The Famous but Difficult Psalm 90:10*

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ABSTRACT

Application of standard text-critical tools to the difficult Ps 90:10 results in the interpretation: The days of our vigor [are] seventy years, [or] Our years with might [are] eighty years, And their pride [is] vexation and sorrow. We fade quickly, and we rattle . . . . It is being claimed that the last colon of MT is a minor textual corruption of the original גָּזֵן יֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים and the rattle is the typical death groan.

Keywords: Ps 90:10, longevity, transience, death rattle.

A INTRODUCTION

Chapter 90, the first in the fourth book of the Book of Psalms, has been described by Jens as

A puzzling text, contradictory and dark, hopeful and somber, merciless and gentle. A song of dying and a word of life—a psalm marked equally by fear and trust, of terrible death and tender friendliness, lament and praise, wrathful judgment and hymnal eulogy.¹

It gained much notoriety because parts of two of its verses (vv. 4 and 10) became colloquial elements.

Chapter 90 is also distinguished by a heading that identifies its author as the venerated Israelite leader Moses.² The heading indicates that the psalm is a “prayer” (תפלה). Relatively recent studies seem to concur with this assessment. Commentators described this psalm as dealing with God’s and man’s time, and as lamenting in esse the transience of human beings.³ A number of scholars, however, noted that reference to “seventy years” (v. 10) is usually associated in the Tanach with a national calamity (Jer 25:11-12, Zech 1:12). This consideration, among others, led them to the perception that ch. 90 is “a lament at the

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³ Moses’ name occurs in a heading only here. It occurs also in chs. 90-106. Already Augustine opined that Moses could not have written the psalm because it does not contain any distinctive Mosaic expressions. Cf. John Goldingay, Psalm 90-150 (vol. 3 of Psalms; BCOT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 23, note 28.
community’s historical experience in which wisdom have been utilized to formulate a lament that leads to a plea.4

This study is focused on the well-known v. 10 in ch. 90, which reads,

\begin{align*}
\text{The span of our lives is seventy years,} & \quad \text{יָמִים שָׁנָה} \\
\text{Or, given the strength, eighty years;} & \quad \text{אֵbbbbד בְּבַחַת | שָׁמְנוֺת שָׁנָה} \\
\text{But the best of them are trouble and sorrow.} & \quad \text{רָהְבָּם שָׁנָה | אֲוָן} \\
\text{They pass by speedily, and we are in darkness,} & \quad \text{יְמֵי־שְׁנֵי הָנָּה}.
\end{align*}

and has posed considerable difficulties to commentators since the time of the Versions. Seybold simply observes that: “der Sinn dieses Verses ist Dunkel.”5

Whatever thematic perspective is adopted, the strange occurrence of the pronominal בָּהֶם in the first colon baffles. Duhm observed:

Wenn der Dichter בָּלְבָּם, ihrer sind, geschrieben hätte, so hätte er sich erstens Schlecht un prosaisch ausgedruckt und zweitens etwas Unrichtiges gesagt, den “unser” Leben währt keineswegs im durchschnitt, sondern nur in den selteren Fällen siebentzig Jahre.6

Reider, a more recent scholar, noted that

בָּהֶם in Ps. xc 10 cannot be pronominal, and yet the ancient versions render it so. . . . Emendations, of course, are not lacking: some suggest בַּחיים, others read גַּבֵּהָם; but it is obvious that none of these can be the original reading.7

The preceding NJPS translation deletes בָּהֶם, notes that the meaning of the \textit{hapax legomenon} יָרָהְבָּם is uncertain (“best of them”?), assumes that the \textit{hapax legomenon} יָיִשְׁנַה means “speedily,” and renders the difficult יָיִשְׁנַה by “and we are in darkness.” The careful reader would also notice that יָיִשְׁנַה is problematic. The NJPS elegantly renders יָיִשְׁנַה by “the span of our lives.” However, the Hebrew equivalent of “the span of our lives” is כל ימי חיינו (Isa 38:20). The last word in the verse (יָמִים) is also problematic. It is doubtful that the NJPS translation “and we are in darkness (equivalent to Hebrew נהיה ונעפה)” reflects יָמִים.

6 D. Bernhardt Duhm, Die Psalmen erklärt (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 226.
The purpose of this study is to suggest resolution of the noted difficulties using standard text-critical tools. In this context, it is being argued that 10αα-10αδ is a conflation of two common sayings: (the days of our vigor [are] seventy years), and (Our years with might [are] eighty years). The conflated statement was meant by the author to be perhaps understood: “The days, years [with/in] vigor, [are] seventy years. And, if with might, [are] eighty years.” It is, however, an awkward Hebrew sentence; as conflated verses are usually. In final evolution of the verse, a copyist might have incorrectly copied בֵּהֶם instead of בָּהֶם. Such an error would have been in particular likely if the copying was from a densely written scroll, and it was probably enhanced by the awkwardness of the conflated text. Finally, the last colon of MT is understood as being a minor textual corruption of the original נֶגֶז נָפַ֣ח נִפְּחַ֣וּן נִפְּח הָבָּֽם (We fade quickly, and we rattle . . .).

B ANALYSIS

1 Ancient Versions

It seems that in context with vv. 7-9 Septuagint understands v. 10 as referring to the transience of human beings, which is caused by divine corrective measures. It renders v. 10:

[As for] the days of our years, in them are seventy years; and if [men should be] in strength, eighty years; and the greater part of them would be labor and trouble; for weakness overtakes us, and we shall be chastened. (Ἀἱ ἡμέραι τῶν ἐτῶν ἡµῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἑβδοµήκοντα ἔτη, ἐάν δὲ ἐν δυναστείας, ὀγδοήκοντα ἔτη, καὶ τὸ πλείον αὐτῶν κόπος καὶ πόνος δότι ἐπῆλϑε πραΰτης ἐφ’ ἡµᾶς, καὶ παιδευϑησόµεϑα).

It takes יְמֵי = “the days” (ἡµέραι); שְׁנוֺתֵינוּ = “our years” (ἐτῶν ἡµῶν); בֵּהֶם = “in them” (ἐν αὐτοῖς); שְׁבַעַים = “seventy years” (ἐβδοµήκοντα ἔτη); שְׁמָוִים = “eighty years” (ὀγδοήκοντα ἔτη); וְרָהְבָּם = “and the greater part of them (or, what is more than these)” (καὶ τὸ πλείον αὐτῶν), apparently reading וְרֻבָּם (Deut 7:7, Hos 4:7) instead of וְרָהְבָּם; עָמָל = “labor” (κόπος); וָאָוֶן = “and trouble” (καὶ πόνος); כִּי־גָז חִישׁ = “for weakness overtakes us” (δότι ἐπῆλϑε πραΰτης ἐφ’ ἡµᾶς), a paraphrase of MT; and, וַנָּ = “and we shall be chastened” (καὶ παιδευϑησόµεϑα), giving an unattested meaning.

Targum (Jonathan) understands v. 10 as describing man’s longevity in this world. It translates:

8 Lancelot C. L. Brenton, The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 754.
The days of years in this world [are] seventy years summoning strength, and if mighty eighty years, and they [are] mostly labor and lying to debtors, for they pass in a hurry and fly as morning.

**Targum (Jonathan)** takes יְמֵי “days” (יומי; 10) adds מַמָּלְכָּנִים = “summoning strength”; as the Septuagint takes וְרָהְבָּם = “and they [are] mostly” (יוֹאִים; סְמָנוּתֵיהוּ; they pass) (יָעֲדָה) and being a form of the verb חִישׁ = “in a hurry” (בְּסֵרוֹ), and, understand גָּז = “they pass” (עָדִי); and, גָּז = “cut off” and גָּז = “soon” (מְכָא; perhaps understanding חִישׁ as “pain and trouble”; and, translate וִנָּ = “and we fly away.”

Peshitta considers v. 10 as describing the human condition. It translates: “The years of our life are three score and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet most of them are labor and sorrow; for life is soon cut off and we fly away.”

Vulgate takes יְמֵי = “days” (dies); שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ = “our years” (annorum nostrorum); בָּהֶם = “in them” (in ipsis); וְרָהְבָּם = “and what is more of them” (et quod amplius), apparently reading as Septuagint שְׁמוּרָם = “labor” (labor); וַאֲוֶן = “and sorrow” (et dolor); כִּי־גָּז חִישׁ = “for mildness is come upon us”

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9 Jastrow, 1298b. Jastrow suggests the more logical reading כצפרא, which is adopted in the translation.
10 Jastrow, 71b. Jastrow raises the possibility that בהם is represented by מַמָּלְכָּנִים “summoning strength.”
12 The Vulgate translation into Latin is based on a Hebrew manuscript (*Psalms iuxta Hebraica*), and the Douay-Rheims translation into English was used.
(quoniam transivimus cito), a meaning that cannot be anchored in the MT; and, בַּֽעַלְפָּה = “and we shall be corrected” (et avolavimus), giving an unattested meaning.

It seems that most of the Versions understand יֶֽהָנָם as “the days”; indeed, being followed by שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ that would be a reasonable translation. No clear guidance is provided by the Versions on the treatment of the pronominal וְרָהְבָּם. All of the Versions consider וְרֻבָּם as having the sense of וְרָהְבָּם. However, it is not clear whether they had a different Vorlage, or considered וְרֻבָּם simply having an extra הוּ. The last word in the verse (בַּֽעַלְפָּה), however, appears to have presented considerable challenges, both textual and thematic.

2 Classical Jewish Exegesis

Classical Jewish exegetes were concerned with the disagreement between the statement in v. 10a and Moses’ longevity of 120 years, and tried directly or implicitly to explain it. Rashi (1040-1105) connects thematically v. 10 to vv. 8-9. He understands הבַּֽעַלְפָּה as referring to the עֲנָתָנוּ and עַנָּה(וֹ) that were mentioned in v. 8; explaining: These years, with these iniquities (עונתינו) and these sins of youth (עמקים), they are seventy years. And if one’s years (יְמֵינוּ) prevailed much they are eighty years. And the honor and rule (ורהבם) that one acquires in those years is inconsequential (עֲמַלּ וָאֹֽנַּר) because of God’s anger (בעברתך כלינו) in v. 9) we quickly fly away and die (גָּז חיש בַּֽעַלְפָּה). Rashi understands גָּז = “they pass” and being a form of the verb גוז (Nah 1:12, Num 11:31). He seems to be implying that man’s life is usually not longer than 70 or 80 years because of his sinning; that is, they could have been more (like those of Moses) otherwise.

Ibn Ezra (1089-c. 1164) notes that Moses’ living to 120 years cannot be used to deny him the authorship of this psalm. Moses simply summed up the experience of previous and his generation. Ibn Ezra has nothing to say about the first two cola and in particular about the awkward הבַּֽעַלְפָּה. He assumes that דֶּת = “(days of) power and strength,” which are the days of adulthood, and is undecided whether נֶפֶשׁ refers to “wandering from place to place as a bird,” “we shall fly to dwell in the netherworld,” or “as a blink will be the days.” Qimchi (1160-1235) observes that Moses spoke not about his self but the majority of people. The generations in exile complain that they would not experience salvation because it is being delayed and life being so short. Qimchi does not explain the oddity of הבַּֽעַלְפָּה. He takes דֶּת = “their strengths (of the days)” (חזוק הימים), explaining “even if one is ripe in years, they are but toil and iniquity, and would not last”; for quickly as the bird flies we shall die. This metaphor is unusual in the Tanach.

13 The commentaries of classical Jewish exegetes are drawn from Rabbinic Bibles.
Menachem Meiri (1249 – c. 1310) understands v. 10a as saying: “The days of our life, few among them (בהם) that are not the usual seventy years. And if so naturally disposed, eighty years.” Meiri explains: “Though Moses lived to 120 years he spoke prophetically about the future and in particular about the exile.” In his view, רהבם = “the pride and power” (הגאות והשררה) of the leaders and rich, עמל ואון = “naught” (הבל ויריק), and נעספה = “we shall fly (to the grave).” Sforno (1470-1550) attaches v. 10a to the preceding verse, takes רהל = “their height and strength” (גבהם והזקם), עמל = “harassment of the nations” (טרדת האומות), ואון = “daily needs” (צרכי השעה), נפשו = “we shall fly (from this life).”

While classical Jewish exegesis has its parochial bent, it is obvious that it struggled in its interpretation of v. 10 no less than the Versions. The interpretations are tainted by personal experiences, but do not offer original insights into the stated textual difficulties. As it will become clear in the next section, modern exegesis did not fare any better.

3 Modern Exegesis

Modern exegesis found v. 10a challenging. The verse has been traditionally understood as a statement on life expectancy. However, what is known on the state of medicine in antiquity defies the stated longevity. Tate felt that “conditional clauses in 10a and 10b seem more plausible,” making it a suitable addendum to the material in vv. 7-9. Briggs, however, deletes v. 10a. In his view

A glossator inserted a prosaic statement as to the usual duration of human life: In them are seventy, or if, by reason of extraordinary might, eighty years. But it interrupts the thought and destroys the measure of the original.

Verse 10, when taken by itself, seems to be a reflection about the transience of human life and a pessimistic assessment of its significance. Delitzsch, a major 19th century commentator, translated v. 10 thus:

\[\text{Die Tage unsere Jahre—ihre Summe ist siebenzig Jahr} \]
\[\text{Und, wenn gevaltig viel, achtzig Jahr,} \]
\[\text{Und ihr stoltz ist Mühsal und nichtigkeit,} \]

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14 Ha-Meiri (המאירי), Mikraot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1992), 75.
15 Sforno (ספורנו), Mikraot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1992), 689.
16 Marvin E. Tate, Psalms 51-100 (WBC 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 433. It is fairly common to encounter in the Tanach conditional statements without an indicator (אם).
17 Charles A. Briggs, The Book of Psalms (vol. 2; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 275.
Den es fuhr vorüber eilends und wir flogen dahin.\textsuperscript{18}

We shall use this translation as a baseline for our analysis of modern exegesis on v. 10.

- יְמֵי־שֵׁנְתֵינוּ = “the days of our years” (Die Tage unsere Jahre). This is the construct form of the plural of הָיוֹם, “day.” However, the plural of הָיוֹם could also mean “year” (1 Sam 2:19, Exod 13:10, Judg 11:14, 21:19, Isa 32:10). If יְמֵי are “days,” then their number is usually more than seventy. If יְמֵי are “years,” then the phrase becomes a meaningless repetition: “year of our years.” Whenever the phrase יְמֵי occurs in the Tanach, referring to a specific number, it is always followed by חיֵי (Gen 25:7, 47:8, 9, 2 Sam 19:35).\textsuperscript{19} Thus, יְמֵי is not a typical phrase in the Tanach; indeed, it never occurs.

Relying on Gen 47:8, some commentators assume that יְמֵי־שֵׁנְתֵינוּ means “the days of our life.”\textsuperscript{20} This would mean that שֵׁנְתֵינוּ could have the sense “our life,” which is unattested in the Tanach.\textsuperscript{21} De Wette assumed a comma after יְמֵי־שֵׁנְתֵינוּ that implied a sense “as to the days of our years.”\textsuperscript{22} In this case one would anticipate a qualitative description to follow.

Müller says:

\[ \text{יְמֵי־שְׁנְתֵינוּ בָהֶם} \] is not a typical phrase in the Tanach; indeed, it never occurs.

This would shift all the problems associated with יְמֵי־שְׁנְתֵינוּ to v. 9b. Moreover, as Schreiner says: יְמֵי־שְׁנְתֵינוּ als ‘Glosse’ streichen, hieße, den Satz v. 10aa des Subj. berauben.”\textsuperscript{23} Finally, it is doubtful that a reader would have recognized this complicated syntax. Schreiner believes that “Der Ausdruck meint das, was wir unsere ‘Lebenszeit’

\begin{enumerate}
\item Franz Delitzsch, \textit{Biblischer Kommentar über die Psalmen} (5th ed.; Leipzig: Dörrfling Franke, 1894), 590.
\item The open-ended יְמֵי is can be found in Qoh 6, where it clearly refers to the days of a man’s life. Cf. Aron Pinker, “The ligature ש = וש in Qohelet 6.3,” \textit{BT} 62/3 (2011): 151-164.
\item Amos Hacham, \textit{הָיוֹם} (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1987), 164-165.
\item Only Prov 5:9, where parallels are found, \textit{םָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָהָדָh}, might (perhaps) have this sense.
\item Wilhelm M. de Wette, \textit{Commentar über die Psalmen} (4th ed.; Heidelberg: Mohr, 1836), 504.
\end{enumerate}
nennen (vgl. Gen 47,8), wie ja der Plural yāmīm des öfteren an die Stelle unseres Begriffes ‘Zeit’ tritt.25

- בהם = “their sum is” (ihre Summe). Meir Leibush ben Yecheil Michel (Malbim, 1809-1879) understands בהם as referring to the normal life span of seventy years; namely “if our years are in them (בהם), in the regular years (the word בהם referring to שנותנו), they would be seventy years.”26 This nuance of שנותנו is, however, not attested in the Tanach. Delitzsch explains: “es sind darin befaßt 70 Jahre, sie begreifen, belaufen sich auf so viel.”27 Similarly de Wette translated by בהם ימי as referring to the normal life span “in ihnen sind siebenzig Jahr, bestehen in siebenzig Jahr.”28 How-ever, that בהם ≠ ימי, is not attested in the Tanach, though some consider Ps 65:5 (ביה) and Ps 118:7 (בשורה) as supporting the notion that a ב prefixed noun could have the same meaning as the noun. Moreover, it suggests the incorrect notion that man’s life span is at least seventy years.

Reider notes that when both first two colons are considered it becomes obvious that בהם is parallel to מבואות and therefore must be either synthetic or antithetic to it. In his view,

הם has been misunderstood as a pronoun, while it should be construed as a noun. Assuming the root בה soit “discomfit,” we might read either בהם, if med.י, or בהם, if med.י, and render “in discomfure.”29

This suggestion leads to the phrase “The days of our years in discomfiture.”

Dahood takes בהם = “then (i.e., as a consequence of God’s fury).” He says:

For the meaning of בהם “hen, thereupon” see Isa 48:14 and Job 22:21. Its components seem to be ב, “from, after,” and הם, “these,” hence “after these, then.” There is a possible occurrence in UT, 137:24, bhm yg’r b’al’ then Baal shouts.30

25 Schreiner, “Erwägungen,” 85 note 31. However, in the quoted source the phrase כי שיי is followed by בהים or its equivalent.
26 Malbim, Mikraot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1992), ad loc.
27 Delitzsch, Biblischer, 590. In support of this meaning, Delitzsch points to Pesiq. Rab Kah. 20a where יש בהם is used. Obviously, יש בהם ≠ בהם ימי.
28 De Wette, Commentar, 504.
29 Reider, “Etymological,” 123.
30 Mitchell J. Dahood, Psalms 1-50 (vol. 1 of Psalms; AB 16; Garden City: Double-day, 1968), 122.
However, Dahood’s etymological explanation is questionable, and the biblical sources cited in support are not compelling.

Schreiner finds the referents for בהם in vv. 7-9 and that the “grammatisch-syntaktischen Richtigkeit des bāhām in v. l0aα ist also nicht zu zweifeln.” He says:

“Unsere Lebenszeit” umfaßt 70 Jahre, und zwar bāhām “durch sie.” Das Suffix hier bezieht sich nicht auf die yāmīn, sondern knüpft an das an, was vorher an Gründen für die Kurzlebigkeit des Menschen aufgezählt worden ist: appākā, hamā’kā (v. 7), wōnāenū, lāmēnū (v. 8), abrātākā (v. 9). “Durch diese” wird die Lebenszeit auf 70 Jahre begrenzt.31

However, when the preposition ב has a causal force it is never followed by a pronominal.

Müller says that “bhm ist mit Duhm, Gunkel, BHS u. a. zu gobhām »ihre Größe«.”32 This contention is not accurate, and the meaning “Größe” for גובה is not attested in the Tanach. Hayot notes that some read כה instead of MT ב of MT ב of MT כה instead of MT and obtain the introductory question לארשי כה. While the emendation of בהם to בהם is minor, the resulting question is not attested in the Tanach, though it occurs frequently in the Talmud (e.g., bHagigah 11a).33 Krüger translates the three letter word בהם by “(betragen) von sich aus.” In his view “Das Suffix 3. masc. pl. in בהם wird am ehesten auf (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהيو (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהيو (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהيو (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהيو (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שהיו (שhave been toil and trouble, // because it has passed quickly and we have
Grätz emends to בְּחֵיים. Duhm reads גָּבְהָם instead of MT בהם, obtaining “Ihre Höhe sind siebenzig.” Kraus is right saying: “BDuhm: גָּבְהָם (‘ihr Gipfel’) wäre eine Bild, das dem Hebräer fremd sein dürfte.” Weiser apparently omits בהם in his rendering of v. 10a by “The years of our life are threescore and ten.” So does Kraus, saying: “בָּהֶם (‘in ihnen’) ist schwer verständlich und wohl metri causa zu streichen.” Tate felt that “the language in 10a need not be changed though it is awkward. The masculine suffix of ‘in them’ refers to the ‘days of the years’; not to the feminine ‘years’ alone.” Hossfeld and Zenger take בהם = “but,” which is unattested in the Tanach.

- שבעים שנה = “seventy years” (siebenzig Jahr). Andersen notes that ‘seventy years’ could hardly be taken as the normal average age; rather it could be regarded as the normal limit of human life, and only a few individuals would live to see their seventieth birthday. An average life span of seventy was attained in relatively recent years, and that only in Western modern countries. However, the ancients had sufficient experience with various age-groups to meaningfully categorize them. For instance, a tablet from Sultantepe categorizes the stages of life from age 40 through age 90: 40—lalutu (“prime of life”); 50—umu kurutu (“short life”); 60—metlutu (“maturity”); 70—umu arkutu (“long life”); 80—sibutu (“old age”); and, 90—littutu (“extreme old age”).


38 Heinrich Grätz, Kritischer Kommentar zu den Psalmen (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1882), ad loc.
39 Duhm, Psalmen, 226.
40 Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalmen (vol. 2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1966), 628.
42 Kraus, Psalmen 2, 628.
43 Tate, Psalms 51-100, 433.
44 Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, A Commentary on Psalms 51-100 (vol. 2 of Psalms; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 421.
45 Gabriel Barzilai, שבעים שנה: מרדכי ותור דואלי: סנסטיקע, פּרְשָׁה וְאֲפֹקָלִיפְסִיקה, BM 59/2 (2014): 45. Many modern commentators note that the phrase שבעים שנה refers to a national calamity; a period of communal punishment, destruction, and exile. Barzilai argues that an analysis of the phrase שבעים שנה in Jer 25:11-12, 29:10, and Isa 23:15-17 links it to the domain of royal dynasties’ continuity and fall, rather than exile.
46 Ludwig Köhler, Der hebräische Mensch: eine Skizze (Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), 42-46.
47 Arnold A. Andersen, Psalms 73-150 (vol. 2 of The Book of Psalms; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 653.
argues that “The literary biblical evidence uniformly endorses Ps 90,10 [and hence, a seventy-year life expectancy] as a realistic statement.”49 However, a “long life” was rarely achieved in ancient Israel. For instance, with the sole exception of David (1 Chr 29:28), none of the other Davidic kings reached the age of seventy. Malamat argues that in Ancient Israel a person could conceivably expect to live to see his great grandchildren. In his view “The assessment of longevity by a standard of four generations matches the Bible’s realistic appraisal of maximal life expectancy.”50 A span of seventy years would allow seeing a maturing fourth generation.51


Köhler, Der hebräische Mensch, 48ff. Köhler estimates that in ancient Israel, a person could become a father at 19, and consequently be 57 at the birth of his first great-grandchild.51 De Wette, Commentar, 504.52 Delitzsch, Biblischer, 590. Delitzsch assumes that seventy, at most eighty years, was the average of the extreme age, which the Desert-dying generation could reach. However, it is doubtful that the psalm was penned by Moses the Exodus and that people could live that long in the harsh desert conditions. It is notable that only 40 years were required for a brand new generation to emerge.
Dahood gives גבורת the colloquial sense “and if Heaven wills.”⁵⁵ In Schreiner’s view, “Die Verlängerung des Lebens auf 80 Jahre ist allein der Unterstützung durch die ‘Taten YHWHs’ zu verdanken.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Krüger has גבורת “und wenn mit Krafttaten,” explaining that “Bei ‘Krafttaten’ Gottes zu denken sein” (Ps 20:7, 106:2, 150:2, Deut 3:24).⁵⁷ The words of Barzillai to David, when David invited him to stay with him in Jerusalem as a reward for his help during Absalom’s resurrection, give us a glimpse on the hardship of being old even for aristocrats. He says:

_With me is today eighty years old; and I cannot discern between luxury and simple living; neither can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks. Nor can I hear anymore the voice of singing men or singing women. Why then should your servant be a burden to my lord the king?_ (2 Sam 20:35).

- שמותשנה = “eighty years” (achtzig Jahr). The numerical escalation “seventy … eighty” is not a simple poetic device for delimiting.⁵⁸ Eighty years is not considered in the Tanach as being an unusually long life span. In Genesis (6:3) the maximal human longevity is set by the symbolic number 120=3x40. Pinker suggested that

the termination of the rainy season in Babylon and the subsequent regeneration of the soil led to the notion that 40 was the right age for significant beginnings. From this evolved the concept of 40x2 as the length of human life, and 3x40 as the utmost length of human life.⁵⁹ Isaiah (65:20) and Ben Sira (18:9) imply that a hundred years count as a long life.⁶⁰

- רוהב = “and their pride” (Und ihr stolz). The noun רֹהַב is a _hapax legomenon_, but the verb רָהַב “act stormily, boisterously, arrogantly,” is well attested in the Tanach and cognate Semitic languages. Delitzsch does not accept the possibility that רוהב is a corruption of רֻבָּם, as all the ancient Versions apparently read. In his view, the noun רַהֵב (here רוהב)
means “impetuosity, violence, vehemence” (Ungestüm) and in particular grandiose and ostentatious acts “das großthüerische Auftreten Iob 9,13. Jes. 30,7.”

Duhm renders רְהָבִים by “their blaster” (ihr Gephrale). Westerman is undecided with respect to רְהָבִים “die Fülle (oder Höhe?, das Wort ist unsicher.” Dahood reads רְהָבִים “arrogance,” instead of MT רָהְבָּם.

Müller suggests

w*rohbām »und ihr Drängen« am Anfang der folgenden Zeile, zu ergänzen (sinngemäß: »ihr Maß«); das masc. Suffix kann sich dabei tatsächlich zumindest nicht allein auf šānēnû »unsere Jahre« beziehen, da šānim wie šānā fem. ist (vgl. šajīm šānim 2Sam 2, 10).

Schreiner understands רְהָבִים as “der Stolz des Lebens.” Krüger has for רְהָבִים “but its urging” (aber ihr Drängen), which gives a thematically awkward text. Seybold says:

Ohne es letztlich beweisen zu können, möchte ich vermuten, dass רְהָבִים nicht von רְבּ I, vielmehr von der Wurzel רָהְב abzuleiten ist, der nach den semantischen Äquivalenten offenbar die Grundbedeutung »eilen, drängen, stürmen« eigen ist, so dass das Nomen רְהָב—eine Hapaxlegomenon—auf eine schnelle Bewegung zu beziehen ist.

However, the notion of “quick movement” does not correspond well to עֹלֵכָה ואון, or to v. 10b, as Seybold suggests. The notions do not contain a time element, and attaching רְהָב to v. 10b would overload it with repetitions of “quick movement.”

Goldingay notes that

For the hapax רְהָב. Versions imply רְהָב “breadth” (but it is doubtful whether this more common word makes better sense; the

62 Duhm, Psalmen, 226.
64 Dahood, Psalms 2, 325.
65 Müller, “Der 90. Psalm,” 274 note 49. In his view “w*rohbām bezieht sich wie ’gobhām’ V. 10a auf jāmenūl šānēnū in V. 9.”
66 Schreiner, “Erwägungen.” 86. Schreiner renders the second hemistic: “Denn eilends verflieht er (der Stolz des Lebens), und wir fliegen ebenso dahin.”
68 Seybold, “Zeitvorstellungen,” 103.
years are long rather than wide), or the much common רֹחַב, “abundance” (which looks even more like a simplification).  

He has רָחָם = “but their boisterousness.”

- עָמל ואון = “toil and nothingness” (Mühsal und nichtigkeit). Cf. Ps 10:7, Job 4:8, 5:6, and Isa 10:1. In most of its occurrences (55), עָמל means the “the burden of labor.” Delitzsch explains that all that during the life span was a source of pride, when correctly viewed is but עָמל, in the sense that it is a burden and causes toil, and און, because it is without true substance and value. This perspective is at odds with that of Wisdom literature, “Wisdom poetry, on the whole, praises the relatively rare phenomenon of aging as evidence of righteous behavior and physical vigor. [Where does the quotation end?] Terrien notes that “the sapiental atmosphere of this strophe [10-12] however finds longevity quite independent from happiness since it is ‘only misery and inanity.’”

- עָמל ואון = “toil and mischief” (Mühsal und Unheil). Seybold takes עָמל ואון = “tiring” (mühsam) and “bad” (schlimm).

- כי גוז = “it went past”(Den es fuhr vorüber). The verb גוז (kindred to גָּז “to cut”) means in all the Semitic dialects “to pass.” It can refer toימי-שנותינו or toרהם. The singular perfect גָּז does not fit all the plurals in the verse. Qimchi takes it as being impersonal, but this is not satisfactory. The word גוז stands out as the only singular term in the verse.

- חִישׁ = “hastily” (eilends). The hapax legomenon חִישׁ is the infinitive adverb of the verb חָזַע and חִישׁ (Deut 32:35, Ps 71:12). Malbim explains כי גוז by describing the quick passage of time. He says that כי גוז refers to “the flow of time that hastily speeds in its run and disappears

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69 Goldingay, Psalms 3, 20.
70 S. Schwertner, ‘‘עָמַל ›Mühsal‹,” THAT 2: 332.
71 Delitzsch, Biblischer, 591.
73 De Wette, Commentar, 504.
75 Krüger, “Psalm 90,” 194.
76 Seybold, “Zeitvorstellungen,” 103.
77 Hacham, תהילים, 164-165.
from existence each second; since constantly present moments become past moments.”\textsuperscript{78} In that case the author could have said הביאו ויהי עון or בורא ויהי עון (‘יהי וזו’). Duham seems to be reading חיש (‘רעה’), “slips away” (enteilt); obtaining “Denn es lauft, enteilt.”\textsuperscript{79} Dahood argues that the meaning of חיש should be derived from the root חיש, “to rejoice” (Ugaritic ḫṣ, “joy, pleasure”), and perhaps used in Qoh 2:25.\textsuperscript{80}

- \textsuperscript{78} Malbim, Mikraot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1992), \textit{ad loc.}
- \textsuperscript{80} Dahood, \textit{Psalms} 2, 325.
- \textsuperscript{81} The “ah” ending is more common for the 1st person singular than for the 1st person plural.
- \textsuperscript{82} Delitzsch, \textit{Biblischer}, 590.
- \textsuperscript{83} De Wette, \textit{Commentar}, 504.
- \textsuperscript{84} Schreiner, “Erwägungen,” 86.
- \textsuperscript{85} Anderson, \textit{Psalms} 2, 653.
- \textsuperscript{87} Krüger, “Psalm 90,” 194.
- \textsuperscript{88} Seybold, “Zeitvorstellungen,” 103. Cf. Job 7:6 and Isa 38:12. However, neither of the sources, used by Seybold in support of his understanding of נעפה, mentions “flying” or uses the root עוף.

K\textsuperscript{r}uger has for נעפה “then we have [already] flown away” (\textit{dann sind wir [schon] davongeflogen}).\textsuperscript{87} This interpretation of the \textit{hapax legomenon} leaves many questions unanswered. Seybold observes that

natürlich die Vorstellung vom Fliegen (nicht so sehr des Pfeils oder Vogels), vielmehr vom «Schuss» der Garnspule, die sich immer weiter abwickelt. Der feste Bildkreis des Verses könnte der Grund dafür sein, weshalb eine Vergleichspartikel fehlt.\textsuperscript{88}
It is very difficult to see how «Schuss» der Garnspule could be associated with נעמם. Malbim struggled with the notion of “time” and assumed that “time” = “human life” (חיי האדם). As each moment of time passes so also does human life pass to the domain of nothingness (תחום האפס). Hacham suggests that time and space fly quickly and we fly with it and disappear. This cosmological notion makes no sense.

Even this partial analysis of the exegesis on v. 10 suggests a fundamental dichotomy. It seems as though the average reader and commentator were in main comfortable with understanding the message that the verse tries to convey. This turned parts of the verse into colloquial elements. However, considerable difficulties arose when one tried to anchor the general understanding in the MT. In that case, the unusual syntax, grammatical forms, hapax legomena, and incomplete metaphors combine to make an exegete’s task formidable.

C PROPOSED SOLUTION

Psalm 90 is one of the better known of the psalter, V, because of its function in various religious rituals and its observations on the human condition. The thematic, structural, theological, and historical problems that it posed have attracted considerable and continued interest of the religious and scholarly community. Unfortunately, this interest did not extend to the textual difficulties in MT. Thus, while v. 10 is widely known and frequently used colloquially, hardly any new exegetical ideas were advanced with regard to its textual difficulties and consequent interpretation. In this section a new understanding of v. 10 will be presented that exploits some well-established text-critical tools.

It is obvious to anyone with a modicum of Hebrew knowledge that v. 10aα is awkward. Verse 10aβ ewhardly adds anything n. From the thematic point of view, having both ages (70 and 80) does not make any substantial difference; man’s life is finite and short in any case. If MT v. 10aα+10aβ is the Psalmist’s original formulation one may rightly wonder why he did not more cogently omit בהם and write ימי שנותינו שבעים שנה. It seems as though the Psalmist was constrained by the accepted formulation of a popular text (or proverb) that he borrowed and used. This suggests authorial indecision (or, conservatism) and a compromise solution that produced a conflated text. Thus, it is

89 Malbim, Mikraot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Even Israel, 1992), ad loc. Malbim’s concept of death, as expressed in the interpretation of v. 10, is scientifically modern and unusual for a religious commentator of his time.

90 Hacham, תהלים, 164-165. He says: “אני שותה Violence ש.assertEquals והםatalogים ת�ים עם גמי מונצלים.”

91 Hayot, תהלים, 200. Hayot believes that the original was ימי שנותינו שבעים שנה comes from a later variant version for רהבים, which was noted on the margin and later included in the text.
likely that v. 10α+10β is the end-result of conflating two colloquial sayings:

שנותינו שבעים שנה

(“the days of our vigor [are] seventy years”), and

בגבורת שמונים שנה

(“Our years with might [are] eighty years”). Perhaps, Targum’s מתאלמין for בהם reflects כֻּהנוּ.

One readily notes that v. 10, in essence, repeats the main idea expressed in vv. 8-9. Thus, it is reasonable to consider v. 10 as mentioning a proverb that supports the idea presented in vv. 8-9. The author had, however, to decide which of two popular proverbs to use. He opted to conflate the two proverbs; placing the two proverbs practically side by side:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{separate} \\
\text{conflated}
\end{array}
\]

where the conditional והם serves as a conjunctive.

Conflation of equally valid, or similarly venerated, texts was apparently a standard practice among scribes in ancient Israel. Zimmermann argued that,

\[
\ldots, \text{as one may reasonably surmise, the scribes who guarded the text so reverently, letter by letter, would have been loath to discard variant readings which may have been striking alternatives.}
\]

The present writer takes the view that, for a brief short-lived period in the transmission of the Hebrew text, a school of proto-Masoretes attempted to imbed in the text variant readings. For the most part, it was probably assumed that the reader would tacitly recognize that a particular verse had variant readings. Of course, these proto-Masoretes could not conceive or did not indulge in the footnotes or apparatus of which a modern editor avails to his self. By and large, however, their method of marking variants consisted of assigning them the following position in the text:

(i) at the end of a verse

(ii) at, or as close as possible, to the cesura (the later official Atnahta)

(iii) side by side in the text.\(^\text{92}\)

The conflated text

שנותינו שבעים שנה אם בגבורת שמונים שנה

is certainly awkward. This might have been intentional; as Zimmerman notes “it was probably assumed that the reader would tacitly recognize that a particular verse had variant readings.” However, it is possible that a later copyist, coming across the word כֻּהנוּ in a densely written indistinct Hebrew manuscript, mis-

conceived it as the pronominalبهם; the awkwardness of the conflated text contributing subconsciously to the misconception.

The confusion of the two words đèn חומת and חומת can be easily rationalized. Confusion of ב and ב is well attested in the Tanach. Confusion of ח and ח was quite likely and occurs in the Tanach. Finally, the ligature ו = ב has been recognized by biblical scholarship and is attested in the Tanach. From a text-critical point of view confusion of הדות with הדות is certainly possible. Moreover, a הדות category occurs in Pirkei Abot 5:21 division of ages, albeit it is associated with the age of thirty, which is not referred to in v. 10. The age of seventy is categorized by וְשָׂפֵה ("graying"), which would also indicate a phase of vigor.

The pair והברות occurs in 1 Chr 29:12 and 2 Chr 20:6, and they are

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93 The Ketib-Qere apparatus contains the following cases: Jos 4:18, Jud 19:25 הבולה (K) but בולה (Q); Jos 6:5 הבולא (K) but בולא (Q); 1 Sam 11:6 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q); 1 Sam 11:9 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q); 2 Sam 5:24 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q); 2 Sam 12:31 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q); and, Est 3:4 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q). Hos 14:3 has instead of ב. The Koren Tanach (Jerusalem: Koren, 1983), 11-14 at the end notes that some MSS have in 1 Sam 30:30 בולא but בולה in others; in 1 Sam 7:22 בולה but בולה in others; in Ezek 30:9 בולה but בולה in others; in Ezek 31:11 והברות but והברות in others; in Job 21:12 והברות but והברות in others; in 2 Chr 20:37 והברות but והברות in others. Codex Petersburg and Codex Aleppo have but Mikraot Gedolot, Venice (1525-1526), has instead of ב. Cf. Zech 2:10 (כאמרון); Isa 65:22 (כאמרון); Jer 18:17 (כאמרון); Hos 7:12 (כאמרון); and, Ezek 16:36 (כאמרון).

94 Frank M. Cross, “The Development of the Jewish Scripts,” in The Bible and the Ancient Near East, Essays in Honor of W. F. Albright (ed. G. Ernest Wright; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 137, Fig. 1.

95 The Ketib-Qere apparatus attests to the following cases of הדות confusion: 2 Sam 13:37 has instead of הדות (Q); Prov 20:21 has instead of הדות (Q); Cant 1:17 has instead of הדות (K) but הדות (Q); and Dan 9:29 has instead of הדות (K) but הדות (Q). Also, 2 Sam 23:25 has instead of הדות but 1 Chr 11:27 has instead of הדות but the Samaritan Bible has instead of הדות; Gen 25:9 MT has instead of הדות but the Samaritan Bible has instead of הדות, etc. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai) mentions the following: in Prov 1:21 instead of הדות; in Prov 5:11 instead of הדות; in Prov 25:27 instead of הדות. Cf. Naphtali H. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai), Meshullash (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1947), 104. See also James Kennedy and Nahum Levison, An Aid to the Textual Amendment of the Old Testament (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 17.

96 Raphael Weiss, “On Ligatures in the Hebrew Bible (נ = ב),” JBL 82 (1963): 188-194. The ligature נ = ב is attested in the Josh 5:1 הבולא (K) but בולה (Q); Ps 12:8 has instead of הבולא (Q); Job 22:20 has instead of הבולא (Q); perhaps, Jos 2:4 instead of הבולא (Q). This ligature occurs also in the Qumran scroll 11QPs 6. [Plate 8', Col. X, Lines 1, 6]. Cf. Emanuel Tov, The Textual Criticism of the Bible: An Introduction (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1989), 167. The closely related ligature נ = ב is attested in Job 34:36 and 2 Kgs 5:13.
parallel in Mic 3:8. Thus there is support in the Tanach for the suggested parallelism between כחנו and גבורת. This parallelism could provide also some insights into the meaning of גבורת. In the Tanach, the plural feminine noun גְּבוּרוֹת is used to describe the mighty deeds of God (Deut 3:24, Pss 20:7, 71:16, 106:2, 145:4, 12:150:2, and Isa 63:15). Prolonging man’s life to eighty years would not seem to be in this category. Moreover, the only defectiva גבורת in our verse suggests that it might have resulted from a ח/ת confusion in the Hebrew square-script. This confusion is attested in the Ketib-Qere apparatus.97 It is also possible that גבורת was written originally in the abbreviated form בגבור. G. R. Driver notes that “A very common abbreviation is the omission of the feminine singular.”98 Perhaps, at a later time, when the abbreviations were filled in, גבורת was completed by adding erroneously a ח at the end (under the influence of the many גְּבוּרוֹת), rather than a י. Whatever the specific mechanism for the error might have been, it is obvious that it could have occurred naturally.

Understanding MT v. 10a+10ab as stemming from a conflation and being originally שנותינו כֺחֵנוּ שבעים שנה ואם בגבורה שמונים שנה ימי, though somewhat awkward Hebrew, has considerable advantages: (1) it explains the origination of the construct ימי; (2) it removes the impossible pronominal בהם; (3) it replaces בהם with כֺחֵנוּ, which fits the context; and, (4) כֺחֵנוּ is an excellent equivalent of גבורה. Thus, MT v. 10a is a somewhat corrupted version of an original, which intended to say:

Whether

The days of our vigor [are] seventy years

or

97 See 2 Kgs 24:14 לשנים (K) but תניות (Q); Jer 25:1; 32:1 לשנים (K) but תנונים (Q); Jer 49:25 לשנים (K) but תנונים (Q); and, Jer 52:21 קומת (K) but קומת (Q). Perhaps one should read in Prov 12:28 ו协会会员 (נער בן), תשתקה instead of ו хоро (נער בן). The closely related ח/ת confusion occurs in Qoh 12:6 והייחק (K) but חירק (Q), and one should, perhaps, read in Prov 6:34 והייחק instead of חירק. Cf. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai), MATERIAL,h 106-107.

98 Godfrey R. Driver, “Once Again Abbreviations,” Text 2 (1962): 78. For instance, one finds in Isa 6:13 בחם instead of INLINE-MT בחם (1 QIs), 2 Chr 20:25 בחם instead of חTextNode (LXX: Text), Prov 30:14 instead of מאמדם (parallel to מאמדין), 2 Sam 13:20 MT חמש instead of חמש, or fully written חמש, חמש, חמש, etc.. Driver, “Once Again,” 93-94, notes that “the recognition of hidden abbreviations in the MT can thus be used for the recovery of the original text without emendation. The method, however, must be used with circumspection and due regard for the rules. These are, briefly, that only certain categories of terms are subject to abbreviation, namely: terminations, including pronominal elements; independent pronouns;…”
Our years with might [are] eighty years

they can be described by רָהְבָּם נְעַמְּל אֲוֶן.

Though רָהְבָּם occurs in many cognate Semitic languages its etymology is not clear. The word might be related to the ferocious and proud Assyrian mythical sea monsters. Schunck says,


In the Tanach, the verb רָהְבָּם is used in the sense “act stormily, boisterously, arrogantly.” It seems prudent to derive the meaning of the hapax legomenon רֹהַב (noun) from the sense that the well-attested verb רָהַב has. In our verse, the noun רֹהַב could mean “pride” and be a metonymic reference to that which one is proud of.

The pair עָמְל וָאָוֶן, or אוֹנָא עָמְל occurs frequently in the Tanach (Isa 10:1; 59:4; Pss 10:7; 55:11; 7:15; Job 4:8; 15:35; Hab 1:3). DCH translates אוֹנ as “misfortune” when it is paired with עָמְל in Hab 1:3, Num 23:21, Job 5:6, Ps 55:11, 90:10, but not elsewhere. The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament explains the pairing of אוֹנ ל and עָמְל as one being the logical consequence of the other; עָמְל “trouble” is the result of אוֹנ ל “inequity.” Ibn Ezra (on Hab 1:3) says that אוֹנ L is a general term encompassing all the depravity and sin that man is capable of.

The masculine noun אוֹנ (once as feminine in Qoh 10:15) means “trouble, labor, toil.” From this meaning are derived “weariness,” “trouble” and “vexation.” Gesenius notes that some render אוֹנ ל as “sin, wickedness (i.e., אוֹנ) (Num 23:21; Isa 10:1), but he believes that the meaning of “vexation” is also possible in both places. In our case too, the context of the verse admits “vexation” as the meaning of אוֹנ ל. Andersen understands אוֹנ as conveying the agony of body or mind that is humanity’s inevitable lot (Job 5:7) and

100 Cf. BDB, 923a.
101 DCH, 154.
102 TDOT 1:142.
particularly the weariness of a person worn out by work and cares of this life. It is spiritual torture, weariness, exhaustion, enervation, or a loss of vitality that is caused not by any physical tiredness but by the hostile behavior of one’s fellows.  

The masculine noun פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ, in absolute state, means “trouble, sorrow, wickedness.” Johnson understands it as “meaningless misfortune.” Some have suggested that פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ means “trouble” when it is coupled with עָ֫מַּל. Szeles feels that פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ expresses human wickedness in the form of deceit, misrepresentation, deliberate misleading of someone so as to do harm or cause him suffer (Isa 10:1, 59:4, Num 23:21, Job 5:6). Of the various meanings that פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ could have it is probably used here in the sense of “sorrow.” Choosing פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ to describe the nature of human life, the psalmist may have intended also to imply its homophone אַבֶּן “stone,” the indifference that humans so often exhibit.

Weiser observes that “the familiar verse which pronounces a completely pessimistic verdict on the brevity and transience of life . . . does not leave any room for even a mere attempt to take a more positive attitude to life.” However, the quick passage of one’s life cannot be the cause for its being עֶמֶל פָּ֫רָּ֫שׁ. Thus, כי in v. 10 is not the beginning of a cause as it is in vv. 8 and 9; it cannot mean “for, because.” Moreover, the context does not admit the other fundamental meanings of כי “that, when.” What is the function of כי in v. 10? The form ו, qal 3rd person singular perfect of genu “pass over, pass away,” occurs only in our verse. Other forms of the root can be found in Num 11:31, Ps 71:6, and perhaps in Nah 1:12. The root is kindred to גָּז "cut, terminate," sharing with the roots of the bi-radical stem גז (גָּזָה, גָּזֵז, גָּזָל, גָּזָמ, גָּזֵע, גָּזָר) its fundamental sense. In our verse the singular is odd, since all the other words are plurals.

The difficulties with כי and singular ג can be resolved if it is recognized that כי ג is corrupted. It is easy to see how the unseparated phrase כי ג could have been perceived being the word קע, perhaps reflected in Vulgate’s transivimus. While the /ק/ confusion is not attested in the Ketib-Qere apparatus it is very likely because of the orthographic similarity between the two letters in both the Hebrew paleo-script and square script. Such confusion might be the cause for the difference in Isa 49:4 between יָ֫שָׁא in 1QIs and יָ֫שָּׁב in Codex Leningrad. We find also in 2 Sam 23:27 מְבֻנַּי but in 1 Chr 11:29 מְבֻכֶּב, which is the same as in 2 Sam 21:18. Perhaps, in Lam 3:52 one should read חִכָּם instead of חִנָּם; in Prov 27:24

108 Weiser, Psalms, 599.
The adverb חיש is a *hapax legomenon*, which was apparently derived from the well-attested verb חיש I (Ps 71:12), which means “haste, make haste.” This meaning gives the phrase חיש נגז the sense “we fade quickly.” However, the psalmist could have obtained this sense by using the well-known adverb מַהֵר. Why did he opt for the *hapax legomenon* חיש? Perhaps, this choice is not accidental. It could be that the psalmist intended the reader to associate intuitively with חיש II “feel, enjoy.” As the Ketib-Qere (חישה-חושה) in Ps 71:12 indicates, the two words were probably pronounced the same way, and consequently confused. The psalmist could have expected his sophisticated readers appreciate his clever choice of the word חיש, to indicate both the quick passing of life and the deterioration of senses.

The last word,׳ֻפָה uni (ךמּיּ alt וַנָּם "and we shall fly,” cannot be correct. The ancient could not have imagined man flying. In the Tanach only locust (Nah 3:16), birds (Deut 4:17, Isa 31:5, Hab 1:8, Hos 9:1, Prov 23:5, 26:2, Ps 55:7) and angels (Isa 6:2, 6, Dan 9:21) are mentioned as having the capability to fly. In Ps 55:7 the psalmist asks rhetorically: “Can someone give me wing as a dove, so that I would fly and settle down?” The answer to this question is an obvious “No.” The psalmist has to remain in his place; man cannot fly. Upon his death man returns to earth, and goes down to Sheol. Man could see objects fly, and could fantasize about angels flying, but could not imagine himself fly. No metaphor of this kind could have been admitted. Thus, it is impossible to accept that MT׳ֻפָה uni (ךמּיּ is the original reading.

Fortunately, a transposition of two adjacent letters in וַנָּפָה results in the word וַנָּפעָה "and we shall groan.” Text-criticism is well aware of the many metathesis cases in the Tanach, and considers this a minor emendation.׳ֶה uni (ךמּיּ (אֶפְכִּילָה כַּיּוֺלֵדָה) to describe a woman’s constrained groans during child delivery. However, Arabic hasضي، and Aramaic hasפעא, both with the sense “bleat.” The root is also

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109 Jehuda Feliks, *The Animal World of the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1962), 108. Feliks observes: “‘The flying serpents’ in the Book of Isaiah [14:29, 30:6] are likewise present in the literature of the people of the East. Herodotus, the historian, describes them as if they were real animals: ‘The flying serpents live in Arabia. Countless numbers are found near the frankincense trees; they migrate to Egypt where they are eaten in their thousands by Glossy Ibes.’ As yet, no flying snake has ever been found in Israel or for that matter anywhere else on the earth.”

used in the Talmud and Midrashic literature. It is possible that the rarity of the verb in the Tanach was a contributing factor for the scribal metathesis, which resulted in the difficult MT ונעפה.

The word מנה מנה gives an excellent contextual fit when it is recognized that the groan that it refers to is the “death rattle.” This rattle, now known clinically as terminal respiratory secretions or simply terminal secretions, was frequently witnessed by the ancients and associated with death. A death rattle is produced by a person near death because fluids (saliva and bronchial secretions) accumulate in the throat and upper chest, and he has no more the ability to swallow. This interpretation of מנה מנה parallels beautifully the use of הגה “moan, growl,” used in the phrase כלינו שוננו שהרגה at the end of v. 9, perhaps giving הגה a more nuanced meaning. Note also the onomatopoeic sound at the end of the word. It seems that the last colon of v. 10 speaks poignantly of the final stage in a human’s life “we fade quickly, and we rattle . . .” (בענ ירשה נמסה); that is, in the troughs of death we often groan, scream, or mutter loudly.

The solutions that have been suggested for the difficulties encountered in v. 10, lead to the following reading:

The days of our vigor [are] seventy years

Or

Our years with might [are] eighty years

And their pride [is] vexation and sorrow.

We fade quickly, and we rattle

This reading can be paraphrased:

The years in which we have strength are about seventy (or, when particularly mighty they are eighty). That which one is proud of, is in retrospect only vexation and sorrow. We quickly fade, lose our senses, and make the death rattle . . .

D CONCLUSION

Verse 90:10 seems to consist of popular sayings about the brevity and insignificance of human life. The psalmist combined these sayings and wove them into a powerful premise for his fundamental plea in v. 13: “Return, O God! // Till when? // And have mercy upon Your servants (שובה יהוה עד־מתי והנחם על־עבדיך).”

111 Jastrow, 1202a.
The critical element in the plea is the temporal phrase “Till when?” (עד־מתי). It connects with the temporal elements in almost each of the preceding verses. In v. 10, the gloomy perspective on life, its shortness and misery, is the basis for the psalmist’s plea that God returns to show grace to his servants. Repeating the life-spans of seventy and eighty, the psalmist articulates a life-consciousness determined by sadness, by melancholy, the experience of God’s distance—the same complaint of the great, universal lamentation of Ecclesiastes, lifted to heights of abstraction, an ahistorical adjuration of what cannot be changed.  

Man has to die, but he cannot fly. Upon death, “dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it” (Qoh 12:7)—nothing flies. Commentators seem to have missed this point. The suggested reading הָעַל (and we rattle . . .) for MT והָעַל provides an eminently suitable word for the text. We are born accompanied by our mothers’ groan (Isa 42:14, והָעַל והָעַל) and we die with a death rattle (Ps 90:10, והָעַל והָעַל). The symmetry is striking.

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