



**PSALM 88**  
Among the dead

Translation Challenges and Performance Notes

LEGEND FOR COLORED WORDS:

Key term

Emotional exegesis

Imagery

Figure of speech

Proper name

Any other words/phrases

Participant notes

<u>Hebrew text</u>	<u>verse</u>	<u>English Close-but-Clear Translation</u>
שִׁיר מִזְמוֹר לְבְנֵי קֹרַח לְמִנְצַח עַל־מַחֲלַת לַעֲגוֹת מִשְׁכִּיל לְהִימֹ הָאֶזְרָחִי:	1	A song. A <b>psalm</b> . By <b>the sons of Korah</b> . <b>For the director. About illness, for self-affliction.</b> <b>A maskil. By Heman the Ezrahite.</b>
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי יוֹם־צַעֲקוֹתַי בַּלַּיְלָה נִגְדָּד:	2	<b>YHWH, God of my salvation,</b> <b>I have been crying</b> out day and night <b>before you.</b>
תִּבְוֹא לִפְנֵיךָ תַּפְלָתִי הִשָּׂה־אָזְנוֹךָ לְרִנָּתִי:	3	<b>May my prayer find favor with</b> you! <b>Incline your ear to my cry!</b>
כִּי־שׁוֹבְעָה בְרַעוֹת נַפְשִׁי וְחַיִּי לְשֹׂאֵל הַגֵּיְעוֹ:	4	<b>For I am weary</b> of troubles, and <b>my life has reached Sheol.</b>
נִחַשְׁבַּתִּי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בּוֹר הָיִיתִי כַּגֵּבֶר אִי־אִמְלָל:	5	<b>I am counted</b> with those who go down to the <b>Pit</b> . <b>I have become</b> just <b>like a man who has no strength.</b>
בַּמַּתִּים חָפְשִׁי כְּמוֹ חַלְלִים   שְׁכַבְתִּי לְקֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתֶּם עוֹד וְהִמָּה מִקְדָּח נִגְזְרוּ:	6	[I am] an <b>outcast among the dead</b> , just like the <b>slain</b> who are <b>lying in the tomb</b> , <b>whom you do not remember</b> anymore, and [ <b>who</b> ] have been cut off <b>from your care.</b>
שָׂמַנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתִּימוֹת בְּמַחְשָׁפִים בְּמַצְלוֹת:	7	You have put me <b>in the lowest pit</b> , <b>in dark places, in watery depths.</b>
עָלִי סַמְכָה חֲמַת וְכָל־מִשְׁבָּרֶיךָ עַנְיַת סְלָה:	8	<b>Your outbursts of wrath</b> have been <b>lying heavily on me</b> , and you have been <b>afflicting</b> [me] with all <b>your waves. Selah.</b>

<p>הֲרַתַּקְתָּ מִדַּעַי לְמַנְוֵי שִׁתְּנִי תוֹעֵבוֹת לְמוֹ כִּלְאֵי וְלֹא אֲצֵא:</p>	9	<p>You have caused <b>my acquaintances</b> to <b>shun</b> me. <b>You have made me repulsive</b> to them. [You have made me] <b>shut in</b>, so that I cannot get out.</p>
<p>עֵינַי דָּאֲבָה מִלֵּי עֵנִי קְרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־יּוֹם שִׁטַּחְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ כַּפָּי:</p>	10	<p><b>My eyes</b> have <b>languished</b> from <b>misery</b>. I have been <b>calling</b> to you, YHWH, <b>every day</b>. I have been <b>spreading out my hands to you</b>.</p>
<p>הֲלֹמְתִים תַּעֲשֶׂה-כִּלְאֵי אִם-רְפָאִים יִקְוּמוּ   יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה:</p>	11	<p>Do you perform <b>wonders for the dead</b>? Do the <b>departed spirits rise up to praise</b> you? <b>Selah</b>.</p>
<p>הֲיִסְפָּר בְּקִבְרֵי חַסְדֶּךָ אֲמִינֻתְךָ בְּאַבְדּוֹן:</p>	12	<p>Is <b>your faithful love</b> <b>recounted in the tomb</b>? [Is] your <b>faithfulness</b> [recounted] in <b>the place of destruction</b>?</p>
<p>הֲיִדְוַע בְּחֹשֶׁךְ פְּלֶאֶף וְאֲדַקְתֶּךָ בְּאַרְצֵי נִשְׁכָּה:</p>	13	<p>Can your <b>wonders be known</b> in <b>the dark region</b>? And [can] your <b>righteousness</b> [be known] in the land of <b>oblivion</b>?</p>
<p>וְאֲנִי   אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה שֹׁנְעָתִי וְכִבְבַּר תְּפִלַּתִּי תִקְדַּמְךָ:</p>	14	<p><b>But</b> I have been <b>crying out to you</b> for help, YHWH, and <b>my prayer will keep welcoming you in the morning</b>.</p>
<p>לְמָה יְהוָה תִּזְנַח נַפְשִׁי תִּסְתִּיר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי:</p>	15	<p><b>Why, YHWH</b>, do you keep rejecting <b>me</b>? [Why] do you keep <b>hiding your face</b> from me?</p>
<p>עָנִי אֲנִי וּגְנוּעַ מִנְּעַר נִשְׂאֲתִי אֲמִידָה * אֲפֹרָה *:</p>	16	<p>I have been <b>afflicted and close to death from youth</b>. I've been suffering <b>your terrifying assaults</b>, and keep being <b>torn apart</b>.</p>
<p>עָלַי עָבְרוּ חֲרוֹנֶיךָ לְבַעוּתֶיךָ * צָמַתוּנִי *:</p>	17	<p>Your <b>outbursts of wrath</b> have been <b>sweeping over me</b>; your terrifying assaults have been destroying me.</p>
<p>סָבְוֵנִי בַמַּיִם כְּלִי־חַי הֲקִיפוּ עָלַי יַחַד:</p>	18	<p><b>They</b> have been <b>surrounding</b> me <b>like water constantly</b>; they have been closing in on me <b>together</b>.</p>
<p>הֲרַתַּקְתָּ מִמֶּנִּי אֶת־כָּל מִדַּעַי * מִחֲשָׁךְ *:</p>	19	<p>You have caused <b>all</b> my <b>friends and companions</b> to <b>shun</b> me; <b>[you have caused] my acquaintances [to shun my] distress</b>.</p>

## GENERAL TRANSLATION TIPS FOR THIS PSALM:

- To translate poetry accurately and beautifully, a knowledge of both the source language's poetry and the target language's poetry is needed. So, here are the steps we recommend to follow when setting out to translate this or any psalm:
  1. **GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE'S POETRY/ARTS.** Research and analyze many examples from numerous genres of poetry, storytelling, and music in the target language and culture, and document findings. See our [Local Arts Analysis Guide](#) for help.
  2. **GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOURCE LANGUAGE'S (HEBREW) MEANING AND POETRY.** The aim of all our materials is to provide exactly this for the translator, poet/musician/artist, and consultant: an understanding of what the psalm *means*, as well as its *poetics*.
  3. **TRANSLATE THE PSALM IN THE APPROPRIATE LOCAL ART/POETRY GENRE(S).**
  4. **TEST THE TRANSLATION WITH THE LANGUAGE COMMUNITY, SEEKING FEEDBACK ABOUT BOTH WORD CHOICES AND FORM/GENRE/MEDIA OF TRANSLATION.**

## TRANSLATION TIPS: PSALM AS A WHOLE

These are the elements that we believe are most helpful to keep in mind during both drafting and checking translations, to help verify that the translation or performance is accurate beyond just a word- or verse-level; just as important is accuracy on the level of a **whole**. Additionally, these are elements that will guide decisions about **performance** in oral translations, songs, poems, or other kinds of art based on this psalm.

### 1. Overview

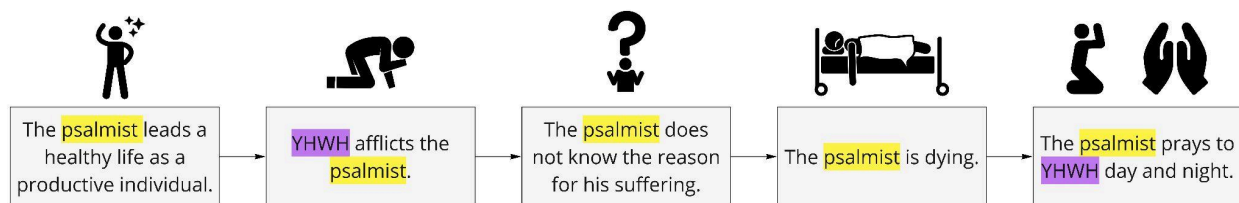
The picture below gives a gives a basic **Overview** of the Psalm, answering the following questions:

- **Title-what title best describes this unique psalm?**
  - “Among the Dead”
- **Purpose-why was this psalm written?**
  - This psalm was written to lament, that is, to express grief and sorrow, during a time of suffering that was caused by God.
- **Content-In summary, what is said in this psalm?**
  - The psalmist says that he is dying because YHWH is afflicting him. He cries for YHWH to save him. Then the psalmist asserts that he will keep praying even if YHWH does not eventually save him.
- **Message-what is the general theme of this psalm? What seems to be the main point the psalmist wanted his audience to realize by hearing this psalm?**

- The psalmist seems to want his audience to realize that he will continue to pray, even though he does not know the reason for his ongoing suffering.

## 2. Background

- **Background Ideas**-what are the common cultural assumptions which are the most helpful for making sense of the psalm?
  - Sheol is a Biblical term for the realm of the dead, located under the Earth.<sup>1</sup>
  - Inhabitants of Sheol are forgotten by YHWH, and therefore no voice is raised in Sheol to praise the wonders of YHWH.
  - The “outcasts” (שִׁפְיָהוּ) were a low social class, despised and excommunicated.
  - The “slain” (הַלְּלִים) are those who die in a violent way, particularly in battle.<sup>2</sup>
  - Some common images for death and Sheol are: the Pit; darkness; and deep waters.
  - YHWH’s policies do not include interfering in Sheol.
- **Background situation**-what are the series of events leading up to the time in which the psalm is spoken?



<sup>1</sup> Amos 9:2; Ezek 31:17; Prov 5:5.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam 17:52; 31:8, 2 Sam 1:19; 1 Kgs 11:15; Jer 51:4.

### 3. Layout

Knowing the layout of the psalm by sections helps us to understand the progression of thought as the poem progresses.

The picture below shows the main “chunks” or pieces of the poem. Verse numbers appear on the left. The second column has a title for each section. The large third column contains a brief summary of the section’s content. As you read through the content column, you will see important words and ideas highlighted in similar colors. The icons on the right may be used as memory aids.

Verse	Section Title	Content Summary	Icon
v. 1	Superscription		
v. 2-10	Afflicted and fearing death	I've been praying, YHWH, because I am about to die. I am like the dead already, an outcast, forgotten by you.	Person in bed, person lying down
v. 11-13	Facing death	You are the one afflicting me and causing me to be shunned, even while I have been praying, YHWH. What did I do to deserve this?	Person in water
v. 14-19	Afflicted and continuing to pray	Do you and your faithful love reach to the dead, the forgotten? Do they praise you and recount your faithful love? I will keep praying, YHWH, even though you are ignoring me, YHWH, and you continue to afflict me and cause my friends to shun me.	Four people lying down, person in water with hands raised

**Psalm 88** is divided into three main sections:

- In **verses 2-10**, the psalmist speaks as someone who is afflicted and fearing a very fast-approaching death, despite his constant calling to YHWH his God. **Verses 11-13** are about the psalmist facing death and wondering if God's loving attributes are experienced in the world of the dead (that is, in Sheol).
- **Verses 14-19** begin with the psalmist realizing that whatever God may do, it is always motivated by his faithfulness and loving character. However, the section is dominated by the psalmist being terrified of YHWH's assaults. Instead of a happy ending, this last section offers the picture of an afflicted psalmist, ignored by his God and seemingly having no good explanation about his fate, yet ready to continue praying.

#### 4. Emotions

Part of poetry is communicating emotion. Each section, and even each verse, can contain a number of different emotions. Here are the main emotional themes of each section:



#### 5. Prominence

**Prominence**—what words, phrases, or ideas are most important in this psalm?: It is also important to consider how the author chose to draw attention to certain parts of the psalm. Here are the parts of the psalm that we believe are most prominent, and thus should be most prominent in a performance of the psalm.

- Verses 11-13** constitute a significant section and mark the **rhetorical climax**<sup>3</sup> of the psalm. It's the turning point in the thought/logic progression of the poem as the psalmist tries to convince YHWH to save him by asking a series of deep questions.
- Verse 14**, particularly the second line, is the **emotional climax** of the psalm and a major turning point in the emotions of the psalm. Instead of giving up, the psalmist commits to continue praying and fulfilling his part of the covenant.

<sup>3</sup> By rhetorical climax, we mean the key point of persuasion of the whole psalm and the most intense moment of the psalmist's argument.

## 6. Poetics

**Poetics**—what kinds of artistic beauty did the psalmist incorporate into the poem to reinforce its message? (See Poetic Features video and layer for more details.)

One poetic feature, which we have entitled **Passive and Active**, stands out in this psalm:

In this psalm, the psalmist is sometimes *passive*, meaning that events happen **to** him. When passive, he uses vocabulary from the first two verses of the Bible that describe events before the seven days of creation began: **earth**, **darkness** and **(deep) waters**. These three things are called *primordial* elements, and they are the only things the psalmist has direct physical contact with in Psalm 88. They symbolize the chaos his life has become. He has lost his social network. He has lost control over his routine. Now, he is being passed from the hands of one of YHWH's agents to the other.

Other times, the psalmist is *active*, meaning that **he** takes initiative to cause events. Whenever the psalmist is active and takes initiative, time-related words are mentioned: **day** and **night** (verse. 2), **day** (verse 10b), and **morning** (verse 14b). These four elements are an integral part of the six days of creation, which was when YHWH began to bring order to the world. Thus, the four temporal words symbolize the psalmist's attempt to find some order and reason in his life.

<p>1 אֵשֶׁר מִזְמוֹר לְבָנֵי קֹרַח לְמַנְצָחַם עַל־מִחְלַת לְשׁוֹנֹת מִשְׁכִּיל לְהִמָּנוּ הָאֲזוּרָה:</p>	<p>1 A song. A psalm. By the sons of Korah. For the director. About illness, for self-affliction. A maskil. By Heman the Ezrahte.</p>
<p>2 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעָי יָגִם צַעֲקוֹתַי בַּלַּיְלָה נִגְדָה: 3 תִּבְרַח לְפָנַי תִּפְלֹתַי תִּשְׁמַע אֲזִנְהָ לְרִנָּתִי:</p>	<p>2 YHWH, God of my salvation, I have been crying out <b>day</b> and <b>night</b> before you. 3 May my prayer find favor with you! Incline your ear to my cry!</p>
<p>4 כִּי־שָׁבַעְתָּ בְרַעוּת נַפְשִׁי וְחַיִּי לְשֹׂאוֹל הִגִּיעַ: 5 נִחַשְׁבַּתִּי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בֹרָה דְּלִיתִי כַּקֶּבֶר אֲדֹמָאִל:</p>	<p>4 For I am weary of troubles, and my life has reached Sheol. 5 I am counted with those who go down to the <b>Pit</b>. I have become just like a man who has no strength.</p>
<p>6 בְּמֵתִים חָפְשִׁי כְּמוֹ חַלְלִים   שְׁכַבְתִּי לְקֹבֵר אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתָּם עוֹד וְהִמָּה מִדְּבַר נִגְדָה:</p>	<p>6 [I am] an outcast among the dead, just like the slain who are lying in the tomb, whom you do not remember anymore, and [who] have been cut off from your care.</p>
<p>7 שָׂתַנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתּוֹנֹת בְּמַחְשְׁפֵימַי בְּמַעְלֹת: 8 צָלַי כִּמְבַרַּת חֲמָתְךָ וְכָל־מַשְׁבְּרֵי־חַיִּי עֲנִיתָ סֵלָה: 9 הִרְחַקְתָּ מִדַּעֲי מִנְּעִי שָׂתַנִּי חֹרֵעַבֹת לָמוֹ עָלְתָא וְלֹא אֲצֵא: 10 עֵינַי דָּאֲבָה מִזֵּי עֵינִי קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה כָּל־יָוֵם שִׁטְחִיתִי אֶלְיָה כָּפִי:</p>	<p>7 You have put me in the <b>lowest pit</b>, in <b>dark places</b>, in <b>watery depths</b>. 8 Your outbursts of wrath have been lying heavily on me, and you have been afflicting me with all <b>your waves</b>. Selah. 9 You have caused my acquaintances to shun me. You have made me repulsive to them. [You have made me] shut in, so that I cannot get out. 10 My eyes have languished from misery. I have been calling to you, YHWH, every <b>day</b>. I have been spreading out my hands to you.</p>
<p>11 הַלְמַתִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה פֶלֶא אִם־יִרְאִים לְקוֹמֵי   יִזְדָּה סֵלָה: 12 הַלְסִפְרִי בַּקֶּבֶר חֲסִדְךָ אִמִּינוּתְךָ בְּאֲבֹדוֹ: 13 הַיִּגְדֵּעַ בְּחַשְׁמוֹת פֶּלֶא וְצִדְקָתְךָ בְּהַרְיֹוֹ לְשֵׁנָה:</p>	<p>11 Do you perform wonders for the dead? Do the departed spirits rise up to praise you? Selah. 12 Is your faithful love recounted in the tomb? [Is] your faithfulness [recounted] in the place of destruction? 13 Can your wonders be known in the <b>dark</b> region? And [can] your righteousness [be known] in the <b>land</b> of oblivion?</p>
<p>14 וְאֲנִי   אֶלְיָךָ וְתָנָה שְׁנַעֲתִי בְּבֹרַחַת תִּפְלֹתַי תִּשְׂמַעְתָּ: 15 לָמָּה, יְהוָה, תִּתְּנֵנִי נַפְשִׁי תִּסְתִּיר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי: 16 עָלְתִי אֲנִי וְנֹעַם מִצֶּעַר נִשְׂאָתִי אִמְרֵךָ * אֶפְרָה *: 17 צָלַי עֲבָרוּ חֲרִיבָה בְּעִתְרֵךָ * צְמַחֹתַי *: 18 סָבְבוּנִי כַּיָּם בְּיָם הִסְפִּיפוּ עָלַי יַחְדָּם: 19 הִרְחַקְתָּ מִנְּעִי אֶת־רֵעֵי חַיִּי * מִדַּעֲי *:</p>	<p>14 But I have been crying out to you for help, YHWH, and my prayer will keep welcoming you in the <b>morning</b>. 15 Why, YHWH, do you keep rejecting me? [Why] do you keep hiding your face from me? 16 I have been afflicted and close to death from youth. I've been suffering your terrifying assaults, and keep being torn apart. 17 Your outbursts of wrath have been sweeping over me; your terrifying assaults have been destroying me. 18 They have been surrounding me like <b>water</b> constantly; they have been closing in on me together. 19 You have caused all my friends and companions to shun me; [you have caused] my acquaintances [to shun my] <b>distress</b>.</p>



# TRANSLATION TIPS, VERSE BY VERSE

## VERSE 1

**Expanded Paraphrase** - the words in *italics* provide a fuller sense of the psalm; the text itself is in **bold**.

A song. A psalm. By the sons of Korah. For the director. About illness, for self-affliction. A maskil. By Heman the Ezrahite.

<p>שִׁיר מִזְמוֹר לְבְנֵי קֹרַח לְמוֹנָחַ עַל־מַחֲלַת לְעֵנֹת מִשְׁכִּיל לְהִימְנוּ הָאֶזְרָחִי:</p>	1	<p>A song. A <b>psalm</b>. By <b>the sons of Korah</b>. <b>For the director. About illness, for self-affliction.</b> <b>A maskil. By Heman the Ezrahite.</b></p>
--	---	--

- This entire verse is a superscription, which is a series of phrases that contains details about the nature and the background of the psalm. The superscription is composed of many short phrases that do not always provide a complete thought, and so translators may need to supply information to make the meaning clear..
  - For languages where it is impossible to form a verbless clause, translators can start the verse with the phrase “This is...”
  - For more specific translation advice on superscriptions, see our page on the subject.
- The superscription describes this poem both as a ‘song’ and a **psalm**. The translator must make sure to translate the word ‘psalm’ the same way it has been done in the psalms already translated.
  - A psalm may be distinguished from a song. In the Christian tradition, psalms are specific kinds of songs that are meant to help humans honor God by their conduct. Some languages render it as “songs of praise” or something similar.
- The phrase **By the sons of Korah** gives the identity of the author of the psalm. There is implicit information that the translator may make explicit here:
  - “(It was composed/crafted) By the sons of Korah”
  - “(It is) The sons of Korah (who) composed/crafted it.”
  - The **sons** of Korah: According to Exod 6:21–24, the Korahites are descendants of Levi. The Korahites were a special group of temple singers according to 2 Chr 20:19. The Psalter contains 11 Korahite psalms, all in the second (Pss 42–48) and third books (Pss 84–85; 87–88). The common theme to all the Korahite psalms is the desire to be near to God and be given attention by him.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Korah** refers to a man, and the phrase ‘the sons of Korah’ to his descendants who formed a brotherhood. Other possible renderings are:
    - NLT: “the descendants of Korah.”
    - French BFC: “la confrérie de Coré” (the brotherhood of Korah).
    - French PDV: “groupe de Coré” (the group of Korah).

<sup>4</sup> For more details see our [verse by verse notes](#).



- NET: “Korahites.”
- **The director:**
  - There are different renderings of the Hebrew term in different English translations: *choir director*,<sup>5</sup> *chief musician*,<sup>6</sup> *music director*,<sup>7</sup> *choirmaster*,<sup>8</sup> and *leader*.<sup>9</sup>
  - These numerous renderings support the idea that ‘the director’ was someone who led music in the Temple. Another possible paraphrasing here may be “the person who leads singers/songs (in the Temple).” It will be wise to translate the term in such a way that the audience understands the musical context.
  - The phrase ‘For the director’ indicates the person who was to lead the song. Some languages may need to state the verb for more clarity: *(this psalm is) for the director*. For more on this phrase, see [Lamnassēah](#).
- The meaning of the Hebrew phrase we have translated as **about illness** (עַל־מַחֲלָה), is uncertain, though it is probably a reference “flute playing” in a lament.<sup>10</sup> The phrase may mean “in connection with ... illness,” which fits with Psalm 88’s main theme of the suffering of a man who is probably very sick.
  - A good number of English translations prefer to transliterate the phrase directly from the Hebrew: *according to Mahalath*.<sup>11</sup>
  - Some French translations prefer a descriptive phrase, whether about the flute or about sadness:
    - *Song with flute accompaniment*;<sup>12</sup> (*For singing on the flute*;<sup>13</sup> *To intone on the flute*.<sup>14</sup>
    - *To be performed in melancholy mode*;<sup>15</sup> *To be sung with sadness*.<sup>16</sup>
- The Hebrew phrase we have rendered as **for self-affliction** (לְעַנּוּת) is probably related to a Hebrew figure of speech that means “to humble oneself” (עָנָה נָפְשׁוֹ; cf. Ps 35:13).
  - The phrase is a purpose clause that indicates the religious function of the psalm.
  - A good number of English translations prefer to transliterate the phrase: “Leannoith.”<sup>17</sup>
- The meaning of the word **maskil** is uncertain... possible interpretations include: a song that shows understanding...; or a song that gives understanding; or a meditation.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>5</sup> NASB95, NLT, CSB, HCSB, LSB.

<sup>6</sup> KJV 1900, ASV, Darby.

<sup>7</sup> LEB, NET, TLV.

<sup>8</sup> ESV, RSV.

<sup>9</sup> NRSV, NRSVCE.

<sup>10</sup> Reed pipes/flutes were played at lamentation ceremonies; cf. Jer 48:36.

<sup>11</sup> ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, HCBS.

<sup>12</sup> *La Bible le Semeur*: “Cantique à chanter avec accompagnement de flûtes.”

<sup>13</sup> *Louis Segond*: “Pour chanter sur la flûte.”

<sup>14</sup> NBS: “Pour entonner sur la flûte.”

<sup>15</sup> BFC: “A exécuter sur le mode mélancolique.”

<sup>16</sup> PDV: “À chanter avec tristesse.”

<sup>17</sup> ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, HCBS.

<sup>18</sup> *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*.

- Translators may transliterate *maskil*, as is done by a significant number of English translations:<sup>19</sup>
  - Some languages will need to render the phrase ‘a maskil’ as a full verbal phrase: *it/this is a maskil*.
- We recommend one of the following renderings: TLV: “a contemplative song.” French LBS: “Une méditation.”
- Some translations prefer to see the term ‘maskil’ as synonymous to “a psalm” (NLT); “a well-written song” (NET); “Poème chanté” (French BFC).
- The psalm is described as a maskil attributed to a certain **Heman the Ezrahite**.
  - The adjective **Ezrahite** (אֶזְרָחִי) may be understood as either (1) a reference to Heman's being a descendant of Zerah, the son of Judah (1 Chr 2:6) or (2) as derived from a noun (אֶזְרָח) that means a pre-Israelite family.
  - Since the term ‘Ezrahite’ will be an unknown concept in many cultures, it may be best to render it as *a/the descendant of Zerah*.
- The superscription may give the impression that there are two composers to the psalm at the same time: ‘by the sons of Korah’ and ‘by Heman the Ezrahite’.
  - It is good to remember that (1) on one hand, it is the psalm that is presented as being by the sons of Korah and (2) on the other hand, it is the ‘maskil’ that is described as being by Heman the Ezrahite. See ESV, NIV, NRSV.
  - The Ezrahites could be a group of Korahites. If so, then it is likely that Heman is both a son of Korah and an Ezrahite. Moreover, a maskil is thus presented as a category of psalms.

Gray boxes discuss sections and subsections. The headings (in green) are guides, and not part of the Biblical text.

### **VERSES 2-10: Afflicted and fearing death!**

- **Verses 2-10** are centered on the personal experience of the psalmist, as evidenced by the frequent repetition of the first person pronoun (**I/me**).
- The psalmist's struggles and frustrations are portrayed as coming from YHWH. The name YHWH and the second person pronoun, *you* (referring to YHWH) are repeated many times.
- The structure of verses 2-10 indicates that they belong as a single unit, Notably, verses 2-3 and verse 10 open and close the section with similarities:
  - They share the same theme of: invocation, or a call to YHWH;
  - They both contain the words : day and YHWH;
  - They contain repeated consonants in the Hebrew text (“אלהי ישועתי” and “שטחתי אליך”);
  - YHWH and psalmist are both participants in these verses.

For more on this section as a whole see the [Poetic Macrostructure](#)

<sup>19</sup> ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, HCBS.

VERSE 2

YHWH, God of my salvation, I have been crying out day and night before you (because I am suffering and desperate) (and you answer those in covenant with you who pray to you).

<p>יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי יוֹם-צַעֲקוֹתַי בְּלַיְלָה וּבַיּוֹם:</p>	2	<p>YHWH, God of my <b>salvation</b>, I have been crying out day and night <b>before you</b>.</p>
---	---	--

- In this verse, the psalmist speaks directly to God. Many English translations therefore begin the verse with “O” (ESV, NIV84, NLT). Translators may find means to express this emotion of deep longing to see God’s intervention.
- **YHWH** is both a key term and proper name. How to translate the names and titles of God is a complex issue; see the “Names and Titles of God” document for a more detailed explanation of the 3 main references for God in the Old Testament. Translators should consistently keep in mind the translation project/team decision on how to render divine terms.
- The phrase **God of my salvation** presents God as the one who saves, or has saved, the psalmist.
  - The word **salvation** from the verbal root to *save* refers to the act of coming to rescue or protect someone.<sup>20</sup> ‘Salvation’ is a key concept and the translator must make sure to harmonize its rendering here with the rest of the OT and the NT.
  - This phrase may be expressed using a verbal notion: “(the) God who saves me.” See NIV, NET or French LBS.<sup>21</sup>
  - The genitive may also be rendered through the substantive “savior” as in the French translations BFC and PDV: “God, my Savior.”<sup>22</sup>
  - The entire phrase ‘YHWH, God of my salvation’ is a vocative expression, which means that the psalmist is talking directly to God as though he is standing in front of him.
  - This direct address to God may be translated to clearly show the connection between “YHWH” and “God of my salvation”:
    - YHWH, *you are the God of my salvation*
    - YHWH, *you the God who saves me* (NIV).
    - In some languages, natural word order may mean that this phrase should occur at a different place in the verse; for example, some languages may require it to occur at the end of the verse, and not at the beginning.
- The Hebrew verb that we have rendered **I have been crying** is in a past-tense form, and the context says that the crying happened “day and night,” which suggests that the crying also has a continuous (progressive) sense. So, the Hebrew verb refers to an action that began in the past and was in progress until recently, perhaps even up until the time of speaking. Some modern English translations capture some senses of the verb, but not others:

<sup>20</sup> SDBH.

<sup>21</sup> See also Bratcher and Reyburn (1991, 763).

<sup>22</sup> “Dieu, mon Sauveur.”

- "I cry out" (ESV, NIV94, NRSV) captures the continuous sense of the verb, but not its past-tense nature.
- "I have cried out" (NASB95, KJV1900, ASV) captures the past-tense nature of the verb and the fact that the verb has present time effects, but it does not capture the progressive (ongoing) nature of the action.
- The Hebrew phrase rendered as **before you** (לְפָנֶיךָ) may be understood as: 1) the psalmist being in the presence of God in prayer; 2) the psalmist's prayer being directed intentionally to/towards God; or 3) more literally, a prayer made (before God) in his house. This presence of God most certainly evokes the idea of God being favorable to his requests.
  - The phrase is translated in several different ways:
    - The majority of translations render it as "before you" (ESV, NIV84, BFC)
    - Fewer translations render it as "in your presence" (NRSV, LBS)
    - Other fewer translations prefer rendering it as "to you" (NLT, NIV).
    - One French translation has "towards you"<sup>23</sup> (PDV).
- From the standpoint of emotion, Verses 2-4 portray the psalmist as **desperate**.

### VERSE 3

**May my prayer find favor with you**, (you, who have your eyes and ears tuned towards all human beings), (who listen to people's prayers and answer them)! **Incline your ear to my cry!** (You, who are aware of my miserable conditions), (do something about it and save me!)

תְּבוּאָה לְפָנֶיךָ תִּפְלְתִי הַטָּה-אָזְנוֹךָ לְרִנָּתִי:	3	<b>May my prayer find favor with you!</b> <b>Incline your ear to my cry!</b>
--	---	---

- The modality of the verb 'find favor' expresses a *wish*, as we see in many translations which render it with the words: "**May...**", "Let..." , "Que..." Some translations prefer using an imperative/command to request something from God: "listen to my cry" (NET), "Now hear my prayer" (NLT) and "accept my prayer"<sup>24</sup> (BFC).
- The phrase **my prayer** should be understood as referring to the content of the prayer or the request made by the psalmist. This can be paraphrased as:
  - "what I am asking (from you)" or "the things I am asking (from you)."
  - "what I am praying for." or "the things I am praying for."
- The phrase we have rendered as **find favor with** is figure of speech that literally means to "come/reach before" (בָּא לְפָנֶיךָ) in Hebrew. It may also be understood as "be approved by someone" (BFC).
  - The phrase 'with you' (לְפָנֶיךָ; literally, *before you*) refers to the person to whom the psalmist prayer must find favor, which is YHWH.

<sup>23</sup> PDV "vers toi."

<sup>24</sup> BFC "accueille ma prière."

- The expression **to incline your ear** portrays God as a human, having body parts. It refers to God listening favorably to, or perhaps even answering, the psalmist’s prayer.
  - Languages where a literal translation of this expression is not possible should consider rendering the expression according to its meaning. Some possibilities are:
    - “Listen” (NLT, HCSB)
    - “Pay attention” (NET, LBS)
  - Although it is in an imperative form in Hebrew, the verb **incline** is not a command, but a request and prayer. The translator or performer should not give the impression that the psalmist is giving an order to God. This is especially true for cultures where using commands to talk to superiors is perceived as impolite and disrespectful.
- The possessive construction, **my cry**, should be interpreted in light of the preceding verse, where the psalmist is portrayed as crying out. In other words, the psalmist wants YHWH to pay attention to the fact that he is crying out.
  - The phrase may be translated using the verb to cry: “Incline your ear to me as I am crying to you”.

#### VERSE 4

**For I am weary of troubles** (and I have reached a point where my existence is unbearable;) (I am seriously ill) (and dying), **and my life has reached Sheol.** (I am at the gates of Sheol,) (namely, about to die,) (and only you can redeem me from there!)

כִּי־שָׁבַעָה בְרָעוֹת נַפְשִׁי וְחַיִּי לְשְׂאוֹל הִגִּיעוּ:	4	<b>For I am weary</b> of troubles, and <b>my life has reached Sheol.</b>
--	---	---

- The Hebrew conjunction **for** (כִּי) introduces a statement that provides supporting reasons for what he has said in the preceding verses. The psalmist offers two reasons to justify his previous assertions, and these reasons are linked by the conjunction ‘and’. The reasons are:
  - 1) He is weary of troubles
  - 2) His life has reached Sheol.
- Although our rendering has the first person personal pronoun **I**, the Hebrew has *my soul* (נַפְשִׁי)<sup>25</sup>: The psalmist thus talks about himself in the third person: *My soul is weary of troubles*. A literal rendering in some languages may be more effective.
  - The soul (נַפְשִׁי) as the essence of man stands for the man himself, and often functions as a special way to state the personal pronoun, especially in poetry and ornate discourse thus נַפְשִׁי (lit. *my soul*) equals אֲנִי (I).
- The verb we have rendered **I am weary** is from a Hebrew root that means “to be weary of” (שָׁבַע). This root is stative, and here the verb is in a form that normally conveys a present state.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See ESV, RSV, NIV84.

<sup>26</sup> The verb is a *qatal* verb.

- When the psalmist says he is ‘weary of troubles’, he means that he has reached a point where his existence is unbearable. Translators can look for an idiomatic expression that captures this well in the target language.
- **Sheol** (שְׁאוֹל) is the Biblical name for the underworld, which is the realm of the dead located under the Earth.<sup>27</sup> It is the place people are believed to go to when they die. People who are about to die consider themselves to be in or at the gates of Sheol,<sup>28</sup> but YHWH can always redeem them from there.<sup>29</sup> Translators may render this key term—that is unknown for most target audiences—in several different ways:
  - *Transliteration*. This option is preferred by many translations like ESV, NASB 2020. If the translators use a transliteration, they will probably need a footnote and/or an entry in the glossary.
  - A *descriptive phrase*, as LSG and NBS do in their rendering, “resting place of the dead.”<sup>30</sup> Another possible descriptive phrase is “the world of the dead.”
  - A term used in the target culture which refers to the place where the dead are. If the translators prefer this choice, they must make sure there are no negative pagan implications attached to the term or expression.
  - A term that helps understand that the psalmist is about to die, such as “the grave” (NIV84, KJV1900) or “death” (NLT, NIV, BFC).
- The expression **my life has reached Sheol** is not literal—the psalmist is not actually dead. Instead, the psalmist uses this image to show how desperate his situation is, and how distraught he is.
  - If a literal rendering will be misleading, the translator can look for another way to translate the expression. LBS has “I’m so close to death”<sup>31</sup> and BFC says “I’m a heartbeat away from death).”<sup>32</sup>

## VERSE 5

**I am counted with those who go down to the Pit** (namely, the netherworld)( - everyone knows of my miserable condition). **I have become like a man who has no strength.** (I used to be a strong, productive man contributing to society,)( but now I have lost my strength)( so I am no longer valuable to society,)( which considers me as an unproductive individual.)

<p>וְהִשְׁבַּחְתִּי עִם־יְוֹרְדֵי בֹר הַיָּם כִּי־אֵין־אֵיל:</p>	5	<p><b>I am counted</b> with those who go down to the <b>Pit</b>. <b>I have become</b> just <b>like a man who has no strength</b>.</p>
--	---	---

- Though a **pit** is normally just a large hole in the ground, here it is as an image representing the realm of the dead.

<sup>27</sup> Amos 9:2; Ezek 31:17; Prov 5:5.

<sup>28</sup> Ps 30:4; 2 Sam 22:6; Jonah 2:3.

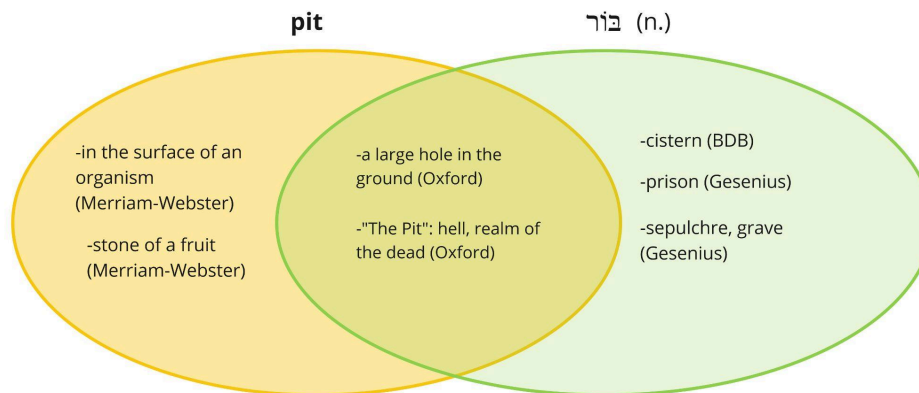
<sup>29</sup> Hos 13:14; Jonah 2:3; Pss 30:4; 49:16.

<sup>30</sup> “Séjour des morts.”

<sup>31</sup> “Je suis tout près de la mort.”

<sup>32</sup> “Je suis à deux doigts de la mort.”

- “The Pit (verses 4a, 6a) is a synonym for Sheol, the world of the dead.”<sup>33</sup>
- By mentioning the *pit*, the psalmist is pointing to the fact that his life is at stake.
- The following Venn Diagram presents a comparison between the Hebrew word (בֹּרַר) and the English word 'pit'. The wording in the center shows the similarities between the two:

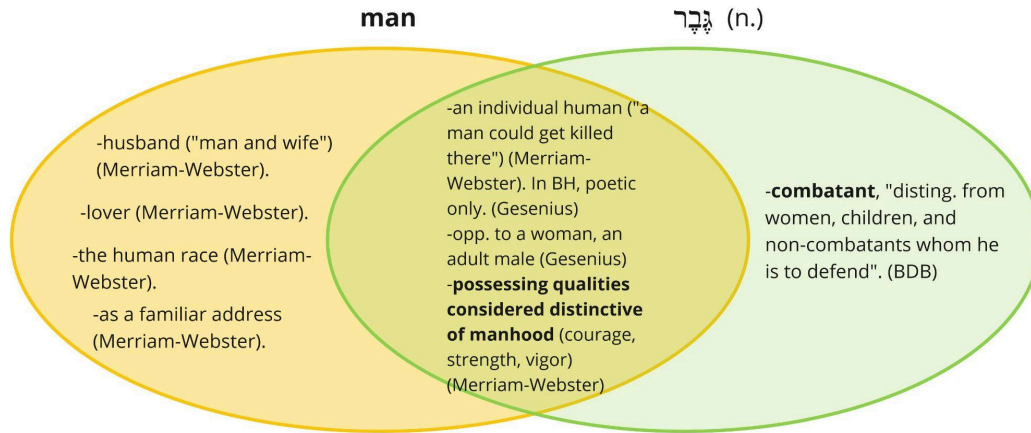


- Importantly, the word 'pit' in verse 5 should never be rendered as referring to “the surface of an organism” or “the stone of a fruit.” Instead, the translation team can explore the meanings of the terms in the middle of the Venn diagram, as well as “cistern”, “prison” and “sepulcher.”
- The passive voice verb **I am counted** does not connote the ideas of numbers or numbering, but rather it expresses the way people look at, regard, and consider the psalmist. The verb “must be expressed in the active voice in many languages, as FRCL has done; for example, ‘people look upon me like a corpse’ or ‘people think of me as a dead man.’”<sup>34</sup>
- The verb we have translated as **I have become** (הָיִיתִי) probably signifies entrance into a state of being. Alternatively, it is possible to interpret the verb in a stative sense: “I am.”
- The preposition **like** can represent either likeness (“like”) or equality (“just like,” “truly”). Given the general tone and message of the psalm, we prefer to adopt the latter option in our CBC.
- The particular Hebrew noun for **man** used here (גִּבּוֹר) denotes a man in his masculinity and toughness. By placing in the same phrase both the word ‘man’ and **who has no strength** (אֵין-אַיִל), the psalmist creates a sharp contrast between the ideal of a man and his own reality, emphasizing his frustration of his situation. The following Venn Diagram presents a comparison between the Hebrew for man (גִּבּוֹר) and the English word ‘man’. Note the emphasis in Hebrew on aspects of masculinity and courage:

<sup>33</sup> Bratcher and Reyburn (1991, 764).

<sup>34</sup> Bratcher and Reyburn (1991, 764).





- The noun **strength** (אַיִל) only occurs here in the Bible. The Hebrew root from which it is derived has the primary meanings of “to be in front” and “to be strong.”<sup>35</sup> We therefore prefer to read it as *strength*, following the basic meaning of its root.

## VERSE 6

[I am] an **outcast** (despised and excommunicated) **among the dead**, just like the **slain** (who died in battle,)( despised as well in the Netherworld, since they were buried in mass graves and) **who are lying in the tomb**, **whom you do not remember anymore** (since the dead are forgotten by you), **and [who] have been cut off from your care** (and have no channel of communication with you). (In the same way, you have forgotten and forsaken me,) (and I have no hope.)

<p>בַּמָּוֹת הַחַיִּים כְּמֹו חַלְלִים   אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתָּם עוֹד וְהָיָה מִדָּדָה נִגְזָרוּ:</p>	6	<p>[I am] an <b>outcast among the dead</b>, just like the <b>slain</b> who are <b>lying in the tomb</b>, <b>whom you do not remember</b> anymore, and [<b>who</b>] have been cut off <b>from your care</b>.</p>
---	---	---

- **Outcast** (חֲפָשִׁי) has the basic meaning of *free*, particularly in the context of slavery.
  - The variety of readings found in various modern translations shows how complex interpreting the word ‘outcast’ in this verse is:
    - as an adjective meaning *released, free, set loose*: “like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand” (ESV).
    - as an adjective meaning *abandoned, forsaken, cast off, secluded, set apart, expelled*: “abandoned among the dead. I am like the slain lying in the grave, whom you no longer remember, and who are cut off from your care” (CSB).
    - as a noun meaning *abode* or *couch*: “My couch is among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave. You remember them no more; they are cut off from your influence” (NAB).

<sup>35</sup> HALOT.

- However, in verse 6, we understand this adjective as denoting a social status in the society of the dead, which we translate as *an outcast, a low social class of the despised and excommunicated imported from the society of the living into the world of the dead.*<sup>36</sup>
  - In translating the adjective ‘outcast’, the translator or performer should think about a word used to describe groups that have low class or low social status.
- In Hebrew, the phrase **among the dead** (בַּמֵּתִים) is located in an unusual place in the sentence: it is at the beginning of the line. This creates a strong focus that may be reflected as follows: “not only in the society of the living, but even in the society of the dead I am an outcast.”
- The **slain** (הַקָּלִיִּים) are those who have died in a violent way, particularly in battle.<sup>37</sup>
  - The word ‘slain’ is plural in the Hebrew text and the translator or performer should make sure this is reflected in his rendering.
  - The ‘slain’ were considered a despised class even within the world of the dead, since they were buried in mass graves, if they were buried at all. The ‘slain’ are described in three dramatic and pitiful ways here: as (1) lying in the tomb, (2) no longer remembered by God, and (3) being cut from God’s care.
  - The verb ‘slain’ is passive here in Hebrew, but it may be translated in the active voice. For example, “those that have died (violently),” or “those that the enemies killed.”
- On the ‘like’ in ‘just like the slain’ (כְּמִוְהָקָלִיִּים), see note above on ‘like a man’ in verse 5.
- The expression ‘to be **lying in the tomb**’ should be interpreted as “being buried in a tomb” and may be rendered in the active voice: “they/people have buried (in a tomb).”
- Those ‘slain who are lying in the tomb’ are further described by two relative clauses introduced by the relative pronouns **whom** and **who**.
  - Those two relative clauses describe the normal state of someone slain and lying in the tomb. They explain that all the slain are not remembered by God and are no longer under his care.
  - The translator and performer should therefore avoid a rendering that suggests that there is a category of slain people lying in the tomb who are remembered by God and who are under God’s care.
- The meaning of the clause **you do not remember** is close to the meaning of the next clause, which talks about being cut off from God’s care.
  - God is the subject of the verb ‘remember’, and in the Hebrew perspective, God does not actually stop remembering information, facts, or people. Instead, the entire phrase is a figure of speech. It means that God will no longer act in favor of the person to deliver and save him from danger or harm.
  - So, translators must make sure that the audience will understand that the word *remember*, as it is used here, has in view helping a person out of his difficulties.
  - The negative ‘whom you do not remember anymore’ may be translated using the affirmative *whom you have forgotten*.

<sup>36</sup> For a thorough discussion of this term, see [The Meaning of הַקָּלִיִּים in Ps 88:6](#).

<sup>37</sup> 1 Sam 17:52, 31:8, 2 Sam 1:19, 1 Kgs 11:15, Jer 51:4.

- The second person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your (care)’ are singular and refer to YHWH.
- The conjunction ‘and’ can also be understood to denote consequence. As a consequence, it may be rendered as “and thus”, “and then”, or “and therefore.”
- The prepositional phrase **from your care** is also rendered literally as “from the hand of God” by some modern translations. See ESV, NASB2020, and NRSV.
  - The psalmist has placed the phrase ‘from your care’ in an unusual position in the Hebrew text in order to create emphasis. So, it should be understood as saying “from your *own* care.”
- The phrase ‘and [who] have been cut off from your care’ may also be paraphrased as “and whom you no longer care for.” The general meaning of the phrase is that God has completely stopped caring for the person, and the person can no longer benefit or expect anything from YHWH.

## VERSE 7

(You are ultimately responsible for my conditions, as) **you have put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in watery depths** (of Sheol,)( like Jeremiah, who was sent down into the pit). (Did I anger you, like Jeremiah angered the king? )(Are you punishing me for something I did?)

שְׁתַּנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתִּיּוֹת  
בְּמַקְשָׁיִם בְּמַצְלוֹת:

7

You have put me **in the lowest pit,**  
**in dark places, in watery depths.**

- The verse indicates three locations in which YHWH places the psalmist: **in the lowest pit** (בְּבוֹר תַּחְתִּיּוֹת), **in dark places** (בְּמַקְשָׁיִם) and **in watery depths** (בְּמַצְלוֹת).
  - These three elements (darkness, water, and the pit) are all common images for *death*: pit is a synonym of a tomb; Sheol is as dark as a tomb (e.g. Job 10:21-22); and deep waters are a common image for death and Sheol.
  - The list is not chronological and should not be understood as the psalmist was placed first in the lowest pit, then in dark places and finally in watery depths. Rather, the list is poetic and states multiple synonymous ideas for emphasis.
- The images of death mentioned in the previous note are an attempt to hint at the psalmist's desperate situation, but they obviously do not represent his actual reality in the world of the living.
  - *Putting in the lowest pit, in dark places, in watery depths* may therefore be seen as images symbolizing the current situation of the psalmist as one who is sick, quarantined and dying.
- In this verse, **the lowest pit** may be understood as “a large hole which is situated at the lowest places.” This phrase is often a synonym of *Sheol*, as it lies deep under the earth, like the deepest pit (e.g. Ezek 31:14; Ps 86:13). The word pit may be defined as a “large hole.”

## VERSE 8

**Your outbursts of wrath have been lying heavily on me,** (like a priest putting his hands on a sacrifice or on a scapegoat bearing the sins of all the people.) (Am I being treated as a scapegoat like this,) (since I am innocent?) **And you have been afflicting me with all your waves,** (as a means of testing me). (Did I anger you, like Jonah, who ran from you?) (Are you afflicting me, so that I should turn back to

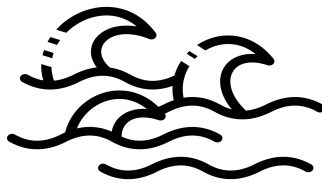
you?) (But I am here calling out to you, like he did before you delivered him from the depths!) **Selah.**

עלי סמכה קמת  
וקל-משבריך ענית סלה:

8

**Your outbursts of wrath have been lying heavily on me,**  
and you have been **afflicting** [me] with all **your waves**. **Selah.**

- **Your outbursts of wrath have been lying heavily on me** may be reexpressed as follows:
  - “You are greatly angry with me, and this lies heavy on me.”
  - “The extreme anger you have with me is lying very heavily on me.”
  - “You are getting ready to kill me as a sacrifice.”
- The Hebrew term to **afflict** is “literally, to bow down.”<sup>38</sup> It is further understood as the “causative action in which humans or deities cause (other) humans to suffer hardship and trouble,” thus “resulting in a state of inability to help oneself.” The Hebrew may be rendered as *to afflict*; *to oppress*; *to make helpless*.
- The concept of **waves** may be unknown for cultures where people have no experience of the sea. The [SDBH](#) defines waves as “water taking on a curly shape as a result of the wind moving over its surface.” It adds that it is “mostly used in a figurative sense to denote human suffering.”



- For cultures where *waves* are unknown, they can use a cultural functional equivalent: here, God is using his waves to afflict the psalmist. Try to find something that people in the target culture perceive as functioning the same way waves do in our passage:
  - An example would be “the waters”, as what we see in big rivers or lakes.
  - Since the idea of destruction or perturbation is in view, something like “strong gusts of wind” could also be used.
- Unlike in Jonah, the image of *waves* in this psalm is not a literal representation of the psalmist's situation. Instead, it creates an intertextual connection between this psalm and Jonah, and it also poetically conveys the nature of the psalmist's affliction.
- The translation of the possessive phrase **your waves** must take into consideration the following points:
  - Since the word 'waves' is imagery, here a metaphor meaning torture/hardships, the translator must make sure that his rendering is not understood as literal sea waves. Translators may consider rendering this implicit comparison with an explicit comparison (such as using the preposition *like* in English).

<sup>38</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semidic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>.

- The genitive ‘your waves’ should be interpreted in this context as “the waves you sent against/on me” or “the waves you made to come against me.”
- Translators may render the line “you have been afflicting me with all your waves” as:
  - You have been afflicting me by sending all kind of [hardships/suffering/torture] like waves to pound against me.
- The unusual positioning of ‘all your waves’ (כָּל-מַשְׁבְּרֶיךָ) in the Hebrew marks an emphasis, highlighting the total and merciless character of YHWH's affliction of the psalmist—not sparing a single wave from him.
- The meaning of the word **Selah** is uncertain, but it often marks transitions or highlights in the text, and this may be the case for the ‘selah’ closing verse 8.
  - The translator/performer may instead focus on the function of ‘selah’, which is to serve as a transition. This means considering ways (whether a word, or a performance feature such as a change in voice or musical interlude) to indicate a transition or a new section in a poem/song in the target culture.
  - See how ‘selah’ has already been rendered in other passages.
  - Possible rendering strategies used by modern translations include:
    - The transliteration rendering strategy (See ESV or NET); this seems to be one of the best options for translators, especially because nobody really knows exactly what the word means.
    - Cultural equivalent for transition: “Interlude” (NLT); “Musical Interlude” (LES),<sup>39</sup> “Pause”(LBS, LSG).
    - Untranslated (NIV, PDV).
- The emotional tone of the verse in general is that of deep *stress* and *suffering*.

## VERSE 9

You have caused my acquaintances to shun me, (like you did to Job.) (I am lonely and nobody wants to be near me). You have made me repulsive to them, (considered unclean, to be avoided and as good as dead). [You have made me] shut in, so that I cannot get out. (Like lepers who are excommunicated and quarantined,) (I am confined to one place) (and locked in like Jeremiah, because I am undesirable to everyone.)

הֲרַתַּקְתָּ מֵיָדַעַי לְמִנְנֵי שְׂתִנֵּי תוֹעֵבוֹת לְמוֹ כָּלֵא וְלֹא אֲצִיא׃	9	You have caused <b>my acquaintances</b> to <b>shun</b> me. <b>You have made me repulsive</b> to them. [You have made me] <b>shut in</b> , so that I cannot get out.
---	---	---

- In this verse a new participant is introduced: **my acquaintances** (מֵיָדַעַי), who will also reappear in the last verse of the psalm.
  - The Hebrew for ‘acquaintance’ is defined by the SDBH as a “person with whom someone is acquainted in an intimate way. It is a friend; a companion.” Here is how modern translations have translated the genitive phrase ‘my acquaintances’:

<sup>39</sup> The Lexham English Septuagint.

- English: “My companions” (ESV, NRSV); “My acquaintances” (NASB95); “My closest friends” (NIV84); “My friends” (NLT, HCSB); “Those who know me” (NET).
  - French: “My close relations”<sup>40</sup> (LBS); “Those I am used to”<sup>41</sup> (BFC); “My friends”<sup>42</sup> (PDV, LSG); “Those I know”<sup>43</sup> (NBS).
- The English verb **to cause to shun** (הִרְחַקָהּ) comes from the Hebrew verb רָחַק ('to distance oneself') using a preposition “from”, instead of a direct object.
- In verse 7, Sheol is presented as dark as a tomb, which is similar to a comparison made in Job. Here in the second line of verse 9, there is a similarity between the psalmist and Job: YHWH has caused his acquaintances to shun him by making him **repulsive** to them, a hint at the possibility that the psalmist has contracted a harsh disease distorting his physical appearance, possibly leprosy.
- The main clause of the third line is a sentence fragment, lacking both an open subject and verb. Our preferred reading considers **You have made me** (שָׂתַנִּי) as the underlying verb, with **shut in** (פָּלֵא) as a complement. This reading was chosen for the sake of harmony with the first two lines of the verse, with YHWH serving as subject and active agent of all three actions.
  - In Hebrew, the word **shut in** (פָּלֵא) is an image that denotes a completed action or a state, namely, being trapped or enclosed in a small place.<sup>44</sup>
- The Hebrew text has a conjunction (*waw*) opening the last clause ‘so that I cannot get out’ (וְלֹא אֲצַא), which marks a clause of consequence (“so that...”).
  - The psalmist means that he is not able to get out *from where he is* at the time of his struggles. Some languages may require that this implied information be made explicit.

## VERSE 10

**My eyes have languished from misery**, (lacking strength),(since I have been waiting for too long for you to answer), **I have been calling to you, YHWH, every day** (because I believe that by praying to you, you may save me, like you did Jonah, Job and Jeremiah). **I have been spreading out my hands to you**, (demonstrating that my hands are empty and opening myself in helplessness.) (I am helpless!)

<p>עֵינַי דָּאֲבָה מִלִּי עֵינַי קְרָאתֶיךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־יּוֹם שִׁטַּחְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ כַּפָּי:</p>	10	<p><b>My eyes</b> have <b>languished</b> from <b>misery</b>. I have been <b>calling</b> to you, YHWH, <b>every day</b>. I have been <b>spreading out my hands to you</b>.</p>
---	----	---

- The Hebrew for **my eyes** is actually singular--the singular “eye” (עֵינַי) is often used in poetry to mean both eyes.

<sup>40</sup> “Mes proches.”

<sup>41</sup> “Mes familiers.”

<sup>42</sup> “Mes amis.”

<sup>43</sup> “Ceux que je connais.”

<sup>44</sup>This passive participle is elsewhere found only in Jer 32:2, another indication to the affinity (see verse 7 where there is similarity at the level of the place of incarceration) between the story of Jeremiah and that of the psalmist (see note above on verse [7a](#)).



- The ‘eye(s)’ is a figure of speech (called *synecdoche*), in which the ‘eye(s)’ represent the whole person. Furthermore, the **eyes** serve as an indicator of the vitality and health of that person, whether the person is healthy<sup>45</sup> or lacks vitality and strength.<sup>46</sup>
- Unless the word functions in the local language similarly to the way it does in Hebrew, translators should avoid a literal translation of this figure of speech. Instead:
  - They can look for a culturally appropriate comparison that functions the same way the ‘eye(s)’ function in the biblical cultural context.
  - They can render the meaning behind the figure of speech/image:
    - instead of “eyes”, use the first person singular, referring to the psalmist: “I have languished from misery”
    - Or use the aspects of vitality, strength or health: “my strength/health has wasted away” or “my strength has grown weak.”
- The rare verb **languish** (לָנַחַח) normally denotes the languishing of the *soul* (נַפְשׁוֹ)<sup>47</sup> but only in this verse it describes the eye. In English to *languish* means to “to be or become feeble, weak, or enervated” or “to be or live in a state of depression or decreasing vitality.”<sup>48</sup> Two main ways modern translations render the term are:
  - Some translations render directly the meaning of the metaphor and make use of the verbs “mourn” (KJV1900); “languish” (LEB); “grieve” (YLT).
  - Other translations preserve the eye imagery and go for verbs such as “grow dim” (ESV, NIV8); “waste away” (NASB95); “grow weak” (NET).
- The Hebrew term translated here as **misery** (מִסֵּרָה), means literally “to be bowed down” and “hence, (the) state in which humans are suffering hardship and trouble and unable to help themselves.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, it may be rendered as “affliction, misery, or suffering”, “sorrow” (ESV), or “oppression” (NET).
- **Calling** to YHWH is an act of prayer and supplication. The Hebrew verb used here has to do with an “action by which humans or deities speak with a loud voice, often to draw attention to themselves or to their situation and expecting someone to respond in one way or another.”<sup>50</sup> The psalmist is praying so that YHWH would intervene and help him.
  - It’s important for translators to communicate the durative nature of the verb “have been calling.” It is not a one-time event; it has been happening repeatedly, over and over, and it is continuing even now.
- The psalmist calls YHWH **every day**. The Hebrew prepositional phrase indicates the time during which the calling of the psalmist is happening. It is translated differently by modern translations:
  - The majority use “Every day” (ESV, NIV, NRSV) or “Each day” (NLT), thus telling us when the event took place. This first option is preferred.

<sup>45</sup> Sam 14:27, 29; Deut 34:7; Ps 19:9; Ezra 9:8.

<sup>46</sup> Gen 27:1; Job 17:7; Ps 6:8; 38:11; Lam 5:17.

<sup>47</sup> See Deut 28:65; Jer 31:11, 24.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/languish>.

<sup>49</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>.

<sup>50</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>.



- “All day long” (HCSB, NET) instead tells us how long the event lasts when it happens.
- Some focus on the meaning as “without ceasing” as does the French NBS.<sup>51</sup>
- The direct address ‘YHWH’ in verse 10b is very interesting, as it occurs in the middle of a clause. To have a natural text that bears the same effect of the Hebrew text, the translator may need to change the word order, especially concerning the name YHWH. For some languages, it might be better to have the name YHWH at the beginning of the sentence, for others, at the end.
- The **spreading out of someone's hands** to another (שִׁטְחָתִי אֵלָיֶךָ כַּפָּי) is a symbolic act that includes the following meanings:
  - Openness of hands demonstrates that the hands are empty and that the suppliant knows this and opens up in helplessness.
  - This symbolic act extends “the open hand upward in order to receive,” which is “a gesture of prayer especially in the form of invocation, petition, or intercession.”<sup>52</sup>
  - Translators should reflect and check how the target audience understands this symbolic act of *raising or spreading hands to another person*. If it is meaningless, or yields a different meaning from what we have described, then translators should seek for ways to render the meaning of this symbolic act, perhaps using another figure of speech.
  - Since this is a symbolic act, the statement is not only a figure of speech, but it is also highly probable that the psalmist is describing his actual literal posture.

Gray boxes discuss sections and subsections. The headings (in green) are guides, and not part of the Biblical text.

### **VERSES 11-13: Facing death**

**Verses 11-13** focus on the realm of the dead and have related words/themes repeated along this theme: “**the dead**”, “**the departed spirits**”, “**the tomb**”, “**the place of destruction**”, “**the dark region**” and “**the land of oblivion**.” Through a series of rhetorical questions, many of YHWH's loving attributes are mentioned and portrayed as impossible to experience in this realm. The psalmist lays emphasis on these repeated words just as he does for the rhetorical questions.

Verses 11-13 constitute a significant and well distinguished section in the psalm:

- From the viewpoint of the psalmist’s argument, it is the climax of the whole psalm, immediately followed by an emotional peak at verse 14;
- The verses are all rhetorical questions addressed to God, asserting that God’s mighty acts are not experienced in the underworld;
- And we see a significant participant shift where the focus is no longer on the psalmist but on God.

For more on this section as a whole see the [Verse by verse notes](#)<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup>“Sans cesse.”

<sup>52</sup>Briggs and Briggs (1906-1907, 245).

<sup>53</sup> [https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm\\_88\\_Verse-by-Verse#Facing\\_death\\_\(vv.\\_11-13\)](https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm_88_Verse-by-Verse#Facing_death_(vv._11-13)).

VERSE 11

**Do you perform wonders for the dead?** (No, you do not!) (There is no coming back from Sheol.) (Therefore, it is your last chance to save me.) **Do the departed spirits rise up to praise you?** (No, they do not!) (Only the living praise you.) (So remember, I am more useful to you alive than dead.) (When you save, you are praised for that.) (What a preferable outcome than my death!)

<p>הַלְמִתִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה-פְּלֵא אִם-רְפָאִים יִקְוּמוּ   יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה:</p>	11	<p>Do you perform <b>wonders for the dead</b>? Do the <b>departed spirits rise up to praise</b> you? <b>Selah.</b></p>
--	----	--

- This verse is made up of two rhetorical questions; their purpose is not to request information. The implied answers to these questions are “no, you do not!” in the case of the first question and “no, they do not” in the case of the second question.
  - If the target language can use a rhetorical question with a clear implied strong negative answer, translators should go with this rendering.
  - If the implied negative answer is not perceivable in the target language, the translator may translate the answers explicitly: “Do you perform wonders for the dead? No!”
  - Another option for translating the rhetorical questions is to use negative declarative sentences, while looking for other strategies to keep the rhetorical effects of the source text:
    - “No! You do not perform wonders for the dead! (You do only for the living!) No! The departed spirits do not rise up to praise you! (Only the living praise you!)”
    - “You do not perform wonders for the dead! Do you? The departed spirits do not rise up to praise you! Do they?”
- The prepositional phrase **for the dead** (לַמֵּתִים) is interesting:
  - Although it is not perceptible in English, the Hebrew term for ‘dead’ is plural here. For languages where there is distinction between plural and singular form for *the dead*, translators should make sure to use the plural.
  - The phrase is translated differently by existing translations, which show two slightly different interpretations:
    - The dead are beneficiaries of the wonders performed by God, the benefactor: “for the dead” (ESV, HCSB, NET). This option is preferred.
    - God performs miracles in a way that the dead can see and (most probably) stand in awe: “to the dead” (NIV, ASV).
  - The phrase is located in an unusual position in the Hebrew text. It emphasizes a contrast, on which the rhetorical yes-no question focuses: “Is it *for the dead* that you perform wonders (or, for the living)?”

- In poetry, we find the singular of ‘wonder’ (פִּלְאָה) representing the totality of **wonders** that have been performed by God.<sup>54</sup> It is preferable to translate using the plural here.
- The ‘dead’ and the **departed spirits** are synonymous here. ‘The departed spirits’ should not be translated as referring to ghosts, demons, or any other supernatural spirits.
  - For languages where only one word exists for the concept of *the dead*, translators can use the one term. Otherwise, translators should choose two synonyms.
- The verbal sequence **rise up to praise** (יָקוּמוּ יוֹדוּךָ) is a special construction (called a *hendiadys*) in which two verbs combine to create a single idea.<sup>55</sup> This construction should be rendered in translation by a subordination of the second verb to the first one.
  - Examples for this: “I rise up (so that I can) praise you” or “I rise up (with the intention) to praise you.”
- **Selah** often marks transitions or highlights in the text, and so the ‘selah’ at the end of this verse may mark the beginning of the rhetorical climax of the psalm (verses 11-13).
  - For the translation of ‘selah’, see verse 9.

## VERSE 12

Is your faithful love recounted in the tomb? (No, it is not!) [Is] your faithfulness [recounted] in the place of destruction? (No, it is not!) (Because there are no wondrous acts of truthfulness carried out in the realm of the dead and no one to confess them in that world, to bring you praise.) (You can show your faithful love to me now by saving me, but only as long as I am alive.) (If you do that, I will tell the whole world of it.)

הִיִּסְפֵּר בְּקִבְרֵי מֵסֵדָה אֱמוּנָתְךָ בְּאֵבֶדוֹן׃	12	Is <b>your faithful love</b> recounted in the tomb? [Is] your <b>faithfulness</b> [recounted] in the place of destruction?
--	----	---

- The governing message of this verse, as well as the next one, is that “There are no wondrous acts of truthfulness and commitment and faithfulness in the realm of the dead and, therefore, no wonders to acknowledge and confess in the way they can be confessed in this world so as to bring honor to YHWH.”
- This verse is made up of two rhetorical questions, just like the preceding verse. The implied answers to these questions are “no, it is not!” Translators can render these questions using a similar structure as they did for the rhetorical questions in verse 11.
- In the phrase **your faithful love**, the term ‘your’ refers to God, who is the giver and possessor of the faithful love. God is portrayed as having a particular character, which is that of loving faithfulness.
  - The word **faithful love** is a key term. Numerous articles have been written by scholars to help understand the Hebrew word rendered here as *faithful love*.

<sup>54</sup>E.g. Psa 77:12 “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old” (ESV).

<sup>55</sup>A hendiadys is “the expression of an idea by the use of usually two independent words connected by and (such as nice and warm) instead of the usual combination of independent word and its modifier (such as nicely warm).” See [Merriam Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hendiadys) online.

- It is a “state in which humans or deities are committed towards fulfilling their obligations and show that by their actions; these obligations include responsibilities towards kinspeople, spouses, friends, covenant partners, and people to whom one is indebted as a result of favors received.”<sup>56</sup>
  - Modern translations translate it in a variety of ways: “steadfast love” (ESV, NRSV), “lovingkindness” (NASB 95), “love” (NIV, LBS, PDV), “graciousness” (NASB 2020), “unfailing love” (NLT), “loyal love” (NET), “kindness”<sup>57</sup> (BFC), “faithfulness”<sup>58</sup> (NBS).
- ‘Your faithful love’ should be interpreted as “the faithful love that you have” or “the faithful love that characterizes you.”
- To **recount** means to declare or to speak about something. The verb is passive, and some languages may need to express it using an active construction. Some strategies to do this are:
  - With ‘people’ as the subject: “Do people recount your faithful love in the tomb?”
  - With the pronoun ‘they’ as the subject: “Do they recount your faithful love in the tomb?”
  - The Hebrew verb ‘recount’, which appears twice in the CBC of the verse, is in the present simple tense.
- The prepositional phrase **in the tomb** indicates the place where the faithful love is not recounted.
  - The **tomb** here means the “realm of the dead,” otherwise known as the “underworld,” so the definite article ‘the’ does not mean a specific tomb. Rather, it refers to the fact that there is only one realm of the dead. For languages where a literal rendering of ‘in the tomb’ doesn’t convey the right meaning of ‘the realm of the dead’, translators may use:
    - The meaning behind the imagery, namely “the world/place of the dead.”
    - A different image for “the world of the dead” that is relevant for their audience.
    - It is not advisable to render the imagery as “hell” because that word refers to part of the “world of the dead” where only wicked people find themselves being under divine judgment.<sup>59</sup>
  - There is implicit information in the prepositional phrase that may be expressed overtly for more clarity: (while/once) in the tomb. The ‘faithful love’ is not recounted once people are ‘in the tomb’.
- The phrase **your faithfulness** refers to God’s character:
  - The word **faithfulness** is a different word and concept than ‘faithful love’ from the first clause, because they have two different Hebrew roots.
  - The meaning of ‘faithfulness’ is closer to *trust* and *full commitment*. It has to do with how we can rely on somebody. It is someone’s constant commitment to something or someone, not changing his mind on something he has accepted and vowed to do. God is notably faithful to his people and his covenant.

---

<sup>56</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>

<sup>57</sup> “Bonté.”

<sup>58</sup> “Fidélité.”

<sup>59</sup> See Bauckham (1992, 14).

- Since the concept of ‘faithfulness’ here is different from the word ‘faithful love’ at the beginning of verse 12, it should be translated differently, if possible.
- ‘Your faithfulness’ is interpreted here as “the way you are faithful/committed/trustworthy (to your word)” or “the way one can trust (and depend on) you.”
- The Hebrew word we have rendered as the **place of destruction** (אַבְדֹן; *Abaddon*) is another term for the netherworld to which the dead go. It literally means “destruction” (cf. Job 31:12).
  - However, in most of its occurrences it is a figure of speech used as a *place* of destruction, with clear reference to [death and Sheol](#). Physically, it refers to being in the grave.
  - The expression is rendered using different approaches in existing translations:
    - Many translations transliterate the Hebrew and have “*Abaddon*.” See ESV, NASB, HCSB. The weakness of this choice is that it does not communicate much to the audience. If a translation team goes with this less preferred option, it is advisable to have at least a footnote explaining the term.
    - Another number of translations use the substantive *destruction*:
      - Some, like NIV, use a capital letter “in Destruction.” The capital letter helps the reader know that we are dealing with a specific kind of destruction. For an oral audience, it may be necessary to have an explicit definite article: “in the Destruction.”
      - Other translations use a descriptive phrase, as in our rendering, “(the) place of destruction” (see NLT). The advantage of this rendering is that it clarifies that the word refers to a *place*.
    - Some translations render the meaning as *the world of the dead*, such as NET: “in the place of the dead.” See also the French LBS, BFC, PDV and NBS. This rendering understands the Hebrew word to refer to the place people go after dying.

## VERSE 13

Can your wonders be known in the dark region? (No, they cannot!) And [can] your righteousness [be known] in the land of oblivion (namely, Sheol, the inhabitants of which are forgotten by you)? (No, it cannot!) (Because there are no wonders to acknowledge there, and therefore no one in that place can be aware of any.) (Therefore, if you perform a wonder for me by saving me, I will tell the whole world of it so that your righteousness is known.)

הַיְוֹדַע בְּחֹשֶׁךְ פְּלֶאָה אֲצִדְקוֹתַי בְּאֶרֶץ נְשִׁיחָה:	13	Can your <b>wonders be known</b> in <b>the dark region</b> ? And [can] your <b>righteousness</b> [be known] in the land of <b>oblivion</b> ?
---	----	---

- This verse consists of the last two rhetorical questions of the section. The implied answers to these questions are “no, they/it cannot”. Translators can render these questions using a similar structure as they did for the rhetorical questions in verses 11 and 12.
- The verb **can be known** (יָדַעַ) implies *possibility*.

- If the local language requires that the passive voice must be rendered as an active construction, the subject of the verb might be “people”, or simply a dummy subject: “Can people/they know your wonders in the dark region?”
- The Hebrew verb ‘to know’ (יָדַע) concerns not merely the level of everyday thoughts, but includes a knowledge flowing from experience and intimacy.<sup>60</sup>
- As was explained in verse [11](#), in poetry we find the singular of ‘wonder’ (פְּלֵאָה) representing the totality of **wonders** that have been performed by God.
  - The genitive phrase ‘your wonders’ refers to the wonders or miracles performed by God. Translators/performers who need to use a verbal construction can render this phrase as “the wonders you do/perform.”
  - Thus, the whole verse can be paraphrased as “Can people in the dark region know the wonders you do?”
- The term **the dark regions** (חַשְׁמַיִם) should be understood in light of the immediately preceding context in verses 12-13. These verses contained a sequence of places, all referring to the underworld: *in the place of destruction, in the tomb, in the land of oblivion*.
  - Thus, what is literally ‘in darkness’ (בְּחֹשֶׁךְ) should be taken as a figure of speech that refers to the *place of darkness* or *dark region*, that is, the world of the dead, rather than to the natural phenomenon of darkness. For more details see our [verse by verse notes](#).
  - Translators should avoid a literal translation that may not be understood as referring to the world of the dead. If the translation team wants to keep a literal rendering, they might:
    - (1) either add an explanatory footnote
    - (2) or add an explanatory phrase, such as in the following example: “the dark region, which is the world of the dead.”
- The key term **righteousness** is the noun form of the adjective “righteous.” Here, it should be understood as the fact that someone stands blameless according to a particular norm, usually a law.
  - Some languages may only have the adjective “righteous.” In this case, translators should consider using the adjective in rendering the key term: “the way someone is righteous.”
  - The phrase ‘Your righteousness’ can be interpreted in at least two ways:
    - It means that what God does is righteous, so that ‘Your righteousness’ is understood as “the righteous things you do.” From this perspective, the full line can be rendered as “You do righteous things/acts. Can they be known in the land of oblivion?”
    - It refers to the way in which God is righteous, so that ‘Your righteousness’ is understood as “the way you are righteous.” From this perspective, the full line can be rendered as “Can your way of being righteous be known in the land of oblivion?”
- The Hebrew noun **oblivion** (נִשְׁכָּח) is a verbal noun derived from the root “forget” (נָשַׁח).

---

<sup>60</sup><https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en>.



- The verb may be interpreted as either active (“the land of those forgetting”) or passive (“the land of those forgotten.”) Our preferred reading is the latter (see the footnote for more detail).<sup>61</sup>
- Translators may therefore render the phrase ‘the land of oblivion’ simply as *the land of those forgotten*. They should ensure this will be understood as a figure of speech referring to the world of the dead. See the note above for the translation of ‘dark region’.
- The word order of verse 13b mirrors the word order of verse 13a, with the verb elided.

Gray boxes discuss sections and subsections. The headings (in green) are guides, and not part of the Biblical text.

### **VERSES 14-19: Afflicted and continuing to pray**

Verses 14-19 are the concluding section of the psalm:

- In terms of participants, the psalmist reappears here after having disappeared in verses 11-13, while the dead disappear for good.
- From this point and until the end of the psalm, the psalm will be characterized by an interaction between YHWH and the psalmist. The emphasis in this section is laid on phrases related to the psalmist (**I, my, me**) and **YHWH (the divine name, you, your)**.
- The section portrays the psalmist’s struggles and frustrations as coming from YHWH.

For more on this section as a whole see the [Verse by verse notes](#)<sup>62</sup>

## VERSE 14

**But I have been crying out to you for help, YHWH,** (because only you can save those who believe in you) (and you will be consequently praised,) **and my prayer will keep welcoming you in the morning,** (since daybreak is the time when you appear to deliver) (and since I have not given up yet!).

וְאֲנִי   אֲלִיף יְהוָה שְׁנֵעָמִי וְבִבְקָר תִּפְלְתִי תִקְדָּמָךְ:	14	<b>But I have been crying out to you for help, YHWH,</b> <b>and my prayer will keep welcoming you in the morning.</b>
---	----	--

- The conjunction **But** that opens the verse does not function to connect verse 14 and verse 13. Rather, it marks a shift in the topic from YHWH back to the psalmist, and therefore begins a new section in the psalm. See [our verse by verse notes](#) for more detail.

<sup>61</sup> (1) The equivalent core section in verse 6 has an explicit mention of the dead being forgotten by YHWH: ‘whom you do not remember’ (אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתָּם עִיד) (āšer lō’ zəkartām ‘ôd). For more details consult our verse by verse notes: [https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm\\_88\\_Verse-by-Verse#cite\\_note-70](https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm_88_Verse-by-Verse#cite_note-70). (2) The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT, has a passive participle—“a forgotten land.” See our verse by verse notes: [https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm\\_88\\_Verse-by-Verse#cite\\_note-70](https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm_88_Verse-by-Verse#cite_note-70).

<sup>62</sup>[https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm\\_88\\_Verse-by-Verse#Afflicted\\_and\\_continuing\\_to\\_pray\\_\(vv.\\_14-19\)](https://psalms.scriptura.org/w/Psalm_88_Verse-by-Verse#Afflicted_and_continuing_to_pray_(vv._14-19)).



- The phrase **to you** (אֵלַי) is not located at its expected position in the Hebrew text. This means that the focus is restricted to YHWH alone: “I have been crying out to you (only) for help, because I know you are the only one who can save me).”
- The word **YHWH** is in the form of direct address (it is a *vocative*). The word is also found in an unusual place in this verse: near the front of the line, just after ‘to you.’ Beyond having a poetic effect, this word order lays an emphasis on YHWH as the person called by the psalmist. Modern translations capture this unusual word order by using different translation strategies from which translators can take inspiration:
  - Placing the divine name YHWH at a specific position of the sentence:
    - If translators/performers opt for this solution, they should reflect on what word order in the target language would give prominence to YHWH in the sentence.
    - For English and French translations, the divine name YHWH is placed at the beginning of the sentence.
  - Using a particle that brings out the emphasis on YHWH:
    - Some English translations use the particle “O (YHWH)” to bring out the emphasis: NLT, LBS.
  - Combine the two preceding strategies at the same time like ESV and NRSV.
  - Keep the same word order and make use of no particle of emphasis like NIV, NBS, BFC.
- The phrase **have been crying out for help** suggests an earnest prayer through which the psalmist seeks the intervention of God, as the context clearly suggests. Unlike the more generic expression “call out to YHWH” of verse 10, the Hebrew root of the verb used here is more specific as it refers to the action of raising one’s voice in times of hardship, with the hope of receiving some kind of help.<sup>63</sup>
  - Some major English translations render it: “Cry to you” (ESV); “call to you for help” (HCSB); “cry out to you” (NLT).
  - Although in English we have rendered the verb as “cry out to someone for help”, it is actually only one word in the Hebrew text. Translators have some relative freedom in rendering, considering the English translations:
    - If the language has a verb for *crying* where the idea of *help* is implied, the translation team can use it here.
    - In a similar way, translators can change the word order of our English rendering: “cry out to you so you can help me”, “cry for you to help me.”
  - The performance of the verse can be built around acting out the deeply emotional “cry for help.”
- The positioning of the phrase **in the morning** (בַּבֹּקֶר) is interesting :
  - The positioning shows an emphasis on *in the morning*, as opposed to other times of day: “it is specifically in the morning that my prayer will keep welcoming you.”

<sup>63</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>.

- The morning “is supposed to be the time when God appears to deliver (e.g., Pss 90:14; 143:8).”<sup>64</sup>
- The phrase **my prayer** (תַּפִּלָּתִי) marks a transition in perspective. God’s perspective is no longer the focus, but instead the psalmist’s perspective is in focus, as we can see with the use of the first person singular in the following verses.<sup>65</sup>
- Rendering literally the sentence **my prayer will keep welcoming you** can yield a non-plausible sentence in some languages. This is because of the personification of the prayer: how can a prayer *welcome* someone?
  - The genitive or “of phrase” ‘my prayer’ refers to the psalmist praying to God, and may be rendered with a verbal expression: “the prayer *I make* will keep welcoming you.”
  - This poetic language refers to the fact that the psalmist intends to constantly get up very early (‘in the morning’) and start praying. The continuous aspect ‘will keep welcoming you’ brings out the fact the psalmist intends to repeat his prayer each morning.
  - The vast majority of English translations have “my prayer comes before you.” Nonetheless, this rendering does not emphasize the continuous nature of the verb as suggested by the context.
  - Translators may simply render the phrase as “I will keep praying to/before you.”

## VERSE 15

Why, YHWH, do you keep rejecting me? [Why] do you keep hiding your face from me, (ignoring me and withdrawing your favors from me)? (Are you angry at me and punishing me?) (I am innocent, am I not?)

לָמָּה יָהוָה תִּזְנֹחַ וּפְשִׁי תִּסְתִּיר פָּנָיֶךָ מִמֶּנִּי:	15	<b>Why, YHWH, do you keep rejecting me?</b> [Why] do you keep <b>hiding your face</b> from me?
---	----	---

- In this verse, the psalmist pleads with YHWH to stop ignoring him.
- The verse is made up of two rhetorical **why** questions—not actually seeking any kind of information. So, while the sentence type is interrogative, its purpose is to give directives:<sup>66</sup>
  - ‘Why do you keep rejecting me?’ can be interpreted as “Stop rejecting me!”
  - ‘[Why] do you keep hiding your face from me’ can be interpreted as “Stop hiding your face from me!”
  - The two ‘why; questions:
    - are strong emotionally and should be kept in translation, if possible.
    - express both the frustration of the psalmist and the fact that he cannot explain why God is not intervening in his situation.

<sup>64</sup> Goldingay 2007, 655; see also Ps 46:6, 2 Sam 23:3-4, Zeph 3:5.

<sup>65</sup> This is technically called topic activation. The word order (focus-topic) is also attested in 2 Kgs 19:23 and Isa 28:17.

<sup>66</sup> This is an indirect speech act.

- The positioning of the direct address YHWH may need to be changed in the target language. Translators and performers should strive to communicate the feeling of desperation by the psalmist. For example, in some languages it may be possible to communicate this feeling by putting YHWH at the end of the sentence, for more effect.
- For discussion of the soul (נַפְשׁ) as interchangeable with the personal pronoun **me**, see the discussion above on verse 4a ('I').
- God is presented here as a human having a **face**.<sup>67</sup>
  - YHWH's *face* represents YHWH himself.
  - This imagery should not be understood literally. For a literal rendering, translators must make sure the target audience does not have a literal interpretation.
  - If a literal rendering of “your face” is confusing, translators may use “yourself” instead, as in the rendering “why do you keep hiding yourself from me?”
- When used of YHWH, the collocation or the combination of the words **hide** and **face** (as in the phrase הִסְתִּיר פָּנָיו) has two possible senses:
  - (1) to ignore or be indifferent towards people's troubles (Ps 10:11; 13:2; 42:25),
  - (2) more often, to withdraw his favor due to his anger towards sinners.<sup>68</sup> This second option is preferred.

## VERSE 16

**I have been afflicted and close to death from [my] youth.** (I have forgotten what well-being feels like )and have been feeling hopeless and lonely for so many years.) **I've been suffering your terrifying assaults.** (I am terrified) (and tired of living under constant terror), **and keep being torn apart** (consequently,) (totally without strength).

<p>עָנִי וְגִנַּע מִנְעוּר וְשָׂאתִי אֲמִידָה * אֶפְוֶרָה *</p>	16	<p>I have been <b>afflicted and close to death from youth.</b> I've been suffering <b>your terrifying assaults</b>, <b>and</b> keep being <b>torn apart.</b></p>
---	----	--

- The phrase ‘I have been’ is implied in the Hebrew text “afflicted and close to death” (ESV). It points to the psalmist's ongoing and durative experience of a difficult situation in which he finds himself ‘afflicted’ and ‘close to death’.
- The psalmist is portrayed as having been **afflicted** (עָנִי):
  - The word ‘afflicted’ is a noun that can describe a person. It may also be reexpressed as “(I have been as) an afflicted (person).”
  - The term ‘afflicted’ has to do with “a class of people who are suffering, often because of poverty but also because of an oppressive external situation” and “a class of people that do

<sup>67</sup> This is a figure of speech called anthropomorphic language.

<sup>68</sup> Deut 31:17-18; 32:20; Isa 54:8; Jer 33:5; Ezek 39:23-24; Mic 3:4.

not think highly of themselves, usually as a result of poverty or other kinds of suffering.” See [SDBH](#).<sup>69</sup>

- For some languages, the passive voice of ‘afflicted’ may need to be rendered using the active voice. The context suggests that the psalmist sees God as being responsible for his difficulties. Thus one may rephrase the first line as “You, YHWH, have made me go through difficulties and be close to death from my youth.”
- The position of the noun ‘afflicted’ (אָפְּרָן) is at the beginning of the line, which is unusual for Hebrew. The positioning marks that the psalmist is confirming the truth of his status as afflicted: “Why do you keep rejecting me? I’m afflicted, as you know!”
- The conjunction **and** is additive and means that the two things described here are happening at the same time. The psalmist was simultaneously afflicted and close to death.
- The phrase **close to death** (קָרִיב לְמוֹת) is a single word in Hebrew. It is in a form (a *participle*) that indicates an on-going state. It is best rendered in English with a present perfect tense, but may be rendered with other tenses in other languages (for example, with a present tense).
  - If necessary, translators may make the tense clear (“I have been) close to death.”
  - The verbal idea of dying may be used in translation of the participle: “I have been close to dying.”
  - The opposite of *close* may also be used: “I have not been far from death.”
  - Another possible rendering consists of making death the subject of the clause: “death has been not far from me.”
- The phrase **from [my] youth** gives the time from which the psalmist began being ‘afflicted and close to death’. The Hebrew term for ‘youth’ refers to “the period of a person's life ranging from early childhood to adulthood.”<sup>70</sup>
  - It may be more effective for some languages to bring out the fact we are dealing with a period of time. With such languages, translators or performers can consider rendering the phrase as:
    - “since/from the time I was (still) a youth.”
    - “since/from the time I was (still) a young man.”
- Verses 16-19 mention several different afflictions sent by YHWH. They are sent by YHWH to create terror within the psalmist. **Your terrifying assaults** (אֲפָרָיִם) are the first terror agents that are mentioned in verses 16-19.
  - Similar to the Hebrew term we rendered ‘Your outbursts of wrath’ (אֲפָרָיִם) in verse 8, the abstract term *terrors* (אֲפָרָיִם) could be better rephrased in a concrete form like ‘terrifying assaults’.
  - ‘Your terrifying assaults’ means things Yahweh has done that are causing extreme fear to the psalmist.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> <https://semanticdictionary.org/semdic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en#>

<sup>70</sup> SDBH.

<sup>71</sup> Bratcher and Reyerburn (1991, 769).

- Some languages will have to make explicit the phrase ‘your terrifying assaults’ as the source of the suffering: “I have been suffering *because* of your terrifying assaults”; “*because* of your terrifying assaults, I have been suffering”; “your terrifying assaults have been making me suffer”; “you are making terrifying things happen to me and I am suffering.”
- The last Hebrew word in this verse, which we have rendered **tear apart** (הִפְתִּיחַ), has posed difficulties for translators and commentators for generations, as is shown by the variety of renditions for the second line. To name a few of the English ones: “am in despair” (NIV), “I am helpless” (ESV), “I grow weary” (NASB), “I am overcome” (NASB 1995), “am overwhelmed” (ISV), “am numb with pain” (NET), “I pine away” (LSV), “I am petrified” (Hossfeld & Zenger), “I am at a loss” (Goldingay).
  - Our English translation, which is not matched by any other translation, whether modern or ancient, takes into account all the interpretative challenges related to the Hebrew text.
  - For a thorough analysis of this exegetical issue, see [The Text and Meaning of Ps 88:16b](#).

## VERSE 17

**Your outbursts of wrath have been sweeping over me.** (Like Job, I do not know why you are furious with me.) (Have I unknowingly sinned against you? Or are you testing me like you tested Job?); **your terrifying assaults**, (acting as my enemies,) **have been destroying me.** (You appointed them to afflict me the same way you let Satan afflict Job).

צְלִי עֲבָרֶי הַרְוֵנִי בְּעוֹתֵיךָ *צִמְתוּנִי*	17	Your <b>outbursts of wrath</b> have been <b>sweeping over me</b> ; your terrifying assaults have been destroying me.
---	----	---

- In addition to its spatial sense, the preposition **over** (עַל) often has a nuance of hostility and can signify dominance over someone or something.
- The unusual position of the phrase of **over me** (עָלַי) at the beginning of the Hebrew text emphasizes that it is the psalmist, and no one else, who YHWH is "over" in the sense described in this verse: “Of all people it is ‘over me’ that your outbursts of wrath have been sweeping.”
- The first line depicts a picture in which the wraths of YHWH **sweep over** the psalmist.
  - The Hebrew term *wraths* (הַרְוֵנִי) is plural and requires a rephrasing of the simple “wraths” into **the outbursts of wrath**. These outbursts are sudden and very emotional demonstrations of YHWH’s wrath against the psalmist.
  - It may be more effective for some languages to make the image of a *sweeping sea* explicit. Translators may thus add the sentence “like the sea waves.”

## VERSE 18

**They have been surrounding me like water constantly** (just like you did to Jonah.) (Do you want me to turn back from something like him?); **they have been closing in on me together**, (like enemies do.) (I have no way out.) (Is this the end?) (I am totally dependent on your deliverance).

סביוני במים כלהיג הקיפו עלי יחד:	18	<b>They</b> have been <b>surrounding</b> me <b>like water constantly</b> ; they have been closing in on me <b>together</b> .
-------------------------------------	----	---

- This verse continues the previous one, with YHWH's messengers continuing to afflict the psalmist: “they are God’s ‘terrors’ and do his bidding, as they swirl around and close in for the kill.”<sup>72</sup>
- The explicit comparison **like water**, used in the imagery described below, evokes a body of water **surrounding** the psalmist. Some translations prefer rendering the term as “flood” (ESV, NIV) or “floodwaters” (NLT).
- The pronoun **they** refers to ‘YHWH's terrifying assaults’ mentioned in the previous verses, and acting here as humans:
  - If necessary for clarity, translators or performers can replace the pronoun with the noun phrase it pointed to, for example:
    - “YHWH's terrifying assaults have been surrounding me like water constantly.”
    - “YHWH's terrifying assaults have been closing in on me together.”
- The particular phrase **constantly** is literally “all the day” (כָּל-הַיּוֹם) and may mean:
  - “Each of all days” meaning “all the time” or “constantly.” This is the preferred option.<sup>73</sup>
  - “The entire day,” referring to one specific day.
- The noun *unitedness* (יחד) is normally used adverbially with the sense of **together**—in union.
- The performance of the verse may be built on the idea of being surrounded by attackers, or perhaps surrounded by waters if one were adrift at sea.

## VERSE 19

You have caused all my friends and companions to shun me; [you have caused] my acquaintances [to shun my] distress, (like you did to Job.) (I am lonely and everyone avoids my presence,) (because they think my distress is contagious). (Will I die as an outcast or will you finally answer me?)

הרחקת רמני אהב ורע מנדעי מהשד*:	19	You have caused <b>all</b> my <b>friends and companions</b> to <b>shun</b> me; [ <b>you have caused</b> ] my acquaintances [ <b>to shun my</b> ] distress.
------------------------------------	----	---

- This verse repeats the same theme as in verse 9: YHWH causing the psalmist's friends to shun him.
- ‘YHWH's agents of terror’, which were prominent in verses 16-18, disappear as participants and the ‘friends and companions’ reappear.
- The phrase **friends and companions** (אהב ורע) is a fixed compound of two synonyms to express totality and add to the emotional force of *sadness* and *disappointment*.

<sup>72</sup> Tate (1990, 404).

<sup>73</sup> The first option is preferred, as it fits better with the message of the psalmist, who emphasizes his ongoing misery from youth and his praying to God every day.

- The Hebrew term for ‘friends’ is built on the verbal root of love. It means a “person to which one directs one’s feelings of affection.”<sup>74</sup> It is a “companion; lover.”
- The Hebrew word for ‘companions’ means “someone with whom a person has some level of association, for example, by geography, social or ethnic grouping, personal connection, or temporary circumstance.” Other synonyms for the term are: “friend; neighbor; companion; another person.”<sup>75</sup>
- Here, the word **all** before this phrase is most certainly a poetic use to convey the strong sense of abandonment that the psalmist feels.
- For languages where it is impossible to find two words referring to *friends* and *companions*, translators/performers should feel free to use the only word they have and use a strategy to compensate for the loss, to ensure that the translation keeps the same emotional force we have here.
  - For example: “all my friends, yes all of them”, “all my friends, I mean *all* of them”...
- The form of the verb **shun** in Hebrew suggests that YHWH is *causing* the ‘friends’ (אֲהָבִים) and ‘companions’ (רֵעִים) to shun away from the psalmist.
  - For the translation of the verb, see verse 9.
- The clause **[you have caused] my acquaintances [to shun my] distress** in verse 19b is the hardest to interpret in the whole psalm. The clause’s difficulty has resulted in at least six different readings in both ancient and modern translations.
  - Many renderings of modern translations seem awkward and difficult to reconcile with the context, where the psalmist is complaining about his acquaintances having shunned him:
    - “My companions have become darkness” (ESV). See also NBS.
    - “My companions are in darkness” (NRSV).
    - “Darkness is my closest friend” (NLT); “darkness is my only friend” (HCSB).<sup>76</sup>
    - “Those who know me leave me alone in the darkness” (NET).
    - “My intimate friends have disappeared” (LSG).<sup>77</sup>
  - “Darkness” (present in the Hebrew) should not be understood literally and can effectively be used figuratively for ‘distress’, as can be seen in passages such as Ps 18:29. This is the main reason our CBC rendering should be preferred.
  - For ‘my acquaintances’, see note in verse 9.

## REFERENCES

Bauckham, Richard. 1992. “Hades, Hell”. Ed. David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday.

<sup>74</sup> [SDBH](#).

<sup>75</sup> [SDBH](#).

<sup>76</sup> See also NIV, LBS, BFC, PDV.

<sup>77</sup> “Mes intimes ont disparu.”



Bratcher, Robert G. and William David Reyburn. 1991. *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies.

Briggs, Charles A. and Emilie Grace Briggs. 1906–1907. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms, International Critical Commentary*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

DuBois, Carl D. 1999. *Metonymy and Synecdoche in the New Testament*. A revision and augmentation (1999) of John Beekman's "Metonymy and Synecdoche" in *Notes on Translation 23* (1967).

Tate, Marvin E. 1998. *Psalms 51-100*. WBC 20. Dallas, Tex: Word Book.

