

PSALM 88

Translation by Marshall H. Lewis

A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah.
To the choirmaster.
According to Mahalath Leannoth.
A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

1. O LORD, God of my salvation,
By day I cry out,
In the night, before you.
2. Let my prayer come before you,
Bend your ear to my ringing cry.
3. For my being is saturated in miseries
And my life reaches to touch Sheol.
4. I am accounted with those descending to the Pit;
I am like a man without strength.
5. Among the dead is my [bed],
Like the pierced ones lying in the grave,
Whom you do not remember again,
For they are cut off from your hand.
6. You have put me in the lowest pit,
In dark places, in depths.
7. Your burning anger has lain upon me
And with all your waves you have afflicted me.
Selah.
8. You have caused those knowing me to be far from me.
You have made me an abomination to them.
I am shut in and I cannot go out.
9. My eye has grown dim through affliction.
I call to you, O LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.
10. Do you work wonders for the dead?
Will the shades rise up and praise you?
Selah.

11. Is your loyalty recounted in the grave?
Or your steadfastness in the [place of] destruction?
12. Are your wonders known in the darkness?
Or your righteousness in the land of oblivion?
13. But to you, O LORD, I cry,
And in the morning my prayer comes before you.
14. Why, O LORD, do you reject me?
Do you hide your face from me?
15. I am afflicted and dying.
From my youth I bore your terrors.
I grow numb.
16. The burnings of your anger have passed over me;
Your terrors have annihilated me.
17. They surround me like waters all the day,
In unison they close in upon me.
18. You have caused lover and friend to be far from me.
Those knowing me, darkness.

The Dead Do Not Praise:
An Examination of Psalm 88

Marshall H. Lewis

Psalm 88 is like no other psalm. There is nothing like it in the Psalter, nothing like it in the rest of the Bible, nothing like it among Israelite and Judean noncanonical psalms, nothing like it among Babylonian and Egyptian psalms.¹ It is unique in its utter hopelessness, its complete lack of praise, its unmitigated blame of God. Brueggemann goes so far as to call it "an embarrassment to conventional faith."² Not even the Book of Job is as dark. At least God responds to Job; here, the cry of the psalmist disappears into the void. God is invoked, but remains absent. This is the challenge in interpreting Psalm 88. This paper will begin with a description of the psalm's general characteristics (classification, date of composition, and so forth), continue with a verse by verse discussion stressing exegetical points, and conclude with a general discussion offering one possible understanding of the psalm. The translation used throughout is my own.

All modern scholars agree that Psalm 88 belongs to the category of individual lament, although some earlier scholars (Wellhausen, Briggs) considered it to be a national lament.³ It shares this classification with Psalms 3-7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42-43, 51, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69-71, 86, 102, 109, 120, 130, and 140-143.⁴ Of these, it is most similar to Psalm

¹ Westermann, C., *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (translated by K.R. Crim and R.N. Soulen). Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981, pp. 37, 45, 169.

² Brueggemann, W., *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, p. 78.

³ McCullough, W.S. and Poteat, E.M., *The Book of Psalms* in *The Interpreter's Bible*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956, p. 473.

⁴ Toombs, L.E., *The Psalms* in Laymon, C.M., ed., *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 257.

22; both share accusatory questions.⁵ According to Brueggemann's classification system, it is a psalm of disorientation.⁶ Even more specifically, Seybold believes it to belong to a group of sickness and healing psalms, which also include Psalms 38 and 41.⁷ Its most singular characteristic is that, unlike other laments, Psalm 88 contains no degree of praise at all, no confession of trust, no assurance of being heard, no vow of praise. Further, there are no attacks by enemies, no sins to confess,⁸ no explanation of God's unresponsiveness, no speculation.⁹ It is also noted for its many names for Sheol.¹⁰

Because of its similarity to the Book of Job, *The Interpreter's Bible* suggests that it was composed in the Persian or early Greek era;¹¹ however, Westermann notes that early laments were characterized by complaints against God with the roles of the enemy and of the psalmist remaining in the background.¹² As time passed this type of lament disappeared, only to reappear independent of prayer in a late period, but with the role of the enemy firmly established.¹³ Moreover, the term מַלְאָכָה, which both Briggs and Gunkel considered to be an Aramaism, has since been found to have an ancient Ugaritic counterpart.¹⁴ Other Canaanite archaisms have been mentioned by Albright.¹⁵ Given these arguments, at least some version of Psalm 88 may be seen as earlier rather than later.

Psalm 88 belongs to Book Three of the Psalter, which is generally regarded as a collection of psalms of the Temple singers.¹⁶ More specifically, Westermann identifies Psalm 88

⁵ Westermann, op. cit., p. 185.

⁶ Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 21.

⁷ Kraus, H.J., *Psalms 60-150* (translated by H.C. Oswald). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978, 1989, 1993, p. 192.

⁸ McCullough and Poteat, op. cit., p. 473.

⁹ Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁰ Dahood, M., *Psalms 51-100* in The Anchor Bible Series. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964, 1968, p. 302.

¹¹ McCullough and Poteat, op. cit., p. 474.

¹² Westermann, op. cit., pp. 199, 201.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 206, 208.

¹⁴ Dahood, op. cit., p. 303.

¹⁵ Kraus, op. cit., p. 192.

¹⁶ Boadt, L., *Reading the Old Testament*. New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984, p. 280.

as part of an appendix to the Elohist Psalter (Psalms 42-83). The appendix includes Psalms 84-88. These units are joined with the Psalms of David (Psalms 3-41) and both sets are then framed by the royal psalms 2 and 89.¹⁷ Thus, this unit of the Psalter may be diagrammed as:

$$2+[3 \text{ through } 41]+[(42 \text{ through } 83)+(84-88)]+89$$

This may give us some clue as to the *Sitz im Leben*. According to Gunkel, the *Sitz im Leben* of the individual lament is the cult. Westermann disagrees, however, and states that prayer, not cult, is the correct *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁸ Westermann is probably more correct in regard to Psalm 88. Here we may notice that there is little allusion to the cult and, in any event, the cult would have been completely powerless to help the psalmist. A problem arises, however, when we consider that the Elohist Psalter includes a second set of the Psalms of David (51-72) framed by two collections of community psalms. The psalms of the appendix continue as community psalms, yet Psalm 88 is individual. We will return to this problem later in the paper. Brueggemann suggests a three-part structure for Psalm 88, each beginning with an appeal to the Lord (vv. 1, 9b, 13). For the sake of continuity, I will follow his structure in my discussion; however, I have also been struck by the similarities between verses 8a and 18 and speculate that the psalm may be divided into two parts, each ending with these verses and their similar refrain (You have caused those knowing me to be far from me). A number of parallel bicola are present as are repetitive synonyms. Finally, the meter is irregular (as is appropriate to the mood of the psalm), although the 3+3 generally dominates.¹⁹

The psalm opens with a title:

A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah.
To the choirmaster.

¹⁷ Westermann, op. cit., pp. 254-255.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 24, 165.

According to Mahalath Leannoth.
A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

The identification of the sons of Korah is unclear; the Hebrew Bible contains varied information about them. Of greatest relevance to the Psalter, the Korahites are mentioned in II Chronicles 20:19 as a guild of singers. Kraus assumes that they were editors of a book of psalms which has been absorbed into our Psalter. He also mentions that they have been associated with a group of specific statements about Zion in their psalms,²⁰ but this appears to be unrelated to Psalm 88. The phrase translated here as "to the choirmaster" is also ambiguous. I have followed a common translation, although it has been translated variously as "for the musical performance," "for making the face to shine," and "from him who excels." This title is used in 55 psalms.²¹ The term "maskil" has traditionally been thought of as a teaching poem, though Kraus suggests that the evidence better supports the concept of an artistic or wisdom psalm.²² The Hebrew root of this word means to be prudent. The psalms prefaced by this title are varied; no unifying theme or type has been identified. Heman is one of three (along with Ethan and Asaph) appointed by David to be in charge of the music of the house of the LORD. Although many psalms have been credited to Asaph, only this psalm has been credited to Heman. (Ethan also has only one credit.)²³ Perhaps this indicates something distinctive about this psalm. The words transliterated as Mahalath Leannoth are more mysterious. Actual translation has not been determined, but the root of Mahalath means sickness or disease while the root of Leannoth means to be bowed down or afflicted. Thus, we may surmise that the song is to be sung according to the mood of one afflicted with disease.

¹⁹ Kraus, *op. cit.*, p. 192 and McCullough and Poteat, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

²⁰ Kraus, H.J., *Psalms 1-59* (translated by H.C. Oswald). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978, 1988, 1993, p. 438-439.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

²³ McCullough and Poteat, *op. cit.*, p. 472.

The first part of the lament begins in verse 1 and runs through verse 9:

O LORD, God of my salvation,
By day I cry out; in the night before you.
Let my prayer come before you;
Bend your ear to my ringing cry.
For my being is saturated in miseries
And my life reaches to touch Sheol.

I am accounted with those descending to the Pit.
I am like a man without strength.
Among the dead is my [bed],
Like the pierced ones lying in the grave
Whom you do not remember again
For they are cut off from your hand.

You have put me in the lowest pit,
In dark places, in depths.
Your burning anger has lain upon me
And with all your waves you have afflicted me.
Selah.

You have caused those knowing me to be far from me.
You have made me an abomination to them.
I am shut in and I cannot go out.

Verse 1 opens with a *merismus* of day and night, indicating that at all times the psalmist cries out to the LORD. (I follow the tradition of writing LORD in capital letters to indicate the use of the Tetragrammaton.) The Revised Standard Version (RSV) corrects verse 1 to read: "O LORD, my God, I call for help by day; I cry out in the night before thee." The editors of the RSV believe that the Masoretic Text has been corrupted, but I am not convinced of this. It is true that the Hebrew of verse 1 is a bit awkward, but perhaps it is meant to be. I imagine the psalmist

choking on his words as he cries out in despair. One does not always use perfect grammar in times of great distress. The opening cry of Psalm 88 may intentionally reflect this.

It is also interesting to note that the petition of verse 1 is phrased in the completed (perfect) tense, whereas in verse 2 and following the psalmist picks up the incompleted (imperfect) tense. This pattern also occurs in verse 9 and verse 13. I have been tempted to translate this into the English past tense: "By day I cried out...Let my prayer come before you." This would reflect an even greater sense of despair, as if the psalmist no longer cries to the LORD, lacks the strength to do so, and yet wishes (hopelessly) that his prayer will yet reach God.

Verses 2 and 3 further highlight the psalmist's despair. The verb הִטָּה suggests that God must bend down, even stretch down to hear the plea of the psalmist, despite the fact that his cry is a רִנְתִּי, a loud, ringing cry, as may be used in distress, summons, or call to wisdom. The Aramaic cognate also has the meaning of the twang of a bowstring, which might be considered a quieter, even mournful sound. Further, it is the נִפְשִׁי of the psalmist that is שָׂבַע full to the point of being completely saturated, unable to absorb even one more misery. "For I am saturated in miseries" and, as a result, the life of the psalmist הִגִּיעַ to Sheol. This is often translated as "draws near." The root means to touch, reach, or strike. Here, the Hiph'il form is causative; his life causes him to reach to Sheol.

The word for man in verse 4, בְּנִיבָר, is not the usual word for man, nor can it be translated inclusively. It is the man of valor, the warrior, the strong man, defined as separate from women, children and non-combatants whom it is his duty to protect and defend. Thus all the more poignant is the fact that the psalmist is a strong man without strength, a warrior without ally,²⁴ a man of valor unable to do his duty, unable to protect his family.

²⁴ "Ally" may, in fact, be a better translation in this context as אֵיל also means "help."

The only point at which I have departed from the Masoretic Text is in verse 5, which reads, *בְּמִתֵּיָם הַפְּשִׁי*, "among the dead, free." I have followed the translation of Nötscher who relates this term to "my bed" in Ezekiel 27:20, despite the fact that this text is uncertain.²⁵ This is also consistent with the motif of Sheol as a place of beds in Job 17:13, Psalm 139:7 and Proverbs 7:27.²⁶ However, the case may also be made that the Masoretic Text is correct. Perhaps the psalmist believes that only in death will he find freedom.

The "pierced ones" of verse 5 are those who died in battle, perhaps even the friends of this man of valor. Yet, for all their mighty deeds, once dead, they are no longer remembered by the LORD. Death is understood as complete separation from God. This is expressed in verses 5 and 6 where parallel lines drive the point home.

The accusation against God is first made in verse 7: it is the *הַמְתֵּן* of God which is the cause of the psalmist's complaint. The root means to be hot; the noun means both heat and rage. Thus, the intensity of God's anger is indicated vividly in the superlative degree. The reason for the anger remains unknown. Again, the psalmist confesses no sin, complains against no enemies; he merely endures the unexplained wrath of God.

Verse 8 indicates the separateness of the psalmist, again with the responsibility belonging to God. Similar words are repeated at the end of the psalm. God has caused the psalmist's friends to be far from him. He is an abomination to them. Those ritually unclean were required to be separated from the community (Leviticus 13:9); other examples occur in Psalm 31:11 and, most dramatically, in Job 19:13-22 and Job 30:9-23.²⁷ The word *תועבות* has a ritual sense; the sacrifice was regarded as an abomination after the sins of Israel were placed upon it. In verse 7 the burning anger of God is placed upon the psalmist as the hands of the priest are placed upon

²⁵ Kraus, op. cit., *Psalms 60-150*, p. 191.

²⁶ Dahood, op. cit., 304.

²⁷ Miller, P.D., *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, p. 59.

the sacrifice. One cannot help but be reminded of the suffering servant motif expressed in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Although I have yet to find a commentator who has placed Psalm 88 into that tradition, the use of these words in verses 7 and 8 seem to make such an interpretation possible. It may even give us some insight into the silence of God in this psalm.

The next part of the psalm begins in verse 9 and continues through verse 12:

My eye has grown dim through affliction.

I call to you, O LORD, every day;

I spread out my hands to you.

Do you work wonders for the dead?

Will the shades rise up and praise you?

Selah.

Is your loyalty recounted in the grave?

Or your steadfastness in the [place of] destruction?

Are your wonders known in the darkness?

Or your righteousness in the land of oblivion?

Again in verse 9 the psalmist uses the completed tense in his cry to the LORD. Note the pain if we translate:

My eye has grown dim through affliction.

I called to you, O LORD, every day;

I spread out my hands to you.

A series of six rhetorical questions follow, which serve to inform God of his loss if the psalmist dies. Verses 10 and 12 speak of the "wonders" of God, the acts by which God is made known in history.²⁸ Verse 11 reminds us of two critical characteristics of God through which he acts in covenant -- **חֶסֶד** and **אֱמִּןָּן** -- the loyalty and steadfastness of the LORD to his people. The righteousness of God is mentioned in verse 12. One meaning of this word is God's righteousness

²⁸ Boadt, op. cit., p.12.

in government as the king of Israel, the dispenser of justice. The word יָדָן occurs next in the verse, perhaps implying that this is exactly the sense of צָדִיק implied. That justice seems remote to our psalmist.

This section of the psalm is also noteworthy for the number of terms for the underworld - the grave, the place of destruction (Abaddon), the darkness, the land of oblivion. Brueggemann notes that these six questions contain six references to death or to the underworld as well as six words describing the LORD's usual manner of working²⁹ -- a stark contrast indeed, offering no explanation for the LORD's absence in this case.

The Interpreter's Bible, strangely, sees words of hope in these questions. Taking these questions not as rhetorical, not as angry, McCullough and Poteat seem to imply that the answers to these questions are actually "yes" and that the psalmist is expressing hope for immortality.³⁰ This reading, however, is clearly a later interpretation and is inconsistent with the early Hebrew understanding of death as the termination of one's relationship with God.³¹

The latter part of the psalm begins in verse 13 and continues to the end:

But to you, O LORD, I cry
And in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Why, O LORD, do you reject me?
Do you hide your face from me?

I am afflicted and dying.
From my youth I bore your terrors.
I grow numb.

The burnings of your anger have passed over me;
Your terrors have annihilated me.
They surround me like waters all the day,

²⁹ Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

³⁰ McCullough and Poteat, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

³¹ Toombs, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

In unison they close in upon me.

You have caused lover and friend to be far from me,
Those knowing me, darkness.

Verse 13 refers to prayer coming before the LORD in the morning. This may be a cultic reference, but normally the reference would be to salvation coming in the morning.³² For this reason, I have not interpreted this psalm as clearly belonging to the cult. Yet, here again, we see ritual references, particularly in verses 16 and 17.

In verse 15, I have translated וַיָּמָוֶה as "and dying," though the RSV and others render "close to death." Direct translation as a participle seems more powerful to me and is consistent with the psalmist already living as though dead, as one from whom the LORD's face is already hidden. This verse is also the reason that commentators believe the psalmist suffered from a disease for all or most of his life, perhaps leprosy or palsy. The *hapax legomenon*, הִפְּנִיחָה translated in the RSV as "I am helpless," I have translated as "I grow numb." To me, this seems better to fit the apathy that comes with increasing despair and hopelessness.

One again, in verse 18, we have the isolation of the psalmist expressed, repeating the refrain from verse 8. The last line is difficult in Hebrew and has been rendered "my companions are in darkness" and "darkness is my companion."³³ I tend to favor the last interpretation. The ones knowing the psalmist have been removed by the LORD; the ones knowing him now are no one, or Sheol, or darkness. Again the Hebrew is broken, as it is in verse 1, I believe in recognition of profound despair. As the psalmist choked when he began his lament, so now he chokes at the close. His plea as been for naught. His last word, darkness.

³² Ibid., p. 257.

³³ McCullough and Poteat, op. cit., p. 478.

How is such a dreary piece of work to be understood? Some scholars seem determined to find hope in this psalm where there obviously is none. McCullough and Poteat head this section of *The Interpreter's Bible* as "A Stubborn Faith."³⁴ In the same section they quote A.F. Kirkpatrick's description of Psalm 88 as a "noble example of faith."³⁵ Brueggemann notes that it is not a psalm of *mute* depression, finding hope in the fact that the psalmists still speaks.³⁶ Westermann, in a footnote, says that traces of a vow of praise may be present in verses 10-12.³⁷ Why is there such reluctance to accept the darkness of this psalm on its own terms? I will grant that one may find hope implied, but only from the fact that Psalm 88 is included in the Psalter. Hope is a theme of the entire collection. According to Westermann, an oracle of salvation appears in Psalm 81, part of the appendix including Psalm 88.³⁸ However, hope is absent from this psalm. Rather than deny this, we should learn from it. Why is hope absent? Given the Hebrew tradition of always ending a psalm on a positive note, why was this psalm allowed to be an exception? Why was it retained the way it is? If we can answer these questions, we will be well on our way to uncovering the purpose of Psalm 88, a deeper understanding of its *Sitz im Leben*.

The dangers of psychological exegesis are well known.³⁹ McCullough and Poteat seem to suggest that "diagnosing" the psalmist means to dismiss him as a "self-deceived psychopath."⁴⁰ Still, the emotional pain of Psalm 88 is a human experience that transcends time, transcends culture. In this unique case, psychology may help us understand this psalm more fully.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Brueggemann, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

³⁷ Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³⁹ Theissen, G. *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987 (English translation by J. P. Galvin), p. 1, on the dangers of psychological exegesis.

First of all, Psalm 88 suggests that it is about terminal illness. The psalmist suggests that he has had this illness since his youth. Brueggemann reminds us that disorientation results from changed circumstances,⁴¹ so we may wonder why the psalmist wrote when he did. Had his condition worsened? Remember the participle form used in verse 15: "I am dying," he writes. In verses 4b and 5a he notes, "My life reaches to touch Sheol. I am accounted with those descending to the Pit." It may be that the psalmist realized his time was short; Psalm 88 may have been his last (or only) composition. Reverence for the dead may be one reason the psalm was allowed to stand untouched, at least initially. More than his illness, however, his hopeless and helpless mood dominates this psalm. It has been noted clinically that depression is a common and expected result of physical illness. At one time, it may have served as a way to force humans to rest when they were sick. Depression is also related to normal grief,⁴² as experienced by terminal patients.⁴³

Acknowledging the danger of applying modern diagnostic criteria to a small document written in another culture untold centuries ago, one still cannot help but be stuck by the similarities. Modern criteria of depression which the psalmist mentions include: worry over physical health (v. 3), fatigue (v.4), loss of ability to work (v. 4), thoughts of death (v.5), decrease in social functioning (v. 8), and apathy (v. 15).⁴⁴ Noted depression expert Aaron T. Beck describes the condition in this way: "By what perversity does depression mock the most hallowed notions of human nature and biology? The instinct for self-preservation and the maternal instincts appear to vanish. Basic biological drives such as hunger and the sexual drive are extinguished. Sleep, the easer of all woes, is thwarted. Social instincts such as attraction to

⁴⁰ True psychopaths are generally not depressed and lack the emotional ability to produce of psalm of such deep feeling.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴² American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed.* (DSM-IV). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 326.

⁴³ Miller, op. cit., p. 11.

other people, love, and affection evaporate. The 'pleasure principle' and 'reality principle,' the goals of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, are turned around. Not only is the capacity for enjoyment stifled, but the victims of this odd malady appear driven to behave in ways that enhance their suffering. Capacity to respond with mirth to humorous situations or with anger to situations that would ordinarily infuriate seems lost."⁴⁵ The American Psychiatric Association notes that in some cultures depression may be experienced largely in somatic terms, rather than in feelings of sadness or despair.⁴⁶ Miller notes that the use of sickness as a metaphor is common in the Hebrew Bible lament, whether an actual sickness is present or not.⁴⁷ Brueggemann agrees, stating that imagery, especially about death, is often overstated.⁴⁸ Therefore, we may conclude that the psalmist's emotional state is the most sure observation that can be made from Psalm 88, even more sure than the state of the psalmist's physical health.

Would a person in such an emotional state seek help from the Temple? Toombs hypothesizes that the one function of the Temple was to hear extra-ordinary complaints, such as complaints against God for affliction. The petitioner would state his case, declare his innocence and invite the scrutiny of God. If accused by enemies, he could denounce them. After spending the night in the Temple, a divine sign would be given by dream, priest or prophet. If the petitioner was found innocent, that is, if salvation came in the morning, he would pay his vows -- a thank offering and public testimony to the goodness of God.⁴⁹ If the petitioner were free of emotional disturbance, this hypothetical ritual may well have served a beneficial purpose. Lacking a causative understanding of disease, ancient peoples quite naturally attributed it to God

⁴⁴ DSM-IV, op. cit., pp. 322-327.

⁴⁵ Beck, A.T., *The Development of Depression: A Cognitive Model* in Friedman, R.J. and Katz, M.M., *The Psychology of Depression: Contemporary Theory and Research*. Washington, D.C.: V.H. Winston and Sons, 1974, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁶ DSM-IV, op. cit., p. 324.

⁴⁷ Miller, op. cit., p. 59.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴⁹ Toombs, op. cit., p. 257.

or to sinful behavior. Believing that God forgave them at the Temple may even have brought about some faith healings. However, if the petitioner were depressed the ritual would likely not have been very effective. Endogenous depression may arise from no environmental circumstance or loss at all.⁵⁰ There may be no enemy, no disease, no guilt to confess.

The natural reaction to a depressed friend is to try to cheer up the friend. This is usually done by remembering happy times, trying to get her mind on something else, and so forth. Clinical experience demonstrates that this does not work with depressed clients. In fact, this may only serve to drive the client deeper into depression because it is proof that no one understands her. Brueggemann is wrong when he says that being heard is enough.⁵¹ It is not. One must also be understood. To understand the one depressed, the clinician must place some value on the message of depression as it stands, without trying to change or modify it. The client will often begin to improve after realizing that her experience is being given value by someone else. This is the beginning of recovery from depression.⁵²

Knowing this, the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 88 starts to seem less of a problem. Suppose a petitioner comes to the Temple, but the ritual fails. Salvation does not come in the morning. The disease has no cure. Perhaps Psalm 88 was retained for this purpose: to give voice to the supplicant who's prayer is not answered, to give value to the experience of one for whom there is genuinely no help. The priests do not simply throw that one outside the gates of the Temple. (Given the ritual allusions in the psalm, it may even have been composed for this purpose by a priest with some personal experience with depression, hence its identification as a *maskil*.) Perhaps, as Gerstenberger believes, this lament was performed outside the cult, in the circle of

⁵⁰ Sacks, M. H., *Depressive Neurosis* in Cooper, A.M., Frances, A.J. and Sacks, M.H., eds., *Psychiatry: Volume One, The Personality Disorders and Neuroses*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1986, pp. 397-398.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 56.

⁵² Beck, A.T., *Depression: Causes and Treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967, p. 316-317.

family and friends.⁵³ Either way, there is at least understanding and shared grief. It would be wrong to praise God in Psalm 88; doing so would simply prove to the supplicant that there really is no one who understands his plight, no one who can be his voice. It should come as no surprise that Psalm 88 has found use in hospital ministries and pastoral counseling.⁵⁴

Depressed persons understand the problem of evil almost instinctively. They also understand it has no solution. They are benefited by learning that they are valued despite their depression; for that reason we must also value Psalm 88. Our ancestors knew death, disease, disaster, dictatorships. They, therefore, knew depression. So will our grandchildren. Only the names will change. Leprosy and palsy become cancer and heart disease; Antiochus Epiphanes becomes Saddam Hussein. Our psalmist did not retreat from life into fantasies about paradise. He knew God and he believed death would end that relationship. He knew he was dead. The dead do not praise.

⁵³ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 6. This also agrees with Westermann (*op. cit.*, p. 24) who believes that prayer, not cult is the *Sitz im Leben*. Supporting this, we may note that the cult is powerless to help in Psalm 88.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

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