helpless" (see Gen 45:26; Pss 38:9; 77:3; Hab 1:4). Other proposals are rather numerous, but not very persuasive. I have followed the Greek text, which probably reflects MT, but no major change is involved in reading as from פוג. For discussion of the cohortative form of the verb, see GKC 108g. The translation above is rather free, but seems to fit the context.

17.a. Treating the plural (lit., "wraths/furies") as an intensive or plural of amplification (GKC 124e).

17.b. For the form of the verb, see BDB, 856.

18.a. Lit., "together" or "altogether."

19.a. The מחשך, "dark place or region" (it can mean a "hiding place," see Ps 74:20; "darkness" [?], Isa 29:15), poses a well-known problem. LXX has ἀπὸ ταλαιπωρίας ("away from [my] distress/suffering"), indicating that the translators took the *mem* as a preposition, perhaps reading חשך as "darkness" in a metaphorical sense for "distress," or understanding the adj. חָשֵׁךְ, "obscure/low." *BHS* indicates that a few Heb. mss read מחשך, perhaps מְחַשֵּׁךְ (from חשך) "withholding/keeping back": "keeping back (or, away) my close friends" (see Anderson, II, 630). Another option from חשך is to assume the חשכת perfect ("you have kept back"); less probable is שכחני, "they (my close friends) have forgotten me" (adopted by Gunkel, 384). I have followed Kraus (II, 772, 773) and retained "darkness" as a closing word for the psalm, with the recognition, however, that the end of the text may have suffered damage and appears to be incomplete. An option would be to read "my close friends (are) darkness" (cf. Job 17:13–14), which would of course be eased by reading מידעי ("my close friend is darkness," and would be eased even more by reading ורק for ורע: "and only the darkness is my close friend"; cf. Gunkel, 384). Note the appearance of מחשך ("darkness/dark places") in v 7 in the plural, which I translated as an intensive plural.

Form/Structure/Setting

Ps 88 is easily recognizable as having the features of the individual laments. An individual speaker pleads before God for divine attention and response to a complaint about great distress. The complaint is set forth in vv 4–10, and is followed by a series of rhetorical questions, all of which expect a negative answer in vv 11–13. The latter verses intensify the complaint and add urgency to the speaker's prayer. The complaint is resumed and extended in vv 14–19, ending (in the present text, at least) with the emphatic word "darkness." Expressions of trust in Yahweh and vows of praise, found in some individual laments, are either missing or veiled in the psalm.

Goulder (*The Psalms of the Sons of Korah,* 203) protests against the bleakness ascribed to the psalm by many commentators and argues that v 14b should be read as the speaker's confidence that a night of lamentation is almost over and a morning of joy is at hand when the laments of the speaker will change into

celebration (see *Notes* on v 14 and *Comment*). In Goulder's interpretation, the entire psalm becomes a kind of prelude to celebration and good things that follow on the last day of the fall festival. This depends on an elaborate scenario for the psalm, which is very interesting and may be true, but which is too speculative to inspire much confidence as a basis for interpretation.

The situation of the speaker is clearly one of great distress, though a specific definition of the distress has the typical elusive quality of descriptive language in the psalms. The impact of the poetic expressions is powerful, but the focus on a definite, particular context remains blurred at the edges. Most interpreters of the psalm have read it as reflecting a prayer for a very sick person, who is near death (e.g., Kraus, II, 773; Dahood, II, 302, describes it as the "lament of a desolate man in mortal illness"). Seybold (*Das Gebet,* 113–17) places Ps 88 among those psalms which can be understood with assurance as relating to illness and healing (Pss 38, 41, 88, and 11QPs^a 155 [Syr. 3 = 11QPs^a 155]). Interpreters who take this approach include loneliness and spiritual distress along with sickness. "To his physical suffering is added the excruciating mental pain that his friends are estranged from him and his acquaintances have forgotten him" (Leslie, 397).

Among those who read the psalm as a liturgical composition from some sort of communal atonement ritual, perhaps the most interesting is Goulder, who argues that the Korahite psalms originally related to festival contexts at the ancient sanctuary at Dan. He argues that Ps 88 belonged to an atonement rite for the sixth day of the festival in which a human scapegoat was banished from the community for a day and a night. In such rites, the king was probably originally the representative of the people in ritual humiliation and penitence (201; see Eaton, *Kingship* 177–81). However, it is unlikely that major kings like Solomon and Ahab would have submitted to the ordeals, and if there was such a ritual it is probable that a priest was assigned the role. As discussed in the *Notes* on v 1, Goulder thinks that the psalm reflects the experience of a representative priest who was placed in a pit-cave not far from the sanctuary. The sufferer was left alone in the pit to undergo an experience like one in the realm of the dead, down in the depths of the pit with darkness and water, while the frightening ghosts of the dead whispered as they milled about in the dark. The priest was there to pray and plead for himself and the people.

Goulder suggests that after the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 B.C.E.), worshipers from the Northern sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel brought the Korahite psalms to Jerusalem, where some of them were associated with David and Zion theology (transferred from Mount Tabor and Dan theology; see *Form/Structure/Setting* of Ps 89). In the case of Ps 88, the ordeal it reflects probably seemed too strange and barbarous for the people and priests in Jerusalem, especially after the exile, and the psalm (with Ps 89) was assigned to a supplementary collection. Goulder theorizes that there was a "tribulations-of-David" sort of liturgy used in the autumn festival in Jerusalem which is reflected in Pss 51–72 (with these Psalms extending from the Bathsheba incident in Ps 51 to the triumph of Solomon's accession in Ps 72; based on 2 Sam 10–1 Kgs 2). The use of Pss 51–72 forced some of the Korahite psalms into an appendix to Book III of the Psalter (Pss 73–89), which is now Pss 84–89. Otherwise Book III is composed of Asaphite psalms—assuming that Ps 89 is a Korahite psalm.

Such an elaborate reconstruction is highly conjectural and can hardly be used as a firm basis for exegesis without further historical evidence. Goulder, *Psalms of the Sons of Korah,* 209, himself recognizes the theoretical nature of his proposals. Even if the liturgical history is correctly reconstructed, it does not follow necessarily that the psalms involved were written for actual use in liturgical rites. In fact it seems rather improbable to me that a priest assigned to a scapegoat role in a pit would be provided with a particular psalm of eighteen verses to recite (over and over?); though one would expect such a priest to recite many stock verses and even entire psalms, while extemporizing extensively in his prayers.

A sounder conclusion is that of assuming the possibility of such an ordeal for the *metaphorical* milieu of the psalm. P. K. McCarter ("The River Ordeal in Israelite Literature," *HTR* 66 [1973] 403–12; also Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents,* 205–9) notes that there are several psalms in the Psalter which share the motif of a judgment by water (or the threat of death from water), citing Pss 18 (2 Sam 22); 66; 69; 88; 124; and 144, plus the psalm in Jonah 2. The following elements are present to one degree or another: (1) the speaker is beset by raging waters; (2) he/she is surrounded by accusers; (3) he/she protests his/her innocence and affirms reliance upon God, pleading to be delivered from the waters; in some cases (4) the speaker has been drawn from the waters and offers praise for being brought to safety. McCarter suggests that ancient customs of water judgment, especially in Mesopotamia, lie behind such language. The water judgments were intended to determine guilt or innocence by plunging the accused person into a river. Survival indicated innocence; drowning was proof of guilt. The survival or death of the accused was assumed to be the action of gods, of course. Widengren (207–9) discusses the possibility that the poems which allude to such legal procedures may actually have reference to judgment in the netherworld, or the earthly legal procedure may have symbolized one in the netherworld. The river ordeal does not appear in OT legal material, and the language in the psalms of the Psalter is unlikely to have direct reference to such procedures, but it may be drawn from a "general mythological backdrop" widely shared by the literature of the ancient Near East (K. Seybold and U. B. Mueller, *Sickness and Healing* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1981] 53).

The metaphorical language of sickness is sufficiently varied enough to encompass the statements in Ps 88 (see Seybold and Mueller, *Sickness and Healing,* 43–56; Seybold, *Das Gebet,* 35–36). Sickness involves an increased danger of death and heightens the awareness of the nearness of dying. Death language is "stereotypically associated with the image of sickness" (Seybold and Mueller, 53; note: Isa 38:10–19; Job 33:22, 28). "The sick person feels near to death, or believes himself to be caught in the flow of those who are descending to the Pit; indeed he already feels himself leaning toward the underworld, towards Sheol, the collecting center for all the living" (Seybold and Mueller, 53). On the other hand, there appears to be no language in Ps 88 which *necessitates* a direct reference to illness. The language of lamentation similar to that in Ps 88 is found in contexts with no direct reference to sickness: e.g., see the pit-water language in Pss 18:5–6; 28:1; 30:2–4; 40:3; 42:8; 69:2–3; 124:2–5; Lam 3:54; Jonah 2:4, 6, 7; Zech 9:11—though some of these contexts could involve illness. The lack of any reference to enemies or accusers in Ps 88 also mitigates against relating the psalm exclusively to sickness (note the presence of enemies in Pss 38:20–21; 41:3, 6, 8, 10; Seybold and Mueller, 46–47; Mowinckel, *PIW,* II, 6–8). However, the isolation of the speaker from friends and family (88:15, 19) aligns well with illness (note Ps 38:12; 41:10; Job 19:13–22).

Thus, Ps 88 may be classified generally as an individual lament, lacking some common elements (enemies, confession of guilt, direct petition for divine intervention, vow of praise or statement of confidence; Kraus, II, 773; Haag, "Psalm 88," 155). There is no difficulty in associating the psalm with serious and chronic (v 16) illness, but the metaphorical backdrop is wider than sickness and can encompass any severe distress or life-threatening situation (see *Form/Structure/Setting* of Ps 69). The variegated metaphorical tapestry in the psalm has threads from penitential rites (possibly including those proposed by Goulder), river ordeals, and sickness, including the partially family-based rituals for sickness postulated by Seybold (see *Form/Structure/Setting* of Ps 69) and the family community rites of lament and petition suggested by Gerstenberger (*Die bittende Mensch*).

The psalm offers little or no evidence for dating. If the theory of Goulder is correct, or other interpretations which would assign the psalm to humiliation rites for the king (advocated by G. Widengren, *Sakrales Königtum: Im Alten Testament und im Judentum* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1955] 75–76), the psalm would be pre-exilic—if from the sanctuary at Dan, before 722 B.C.E. W. F. Albright (*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1956] 126–29) says that Pss 88 and 89 "swarm with Canaanitisms" and may indicate an original date as early as David. However, Albright (128) notes an abundance of Canaanite material in exilic and post-exilic books (Job, Proverbs, Deutero-Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk) and adds that "we cannot . . . establish any definite correlation at present between the date of a Psalm and its Canaanite content." It seems to me that the linguistic criteria for dating a psalm spelled out in the *Form/Structure/Setting* of Ps 93 are inconclusive when applied to Ps 88, though they are not incompatible with a date in the monarchy of pre-exile Israel. If we must have a date, the period of the monarchy before 722 B.C.E. seems to be a good guess. However, it is worth remembering that there is a long tradition of interpretation (including Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, Tarqum, and Kimchi) which treats the psalm as an exilic or post-exilic prayer of the nation or of faithful Israelites. This approach is found in Briggs (II, 244) and recently in Haag, "Psalm 88"; see Jacquet, II, 670, 674 for references.

Comment

Introductory petition (88:2–3). These are words of petition which indirectly express a complaint. The speaker has prayed day and night but feels deserted; the prayers have not reached the ear of God. The speaker has cried out for help (צעק), an expression which suggests strong cries; "not a dignified prayer, but protracted wailing" (Goulder, 204; e.g., Deut 22:24; 2 Kgs 4:1, 40; 8:3; Num 11:2; 12:13; 20:16; Isa 33:7; 65:14; Ps 107:6, 28). The language is typical of lamentation (note Pss 17:1; 22:3; 61:2; 77:2; Exod 14:10, 15), but the distress of vv 2–3 is not ordinary. The expression "Yahweh, God of my salvation" conveys a continuing faith in Yahweh despite his failure to respond. "In the midst of his agonies he clings to his faith in God as the only source from which his salvation can come"

(Cohen, 285). The speaker's faith is troubled but unbroken (Kraus, II, 774), and Kidner declares that this is "the only positive note in the psalm" (II, 317).

The first complaint (88:4–10). The speaker's "soul" ("self," see Ps 54:3) is "sated," not with the good things of God's house (65:5), but with troubles and with a life that is lived on the brink of disaster and death (cf. Pss 123:3, 4; Isa 1:11; Lam 3:30). The heart of the complaint is the description of life near to death and to Sheol, of being reckoned with the stream of humanity going down to the Pit (another term for the netherworld and the abode of the dead; cf. Pss 28:1; 30:4; 40:3; 143:7; Prov 1:12; Isa 14:15, 19; 24:22; 38:18; Ezek 26:20; 31:14, 16; 32:18; also, Ps 107:18; Job 33:22, Prov 2:18; 5:5; 7:27). The speaker feels like a strong man who has lost his strength (5b).

The meaning of חפשי in v 6 is uncertain (see note 6.a.), but I have taken it in the ironic sense of "set free," released from the normal obligations of life—but "free" among the dead! Like King Uzziah in 2 Kgs 15:5, whose leprosy caused him to dwell in a "freedom-house" (see commentaries) and exempted from royal duties, the speaker has been cut loose from community responsibilities and given "freedom" among the dead and near-dead—a living hell. Durham's summary (351) is well put: "He is like a valiant man whose strength has failed, like a wounded man deserted among the dead in the field of battle; like one defiled, lying in a grave; like all of these, whom Yahweh no longer remembers, as they are gone from his 'hand.'" Like the dead in a common grave, the speaker is cut off from the power of Yahweh. The "slain ones" (חללים in v 6) is probably a shortened form of the "slain by the sword" (חללי־חרב; Ezek 31:17, 18; 32:20, 21) which according to Eissfeldt ("Schwerterschlagene bei Hesekiel," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, ed. H. H. Rowley [Edinburgh: Clark, 1957] 71–81) includes those who are murdered or executed as well as those who are killed in battle, those like miscarriages and the "uncircumcised" who do not receive an honorable burial (cf. Deut 21:1–9; Isa 34:1–3; Jer 41:9; Lam 4:9).

The speaker complains that he/she is in the darkness at the bottom of the Pit (v 7), with waves of divine wrath surging over (cf. Lam 3:53–55; cf. vv 4–6, 7–9). The subject changes in v 9 to the shunning of the speaker by friends (cf. Job 19:13–32; 30:9–15; Pss 31:12; 38:12), who has become "repulsive" (lit., "an abomination") even to close friends, closed in and isolated from normal community life. V 9c suggests some sort of confinement, such as a quarantine (Anderson, II, 627; cf. Lev 13:4–46) or imprisonment (cf. Jer. 32:2), but it may be only a metaphorical account of the confinement of the distress in which the speaker is shut in by loss of strength and power. The "eye" of the speaker has grown weak or dim (9d); probably more a reference to a loss of strength, an ebbing loss of life, rather than to the loss of sight (Anderson, II, 627). The "eye(s)" is a synecdoche for the whole person, an indicator of the vitality and health of a person (cf. 1 Sam 14:27, 29; Deut 34:7; Ps 19:9; Ezra 9:8) or of the lack of vitality and of depleted strength (Gen 27:1; Job 17:7; Ps 6:8; 38:11; Lam 5:17). Job's eye grew dim because of anguish (כעש) rather than from old age (Job 17:7). There is also a play on words between עיני ("my eye") and עני ("my suffering/anguish").

The last part of v 10 (10bc) relates back to vv 2–3 and reiterates the repeated praying of the speaker. The complaint in vv 2–10a is enclosed by an "envelope" formed by vv 2–3 and 10bc, with the center of the framing verses formed by the petitions in v 3. At the same time v 10bc provides a transition to the rhetorical

questions in vv 10–13. It is also possible to read two strophes in vv 2–10 (cf. Haag, "Psalm 88," 153–54): vv 2–6 and vv 7–10, with an ABCDCBA pattern: vv 2–3; v 4; v 5; v 6; v 7; vv 8–10a; v 10b, c. The description of the dead in v 6b, c, d is the central focus of the first part of the psalm. V 6a is the key expression in the entire psalm: "'set free' among the dead!"

The Land of Forgetfulness (88:11–13). The rhetorical questions in these verses present the realm of existence in the netherworld as without the wonderful deeds of Yahweh and without praise for him. Even the mighty among the dead (the Rephaim; see note 11.b.) are incapable, or unwilling, to rise and praise Yahweh. Abaddon does not hear proclamation of Yahweh's wonders, loyal-love, faithfulness, and saving deeds of righteousness. It is a terrible Land of Forgetfulness, where no voice is raised to praise the wonder of Yahweh (cf. Eccl 9:5). The praiseless quality of death is found in a number of references (see Pss 6:6; 30:10; 115:17; Isa 38:18–19; Ecclus 17:27–28). Praise of God is from the living; "The living, the living, he thanks thee" (Isa 38:19); "From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased; he who is alive and well sings the Lord's praise" (Ecclus 17:29, RSV; see also Pss 115:17; 118:17; 119:175). "Where death is, there is no praise. Where there is life, there is praise" (C. Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, tr. K. R. Crim [Richmond: John Knox, 1961, 1965] 159). G. von Rad declares that "Praise is man[kind]'s most characteristic mode of existence: praising and not praising stand over against one another like life and death" (*Old Testament Theology*, tr. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1962] I, 369–70). Westermann (159) adds that, while it is not expressly stated in the OT, the conclusion must be drawn that "There cannot be such a thing as true life without praise. . . . Praise of God, like petition, is a mode of existence."

Vv 11–13 intensify the complaint of the speaker in Ps 88. They imply the need of a swift and effective divine intervention for one who is already near to Sheol and reckoned among those on their way to the pit of death. Sheol is the realm of the dead, of the Rephaim, of the grave, Abaddon, darkness, and forgetfulness. "Abaddon" is another term for the netherworld to which the dead go; the "place of destruction and perishing" (see Prov 15:11; 27:20; Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12). Both Sheol and Abaddon were probably originally names of gods of the netherworld, as was the Greek Hades (R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978] 278). Note that in Rev 9:11, Abaddon is the name of "the angel of the bottomless pit" (Healey, "*Rephaim*," 38, cites *rpʾ u* as a divine title; KTU 1.108.1, 19, 22: *rpʾ u mlk ʿlm* has a part in a mythical banquet).

The second complaint (88:14–19). In these verses the speaker returns to direct complaints: unanswered prayer (v 14), spurning by God (who hides his face from the speaker), long-continued affliction (perhaps physical disability which has forced the person out of normal life and into inactivity), terrors which have brought despair of life (v 16), crushing by divine wrath, and annihilation by God's terrors (v 17)—which close in on the speaker from all sides (v 18)—and desertion by lovers and friends (v 19). The reader will recognize, of course, that the complaints are similar to those of Job.

The reference to unanswered prayer in the morning in v 14 has a bitter note because the morning was a time to expect God's help (cf. Pss 46:6; 90:14; 143:8; 2 Sam 23:3-4; Zeph 3:5; Kraus, II, 776). Two words for "terrors" are used in vv 16 and 17. The word אמה (אימה) used in v 16 ("your terror") is used in other contexts

for the terror or dread which Yahweh produces in his enemies or sends against them (see Exod 15:16; 23:27; Deut 32:25; Job 9:24; 13:21; cf. Josh 2:9). The "terrorizing power" is sent out from Yahweh and intimidates his foes. A second word for "terrors" is in v 17 in the plural noun בעותים, occurring elsewhere only in Job 6:4, though the verb בעת, "startle/terrify," appears in a number of places (Job 3:5; 7:14; 9:34; 13:11, 21; Isa 21:4; 1 Sam 16:15; Job 18:11) and the word בעתה, "terror/dismay," is found in Jer 8:15=14:19. The references point to a degree of hypostatization at least, in which the "terrors" of Yahweh act as his agents of destruction (cf. plague and pestilence in Hab 3:5, and "the spirit" in 1 Kgs 22:21-22). They are the demon-like beings and powers which afflict the speaker—and they are God's "terrors" and do his bidding, as they swirl around and close in for the kill. In the midst of all this, the speaker experiences the loneliness of being deserted by lovers and friends (v 19). The final word of the psalm is "darkness" (מחשך), or "dark place," such as the dark region in which travelers lose their way and places where criminals hide, waiting for an opportunity to attack violently (cf. Isa 42:16; Pss 74:20; 143:3; Isa 29:15; Lam 3:6). The colon in v 19b seems defective (see note 19.a.), but in its present form it ends the psalm with the grim prospect of the dreadful darkness of the impending netherworld confronting the speaker (cf. Job 17:13–16; 18:18).

Explanation

Ps 88 is frequently described as a gloomy psalm: "the saddest Psalm in the whole Psalter" (Kirkpatrick, 523); "unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or hope" (Weiser, 586); "stark and lonely and pain-riddled" (Durham, 352). Such descriptions are justified, though they should not be applied out of context. Fortunately, the psalm does not have to be read alone. The reader knows that the very next psalm in the present Psalter, though a lament, opens with the words חסדי יהוה, "Yahweh's deeds of loyal-love" and the speaker declares a desire to sing on and on about the merciful deeds and faithfulness of Yahweh. Praise is not far away from Ps 88, and glimmers in the opening affirmation: "Yahweh, the God of my salvation."

But these qualifications must not be allowed to dim the starkness of the lonely pain and terror of the psalm. It offers no easy comfort, derived from "cheap grace." It opens with an encouraging word, and the reader expects a change to confidence and praise as the poem develops, but the end is "the final *darkness* thumping leadenly like some muffled drum in the poet's own funeral cortege" (Durham, 352). The nocturnal silence of the long night of death is at hand.

M. Marty in his book *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* ([San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983] 68) writes of Ps 88 that it deals with a "wintry landscape" of the soul: "The psalm is a scandal to anyone who isolates it from the biblical canon, a pain to anyone who must hear it apart from more lively words. Whoever devises from the Scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing out this page of the volume." Ps 88 may be "an embarrassment to conventional faith" (W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms,* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984] 78), but it is an "embarrassment" which we should keep. Whenever we pass through the "valley of the shadow of death" we may find that it prepares the way for divine comfort.

With other laments, Ps 88 stands as a witness to the intent of the Psalms to speak to all of life, to remind us that life does not always have happy endings. Long trails of suffering and loss traverse the landscape of human existence, even for the devoted people of God. There are cold, wintry nights of the soul, when bleakness fills every horizon, and darkness seems nearly complete.

The distress in Ps 88 has the added dimension of being perceived as caused by God. The lack of explicit references to enemies in this psalm has been noted (see *Form/Structure/Setting*), but their place is taken by God and his agents of destruction. The psalm gains poetic power and intensity by the repeated complaints of God's actions; note vv 7–9, 15–19:

> You have put me . . .
> Your wrath has come down on me
> You have squashed me
> You have caused close friends to stay away
> You have made me repulsive
> Your wrath has swept over me
> Your terrors have annihilated me.

The similarity to Job is obvious. The anguish of spiritual and physical dereliction is expressed in the psalm; the speaker speaks as one forsaken whose faithful prayers are unanswered. As in the case of Job (see Job 12:1–5; 13:1–8; 16:1–5; 19:13–22), the spiritual distress is made worse by the desertion of the speaker by companions and friends. The abandonment by God is embodied and intensified by the abandonment of friends (cf. Ps 31:11–19). The "recall of personal biography" (Marty, *Cry of Absence,* 146) is of no help: "I have been afflicted and nearly dead since boyhood." God seems hidden, impervious to all prayer. This is a landscape which some have never known and perhaps never will. For others, however, its bleak features are well known because of journeys there. Some will know of it only as passing tourists, but others are longtime sojourners in it and know it well—too well.

However, all is not perplexity and hopelessness in the psalm; it is not "a psalm of mute depression" (Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms,* 80). The prayer is addressed to God and the speaker assumes that God hears the complaints. The speaker has "no option but to deal with Yahweh"—which is basic for all the life of Israel—the speaker must deal with Yahweh even in the silence of divine absence. Prayer and speech form a lifeline human beings cannot do without. God is addressed throughout the psalm, though he cannot be praised. The reader knows, however, that the complaints could become praise. The speaker is on the brink of death, but prayer is the lifeline which keeps him/her from the Pit. Even the greatest of those in Sheol cannot rise to praise Yahweh, but the speaker keeps death away by conversation directed to God. "This author, like Job, does not give up. He completes his prayer, still in the dark and totally unrewarded" (Kidner, 319). Further, the silence of God will not last forever. Our memory stirs and we recall a line from another psalm: "Even the darkness is not dark to thee, / the night is bright as the day, / for darkness is as light with thee" (139:12, RSV). Or, perhaps, we leap ahead and remember that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5, RSV).