the part of the plague-pericope generally attributed to J and neglects all other aspects of this narration. But even this limited analysis shows the highly problematic character of the alleged source J.

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THREE SUGGESTED INTERPRETATIONS IN PS. LXXXIV

Interpretation of verse 6 largely depends on the relation of מֶסִילָתָּה to the rest of the sentence. Most commentators have identified this as the plural of מֶסִילָה (highway) from the root sll (lift up, cast up). There is no doubt that the word means "highway", but what can it mean to say "highways in their hearts"? R. S. V. has to add the words "to Zion" in order to make sense of this. N.E.B. paraphrases by giving "whose hearts are set on pilgrim ways". LXX gives ἀναβαςτεῖς, either from the root sll, or from a postulated μα'υλέθ. Symmachus gives τῇς τρὶς τρίβου σου—but this is just as hard to understand as the original. Targum suggests קיסלד (confidence). None of the above is really satisfactory. It is much more likely that the text was dislocated at an early stage by an error in audition when a scribe wrote תָּאָּו for תָּאָו. The text would then read: "... lâ bakkâmûs lôt bilbâbhâm". It is a remarkable coincidence that these consonants, when redivided as above, make perfectly good sense. A literal translation would then read: "... in the stored away place, the covering in their hearts". The full line can then be given:

"Happy are the men whose strength is stored in the secret place of their hearts".

lôt is used Is. xxv 7 in a similar sense, while kâmûs, qal participle passive, appears in Deut. xxxii 34 in parallel with ḫîthûm (sealed up). It is true that the disagreement in number between lô and -âm is still a serious difficulty, but then such grammatical incongruencies are quite common.

In verse 7 the most critical word to interpret is bâkba'. LXX (ἐν τῇ κοιλάδι τοῦ κλαυθμῶν). Vulgate (vallē lacrimarum), Aquila, Jerome and Syriac seem to accept that the word is bekhe (weeping), as used in Ez. x 1. There is some manuscript evidence for changing אָלֶפֶּה to הָי, but what could this mean in relation to מָיָן (spring)? This translation is not convincing except as a possible secondary meaning of a double entendre. The other main interpretation is to accept that bâkba' means "balsam tree" as in 2 Sam. v 24 where Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXIV, Fasc. 3
balsams are mentioned in connection with the valley of Rephaim. This tree, which exudes gum (tears?), could have given its name to the valley because of the number of such trees there (cf. the valley of Elah). R.S.V. transliterates, "the valley of Baca". If there was, indeed, such a valley it was probably dry and waterless in the summer. The parallelism demands this and it is, therefore, fair to translate "a desert valley".

The third stichos is difficult. gam is probably used in the sense, "yea", in current English, "yes". berâکbâšh could be translated "blessings" as by LXX and Jerome, or "pools" as by R.S.V. and N.E.B. However, the word should probably be parsed as the feminine plural of rakâ (tender), preceded by bê. In Ezek. xvii 22 this adjective is used of twigs and is translated at that place as "tender shoots" by N.E.B. Thus, the word here refers to "tender shoots" encouraged to grow by the early rains in the desert valley. Many can testify that such sudden transformations in desert country are very real. This is reminiscent of the transformed desert theme of Is. xxxv 1-2. "Tender shoots" gives a much better parallel than either "blessings" or "pools". ya'âš really causes no difficulty, but N.E.B. seems to transpose to yiš'e (err), while some manuscripts give ya'ašâ. The word should be understood as causative, the early rains causing the valley to be covered with tender shoots. môre is given by LXX as "lawgiver", while others give as "early rain". This confusion arises from the two meanings of yârâ, namely: (a) to shoot, to shed water, (b) to teach. However, "early rains" provides the best parallel and makes most sense. The verse can now be translated:

"As they pass through the desert valley
they turn it into a fountain-head;
yes, the early rain covers it with tender shoots".

The general picture, then, is of a desert valley converted by the early rains into a land where tender shoots suddenly cover the landscape. The connection between prayers for rain at Jerusalem and God's gift of rain is mentioned in Zech. xiv 17 in the context of universal worship. This idea in Psalm lxxxiv should be seen as evidence of God's providential care and not as a magical answer to prayer. The imagery certainly suggests that pilgrims are wending their way to Zion both in the immediate and ultimate senses. As far as the latter meaning is concerned, Psalm xxiii 4 is a valid parallel.

Verse 11 has proved difficult to translate for two reasons. First