

Psalm 88 Exegesis:
A Prayer to My Sovereign God in Darkness and Death

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Introduction

The Psalter does indeed deal with every human emotion in this book of praise. As Calvin famously stated in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;” for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.¹

This Psalm in particular is one which deals with the griefs and sorrows of life, and I believe deals with these things in a way that no other Psalm does. It is a cry which is poured out to God, detailing the trouble and darkness and death that the Psalmist feels encircling him every day. And the Psalmist recognizes that God is sovereign over these troubles throughout his cry.

This Psalm is quite unique in the Psalter. It is truly the only Psalm which does not seem to have any positive note. It begins in darkness (“I have cried out by day and in the night before You” – *New American Standard Bible – NASB*) and also ends in darkness – as the *English Standard Version (ESV)* says, “my companions have become darkness,” or, as in the *New International Version (NIV)* “darkness is my closest friend.” The Psalmist, Heman, of whom Psalm 88 is the only Psalm attributed to him, cries out to God out in the midst of intense trouble which he feels has completely surrounded him.

Psalm 88 is a Psalm which we need at times! We need to have a prayer which we can give to God in the midst of overwhelming turmoil, and God wants to hear of our troubles. He wants us to cry out to him and to trust Him. This Psalm is also an honest Psalm. We do go

¹ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. 1* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), xxxvi–xxxvii.

through times when we cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel, as it were, and when we need to simply give our distresses to our God.

This Psalm also gives us, most clearly at the beginning of the Psalm, but as can be seen throughout, a reminder of who God is. The LORD is indeed the God of our salvation, יהוה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי, Yahweh Elohim Yeshua, as the Psalmist begins this prayer. The LORD God of our salvation is the only one we are able to cry out to who can help us in the midst of our intense distress.

Redemptive-Historical Analysis

We do not know the precise historical context of this Psalm, but do know some things about the author. As stated previously, this Psalm is attributed to Heman the Ezrahite. This Psalm is also a Psalm of the Sons of Korah, and we know from elsewhere in Scripture that Heman is one of the Sons of Korah, as well as the grandson of Samuel. Heman was appointed by David to serve as one of the temple singers, and to write Psalms as well:

These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD after the ark rested there. They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting until Solomon built the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they performed their service according to their order. These are the men who served and their sons. Of the sons of the Kohathites: Heman the singer the son of Joel, son of Samuel, (1 Chronicles 6:31-33)²

This is not what you might expect from someone who went through years of deep sufferings (as is seen in Psalm 88), and it is also quite surprising the prominence of the Sons of Korah in Israel's praise and worship. This is surprising to us because Korah, a Levite, led a rebellion

² *ESV (English Standard Version)*. All other Scripture references will be in the *ESV* unless otherwise specified.

against Moses and Aaron, and for his sins, God swallowed up him and his household, and those who rebelled beside him in Numbers 16:

But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD.” And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.

(Numbers 16:30-33)

Heman and other Sons of Korah being used by God in prominent ways in the tabernacle, and later, temple worship (and our still singing the Psalms of Korah in praise to God today), is a living picture of God’s taking and making something good out of sin and misery. We see this even back in Numbers 16, as God had told Korah and those Levites with him, through Moses, to each bring his sensor, with fire and incense in them. Then, as these leaders of the people, fellow rebellors with Korah, stood with their sensors, God swallowed up Korah, and at the same time, burned up all these 250 who stood with their sensors. Then, God instructed Eleazar, Aaron’s son, to take these sensors out of the fire and to then beat them down and to use them to cover the altar, as they had become holy, as “a sign to the people of Israel” (Numbers 16:38).

In a way, Heman and the Sons of Korah are living examples of God’s providentially using sin and suffering for His good will. God determined, even though he swallowed up Korah, along with two prominent men with him, and the families of these two men, that he would allow the Sons of Korah to live. (Numbers 26:9-11). Not only did Heman write this Psalm full of darkness and death and suffering, yet fully trusting in God’s sovereignty, his simply being alive

and being used inly being alive and being used by God to write this Psalm was, in itself, a remarkable reminder of God's sovereign and always good will and pleasure.

Literary analysis.

Psalm 88 is certainly a lament. A sad song sung in despair to God. Lament is one of the ways we can categorize the Psalms by mood, and the mood of lament is one of deep sadness, of despair. As Tremper Longman III defines it, "The lament is the psalmist's cry when in great distress he has nowhere to turn but to God." Longman goes on to describe three kinds of complaints of the Psalmist in lament - his own sins, his enemies, or against God.³ One particular lament (Psalm 38) is explicitly titled a psalm for remembrance, or "written to get God's attention."⁴ Psalm 88 seems to be like that one. Lament is not an explicitly Scriptural title, although laments and lamentations (Hebrew - הַקִּינָוֹת, lament or dirge), and even praying and singing them is certainly a Scriptural idea. We can see this in such passages such as 2 Chronicles 25:35: "Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel; behold, they are written in the Laments."

As well, according to its title, Psalm 88 is a maskil. Unfortunately, we do not know fully what the meaning of Maskil is, as Derek Kidner notes, "the participle of a verb meaning to make wise or prudent, or to have success or skill."⁵ In addition to this, the LXX translates maskil as a

³ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 26.

⁴ Psalm 38:1 in the *NET Bible*.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary, Vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 53.

psalm of *συνέσεως* – understanding. Because of this, some have referred to Maskils as teaching Psalms, but this is not necessarily clear when looking at the 13 Psalms which are titled Maskils.

We also know from the title that Psalm 88 is a Korahite Psalm, actually the last of the 12 Psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah (Psalms 42-49, 84-85, 87-88). While some of these Psalms have some similar themes within them, such as death and Sheol (Sheol explicitly in Psalms 49 and 88), they are quite varied, with some obviously laments, and others songs of joyful praise. Psalm 88, obviously, is a sad song in the midst of suffering, which, of the other Korahite Psalms, Psalms 42-44 are most similar to it.

I find the structure of Psalm 88 to be quite interesting, and quite well thought-out and intentional (as is all of Scripture, as men were guided by the Holy Spirit to write these things). There are, I believe, two pairs of four distinct thoughts (with a third repeat of the first thought in the middle of the second pair of thoughts). The first “group” of thoughts are in verses 1-9, and the second “group” in 10-19. These thoughts are:

A: LORD, I cry out to you throughout the day;⁶

⁶ I believe it is significant that, in this Psalm, only verses in this ‘thought’– verse 3, the second half of verse 10, and verse 14 – do *not* contain or relate to darkness and/or death. *Each* of the other verses in this Psalm (not counting the title) refer to darkness or death in one or more ways. To show this, consider the list below:

- night (v2);
- Sheol (v4);
- down to the pit (v5);
- dead, slain in the grave, remember not, cut off (v6);
- lowest pit, dark place, depths (v7);
- wrath rests on me, waves afflicted me (v8);
- companions shun, (I am) an abomination to them, shut up, cannot get out (v9);
- eye wastes away [grows dim] (v10);
- dead, departed (v11);
- the grave, Abaddon (v12);
- darkness, land of forgetfulness (v13);
- soul cast off, God's face hidden (v15);
- afflicted, near-death, terrors, helpless (v16);
- wrath passed over me, terrors cut me off [or dreadful assaults destroy me] (v17);
- they surround me like a flood, they have engulfed me (v18);
- put far from me lover & friend, companions have become darkness [or darkness has become my closest friend] (v19).

B: I am like one who is dead;

C: Your wrath is upon me;

D: You have put my companions far from me.

Each of these is repeated a second time, in order, but there is a third “A” in between the second “B” and “C.” This can be seen on the following page, using my own translation of Psalm 88:

Ps 88 [1 A Song, a Psalm by the Sons of
Title Korah. To the Choirmaster, According
to Mahalath, of affliction. A Maskil of
Heman the Ezrahite.]

2 O LORD, God of my salvation, In the
day I have cried, at night before you
A 3 Let my prayer come before you;
Incline Your ear to my loud cry!

4 For my soul is full of troubles, And
my life draws near to Sheol.
B 5 I am reckoned among those who go
down to the pit; I am as a man without
any strength.

6 Released among the dead; Like the
slain lying in the grave; Whom You
remember no more; And they are cut off
from Your hand. (**A**₂)

7 You have put me in the lowest pit; In
the dark place, in the depths.

8 Your wrath rests upon me; And with
all your waves you have afflicted me.
C Selah.

9 You have put my companions far
from me; You have made me an
abomination to them; I am shut up, and
I cannot get out. **D**

10 My eye wastes away because of
affliction. I have cried out to you O
A₁ LORD, every day; I spread out my hands
to you.

11 To the dead will You do wonders?
Will the departed arise and praise You?
B₁ Selah.
12 Will Your lovingkindness be declared
in the grave? Or your faithfulness in
Abaddon?
13 Will Your wonder be known in the
darkness? And Your righteousness in the
land of forgetfulness?

14 But I, to You, O LORD, have
cried; And in the morning my
prayer comes before you.

15 Why, O LORD, do You cast off my
soul? Why do you hide your face from
me? **C**₁

16 I have been afflicted and near-death
from my youth; I suffer your terrors; I
am helpless.

17 Your fierce wrath has passed over
me; Your terrors have cut me off.

18 They have surrounded me every day
like water; They have engulfed me
altogether.

19 You have put far from me lover and
friend; My companions have become
darkness. **D**₁

Verse by Verse and Translation

Verse One (Title)

Although the title was previously discussed, it must be translated as the first verse in the Hebrew text, and it would be valuable to discuss a few additional things from about the title with respect to the Masoretic notes and the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) critical apparatus. My own translation of the first verse (the title or superscript in English translations, and often not marked as being part of the versification of the text) is this: “A Song, a Psalm by the Sons of Korah. To the Choirmaster, according to Mahalath, of affliction. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.”

The first note deals with the first two Hebrew words in the title, *שִׁיר מְזִמֹּר*, which is translated simply, “A Song, a psalm.” The first Masorah Parvah (small Masorah) note simply notes that this phrase occurs five times in the Masoretic text. These five occurrences are in the titles of four other Psalms – Psalm 48, 66, 83, and 108. Only one of these (in addition to Psalm 88) is a Psalm of the Sons of Korah – Psalm 48. The others include one which indicates no author (Psalm 66), one of which is a Psalm of Asaph (Psalm 83), and another which is a Psalm of David (Psalm 108). One value of taking note of these occurrences would be to show it is not a very uncommon phrase, and perhaps even to discourage the thinking that the title of Psalm 88 is mistakenly two titles – as some, such as Franz Delitzsch, have asserted, saying, “This is a double inscription, the two halves of which are contradictory.” He goes on to state that he believes the “more reliable” half is “most assuredly the latter [half],” as the first half is “only a recurrent repetition of the inscription of Ps. lxxxvii” (87).⁷ However, while the title of Psalm 48 and the

⁷ C.F. Kiel and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 5* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1996), 277.

beginning of Psalm 88's title are identical (with the exception of Psalm 48's title including a maqqep joining together "Sons (of)" and "Korah") the order of the phrasing of the title of Psalm 87, and the 'first-half' of the title of Psalm 88 are not the same, with the Hebrew words occurring in the reverse in the two Psalms. Additionally, Psalm 87's title includes a maqqep connecting the phrase sons of Korah, while Psalm 88 does not.

The next Masoretic note concerns the word, מַחֲלַת (Mahalath), occurring four times. Mahalath is not translatable into an English word, the only occurrences being twice in the Psalms (as the critical apparatus also notes, in Psalm 53's title, in addition to Psalm 88), seemingly being a musical word, referring to some kind of instrument, and twice referring to names of women – in Genesis 28:9, referring to one of Ishmael's daughters, who Esau takes as his wife, and in 2 Chronicles 11:18, referring to one of David's granddaughters (who married Rehoboam). The following word, לַעֲנֹת, of affliction – usually translated Leannoth, also has a Masoretic note attached to it, noting that it occurs twice, one being defective (this occurrence) and one being full (occurs in Numbers 30:14 (30:13 in English Bibles - EB) – this connection is noted in the Masorah Magna). Many take this word to be a musical term, having to do with singing. But the Masorah connects the two words - both are in the piel form, and if these are taken to be from the same root, then the meaning would be something like affliction, from the root, עָנָה, which is the same root word as used in verse 8 (verse 7 EB) where the Psalmist speaks of God's waves afflicting (or overwhelming) him. Thus, it is likely that Leannoth has to do with affliction. The *Septuagint* (*LXX*) translates Mahalath Leannoth as ὑπὲρ μαελεθ τοῦ ἀποκριθῆναι συνέσεως⁸, roughly "concerning Maeleth, to answer him with understanding," taking Mahalath to be a person, and Leannoth to concern answering or understanding, which makes some sense, as one

⁸ *Septuaginta: With Morphology* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979), Ps. 87:1.

definition of ענה means to answer, but the Masoretic notes guide us away from that. The only other note about verse one, the title, is the critical apparatus, which notes that the LXX and Aquilla have τῷ Ἰσραηλίτῃ, the Israelite – instead of the Ezraite, apparently taking Ezraite to mean, broadly, Israelite. This seems an unnecessary change, but does not ultimately change the meaning, as Ezraite does refer to an Israelite.

Verse Two

My own translation of verse two is: “O LORD, God of my salvation, In the day I have cried, at night before You.” The second phrase could also be translated “In the day and in the night I have cried out before you,” but I find the more literal phrase to be more poetic, as well as keeping closer to the word order in Hebrew. In this verse, there are no Masoretic notes, but the BHS has a few critical apparatus notes. In the first note, the editors propose that the beginning phrase – יום־צַעֲקוֹתֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי יְשׁוּעָתִי אֶלֶּהִי אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי ought to be יוֹמָם צַעֲקוֹתֵי אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי.⁹ This changes the meaning from “God of my salvation, In the day I have cried” to “in the daytime I cry to you, God I plead.” It moves around the word order and changes יום, meaning ‘that day’ to a different sense of the word – יוֹמָם, meaning ‘in the daytime,’ and most significantly, takes salvation (as in God of my salvation) to just be ‘I plead’ or ‘I cried.’ However, the most significant change is changing the phrase (arguably the only positive phrase in the whole Psalm) God of my salvation, and taking ‘salvation’ to be a word which has a similar root, but whose meaning is cry or plea (instead of answer to my cry/plea). It seems that the editors may take the initial yod (י) in ‘of salvation’ (יְשׁוּעָתִי) to be dittography – an accidentally repeated yod from the end of Elohim - God (אֱלֹהִים).

⁹ and G. E. Weil Kittel, Rudolf, Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, Hans Peter Ruger, [*Torah, Nevi'im U-Khetuvim*] =: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Fifth rev (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1169.

The second note, perhaps explaining some of the first note, points out that the Targum (Aramaic Bible) uses that same word, םהי, to express ‘in the daytime.’

Verse Three

My translation of verse three is: “Let my prayer come before you; Incline Your ear to my loud cry!” The last phrase could also be translated as “Bend Your ear to my entreaty.” There is a Masorah Parvah note simply specifying that, םהי, translated ‘Your ear’ occurs 13 times. Additionally, the critical apparatus notes that the *LXX*, with the *Syriac* following, adds ‘Lord’ to the end of the verse. There does not seem to be any need for that addition, though it does not change the meaning of the text.

Verse Four

I translate verse four as “For my soul is full of troubles, And my life draws near to Sheol.” Some English translations translate Sheol as the grave (*KJV, NKJV*) or death (*NIV*), but I think keeping it as Sheol is best, as Sheol has a wider range of meanings, and the meaning is not quite as simple as the grave, or certainly not as simple as death. There are no critical apparatus notes, but the one Masorah Parvah note points out that there is but one example of םהי, ‘and life,’ this particular use which comes from the root חי, (chai) “life,” a common word in the Hebrew Bible, with way ו, simply the ‘and’ prefix. The word םהי, translated ‘is full’ (or is filled) has the literal meaning of becoming salted, but is most often used in the Bible for a figurative use, meaning to be filled or become full. It is a relatively unique metaphorical use, as noted by the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*:

The passages in the Psalms can also illuminate yet another metaphorical use of *śāḇa*': its reference to "becoming filled, sated" with physical or spiritual suffering, as in Ps. 88:4(3): "For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol" (the negative aspect comes to expression here not through *śāḇa*' itself, but through the object in the prepositional phrase *b^erā'ōt*). Just as in the concrete sphere the goal of becoming sated is life, so also *śb' b^erā'ōt* leads to death).¹⁰

In comparing the two parts of this verse, there is a striking comparison between troubles and Sheol, emphasizing that the troubles which the Psalmist is going through are so difficult that they are likened to Sheol – death and the grave.

Verse Five

I have translated verse five as, "I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I am as a man without any strength." As in the previous verse, there are no critical apparatus notes, but there is one Masorah Parvah note. It simply notes that *לִּצְרָת* (strength), only occurs once in the Bible. The pit is clearly a metaphor for death, as can be seen in multiple other passages,¹¹ perhaps most significantly Psalm 30:9 – "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to *the pit*? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?"¹² When the Psalmist speaks of being a man without any strength, it is very strong – the negative can mean non-existence (of strength) – and the phrase could even be translated (and is in the *NET – New English Translation*) a "helpless man."

¹⁰ G. Warmuth, "שָׂבַע," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 23.

¹¹ Also Psalm 28:1; Psalm 143:7; Isaiah 38:17-18; Ezekiel 26:20; Jonah 2:6.

¹² *English Standard Version (ESV)*. All other English Scripture citations will be taken from the *ESV* unless otherwise noted. Emphasis mine.

Verse Six

My translation of verse six is “Released among the dead; Like the slain lying in the grave; Whom You remember no more; And they are cut off from Your hand.” There are multiple critical apparatus notes on this verse. The first concerns the first word in the verse, with a meaning of ‘among the dead’ – the critical apparatus notes that a few manuscripts (between 3-10), with the *Syriac* following, instead of the first character א, have מ, which changes the meaning of this word to ‘like dead men.’ This use can be seen in Isaiah 59:10: “We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are *like dead men*.” (emphasis mine) Most manuscripts agree with the Masoretic text in the BHS, so I do not believe there is any need to change to what a few manuscripts have. However, there is very little difference in meaning between the two words even if the minority reading was accepted. The second critical apparatus note proposes that מְפֹרָשׁ (free or released – in this context I translated it released) should be מְפָשׂ (life or self) or מְשַׁבְּחָה (cease or perish) or מְפָשֵׁה (searched), but also says “sed cf Ez 27,20¹³” – meaning, “but compare Ezekiel 27:20.” Ezekiel 27:20 says “Dedan traded with you in saddlecloths for riding,” and the word meaning saddlecloth material, מְפָשֵׁה, is very similar to מְפֹרָשׁ (but is missing the yod). It appears that the editors of *BHS* had little to no idea what to do with this Hebrew word meaning free in this particular context. It is a difficult word to use here, as it normally refers to freedom or emancipation (especially from slavery), so the use here is different than the normal use, but the poetic use in this context fits well. The next critical apparatus note notes that the *LXX* adds

¹³ Gérard E. Weil, K. Elliger, and W. Rudolph, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, [Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia](#), 5. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1169.

ἐπιμένοι, ‘as thrown in with,’ which changes the phrase into something like “as thrown into the grave like the slain.” There appears to be no necessity for this change.

Verse Seven

My translation of verse seven is “You have put me in the lowest pit; In the darkness, in the depths.” The word, בְּבוֹר, “pit,” is the same word as used in verse 5, but prefixed with the preposition בְּ, designating location, and connected to the following word, תְּהוֹתָיִת, “lowest” – the absolute low or lowermost, designates a specific place – not only a pit, but the lowest pit. One cannot help but think of hell as this pit is described – the lowest place, darkness, and depths. This is not a pleasant place to contemplate. The Masoretic notes point out that the word תְּהוֹתָיִת occurs seven times in the Hebrew Bible in its’ plene (full) form. One of these occasions is in Ezekiel 26, which has similar vocabulary and imagery as in this Psalm. In this chapter, God is pronouncing his judgement which will come upon Tyre. In verse 20, God says,

then I will make you go down with those who go down to the *pit*, to the people of old, and I will make you to dwell in the *world below*, among ruins from of old, with those who go down to the *pit*, so that you will not be inhabited; but I will set beauty in the land of the living. (emphasis mine)

In this verse, what the *ESV* translates as “the world below” is the same word referring to the “lowest,” as in Psalm 88:7.

The other Masoretic notation records that each of the last two Hebrew words occur three times. Both other occasions of בְּמַחְשְׁבַיִם, “In the darkness,” reference death. Lamentations 3:6 reads: “he has made me dwell *in darkness* like the dead of long ago” and Psalm 143:3 says: “For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit *in*

darkness like those long dead” (emphasis mine). I think it is notable that this is the first of three separate root words in Hebrew which all mean darkness. This Psalm is indeed a very dark Psalm. The next Hebrew word, בְּמַצְלוֹת, means in the depths, but in the other two instances (Micah 7:19 and Psalm 107:24) the phrase refers to the sea, explicitly and implicitly (respectively). The critical apparatus notes that the *LXX* (with the *Syriac* following) have “καὶ ἐν σκιᾷ θανάτου = וּבְצֵל־מָוֶת¹⁴,” which is “and in the shadow of death” instead of in the depths.¹⁵ While it does not really change the meaning, it is an unnecessary addition to the text, and it also removes the flow into the next verse, which refers to being overwhelmed with waves, as well as similar connections with assault by water in verse 18 (and perhaps verse 17 also).

Verse Eight

I translate verse eight as “Your wrath rests upon me; And with all your waves you have afflicted me. Selah.” The critical apparatus note points out the *LXX* translation: “Θ(Σ) ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ἐπήγαγες, I frt תַּיִן לִי¹⁶,” which is: “*LXX* (with *Syriac* following) has [Greek] ‘You brought upon me;’ probably read as [Hebrew] ‘you have brought upon me.’ This is changing the Hebrew word תַּיִן, meaning to oppress or afflict (specifically to send in oppression/affliction). It really does not change the meaning of the text, but it seems like the translators of the *LXX* perhaps were not sure how to translate this word, or simply misread it (substituting the aleph for an ayin – which does

¹⁴ Gérard E. Weil, K. Elliger, and W. Rudolph, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, [Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia](#), 5. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1169.

¹⁵ This is similar to Psalm 44:20 - כִּי דָפִיתֵנוּ בְּמַקְוֹם תַּגְּיִים וַתִּבֶּס עֲלֵינוּ בְּצֵל־מָוֶת: - “yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with *the shadow of death*.” (emphasis mine)

¹⁶ Gérard E. Weil, K. Elliger, and W. Rudolph, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, [Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia](#), 5. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1169.

not seem like a likely mistake), and the editors of the *BHS* seem to prefer a more common word. However, my preference would be for the original Hebrew. There is one note in the Masorah Parvah. This note points out that נָשָׂא (lays or rests or even supports) only occurs once in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is unique phrase – the Psalmist saying that God’s anger/wrath rests upon him (he is supporting it), and it is a powerful phrase – noting that the Psalmist feels as though God’s wrath is oppressing him by laying upon him and staying there. This is emphasized even further as the Psalmist speaks of God’s waves afflicting him. It is quite a vivid picture – I can almost picture someone standing on the edge of the sea while a massive weight rests on top of him, and then being further pummeled by strong waves, even being driven into the sand and being buried there. I believe this is the kind of picture the Psalmist is bringing to the reader’s mind as they read and think and meditate upon it.

Verse eight (as well as verse 11) ends with הִלֵּל, “Selah,” which no one really seems to be sure how to translate. The *LXX* simply translates it as διάψαλμα, “Musical interlude,” which gives an idea to the possible meaning of the phrase but even this translation is not completely clear. But it likely refers to a point where instruments play with no vocal singing, as would have occurred in temple worship. It is fairly rare in Scripture, occurring 71 times in 39 different Psalms, as well as three times in Habakkuk chapter 3. In the 39 Psalms in which it occurs, it occurs between 1-4 times in each Psalm, with Psalm 89 (the third longest Psalm in the Psalter with 53 verses, after Psalm 119 and Psalm 78) being the only Psalm where Selah occurs four times. Interestingly, there seems to be some connection with Psalms which are noted in the title to be ‘To (or for) the Choirmaster,’ Psalm 78 being one of those. There are 39 Psalms noted to be ‘To the choirmaster,’ and 31 of those Psalms (80%) have Selah in them. In his commentary on the Psalms, Derek Kidner states that,

Probably [Selah] is the signal for an interlude (cf. *LXX*) or change of musical accompaniment. It is usually thought to come from a root *sll*, to lift up (cf. 68:4, Heb. 5), i.e. perhaps, to strike up with the instruments or voices; but a root *slh*, supposedly corresponding to an Aramaic verb ‘to bend’, i.e. bow down, has alternatively been suggested. Other possibilities are that the vowels indicate the response *nešah*, ‘for ever’ (cf. Targ.) to be interjected at this point (sometimes, however, with dubious relevance); or that the consonants of Selah are an acrostic signifying either ‘change of voices’ or ‘repeat from the beginning’. *The first interpretation probably remains the best.*¹⁷ (Emphasis mine)

Ultimately, we simply cannot be fully and completely certain what the meaning is, as it has passed out of use, like some other Hebrew words and phrases which are also hard to translate – including at least one other word in this Psalm (see verse 16).

Verse Nine

My translation of verse nine, a key verse in this Psalm, is: “You have put my companions far from me; You have made me an abomination to them; I am shut up, and I cannot get out.”

The critical apparatus simply notes that תועבות (abominations), is singular in a few Hebrew manuscripts as well as the *LXX* and *Syriac*. I would prefer the plural, as in the MT, as using the plural to amplify the word. However, in translation, there is not really a way to translate this as a plural and still make much sense in English (if it was kept as plural it would be something like “You made me abominations to them”), so I translated it as a singular (as every English translation I found also does). The other critical apparatus note reads, “pc Mss כלו, G παρεδόθην,

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 51–52.

ס 'ikljt detentus sum, prp אָנִי כ' אָנִי vel נִקְלָא תִי,"¹⁸ meaning: a few manuscripts read caged, LXX is 'I was handed over,' Syriac is 'detained I was,' it has been proposed: 'imprisoned in anger' or 'I was imprisoned.' There is not significant difference in the meaning of any of these texts, so I see no reason to change the MT, especially considering the Masorah Parvah note.

Moving on to the Masoretic notes, the first one points out that מִיְדָדָי, 'companions' (or as some translate it, acquaintances), only occurs in this form twice in Scripture. Both occasions are in this Psalm – in this verse and in verse 19. The second note refers to אֲנִי, literally meaning imprisoned or restrained, but used in a more figurative sense here to mean shut up (or shut away) – likening "imprisonment" to being an abomination (which some take to mean disease) to one's friends, perhaps like being imprisoned in (or by) loneliness.¹⁹ This Masoretic note points out that this is the only use in Scripture, and that it is a defective spelling. The last Masoretic note in this verse refers to the phrase אֲנִי אֲנִי, 'I cannot get out' or 'I cannot escape,' noting that it only occurs twice in Scripture, and the Masorah Magna note gives the other reference as Lamentations 3:7, "He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy."

The connection with Lamentations three is quite interesting, and it seems appropriate to go into a little bit of depth on these connections at this point. Lamentations 3 (the central chapter) stands out from the rest of the book, as it is a lament of a singular male voice, when the rest of the book is a book of corporate lament. Additionally, part of Lamentations 3 is really the only

¹⁸ Gérard E. Weil, K. Elliger, and W. Rudolph, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1170.

¹⁹ J. Hausmann, "אֲנִי," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 145.

point of joyful praise in the book, as the rest of the book is full of darkness and despair (like Psalm 88). The beginning of Lamentations 3 – verses 1-20, as well as verses 42-55, are full of similarities to Psalm 88. Here are some examples:

Afflicted	Lam. 3:1, 19	Psalm 88:4, 10
In darkness	Lam. 3:2, 6	Psalm 88:6, 12, 18
Under God’s wrath	Lam. 3:1, 3, 5, etc	Psalm 88:5-7, 14-17
Prayer not heard	Lam. 3:8	Psalm 88:1-2, 9, 13-14
Soul troubled	Lam. 3:17, 20	Psalm 88:3, 14
Problems with eyes	Lam. 3:51	Psalm 88:9
Imprisoned/Closed in	Lam. 3:7, 9	Psalm 88:8, 18
Put in a pit	Lam. 3:53, 55	Psalm 88:4, 6
Overwhelmed by water	Lam. 3:54	Psalm 88:7, 17
Abhorred by people	Lam. 3:45, 53	Psalm 88:8, 18

In addition to these similarities, I also find a significant similarity in the one positive note in Psalm 88, and with the positive note in Lamentations 3. The Psalmist begins Psalm 88 with “O LORD, God of my salvation” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי), and Lamentations 3:26 speaks of the salvation of the LORD (לְתִשׁוּעַת יְהוָה), saying “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.” In a real sense, the answer to the prophet’s lament in Lamentations 3 (especially verses 21-41) could be an answer to the entire lament of Psalm 88:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the

dust— there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. [...] Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven:²⁰

In addition to similarities to Lamentations 3, there are some Close similarities in Psalm 88 to Job, especially Job 19. In the ESV, Job 19:8 says, speaking of God, “He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths.” This is quite similar to Psalm 88:8’s usage of being shut in/imprisoned, and setting darkness upon paths is a very fitting connection to other places in Psalm 88 as well. As well as these connections, in Job 19:13-19, Job speaks about being abhorred by his own loved ones:

He has put my brothers far from me, and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me. My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me. [...] My breath is strange to my wife, and I am a stench to the children of my own mother. Even young children despise me; when I rise they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me.²¹

It is the same root word, תועבה, meaning something that is abhorrent, used in both Psalm 88:9 (abomination) and Job 19:19 (abhor). The overall theme of Psalm 88 – someone in very deep distress, crying out to God, being surrounded by darkness, and being afflicted – fits very much with Job’s experience. Psalm 88 certainly is a Psalm Job could have prayed or sung very much from experience.

²⁰ Lamentations 3:21-33,38-41

²¹ Job 19:13-14, 17-19

Verse Ten

Moving on to verse ten, my translation is: “My eye wastes away because of affliction. I have cried out to you O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.” This is a particularly significant verse in the Psalm, and I believe it to be a mid-point of the Psalm. The Psalmist once again refers to a day or time of day (as he also does in verse 1 and verse 13) in which he is crying out to the LORD. These three occasions also constitute three of the four times in which the Psalmist uses the personal name of the LORD, יהוה (Yahweh), the only other one being at the beginning of verse 14. The beginning phrase in the verse, ‘My eye wastes away because of affliction,’ is very much reminiscent of the beginning of Job 17:7, “My eye has grown dim from vexation...” even though the Hebrew words, other than eye, are different ones. There are no critical apparatus notes, but the first Masoretic note points out that the first word in the verse, עֵינַי (my eye), occurs 29 times. The second note points out that the second word נִצָּחַת (languishes), occurs only twice, the other instance being in Jeremiah 31:25, about God turning mourning into joy. It reads, “For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish.” The last note in this verse points out that בְּכָל־יּוֹם (every day), occurs a total of three times in Scripture. The other two occurrences are also in the book of Psalms, in Psalm 7:12, and Psalm 145:2.

Verse Eleven

Verse 11 says, “To the dead will You do wonders? Will the departed arise and praise You?” The second word translated dead is Rephaim. This is a challenging word to translate, as it has different meanings in different contexts, and other translations of the Old Testament Scriptures have translated it in different ways – such as giants and physicians in the *LXX*, *Syriac*, and *Targum*. In Hebrew, it either appears to mean the dead, “an element of the aboriginal

population,” or it refers to a geographical location.²² For this verse, the critical apparatus simply notes that the *LXX* and *Syriac* do not have “Selah.” The single Masoretic note states that the only occurrence of הַלְמֹתִים (‘to the dead,’ or ‘for the dead’), is here. This verse and the following two verses focus on death, as did verses 4-7. The specific focus about death in verses 11-13 is about questions (a bit like Job) – can the dead do this and that. In this verse, we see two questions which should make the reader think about worship – especially the second question – “Will the dead arise and praise you?” This is a focus of this Psalm – but not exclusively this Psalm (e.g. see also Psalm 6:5, 30:9, 71:17-18, 115:17, 118:17, and perhaps most explicitly in 142:7. And see Isaiah 38:18-19) – and it is pointing to the reality that the dead cannot worship God (at least not on the earth). To continue in the Hebrew poetic parallelism, I translated it departed instead of dead (to have a word that is a synonym of dead, but not the same word), but the idea is clearly connected to ‘the dead.’

Verse Twelve

My own translation of verse 12 is: “Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or your faithfulness in Abaddon?” Again, it is continuing the line of questioning from the previous verse: Can the dead worship You? The single critical apparatus note simply says that in the word אֱמוּנָתְךָ (Your faithfulness), a few Hebrew manuscripts, and the *LXX* and *Syriac* has added the prefix wav - וְ (and), to make it ‘And Your faithfulness...’ The first Masoretic note shows that the first word, הִסְפִּיר (can/will he/it tell or declare?), occurs only twice in Scripture,

²² R. Liwak, “רַפְּאִים,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 603.

the other being in Job 37:20: “הֲיִסְפַּר־לּוֹ כִּי אֶדְבַּר אִם־אֶמַּר אִישׁ כִּי יִבְלָע:” (Shall it be told him that I would speak? Did a man ever wish that he would be swallowed up?). The next note points out that the second word, בִּקְבֹּר (in the grave), occurs only three times. In my searching, I found those occurrences in 1 Kings 13:31 & Numbers 19:18.

Verse Thirteen

I translated verse 13 as: “Will Your wonder be known in the darkness? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” Again, it is a continuation of theme of the previous two verses – questioning if the dead can worship God. All these questions appear to have the implied answer of ‘No.’ The point seems to be that the Psalmist does not want to die because then he will no longer be able to worship and praise God, or to declare His wonders – glorify Him – on the earth, if he is dead. The ‘land of forgetfulness’ is a striking metaphor for death.²³ The critical apparatus note reads ‘a few (Hebrew) manuscripts, and the *LXX* and *Targum*, have the plural of פִּלְאָה (wonder), so it speaks of God’s wonders, which perhaps makes the reading smoother, but does not change the meaning of the text in any significant way. The only Masoretic note says that the first word in the verse, הֲיִנָּדַע (roughly ‘shall it be known’) only occurs here.

Verse Fourteen

²³ Compare with Psalm 31:12: “I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.” and Job 14:21 (speaking about one who is dead): “His sons come to honor, and he does not know it; they are brought low, and he perceives it not.”

My translation of verse 14 is: “But I, to You O LORD, have cried; And in the morning my prayer comes before You.” This is the third and final time the Psalmist again refers to crying out to the LORD at specific time, and again does it using the personal revealed name of God. There are no critical apparatus notes in this verse, but there are a few Masoretic notes. The first note is the longest and most detailed note in this Psalm, and it refers to the first word, אֲנִי (but I), noting that it occurs 67 times at the beginning of the verse, 33 of those times in the writings. In searching myself, I found 179 total occurrences – including those not at the beginning of the verse. Interestingly, at the beginning of the verse, it often has a disjunctive accent (mehuppak legarmeh) – especially in the occurrences in the Psalms. The second note regarding אַרְבָּבָקָר (and in the morning) notes there are a total of six occurrences of this word in this form, two of the occurrences being in Exodus 16, regarding God promising bread (manna) in the morning in verse 13, then, in the morning the manna coming in the following verse. The final Masoretic note in this verse is regarding תִּקְדָּמְךָ (it comes before You), noting that this is the single occurrence. Most English translations have ‘comes before you,’ but the *King James Version (KJV)* has “shall prevent thee,” and the *NET Bible* has “confronts you.”

Verse Fifteen

I have translated verse 15 as: “Why, O LORD, do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?” As mentioned above, this is the third time that God’s personal name is used in this Psalm, and it continues a line of questioning which took place in verses 11-13. However, the question here is not a rhetorical question, asking about how one can praise God from the grace, but rather, it is a question to God, asking Him why He has made Himself distant from the Psalmist. Again, there are no critical apparatus notes, but there is one Masoretic Note

which says that the first word in this verse **לָמָּה** (why), occurs three times at the beginning of the word.²⁴ Clearly from this verse, as well as the rest of this Psalm, the Psalmist feels abandoned – not only by his friends and family, but by God.

Verse Sixteen

My translation of verse 16 is “I have been afflicted and near-death from my youth; I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.” This verse connects back with verse four in that it emphasizes that it has been for his whole lifetime that he has been “drawing near to Sheol” (verse 4). This is not a momentary affliction, but apparently a lifelong affliction. He cries that he is helpless and that he has been “afflicted and near-death” for his whole life – since his youth. This verse has four different critical apparatus notes, the first noting that for the word **עָלִי** (near-death, or ‘close to death’), the *LXX* (and *Syriac*, and Jerome) have *καὶ ἐν κόποις* (and in troubles), which would be **עָלִי** (and weary) in Hebrew. The second and third notes refer to **סָפַרְתָּ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי** (I suffer [or have borne] your terrors). The editors note that the *LXX* (with the *Syriac* following) have *ὕψωθεις ἐταπεινώθην*, which is ‘after being humbled, I was exalted,’ in which case the Hebrew would be **סָפַרְתָּ יְהוָה**, both words being taken as passive.²⁵ It is an interesting change, as it could potentially tie even more closely to Christ’s suffering and humiliation and then His exaltation, but it does not seem to have validity in the text.

The last critical apparatus note refers to the last word in the verse, **הִנֵּנִי**, which only occurs here and which is quite difficult to translate. This can be seen by the many different

²⁴ I am unsure of the meaning and significance of this Masorah Parvah note.

²⁵ Rudolf Kittel, Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, Hans Peter Ruger, and G. E. Weil, [*Torah, Nevi'im U-Khetuvim*] =: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Fifth rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 1170.

translations of this word into other languages, as well as none of the lexicons being confident on how to translate it. The editors propose that the Hebrew should be נָפְוּא (coming from נָפַח, meaning numb or cold), compared with Psalm 77:3. But they also note that the *LXX* translates it as καὶ ἐξηπορήθην (and perplexed). Every English translation I looked at had a different translation for this word. They include: "I am helpless" (*ESV* and *Revised Standard Version - RSV*), "I am distraught" (*NKJV*), "I am overcome" (*NASB*), "I pine away" (*Young's Literal Translation - YLT*) "am in dispair" (*NIV*), "am numb with pain" (*NET*), and "I am distracted" (*KJV*- which appears possibly to be based on the *LXX*). Clearly, people are unsure how to translate this word only occurring here in Psalm 88. Liberal commentator Mitchell Dahood, in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, translates it as "wheel," so the verse ends with, "I suffer the terrors of your wheel." Dahood admits it is "An admittedly desperate attempt to wrench sense out of that ancient puzzle" and suggests different vowel pointing, and comparison to Proverbs 20:26, "where the wheel is an instrument of torture," in order to come up with a coherent description connected with the first cola. He also suggests that it could alternately be read as "I pass away," as in Psalm 72:5.²⁶ I am preferable to "I am helpless" with a possible connection back to verse five, "I am as a man without any strength," but another translation could well be better.

Moving on to the Masoretic notes, each of the last five words has a Masorah Parvah note attached to it. The first concerns נָפְוּא (and I am near-death, or dying/perishing) – which is the third word in the verse. The note distinguishes this as the only use of this word in Scripture. The

²⁶ Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms II, 51-100* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968).

second note on מְנַעַר (from youth), points out that there are three occurrences of this word.²⁷ The third note on נָשָׂאתִי (normally ‘I lift’ or ‘I carry,’ but can be ‘I suffer’) tells us that this word occurs 19 times. Of these 19 occurrences, almost half of them (nine) are in Ezekiel, and five are in Ezekiel chapter 20, where it is used referring to God “lifting up his hand”²⁸ (swearing) to them – promising them both good (such as leading them out of slavery in Egypt – Ezekiel 20:6), and bad (that God would scatter them to the nations – Ezekiel 20:23). One has to wonder if this connection to God “lifting up His hand” would have been obvious to an Israelite many centuries ago reading this Psalm. The next note, on אֲמִירָה (terror, horror, fright, something terrible), notes that there are four occurrences in the defective form. The final note, regarding אֶפְיוֹנָה (I am helpless?), points out that it is the single occurrence of this difficult word, as was mentioned already.

Verse Seventeen

For verse 17, my translation is “Your fierce wrath has passed over me; Your terrors have cut me off.” The single critical apparatus note mentions that the last word צָמַתוּתִי (cut me off, or silenced me), should be read with a few Hebrew manuscripts which have צַמְחוּתִי, which comes from the same root, and has a similar meaning. They seem to believe that it was an unintentional spelling and/or an impossible construction (a likely scribal error). However, the Masoretic note

²⁷ The other two occurrences are Job 33:25 – “let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor,” and Proverbs 29:21 – “Whoever pampers his servant from childhood will in the end find him his heir.”

²⁸ “Lifted up mine hand unto them” in the *King James Version*, and “raised my hand in an oath to those” in the *New King James Version*.

on the same verse denotes that it is a singular occurrence in Scripture. The Masoretes pointing this out gives credence to its intentionality. Dahood argues that it is actually a “blend” of two Hebrew verbs, צמת (to destroy or annihilate) and מוט (to slay), in view of Isaiah 51:9, in which he argues המִקְצָבָה is a combination of two verbs both meaning ‘to smite.’²⁹ The other Masoretic note shows that קְרוֹנֵיךָ (fierce wrath, anger, burning anger), is another word which occurs only once in the Bible.

Verse Eighteen

I have translated verse 18 as, “They have surrounded me every day like water; They have engulfed me altogether.” This verse has no critical apparatus notes nor any Masoretic notes. It is another verse which explicitly references being overwhelmed with water, as verse 8 does also. It is a bit difficult to translate the “they” at the beginning of each cola, but it seems to be referring to God’s wrath and His terrors, so ‘they’ is appropriate – the form is the qal third person plural (with no gender specified). Clearly the Psalmist feels as though God’s ‘terrors’ against Him are so extensive that they are nearly ‘drowning’ him.

Verse Nineteen

The last verse in the Psalm, verse 19, I have translated as “You have put far from me lover and friend; My companions have become darkness,” although the last cola could be read as “darkness is my companion” or “...my closest friend.” The last word of the Psalm is darkness, thus the Psalm finishes on a very dark note – the only Psalm to do so. The first critical apparatus

²⁹ Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms II, 51-100*, 307.

note regards **עֲדָיִי** (my companions), noting simply that a few manuscripts, and the LXX, Syriac, and Targum, have, **עֲדָיִי וְ** (*and* my companions). The second critical apparatus note is regarding the last word **מְשֻׁמְמָה** (of darkness). The note says that some (15-20) manuscripts have **מְשֻׁמְמָה** (withhold), and that the LXX has **ἀπὸ ταλαιπωρίας**, (because of misery - or wretchedness), and that Jerome has **מְשֻׁמְמָה** (withhold or remove) or **מְשֻׁמְמָה** (also withhold, or spare/refrain – see Job 38:23). The editors add it has been proposed that it should be **נִשְׁכַּח** (forget).³⁰ However, I see no reason to change it from darkness as in the Masoretic Text, which is very fitting to the rest of the Psalm. The Masoretic notes that **עֲדָיִי** (and friend, or neighbor) only occurs here in this form, and that both **עֲדָיִי** (my companions) and **מְשֻׁמְמָה** (darkness) occur only twice. As mentioned, the other occurrence of **עֲדָיִי** is previously in this Psalm (verse 9). The other occurrence of **מְשֻׁמְמָה** in this form is from Isaiah 42:16 – “And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn *the darkness* before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.” This is a promise which perhaps could have been of comfort to the Psalmist.

Theological analysis and importance of Psalm 88 for Today

Psalm 88 is a Psalm that we need to have. This “Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite” is a Psalm of one who is deeply distressed, for whom there seems to be absolutely no light at the end of the tunnel. It is unique in the Psalter as the one and only Psalm which does not end on a note of hope. In fact, as was mentioned previously, the only real note of hope is in the first line, and it ends on perhaps its’ most depressing note. But, throughout this prayer-song, this person in deep

³⁰ Kittel, Rudolf, Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, Hans Peter Rieger, [Torah, Nevi'im U-Khetuvim] =: Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 1170.

distress and near-death cries out to God, pleading for God to hear him. The Psalmist begins his prayer by crying out to Yahwah, the LORD, God of his salvation, knowing that He truly is the only one who any person can look to for their salvation. The Psalmist also expresses complete confidence in the absolute sovereignty of God - that He is the one who is truly in control of all things - even our own suffering. This is a helpful Psalm to refute those who do not believe in the complete sovereignty of God, who struggle to believe that God even controls and uses the suffering of people to accomplish His will. The Psalmist clearly believes that God is over His suffering, as he says over and over again in this Psalm. In verse 8 (verse 7 English Bible - EB) "Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves;" in verse 9 (8 EB) "You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them;" in verse 15 (14 EB) "O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?" in verse 16 (15 EB) "I suffer your terrors;" and in verses 17-19 (16-18 EB) "Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me."

This is someone who understands and even trusts in God's sovereignty, even though He is suffering. This is why he cries out to the LORD of his salvation – the one who can, and will save him from all his distress. It is a Psalm for those who are experiencing great trials, who are close to death (whether it be their own or a loved one). It is a Psalm for someone who is having trouble rejoicing in anything, but also who knows they are to pray without ceasing, and so they pray without ceasing.

Psalm 88 is a Psalm which we can and should recommend for anyone struggling and going through difficulties. It perhaps seems strange to recommend such a depressing song for one who perhaps is already feeling depressed, but many times, this is what we need. As Romans

12:15 says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”. This often is a comfort, particularly to help the sufferer remember that others do suffer as well. Additionally, this Psalm can help a believer remember that God is fully sovereign over all things, including our suffering and struggles and even death. Consider how Job’s friends responded to his suffering. They initially simply sat quietly with him, but then began to speak with him, and essentially accused him of unrepentant sin as a cause of his suffering. This was not a help for Job, and the suffering he was experiencing was not due to his own sin. However, after his first three friends spoke extensively to him, there was one other friend, Elihu who finally began to speak. Elihu first speaks against Job’s three friends, then against Job, and then he goes on to speak about God’s justice, His greatness, and His majesty. He reminds Job and His friends that God is over all things and that He causes all things to happen, and that we often do not know His purposes, as they have not been revealed to us.

This is something which we can see in Psalm 88 as well – the Psalmist’s continued recognition of God’s sovereignty over his troubles, even though he does not understand why these things are happening. We also see the positive example of crying out to God at all times, and certainly, the reminder that God is indeed LORD of our salvation. There is perhaps also a reminder of God’s goodness simply by considering the writer of this Psalm, Heman. As was aforementioned, Heman, the grandson of Samuel, was known for His great wisdom, and was one who was appointed as a temple singer, and to compose praise for the for temple worship (1 Kings 4:31), and was known as King David’s seer (a prophet of the king, along with his sons - 1 Samuel 9:9). These things are seen in 1 Chronicles 25:1, 4-6:

David and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. The list of those who did the work and of their duties was: [...] Of Heman, the sons of Heman:

Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel and Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti, and Romamti-ezer, Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir, Mahazioth. All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer, according to the promise of God to exalt him, for God had given Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. They were all under the direction of their father in the music in the house of the LORD with cymbals, harps, and lyres for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the order of the king.

While Heman was humbled and suffered greatly for a time, the other things we know about His life show that God did not forget him, and that He did hear His prayer. This ought to give us hope, and it gives us more reason to praise Him who is all-knowing and all-wise.

God has a purpose even in suffering. This is seen throughout Scripture. One prominent place where we see this explicitly spelled out is at the conclusion to the book of Genesis, where Joseph, hated and sold into slavery by his own brothers, who later spent many years in an Egyptian prison, reminded His brothers of God's sovereignty, even in their sin against him. Joseph suffered greatly as a result of his brothers' grievous sin against him, and his father suffered much as well, believing for decades that Joseph was dead. But after Joseph's father Jacob died, his brothers feared that Joseph would "pay them back" for what they had done to him. But instead, Joseph promised to care for them and their children, telling his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20). We also must not forget this - that God ordains everything, for His own glory, as well as for the good of His people.

There are no quotations of this Psalm in the New Testament, but there is a very specific allusion to Psalm 88:9 (and also similar to 88:19), in Luke 23:49: "And all his *acquaintances* and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at *a distance* watching these things

(emphasis mine).³¹ This can be seen in the English translations, but perhaps especially in the Greek. In the *LXX*, Psalm 88:9 (which is numbered, in the *LXX*, Psalm 87:9) begins: “ἐμάκρυνας τοὺς γνωστούς μου ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ...” literally, “[You] distanced the acquaintances of mine from me...” In Greek, Luke 23:49 begins: “εἰστήκεισαν δὲ πάντες οἱ γνωστοὶ αὐτῷ ἀπὸ μακρόθεν...” which is literally “And stood all his acquaintances from a distance...” using the same root words for distance and acquaintances as does Psalm 88:9. With these similarities, it is no wonder that Luke 23:49 is recognized as an allusion to Psalm 88:9.³² Jesus acquaintances standing afar off from Him while He hung on the cross could perhaps even be considered a prophetic fulfilment of Psalm 88.

But in addition to this allusion, there are many Messianic references in this Psalm. Even some aspects that seem as though they can fit no other person but Christ. Who on this earth, other than Christ, has experienced God’s wrath sweeping over them and lying, even resting upon them? Certainly there is no one who experienced this other than Christ. When we suffer God’s wrath on earth, it is a discipline and it is limited. When Christ suffered God’s wrath on the cross, it was completely undeserved and was the very wrath for untold billions of sins of all those who would believe in Him, which he took upon Himself. The extent of this wrath and the severity of the punishment of sins which Christ took upon Himself over those few hours is hard even to begin to comprehend.

This Psalm a reminder to us of great suffering which Jesus Christ experienced, when He willingly took upon Himself the full wrath of God His Father, for the sins that we, His people,

³¹ Luke 23:49 is also quite likely an allusion to Psalm 38:11 (38:12 in the Hebrew Bible), which says (in the ESV): “My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off.”

³² See also the similar passages in Matthew 27:55 (“There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him,”) and Mark 15:40 (“There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome.”)

committed. Jesus even became sin for us, so that we might have His righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). He enabled us to have a relationship with Himself through this suffering. God loved us so much that He sent His son to die for us, that all who believe in Him would have everlasting life (John 3:16) and be able to spend eternity with God, praising Him. May we praise and worship God for His great work. May we prominently proclaim Christ's Kingship, and name the name of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, who, I believe, cried these words of Psalm 88 to His Father. He is indeed the same suffering servant who was prophesized in Isaiah 53, which carries many similarities to Psalm 88:

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will

divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.³³

Sermon Outline

This is my brief sermon outline. The verse numbers are from the English Bible. My more detailed sermon outline is available upon request.

Main Point: When all you can see is darkness and despair, turn and cry to your God.

- I. Cry out to your God all day and every day (verses 1-2, 9, 13).
- II. Worship your God, even in sorrow and the face of death (verses 3-6, 10-12).
- III. Recognize God's sovereignty even in your affliction (verses 7, 14-17).
- IV. When all your loved ones are far away, God is there (verses 8, 18).
- V. Turn and cry out to the God of your salvation (verse 1).

³³ Isaiah 53:1-12, emphasis mine.

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