Drowning in the Depths of Darkness: 
A Consideration of Psalm 88 with a New Translation

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Abstract
Psalm 88, described by Walter Brueggemann as “an embarrassment to conventional faith,” is the darkest of laments in the Psalter, moving slowly and steadily from “Yahweh” to “darkness,” seemingly without a glimmer of hope. This enigma has puzzled interpreters of various schools, with some seemingly so embarrassed that they go to great lengths to explain away the obvious weight of gloom and despair—a move that destroys the powerful potential of this prayer. Employing a multi-dimensional approach with elements of rhetorical, form, and canonical criticism, I approach the psalm in three movements. The resulting exegesis evinces a consistent darkness running through the whole, separating the psalm from its formal companions and relating closely to its placement in the Psalter at the close of Book III. Reflections on appropriation further relate the content of the psalm to the experience of Christ in Gethsemane and to personal piety and pastoral counselling in the face of depression. The gospel power of this darkest of psalms is found not in squelching its voice but in affirming its realistic portrait of the dark night of the soul.

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Introduction

Psalm 88 is without doubt one of the darkest corners in all of literature, for here, in this poem, the one the psalmist calls “God of my salvation” (אלהי ישׁועתי)\(^2\) has set him in the lowest pit, the murky depths of the sea, where no light of hope penetrates the darkness. For this very reason, it begs our attention and promises to shed light on our own experience in the life of faith. What can we learn from this darkest of psalms?

Method

Various methodologies have vied for a monopoly on psalms interpretation over the last one hundred years.\(^3\) The fruit of the last century’s labour, however, shows that there is much to be learned from different approaches. It is my contention that the greatest potential for interpreting any given psalm is thus found in three distinct approaches. First, a given psalm must be taken seriously in its integrity as a text and in its art as a poem. Second, a psalm must be considered in relation to other psalms of similar form, structure, and theme. Third, a psalm must be considered in relation to its placement in the canonical Psalter. I will integrate these approaches by positing a structure for the whole, proceeding through an exegesis of the final form of the psalm, considering form and placement as vertical and horizontal axes, respectively, and moving toward interpretation as the consideration of the final form at the intersection of these axes.

Structure

Often the employment of “Selah” (סלה) is used to break down a psalm, despite the fact that its meaning continues to elude interpreters.\(^4\) An attempt to do so in Ps 88 does not yield helpful results. The following outline, determined largely by content, is my working approach to this psalm’s structure:\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Ps 88:2. Throughout this paper, unless otherwise indicated, verse references are to the Hebrew text and the translations are my own.


v. 1  Superscription

vv. 2–10a  Movement 1: I/Thou

v. 2  Invocation 1

v. 3  Plea for help

vv. 4–10a  Complaint 1 (descriptive)

vv. 4–6  My afflictions

vv. 7–10a  Which you have caused

vv. 10b–13  Movement 2: Rhetorical Questions

v. 10b  Invocation 2

vv. 11–13  Complaint 2 (questioning)

vv. 14–19  Movement 3: Why?

v. 14  Invocation 3

vv. 15–19  Complaint 3 (descriptive, governed by “Why?” [למה] of v. 15)

Though the psalm is manifestly a lament, elements of praise or of forward-looking trust are strikingly absent. I will comment on this further in “The Vertical Axis,” below.

Exegesis of the Psalm

The Superscription, v. 1

The superscription to Ps 88 associates the psalm both with the sons of Korah and with Heman the Ezrahite. The only other psalm associated with an Ezrahite is Ps 89, “of Ethan the Ezrahite” (לאיתן האזרחי). “Ezrahite” (אזרחי) probably means “son of Zerah” on the basis of 1 Chr 2:6, though the same Heman appears to be identified as a son of Mahol rather than as an Ezrahite in 1 Kgs 5:11. It is interesting to note that the Ezrahites are associated with the lowest point in the Psalter.6

Other Korahite psalms include Pss 42, 44–49, 84–85, and 87. Some scholars argue that “a song, a psalm of the sons of Korah” (שיר המנואים לבני קרח) is actually a postscript to the preceding psalm (87);7 however, it may be that the dual association intentionally ties Ps 88 to both the preceding and following psalms. Five of the Korahite psalms are also identified as “maskil” (משכיל): Pss 42, 44–45, 47, and, of course, 88. There are thirteen maskils in all, ten of which are also laments: Pss 32,

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7 Though not his own view, this is mentioned by Derek Kidner, Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III–V of the Psalms (TOTC 14:2; London: Inter-Varsity, 1975).
Movement 1: I/Thou

Invocation: 1, v. 2

The psalmist begins with an invocation, addressing the Lord, stating that he cries out to him both night and day. He describes the Lord as “Yahweh, God of my salvation” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי). This title is the closest we come to a bright note in the psalm. Some suggest emending the text so that it would read “Yahweh, my God, I cry” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהַי שִׁוַּעְתִי).9 In an unpointed text, the difference is a single letter (א or “jot” as the familiar New Testament passage puts it), and a very similar phrase occurs in v. 14: “But I, O Yahweh, cry to you” (וַאֲנִי אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה שִׁוַּעְתִי). There is, however, no evidence in the MSS or versions to suggest a א was added.10

The difference between the first and the third invocations is probably due to the psalmist’s increasing despair as he moves toward the “darkness” (מחשך) with which he ends (v. 19).11 Here, at the outset of the psalm, he declares Yahweh his salvation. “The psalm will be about whether this declaration is true.”12

Plea for Help, v. 3

This is the only explicit plea in the entire psalm; no volitional forms are employed anywhere else, and any other reference to prayer, and so forth, is descriptive. The first colon employs a jussive, “Let . . . come” (תבוא),13 and the second an imperative, “Bend!” (הטה). The plea is grammatically interesting: both cola are verb-first, the second element in each cola has a 2ms suffix, and the third element has a 1cs suffix.

Let (it) come before you my prayer.
Bend your ear to my cry of lament.

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8 The maskils that are not laments are: Pss 32, 45, 78. Ps 47 uses the word “maskil” (משכילים) in v. 8, but it is identified only as a “psalm” (מזמור) in its superscription.
9 The change results in a Piel perfect 1cs of שוע where the text has ישוע with a 1cs suffix. Cf. the apparatus of BHS.
10 It is difficult to overstate the irony when the apparatus encourages haplography!
11 In defense of the emendation, it may be pointed out that this is the only instance in the entire Hebrew Bible of the phrase אלהי ישועתי (“God of my salvation”). ישוע does occur with אלהים (“God”), however (Isa 12:2, Ps 68:20), and it also occurs with צור (“rock”) in Deut 32:15 and Ps 89:27. A very similar word ישע (“salvation”) occurs with אלהים (“God”) in Pss 65:6; 79:9; 85:5. A further motivation for the emendation is to balance the parallelism, so that the verse will read: נגדך׃ יְהוָה אֱלֹהַי שִׁוַּעְתִי יוֹ(מָ֑)ם צָעַקְתִי בַלַיְלָה (“Yahweh, my God, I cry to you daily; I cry out at night before you”).
12 Goldingay, Psalms, 2.646.
The resulting parallelism is complex, but the result is to tie the two lines together and to connect the “prayer” (תפלה) with the “cry of lament” (רנה), even though they serve different grammatical functions in their respective cola.

Complaint 1, vv. 4–10a
The first complaint can be divided into two sections, hinging at v. 6. The first part focuses on “I” and on a description of the psalmist’s misery; the second part turns to “you” and describes Yahweh as the one who has brought the affliction.

Part 1: My afflictions, vvv. 4–6
As the psalmist moves from plea to complaint, he begins with a chiastic description of his afflictions (v. 4):

שבועה ברעות נפשי: Gorged with evils (is) my soul.
והחי אלשואל הנהוי: My life to Sheol approaches.

His soul is gorged/satisfied/stuffed (שבע) not with Yahweh’s bounty but with evils/calamities (רעות), and his life approaches or touches (Hiphil of נגע) Sheol. He is already reckoned among those in “the Pit” (בור), a word for a generic pit or cistern, but that is also associated with the entrance to Sheol: he is on Hell’s doorstep. He is a strong man (גבר) whose strength has left him. The description of affliction and the imagery of death comes to a climax in v. 6, where he is called “free” (חופשי) among the dead. It is as though he is lying among bodies in a mass grave, those whom God no longer remembers and those who are cut off (Niphal of בור) from his powerful hand.

Precisely what “free” (חופשי) means, however, is a matter of debate. The word normally means “free” as though from slavery (Exod 21:5, etc.) or from taxes (1 Sam 17:25). A related word חפשית describes the abode of a leprous king in 2 Kgs 15:5, perhaps implying an idea of separation or of confinement. Dahood, on the basis of an Ugaritic root הפט, proposes “my cot.” Kraus, on the other hand, emends the text to “I am made to dwell” (השבתי), yielding “I must live among the dead.” My own preference is to retain the text, despite its difficulties, and to understand it with some irony: the psalmist is already “free” or “loosed” from the obligations of earthly life.

17 HALOT 1.342–1.343.
19 Kraus, Psalms 60–150, 190–191.
20 “To be free among the dead means to be liberated, not only from pain and trouble, but also from
The shift toward “you,” the God-ward address of the next section, begins here in v. 6: it is “you who no longer remember” the slain (אשׁר לא זכרתם), and it is “your hand” (ידך) from which they are cut off. This provides a transition from describing the afflictions to pressing suit against Yahweh, their source.

Part 2: Which you have caused, vv. 7–10a

The responsibility for the psalmist’s afflictions is placed squarely on Yahweh’s shoulders. Throughout this section, he is referred to in the second person, whether as actor or as the source of other afflicters: “you set me” (שׁתני), “your wrath” (חמתך), with “your breakers” (משׁבריך) “you oppress” (ענית) “you remove” (הרחקת), and “you make me a horror” (שׁתני תועבות). The imagery of the בור, which could denote a pit, a cistern, a prison, or even the entrance to Sheol, is filled out with water imagery: depths, perhaps of the sea (מצלות), and waves/breakers (משׁברים). The emerging picture is of a person trapped inside a cistern filling with water, like one drowning in a watery prison in the heart of the sea.  

Not only is the psalmist overwhelmed by the waters in the dark and the deep, he is also shunned by his “intimate friends” (midiymim) and is unable to get out (v. 9). Both here and in v. 19, it is made clear that this ostracism is attributable to Yahweh: he is the one who has “removed” or “caused” the friends “to shun” the psalmist (Hiphil of רחק). Alone and drowning in the dark depths, the psalmist’s “eye” (עיןî, ʿênî) grows dim from “misery” (עֶ֑נî, ʿǒnî).

Movement 2: Rhetorical Questions

Invocation 2, v. 10b

The second invocation differs significantly from the first:

히וה אלתי ישועתי יום־צעקתי
בלילה נגדך
קראתיך יהוה בכל יום
אני אלך קראתיך ימי

O Yahweh, God of my salvation, by day I cry out, and at night before you!

I call to you, O Yahweh, every day!

I spread out my palms to you.


21 Cf. vv. 17–18; Jonah 2:3–7. The flood imagery goes hand-in-hand with the death/Sheol imagery “because the earth itself was believed to rest upon the waters of the great abyss,” Anderson, The Book of Psalms, 626.

22 Perhaps we are again to think of a pit filling with water from which he cannot escape.

23 I.e., the psalmist himself wastes away. Cf. Ps 13:4, where the psalmist pleads: "Grant light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death!"
The first invocation addresses God as “Yahweh, God of my salvation” (יהוה אלהי ישועתי); the second only addresses God as “Yahweh” (יהוה). In the first invocation, both the verb from the first colon (“I cry out,” צעקתי) and the prepositional phrase of the second colon (“before you,” נבדך) appear to do double-duty, applying to both lines. The second invocation has two full cola each with its own verb. They employ similar imagery of crying out (צעק), of calling (קרא), or of spreading out one’s palms in prayer (שחט כפים) to Yahweh. However, whereas the first invocation was followed by a plea to be heard, the second leads immediately into a series of rhetorical questions.

Complaint 2, vv. 11–13
The second complaint is characterized by a series of questions. Each verse begins with the interrogative (ה), and the second colon of each “seconds” the question. An eschatological tension runs through the complaint: is there any praising or remembering of Yahweh among the dead and departed? We may be tempted to talk back to the psalmist from other portions of Scripture (especially the New Testament), but here he “speaks phenomenally,” observing that “people who die stay dead.” He cries out to Yahweh for deliverance, but without an answer, this man on Hell’s doorstep will slip all the way into the pit, and there will be no deeds of “covenant love” (חסד) for him to remember. The questions, implying that God will lose a worshipper if he does not intervene, are themselves a kind of plea.

Movement 3: Why?
The first movement described the psalmist’s misery in terms of “darkness” (מחשך), “Sheol” (שאול), “the Pit” (בור), and “the grave” (קבר). Central to the imagery was the picture of a man trapped in a cistern/pit (בור) as it fills with water (v. 7). The second movement, though taking up the imagery of death and of Sheol, leaves behind the water images and focuses on questions that express a plea for deliverance. The last movement combines further description of the psalmist’s lot, here with a resurfacing of the drowning motif and with a penetrating “Why?” (למה).

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24 Zenger also notes that in each of the invocations the name of Yahweh moves back a step from initial position in the clause; cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, Psalms 2, 393. It is as though the placement of Yahweh’s name communicates his perceived distance from the psalmist.
25 The sense, then, is that the psalmist cries out before Yahweh both day and night.
26 Though the “every day” (בכל־יום) may be intended to extend to both cola.
27 As discussed above, no other volitional forms appear anywhere else in the psalm.
28 VanGemeren, “Psalms,” 566.
29 Goldingay, Psalms, 2.652.
Invocation 3, v. 14
The final invocation begins with a contrast. The dead may not see God’s wonders or recount Yahweh’s covenant love, “but as for me” (אָנִי) — I who am still alive (for the moment) — “I cry to you” (שָׁעַת). There is a contrast in aspect between the first colon (a Piel perfect of שָׁעַת, “I cry [to you]”) and the second (an imperfect of עָדֶם, “[in the morning my prayer] will go up”). Some scholars take the imperfect as a jussive, hence “in the morning let my prayer come before you.” It is more likely a simple imperfect based on the verb’s position in its clause. The invocation implies that the psalmist has cried out and will (again) pray in the morning.

Complaint 3, vv. 15–19
As the psalmist recounts his misery in a final section of complaint, he presses his lament by directly asking Yahweh “Why?” (לָמָּה). The interrogative governs both cola of v. 15: “Why, O Yahweh, will you reject my soul? Why will you hide your face from me?” Though the psalmist continues to press his prayer, his afflictions swell as well. Phonological parallelism heightens the intense picture of suffering: “Oppressed am I, and dying from youth” (עָנִי וּגַעְּמַנְךָ, ʿānı̂ ʾānı̂ wᵉgowēaḥ miynnōʿar). Yahweh’s “horrors” (חֲרַנִי, ḥerōnī), “furies” (רֹדֵּנִי, ṛōdenī), and “terrors” (בעְוֹתֵּם, ḫaḇōtem) are pictured as flood waters that fill up the cistern in which the psalmist is trapped, “surrounding” him (סִבָּב, ṣīḇāḇ) and “converging” on him together (Hiphil of נָקַף, nakhaf), v. 18. Trapped, cut off from society, and drowning in afflictions, the psalmist’s only intimate friend is the darkness.

Psalm 88 is jarring and uncomfortable, “an embarrassment to conventional faith.” The powerful imagery of death, flood, and darkness is overpowering—as is the unrelenting “Why?” that receives no answer. Now that we have considered the parts, it is proper for us to proceed to the vertical and horizontal axes of interpretation to help us see how this psalm should be understood and appropriated.

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32 The dagesh present in the suffix may be indicative of a paragogic or energetic nun (תְּקַדְּמֶךָ). Although added nuns do sometimes occur with volitional forms, they by no means are an indication of a volitional form. “The variety of uses leads many to contend that no special sense attaches to the non-perfective energetic forms,” *IBHS*, 518. “When the meaning is clearly jussive, only very rarely a form with נ is found,” Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (SubBi 27; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), 126.
33 The second line of the invocation could be understood on the one hand as expressing a note of hope: the psalmist will still be around in the morning to offer prayer; on the other hand, it may accent the psalmist’s experience of persistent prayer with no discernible answer.
34 The end of v. 16 contains a *hapax legomenon*, הָגוֹנָה. For discussion, cf. the note in Appendix 1.
35 See above on vv. 7–10a.
The Vertical Axis: Psalm 88 as a Lament

One way to examine a psalm is through the lens of form criticism; that is, it can be compared to psalms that share a form (e.g., lament, praise). This is what I call the vertical axis of interpretation: taking various psalms and considering them on the basis of categories in which they fall. Psalm 88 stands out as an extreme example of a common form that goes by many names. Lament, complaint, psalm of disorientation—all of these are appropriate to describe what we see in this psalm. The description can be narrowed by describing Ps 88 as the lament or the complaint of an individual.37 Psalm 88 is different from many other individual complaints (e.g., Pss 3, 7, 13, 17, 22, 35, etc.) in not mentioning enemies. Other individual complaints mention the psalmist’s sin, perhaps even as the cause of suffering (e.g., Pss 25, 38, 39, 51), but this is not so in Ps 88. Mark Boda describes a class of laments based on outlook, into which Ps 88 falls: “Disorientation Stage 1.” These are psalms “which express the stinging questions to God of ‘why?’ and ‘how long?’” as opposed to “those Disorientation Psalms which express either confidence in God’s salvation or contrition before God’s discipline and do not question the action or inaction of God.”38

Psalm 88 stands out even from other Disorientation Stage 1 psalms, however. Not only does it press the question of “why” without any contrition or confidence, but it is also distinct in that there is no direct appeal for deliverance.39 There are three invocations, but the only form of appeal we see is an appeal to be heard, which is voiced in v. 3 and never taken up again; the closest we come to an assurance of being heard is the fact that the psalm keeps going.40 Isaiah 6 contains the Trisagion, the thrice-holy description of the Lord picked up again in the book of Revelation. Psalm 88, with its threefold invocation and threefold complaint, forms a trithrenody.41 It is as though the lament of the psalmist runs so deep that he cannot get beyond complaint and must start over again, eventually coming not to deliverance and to praise but to solitary darkness, still waiting for an answer.

39 Culley, “Psalm 88,” 293.
40 “The unanswered plea does not silence the speaker. Perhaps the speaker is in fact speaking to an empty sky, but that does not deter the speaker . . . . The failure of God to respond does not lead to atheism or doubt in God or rejection of God. It leads to more intense address,” Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms, 79.
41 I.e., a threefold lament.
The Horizontal Axis: Psalm 88 in the Psalter

Form criticism is very useful for showing how Ps 88 is both like and different from other laments in the book of Psalms; however, there is more to be said. My wife and I enjoy following certain TV shows together, but we do so in a certain way. Although it may be enlightening to gather up, for example, all the episodes of Murder, She Wrote in which “the wife did it,” we would never do this. We start at the beginning and, if we like what we see, we proceed to the end. Form criticism is like viewing TV shows in terms of “the wife did it” episodes versus “it was the butler all along.” However, a well-written TV series has an overarching narrative, so that if you were to plunge into the middle of the third season, you would not understand some of the storyline without first going back to view the first and second seasons. Canonical criticism, or my horizontal axis of interpretation, considers the psalms in this way: in light of their placement in the rest of the Psalter.

Psalm 88 and Book III

Psalm 88 comes as the penultimate psalm of the third book in the Psalter. Books I and II are replete with psalms of David, ending with a psalm attributed to Solomon and with the curious note “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (כְּלוֹי תְפָלֹת דּוֹדְּ בֶן־יְשֵׁי). Indeed, though Davidic psalms will reappear in Book IV (and especially Book V), the only Davidic psalm in Book III is Ps 86. Perhaps Book III is concerned with the continuing line of David, which is ultimately responsible for the exile.42 The overall tone of Book III, beginning with Ps 73 and ending with Ps 89, is thus dark and questioning,43 yet it is not without hope.44 The book ends, however, with Pss 88 and 89.

Psalms 88 and 89

Psalms 88 and 89, taken together, are the lowest point in the entire Psalter. Psalm 88 is the darkest individual lament; Ps 89 is the darkest complaint of the nation.

At the conclusion of the third book, immediately preceding the break observed separating the earlier and later books, the impression left is one of a covenant remembered, but a covenant failed. The Davidic covenant introduced in Ps 2 has come to nothing and the combination of three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.45

43 Cf. Pss 73:1–2; 74:1, 9–11; 77:8–10; 79; 80:5–8; 83, etc.
44 E.g., Pss 75–76, 78, 81, 84.
45 Gerald Henry Wilson, The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter (SBLDS 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press,
The two psalms are tied together not only in terms of placement and tone, but they are also connected by their superscriptions and by shared vocabulary: “faithfulness,” “covenant love,” “to remember,” “slain,” “to rise up,” “righteousness,” “to oppress,” “to reject,” “to hide,” “salvation,” “wrath,” “to praise,” “wonder” and “Sheol.” Though Ps 89 begins on a note of praise (v. 2), it ends (before the doxology that closes Book III) with a questioning of Yahweh’s covenant love and with a plea for remembrance (vv. 50–52). The ultimate complaints of individual and of community here come together in expressing the depths of individual and national despair.

**Psalms 88–89 and Psalms 1–2**

Psalms 88 and 89, whether as the end of Book III or as the conclusion to an earlier version of the Psalter, seem to enter into dialogue with Ps 1 and 2. Schaefer connects Ps 2 and 89, stating that Ps 89 “stands as the counterpart to Psalm 2 with its divine decree that the anointed is God’s answer to the hostile nations, that human leadership has failed.” Psalm 89 seems then to point back to Ps 2, with its overtones of the world-dominating Davidic ruler, and says “It just ain’t so.” Yahweh’s anointed, rather than ruling from Zion and inheriting or crushing the nations (Ps 2:7–9), is cast off and rejected, suffering Yahweh’s wrath and defeat from his enemies (Ps 89:39–52). Psalms 1 and 88 bear a similar relationship in the sphere of the individual life. In Psalm 1, we are told that blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the scoffers’ seat. Psalm 88 shows a person who, despite all manners of affliction, appears to have a clear conscience. It ain’t so for David, and it ain’t so for the individual psalmist.

It is important to remember that the Psalter does not end with Ps 88 and 89. There is a movement toward the final hallelujah chorus of Ps 146–50, a movement that includes a restored hope in the Davidic covenant. It is equally important, however, to note that Book III does.

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46 As noted above, Ps 88 and 89 are both maskils and are the only psalms in the Psalter associated with an “Ezrahite.”

47 The last word of Ps 89, “your anointed” (מַשִּׁיחך, mᵉšı̂ ḥeḵā), sounds very similar to the “darkness” (מַחְשׁך, maḥšāḵ) that closes Ps 88, further tying them together and accenting the anguish felt in light of the (apparently) failed covenant.

48 Schaefer, Psalms, 217.

49 “Furthermore, it is not said, as it is in some other Psalms, 6 and 38 for example, that the difficult situation is to be understood as discipline for wrongdoing. What makes this psalm remarkable is the unrelenting concentration on the victim driven to the brink of the realm of death by the fearful onslaught of the anger of Yahweh,” Culley, “Psalm 88,” 299.

50 Brueggemann notes a similar dialog between Ps 73 and 1; cf. Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience.”

51 Cf. Ps 132 and the reappearance of a large number of Davidic psalms in Ps 138–145.

52 Although “there is a general shift in the Psalter from disorientation to reorientation/orientation . . .
The Intersection of the Axes: Toward Interpretation and Appropriation

Psalm 88 in Yehud
As I move toward interpretation in light of the above, it is appropriate to ask what Ps 88 may have meant to a postexilic audience in Yehud. Imagine the situation: the community has experienced punitive exile from the land covenanted to their fathers; the throne of David lies in ruins; the number of returned exiles is sickeningly few;53 and the temple, which has been rebuilt, is a lamentable comparison to what once stood on the site.54 Psalms 88 and 89, for the individual and for the community, are uniquely suited to express and to pray through the postexilic disappointment.

Psalm 88 in the Church
How does the church make use of Ps 88 in these days after the coming of Christ? There are two particular areas into which Ps 88 continues to speak: eschatology and pastoral counselling.

Eschatology
There is a very real sense in which the church is called to live in light of the return of Christ.55 The Lord has tarried long, however, and indeed, much of what Christ has secured on behalf of his people is presently enjoyed.56 The tendency of the church is thus often to err on the side of either a “not yet” or an “already.” Psalm 88, standing at the low point in the Psalter, reminds us of the “not yet,” and it can be appropriated to voice our groanings as we await the consummation. However, as I mentioned, the Psalter does not stop there, and thus we are reminded of the hope that awaits us in the last day.

Pastoral Counselling
Psalm 88 has a special potency for pastoral counselling because it recognizes darkness, discouragement, depression, and unanswered prayer as genuine features of a believer’s walk with God. There is a tendency in the church to shun believers who battle depression, just as the psalmist himself experienced, or to address such a person with harsh words about the sin of unbelief.57 The Psalter, however, is an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, even what has been called “the dark night

53 Cf. Ezra 2.
55 See, for example, 1 Thess 5:1–11.
56 Cf. Eph 1.
of the soul.” Those in darkness can find comfort in Psalm 88, for they need not believe themselves alone in their experience: “We should rather rest assured that the Spirit of God, by the mouth of Heman, has here furnished us with a form of prayer for encouraging all the afflicted who are, as it were, on the brink of despair to come to himself.” Furthermore, the example of Ps 88 encourages us to continue in prayer even when we feel such prayers are bouncing off the ceiling, for “To be Israel [or the Church] means to address God, even in God’s unresponsive absence.”

The Garden of Gethsemane
What does Ps 88 tell us about Jesus? The psalm is often connected with Good Friday, and it accords well with the experience of Jesus, who, in the garden of Gethsemane, was alone in the dark, in anguish and in prayer, because his “friends” had fallen asleep when he has asked them to watch with him in prayer. It is easy to imagine this prayer on his lips. This, too, is where we may most take courage: Jesus has not only prayed but has also lived this psalm for his people! Christ has hallowed this darkest of places.

Conclusion
Psalm 88 is a beautifully crafted, frighteningly dark, refreshingly real prayer with power to comfort the despairing and the brokenhearted and to build up the church as she reflects on the life and death of her Saviour. It is the most extreme of laments and joins with Ps 89 in challenging a simple, naïve appropriation of Pss 1 and 2. It reminds us of the “not yet” in face of the “already,” that all is not streets of gold and sea of crystal. It also presses upon us, though, that the only one who can make it right, the one who has the whole world (and thus our very sufferings) in his hand, is the one with whom we have to do.

59 Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms, 81.
Appendix 1: Text and Notes

Fourteen psalms are identified in the superscription as both a שיר (song) and a מזמור (psalm): Pss 30, 48, 65–68, 75–76, 83, 89–88, 92, 98, 108.

Fifty-five psalms are designated למנצח (“to the director”): Pss 4–6, 8–9, 11–14, 18–22, 31, 36, 39–42, 44–47, 49, 51–62, 64–70, 75–77, 80–81, 84–85, 88, 109, 139–140. The term is also used in Hab 3:19.

Ps 53 is the only other psalm with this designation.

HALOT suggests “acquaintance” for this Pual participle of ידוע; however, the word is also used of kinfolk (Ruth 2:1), and the מי(ו)דעים of the house of Ahab are among those killed by Jehu in 2 Kgs 10:11. Since Jehu himself, not to mention most of those who joined in his coup, would have been “acquaintances” of the house of Ahab, something more like “intimate friend” (in line with HALOT’s other suggestion, “confidant”) seems a far superior translation. Cf. Anderson, The Book of Psalms, 627.

אפורה is a hapax legomenon, apparently an Imperfect of פוג, which appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The reading of lxx suggests “I am in despair,” but many emend the text to reflect פוג, hence “I am numb.” 4QPs has אפורה, perhaps from פור, meaning “I shake” or “I am broken.” My own translation will follow lxx.
Appendix 2: Translation

1 A song. A psalm. Of the sons of Korah, to the director. According to Mahalath, for affliction. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

2 O Yahweh, God of my salvation, by day I cry out, and at night before you!

3 Let my prayer come before you; Bend your ear to my cry of lament!

4 For my soul is stuffed with evils, And my life draws near to Sheol.

5 I am reckoned with those who descend to the Pit, I am like a man devoid of strength,

6 “Free” among the dead, Like the slain lying in the grave, Whom you remember no more— Rather, they are cut off from your hand.

7 You set me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths.

8 Your wrath lies heavy on me, And with all your waves you oppress me. Selah.

9 You removed my intimate friends from me, You made me a horror to them. Shut up, I cannot get out.

10 My eye wastes away from misery.

   I call to you, O Yahweh, every day! I spread out my palms to you.

11 Will you work a wonder for the dead? Will departed spirits rise up to give you praise? Selah.

12 Is your covenant love recounted in the grave? Your faithfulness in Abaddon?

13 Will your wonders be known in the darkness? Or your righteousness in the land of forgetting?
14 But as for me, I cry to you, O Yahweh,  
    And in the morning my prayer will go up to you.

15 Why, O Yahweh, will you reject my soul?  
    Why will you hide your face from me?

16 Oppressed am I, and dying from youth.  
    I suffer your terrors; I despair.

17 Your furies pass over me,  
    Your terrors destroy me.

18 They envelope me like the waters all day long,  
    They converge on me together.

19 You have withdrawn from me both friend and companion;  
    My intimate friends are darkness.\footnote{Cf. NIV: “the darkness is my closest friend.” See also Job 17:13–15.}