
Psalm 88 within its Contexts (Historical, Literary, Canonical, Modern, and Psychological): Do they help with Interpretation?

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Abstract

Psalm 88, considered ‘the darkest psalm’, is often avoided by ‘the average reader of Scripture’ and considered ‘outside of normative theology’ by many scholars. The big problem is that the lamenter accuses God of breaking the covenant, and God does not answer the lamenter. The psalm ends without resolution. Moreover, the complainant claims to be innocent, thereby raising the issue of a person suffering unjustly (before an all-powerful, loving God). Biblical texts like this force us to look wider and deeper, to gain an understanding of the text’s message and its role within the canon.

In this paper, the wider view is considered by studying the psalm within five contexts – historical, literary, canonical, within the modern world, and in the light of a psychological theory. The first has little to offer (of certainty) but the literary view highlights key themes. The canonical view shows how it critiques Ps 1, gives a climax to Book III (with Ps 89) and prepares for Book IV, and connects with Job and Jesus. The modern context brings new insights: the reality of the Holocaust has prompted deep searching and an adjustment of theological thinking by several scholars. And the psychological perspective (from the fact that the psalmist does not experience the identity disintegration common in such situations) highlights the crux of the psalm – his covenant relationship with YHWH as the most important, and only, element that holds in such extreme times.

In essence, the psalm (in context) shows us that innocent people suffer, but God is not unjust. However, sufferers should protest and their pain should be acknowledged as truth. Moreover, meaning should not be squeezed out of suffering, for humanity’s inability to comprehend fully is a reality. Nevertheless, the psalm gives space and permission for sufferers to safely protest with a fellow-sufferer.

Keywords: Psalms of Lament; Biblical Lament; Covenantal Theology; Literary Studies; Psychological Hermeneutics; Holocaust; Chronic Illness; Canonical Hermeneutics; Canonical Interpretation

Introduction

Ps 88 is well known to be an enigmatic psalm, one without resolution and which ends with the single word *darkness*. Many scholars shy away from addressing the theological implications of Ps 88 because it does not seem to match ‘normative theology’. God does not answer the lamenter. The poem ends in darkness, and there is no assurance that the darkness will disappear. Harper (nd:262) argues that “these uncomfortable bits of the Old Testament force us to think differently because they challenge our sheltered

theologies and expose our shallow view of God.” The lack of an answer in Ps 88 indicates that something beyond human understanding is at play.

Indeed, biblical texts like Ps 88 require us to ‘look wider’, to gain an understanding of the text’s message. Towards this end, the psalm is viewed through various lenses to ascertain if together some clarity might emerge. The focus is on viewing the various interpretations in the light of one another. Thus the methodology is largely an analysis of literature from diverse views rather than an in-depth analysis following one perspective.

The first lens, the historical context (as determined from the superscription and references in the poem) is not very clear, and does not have much to offer. The literary context, an important lens when understanding a poem, is more helpful, indicating the highpoint of the poem (at the end), the increasingly dire condition of the psalmist, but also the importance of the covenant to the speaker, his one hope and the reason for his “hanging on”. The canonical context is also of value, seeing Ps 88 in relation to Ps 89 (closing Book III), and providing the questions which Book IV “answers”. Further within the canon of the entire Scriptures, Ps 88 serves to highlight the possibility of unrelieved suffering as a believer’s earthly lot (as seen too in Job, Jesus, and others).

Viewing Ps 88 through a modern lens, in the context of the Holocaust and of chronic illness, the same conclusion is reached: severe suffering cannot be understood. The final lens in this study is that of Psychological Hermeneutics. Betrayal Trauma Theory is used to evaluate the psychological impact of sensing betrayal (as seems to be case of the psalmist in Ps 88). However, in Ps 88, the speaker does not show “identity confusion” or a re-arranging of truth to “make sense”. (Rather he admits he is *in darkness*.) Further, he *contends* with God, recognising that biblical lament is the way covenant people interact with YHWH when they are confused or frustrated. His behaviour is based on his covenant relationship, as seen in the first word of his prayer.

Together the various contexts clarify that the lamenter’s relationship with YHWH, based on the covenant, is what enables him to press on through extreme circumstances. The different lenses highlight various insights which are summarised at the end, indicating that much value accrues from viewing a psalm in more than one context.

Historical context

Information from the superscription

The superscription for Ps 88 mentions that this is “A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.”¹ Heman was known as a singer and liturgist.² In 1 Kings 5:11, he is mentioned along with Ethan the Ezrahite (mentioned in Ps 89:1) as one of the famous wise men of Solomon’s reign.³ The reference *Mahalath Leannoth* is not understood although it probably indicates a musical style appropriate for lament (Maré 2014:179-180).⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:390) argue that the noun carries the meaning “illness”, and thus the expression could possibly mean “to be sung in a depressed / muffled voice.”

¹ Psalm 88 begins with one of the longest titles, or superscriptions, in the Psalter – perhaps suggesting “the importance of this extraordinary psalm to the community” (Goldingay 2007:645).

² Cf. 1 Chr 2:6; 6:18-23; 15:17, 19; 16:41-42.

³ See also 1 Chr 25:5.

⁴ See Tate (1990:394-395) for a discussion of possible theories on the meaning of the expression.

Is the speaker sick?

The speaker's references to illness and abandonment (vv. 8-9) would fit the reaction for leprosy because such a person was considered dead (Illman 1991:116). Kraus (1989:192) argues that the speaker in Ps 88 is very ill and probably close to death. However, there are many other distressing situations that would fit the metaphorical language. Goulder (1982:197, 204) opposes the 'sickness theory' on the grounds that much of the language in Ps 88 (as in other Korahite psalms) must be understood literally (not figuratively, as would be required to interpret "depths", "waves" and darkness" as illness). Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:391) agree that "an interpretation that narrows the situation to illness is not adequate to the text of the psalm". Instead, Goulder (1982) proposes that it could describe the redemptive suffering of a priest for the sins of the community.

Date

Scholars find evidence that the psalm was pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic. Some who support the pre-exilic argument (e.g., Tate 1990b:399, 401) claim that Ps 88 was used as part of an atonement liturgy in the ancient sanctuary at Dan. This would place the date before 722 BCE (Chenowith 2011:48-49). Others (e.g. Gerstenberger (2001, 145-146) argue that the psalm was probably used during pre-exilic times in prayer services outside the sanctuary. The strong complaint of the psalm suggests a personal relationship between the psalmist and God. Gerstenberger (2001) argues that the official cult could not offer such intimacy. He proposes that the poem moved from a family/clan context into Jewish congregations where it was prayed during special services on behalf of "hopelessly destitute persons as an expression of extreme despair in the face of grave distress".

Dating the psalm as exilic or post-exilic would mean that the psalmist's accusations of abandonment (e.g., v. 15) are within the context of exile. deClaissé-Walford (2008) asserts that the psalm could be post-exilic, decrying the loss of the nation of Israel with a Davidic king at its head. Buitenweiser (1938:587) claims that such destruction can only refer to the pain of *the nation* during exile (after 538 BCE). Some scholars (e.g., Anderson 1981:623) cite parallels with the book of Job as grounds for a post-exilic dating of Ps 88. Another justification for a post-exilic dating is that tradition maintains that in the post-exilic era, "the Yahweh religion was wrestling with the problem of human mortality" (Haag 1986:169).

As Prinsloo (339:340) observes, the superscription is not very helpful in dating psalms. Further, a psalm is likely to have "functioned variously in different cultic and historical situations". We will have to consider other contexts as the historical one is not very enlightening.

Literary context (within the poem)

To understand a poem well, the poetic and rhetorical features are helpful, indicating the divisions and the peak (or high-point) which reveals the main message. In the next sections, some of these literary elements are discussed with a view towards how they help interpret the main point of the poem.

Key terms

Key terms are those which carry significant theological weight. When they are included in a verse, they give focus and draw attention, and thus are indicators of the main theme of the poem. Some key terms in Ps 88 are the following:

- 1) *YHWH* (vv. 2, 10a, 10b, 14, 15) refers to God of the covenant.⁵ Covenant is the basis of prayers of lament. Thus by using the covenant name, the psalmist is implicitly requesting (and seeking to persuade) YHWH to act according to YHWH's name.
- 2) *Salvation* (v.1 and v.14) probably refers to a deliverance from the current distress. By calling YHWH "God of my salvation" (v.1), there is a sign of hope in the address (Bluj 2015:27).
- 3) In vv.11–13, there are four key terms, viz. אֱהָבָה ('covenant love'⁶), אֱמֻנָה ('faithfulness'), צְדָקָה ('righteousness'), and אֲמוֹנֹת ('wonders'):
 - a) אֱהָבָה ('covenant love') is important in this psalm, as the term is often used in the OT to denote an aspect of God's character as it relates to his covenant with his people (Nellelhorst 2014). The fact that the psalmist refers to אֱהָבָה suggests that he has the covenant in mind, and is reminding God of the core idea of loyalty within this relationship (BDB Brown 1977:338).
 - b) אֱמֻנָה ('faithfulness'): This is "firmness, steadfastness, fidelity" (TWOT; BDB 1977:53). The psalmist questions where God's steadfastness is.
 - c) צְדָקָה ('righteousness'): God's attribute (or the Davidic king and the Messiah) in government or the law (BDB 1977), 842). Again the psalmist questions how God's behaviour is an expression of his righteousness.
 - d) אֲמוֹנֹת ('wonders'): This is defined as something "unusual, hard to be understood, God's dealings with His people" (BDB 1977:810). Thus it is not necessarily something good or welcomed.
- 4) 'Depths' (v.7) presents a terrifying place, "the lowest and the darkest possible" (Bluj 2015:38), connected with the underworld (where dwells Leviathan, a chaos monster, as well as other forces hostile to YHWH). 'Waters' (vv.8, 18) refers to 'raging breakers' (Bluj 2015:39), angers and terrors of YHWH filling every corner of life, leaving no escape.
- 5) 'Know' (יָדָע) and 'being known' (vv.8, 12a, 18b) indicates cognizance or mental awareness of something, usually by means of personal experience (Fenlason 2014). In V.18b, it has the sense of "the ones knowing me" (companions). Thus

⁵ According to a rabbinic tradition, the name "YHWH" emphasises the characteristic of mercy (Barbiero 2010:145–146).

⁶ Translations come from the ESV with a few slight amendments as indicated in Appendix 1.

it suggests that “the people removed from the psalmist are his close friends or members of his family” (Bluj 2015:41). But instead of them being close and supportive of him during his trial, God has made him an ‘abomination’ to them. This term expresses all that is forbidden in faithful worship. Thus the psalmist accuses YHWH of making him to be seen as unclean and thus cut off from all society (Pawlowski 1992/3:168), particularly by those who could have been a help to him.

- 6) ‘Dark’ (vv.7, 10a, 13, 19) implies not being able to see. Linked with this are ‘weak eyes’ (v.10a) and YHWH’s hidden face (v.15), which surrounds the psalmist (Bluj 2015:54). ‘Darkness’ is also linked with ‘know’ יָדַע (vv.13a and 19b) emphasising that all the poet knows (or experiences) is darkness.

*Poetic devices*⁷

Chiasm

The poem uses many chiasmic structures, often within a verse (e.g., v.3; v.12, v.13, v.17). For example, in v.3: A (Let my prayer); B (come before your face.); B’ (Incline your ear); A’ (to my cry). These emphasise the *completeness of the suffering* the poet is experiencing (Wendland 2016:n.5).

Word-play

Ps 88 has many examples of similar words being placed close together to emphasise a point (often the link between them). For example, in v.10a, אָנִי (‘affliction’) and עֵינַי (‘my eyes’) together emphasise that the poet’s affliction results largely from *not being able to see* the end of the suffering, or the reason for it. Also, in v.16, אָנִי (‘afflicted’) and אֲנִי (‘I’), which begin the verse, are homophones; these are followed in the next verse by אָנִי (‘against me’). The three similar words close together underline the pain the poet is experiencing. Sometimes the word-play involves words similar in sound but opposite in meaning, such as קֶבֶר (‘grave’) in v.12 and בֹּקֶר (‘morning’) in v.14a. The same consonants appear in both words, but in different order (Bluj 2015:52). This suggests that although he is downcast now (in the ‘grave’), he has hope for a new day.

Assonance

In v.9, אַתְּוֹעֲבֹת (‘abomination’) and לָמֹו (‘to them’) are adjacent words which display the same vowel sound (twice in the first word, and word-final in the second). This draws attention to the *intensity of the language* used by the psalmist.

Paired words

Two expressions (often antonyms) close together can highlight an important truth. For example, in v.14, ‘I’ and ‘you’ (overt pronouns) are shifted to the front of the sentence, adjacent to one another, thereby emphasising the *adversarial relationship* between the two persons (Wendland 2016). The frequency of usage of a word relative to its opposite (e.g. ‘death’ cf. ‘life’) shows what idea is dominant in the poet’s thinking. In Ps 88, there

⁷ Space precludes exhaustive discussion of poetic and rhetorical features in Ps 88. See also Wendland 2016, 5.

are twenty-three references and allusions to ‘death’ (e.g., vv.6, 11, 12, 16) but only three references to ‘life’ (v.4, x2; v.15).⁸

Word pairs indicating opposite movement can also be significant. For example, in vv.2, 3, and 14 the psalmist’s action is *before/towards* YHWH whereas in vv.9, 15, and 19 YHWH’s action is *from* the psalmist. This is also seen with אָנִיָּהּ (‘towards’) in v.10b.

Significant repetitions

First, repetition of the same word in close proximity is clearly to emphasise an important matter. For example, אָנִיָּהּ (‘against me’) in vv.17 and 18 underlines the *antagonism* the poet feels. Second, repetition of a noun with different verbs can signal an important message in the poem. For example, פָּנָיִךְ (‘face’) is used in v.3 and v.15, with the psalmist *coming before* YHWH’s face (v.3) but YHWH *hiding* YHWH’s *face* (v.15). The repetition of the noun with opposite verbs heightens the rejection felt by the psalmist. Third, repetition of an idea using different words can also be significant. For example, the words used for ‘cry’ in vv.2–3 focus on the *volume* of the sound (Bluj 2015:27) whereas in v.14 the verb focuses on the *emotion* behind it (Harris et al 1999:911). We also note how there is an intensification from ‘waves’ (v.7) to ‘a flood’ (v.17), symbolising the escalating problem to the psalmist.

Sometimes a word-root is repeated, but details of person or mood highlight an important truth. For example, מַחֲרָה (‘your anger’) in v.8 and מַחֲרָהֶיךָ (‘your angers’) in v.18 both have the root מָחָה which Harris et al. (1999:374) argue could be related to *yāham* (‘conception’). This suggests that anger has been conceived in YHWH and ‘has lain’ (עָבָרָה) on the psalmist (v.7) or ‘passed against’ (עָבָרָה) the psalmist (v.16). In both cases, the psalmist seems to be a passive recipient of anger that was stirred up in YHWH.

Repetition can also be used to draw attention to an important but an unexpected characteristic. For example, YHWH was expected to ‘remember’ the covenant (and ‘remember’ implied action), but twice in Ps 88, the speaker bemoans that YHWH is ‘not remembering’ (vv.5, 12).

We also note how the repetition of the notion of prayer, but at different times, brings an important element to the fore. In vv.2 and 10, the psalmist prays ‘in the day’. But in v.14, his prayer is ‘in the morning’, the “time when YHWH answered prayer” (Schokel 2013:347). By noting this repetition, but also the “movement” in the concept, a flicker of hope enters the poem.

Changes in rhythm

Lines of irregular length draw attention to their content. In Ps 88, v.6 and v.9 are extended, and v.18b is very short. Verse 6 is the first time that the poet actually *accuses* YHWH of abandoning him. Verse 10 is the first time that the poet mentions the *impact* of the accumulated adversity. And the abrupt ending in v.18b, highlights “the theme of darkness that has dominated throughout” (Alter 2007:310).

⁸ *Death* is denoted in the following terms: Sheol (v.3), grave (v.4), the dead (v.5), corpses lying in the grave (v.5), whom you remember no more (v.5), cut off (v.5), the lowest regions of the pit (v.6), in the dark places (v.6), in the watery depths (v.6), overwhelm...with all your waves (v.7), me, an appalling sight (v.8), I am trapped (v.8), the dead (v.10), the departed spirits (v.10), the grave (v.11), the place of the dead (v.11), the dark region (v.12), the land of oblivion (v.12), on the verge of death (v.15), numb with pain (v.15), your terrors destroy me (v.16), they surround me like water (v.17), leave me alone in the darkness (v.18).

Broken/incomplete language

As noted above, the grammar in v.18 is incomplete, representing the poet’s broken state of mind. It could be “a rhetorical technique to challenge the reader to think more deeply” (Wendland 2016).

Rhetorical questions

Complaint is often expressed in poetry through rhetorical questions. In Ps 88:9–12, the use of this poetic device signals the poet’s mood. Further, as there are so many consecutive rhetorical questions, it suggests that this section is the psalm’s “emotive and thematic peak” of the psalm (Wendland 2016:3). A study of the vocabulary in these verses shows the inclusion of several key terms: YHWH (the covenant name, in v.9), ‘wonders’ (x2), ‘steadfast love’, ‘faithfulness’, and ‘righteousness’. These accentuate the importance of this part of the poem: the poet is remembering the characteristics of YHWH, but also complaining that YHWH is not acting in accordance with YHWH’s character. Wendland (2016:3) also notes that “This highly emotive sequence may be construed as lending prolonged ‘rhetorical support’ to the psalmist’s implicit faith (expressed already in v. 1) . . . [They] are implied *professions of trust* on the part of the psalmist.” Indeed, this series of rhetorical questions (vv.10–12) can be viewed as the most important part of the psalmist’s argument, supported by his initial lament (vv.1–9) and his intensified lament (vv.13–18).

Unfulfilled expectation

Certain words carry either positive or negative connotations. Thus, if they are linked with a contrary idea, the effect can be jarring and memorable. For example, in v.3, שָׂבֵעָה (‘satiated’) usually has positive connotations, e.g., of YHWH providing nourishment (Harris et al 1999:869). Thus, being linked with בְּרָעוֹת (evil things) is unexpected and demands attention.

Position of poetic devices as a means to determine ‘the main point’ of the poem

The table below summarises some of the poetic devices (per section⁹ of the poem). It is clear that most of the poetic devices appear in the frame (vv.1–9 and 13–18). In many cases, both parts of the frame use similar poetic devices which are not used at all in the middle section (which rather uses mainly rhetorical questions). One also notices that the number of poetic devices increases in the third section, vv.13–18 (relative to the first section, vv.1–9). This underlines that the language is becoming more intense, to indicate a worsening situation for the complainant.

	vv.1-9a	vv.9b-12	vv.13-18
Chiasm	v.3		vv.12, 13, 17
Word-play	v.10a	v.12	vv.14, 16, 17
Assonance	v.9		
Alliteration			v.18a
Ellipsis			v.15
I/you			v.14

⁹ Most scholars divide Ps 88 into 3 sections, as indicated in the table.

Life/death	vv.4 (x2), 6	v.11	vv.12, 15, 16
Before/from you	v.9		v.19
Changes in rhythm	vv.6, 10a		v.19b
Broken language	v.1		v.19b
Anaphora			vv.11-14
Unfulfilled expectation	v.4		

Movement within the psalm

Most commentators (e.g. Bluj 2015:20–21) note that the psalm shows increasing intensity. Apart from the growing usage of poetic devices, this is apparent in various ways. First, the positioning of the vocative (addressing YHWH) becomes, later in his address, the first word in v.2, the second word in v.10, and the third word in v.14. This suggests the increasingly strained relationship between the psalmist and YHWH.

Vocabulary also shows movement, with related words growing in intensity. For example, in v.6 imprisonment is like ‘a grave’ (a contained structure), but in v.18 the psalmist feels completely ‘surrounded’, with no way out. In v.4, the poet feels ‘full of troubles’, but by v.17, this has become a sense of being ‘annihilated’. The poet’s perception of the cause of his troubles also moves from (a) being unexplained (v.3) to (b) being caused by natural phenomena directed by YHWH (v.8) to (c) a direct accusation against YHWH (vv.16–17).

Thus, the literary-rhetorical study suggests that the psalmist shows a growing sense of ‘darkness’, with a climax in the last verse (and the last word). However, the use of attention-getting rhetorical devices in the middle section adds to the total picture, suggesting that the psalmist is still conscious of the (positive) characteristics of YHWH even if he/she is not experiencing them personally.

Canonical context

Bluj (2015:63) notes that, seeing as Ps 88 ends without resolution, a possible answer to the psalmist’s plight might be found through adopting a canonical approach. A redaction of the Psalter provides insight apart from the intentions of the individual authors (Collins 1987:41). For example, it is suggested that the whole collection shows a movement from glad obedience to utter delight (Wilson 1993:78), or from YHWH’s “*hesed* that is doubted” to “*hesed* that is trusted” (Brueggemann 1991:81). Laments (such as Ps 88) have a special role because they nuance a simplistic understanding of Ps 1:3 (which might be erroneously understood as suggesting that only good things will happen to the one walking with YHWH). It is therefore helpful to look at how Ps 88 interacts with other psalms, especially those in close proximity.¹⁰

Within Book III

Book III of Psalms consists of Psalms 73–89, reflecting upon the history of Israel and the mystery of the covenant (Pavan 2009:277). Towards the beginning of Book III, Ps 77 shows YHWH in a positive light. Ps 77 (like Ps 88) refers to *ḥesed* ‘covenant love’ (v.8) and *ḥesed* ‘wonders’ (v.15). In Ps 77:8 the psalmist asks: ‘Has his covenant love forever

¹⁰ Nasuti (2005:311–313) points out that the Psalter can be analysed by considering either the *order* of the psalms or the *special position* of a particular psalm. For Ps 88, both are important: the order within the group of Pss 84–89, and also the psalm’s close relation to the last psalm in Book III.

ceased?’ The rest of the psalm seems to give the answer, as summarised in v.15: ‘You are the God who performs wonders¹¹.’

Pss 84–89

With one exception (Ps 86), these psalms belong to the second Korahite collection.¹² Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:396) suggest that psalms 84–88 show a chiasmic arrangement (with Pss 85 and 87 giving a vision of God, and Pss 84 and 88 giving contrasting notions of light and darkness respectively),¹³ but other scholars (e.g. Ziegert 2010:79; Pavan 2014:181) suggest various other structures for this group of psalms. For example, positive elements are mentioned not only in psalms 85 and 87 (e.g. 85:1–3, 8–13; 87:) but also in Ps 89, giving a testimony of faith that God will intervene in the future and save his people.

Various commentators view Ps 88 as negating themes and lexemes which are characteristic in Pss 84–87. This suggests that Ps 88 questions the vision of salvation proposed in the preceding psalms (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005:397). God has made promises, and now he seems to be unfaithful to them. Bluj (2015:70–71) agrees, claiming that “God is presented in Ps 84–87 as good, but in Ps 88 only bad things are experienced by the psalmist from YHWH’s hand.” This is underlined by a “break” between Ps 87 and Ps 88 (Pavan 2014:163).

Pss 88 and 89

Pss 88 and 89 close Book III, the part of the Psalter which seems to reflect on the history of Israel and the mystery of the covenant (Pavan 2009:277). Indeed, these two psalms can be seen to summarise the troubles of the monarchic dynasty: Ps 88 on a personal level, and Ps 89 on a communal level.¹⁴ They question God’s involvement in the history of Israel, and whether YHWH’s faithfulness and loyalty are as expected (Vesco 1986:802). Thus Book III ends with two psalms challenging YHWH and which appear to correct the naïve wisdom¹⁵ of the opening psalms of the Psalter,¹⁶ Ps 1 with its description of the blessings for the one who follows YHWH,¹⁷ and Ps 2 with its outline

¹¹ In 3.1.3, it was noted that ‘wonders’ means something “unusual, hard to be understood”, not necessarily something welcomed. Thus the response in v.15 is not necessarily affirming the experience of God’s covenant love.

¹² Twelve psalms are designated as being ‘of the Sons of Korah’. They form two sub-groups, eight beginning Book II (42–49) and 6 concluding Book III (84–89).

¹³ Ps 84 (praise and light) cf. Ps 88 (death and darkness); Ps 85 and Ps 87 (a vision of God).

¹⁴ “Psalm 88 is the darkest individual lament; Ps 89 is the darkest complaint of the nation” (Pyles 2012:22–23).

¹⁵ Ps 1 (v.3) suggests that the one who trusts YHWH can expect a life of blessing, but Ps 88 indicates that “prolonged, unmerited suffering may be a reality of believers’ earthly life” (Kidner (1975:319).

¹⁶ Pyles (2012:23) reads Ps 88 as a failure of Ps 1. Although there is a similarity between the fate of the psalmist in Ps 88 and the wicked (Ps 1:4), Ps 88 does not mention the positive aspects in Ps 1:2, 3. Ps 2 introduced the Davidic covenant, and Ps 89 concludes that it has been a failure (Wilson 1986:90). Ps 88 can also be read as a reversal of the hope presented in Ps 3 (Bluj 2015:69).

¹⁷ Ps 88 shows a person who, despite all manners of affliction, appears to have a clear conscience. Unlike many other psalms, the difficulties the psalmist experiences are “not to be seen as discipline for wrong-doing [but rather] the fearful onslaught of the anger of Yahweh (Culley 1988:299). Thus Ps 88 may serve to nuance the black-and-white wisdom of Ps 1, concerning ‘the way of the righteous person’.

of the blessings for the people of YHWH.¹⁸ Indeed, Ps 88 describes a life of personal suffering for the believer, and Ps 89 reflects national tragedy for the people of YHWH.

Many scholars note numerous semantic links between Pss 88 and 89, which incline one to read them together as the closing pair of the collection (Tate 1990a:91). First, concerning the superscriptions, both psalms are classified as “a *miskal*” (unlike Pss 84–87), and both are ascribed to an Ezrahite. In terms of genre, they are both laments (unlike Pss 84–85, 87), questioning YHWH's involvement with an individual and with a community (Pyles 2012:22–23). Although only the latter part of Ps 89 (v.39ff) is formally a lament, the preceding verses prepare for it and are heavily questioned by v.39, with another significant question in v.47 (Barbiero 2007:537).

The first two verses of Psalm 89 begin with a strong contrast in tone to the ending of Ps 88. Further, two important terms in the peak of Ps 88 (viz. *faithfulness* (אֱמֻנָה) and *steadfast love* (חַסֵּד) in v.11) are repeated in Ps 89 (vv. 1, 2, 24, 33) but with a different sense: in Ps 88, the psalmist questions YHWH's steadfastness and faithfulness, whereas in Ps 89 he affirms them.¹⁹ Thus, the characteristics of YHWH that the psalmist mentions in Ps 88:11–13 (but does not experience) are experienced in Ps 89 (e.g., vv.2, 6, 9, 15), adding to the strong relationship between the two psalms.

Other common key terms in Pss 88 and 89 are *wonders* (88:12, 89:5) and *righteousness* (88:12, 89:14, 16). There are also references to the covenant (89:3, 28, 34), YHWH having control over the waves (89:9b), *face* used positively (89:15), and the divine name YHWH (89:1, 5, 6 (x2), 8 (x2), 15, 18).

Although it seems initially that problems raised in Ps 88:11–13 are positively resolved in Ps 89 (vv.1–5, 29, 36–37), the latter part of Ps 89 (vv.38–51) highlights “an enormous gap between the promises and the reality” (Pavan 2014:169–170, 182). The people's failure to honour the covenant results in all promises being cancelled. Indeed, Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:397) suggest that there is an intensification in the problem, moving from Ps 88 to Ps 89, as no longer is it just the individual who is at peril but the community. Further, vv.48–49 (of Ps 89) extend the problem of death to all humanity. Thus Book III ends with two psalms challenging YHWH's involvement in the history of Israel, i.e., whether YHWH's faithfulness and loyalty are as expected (Vesco 1986:802). Although Book III ends with questioning the *national* tragedy, it is inseparable from the *personal* suffering (Ziegert 2010:80).

Within the Psalter

Within the Psalter, there are other psalms (e.g. Ps 30:8) which give a response to the pain lamented in Ps 88. In particular, Book IV seems to provide answers for some of the questions raised in Book III (Bluj 2015:73–74). For example, the problem with human kingship is answered with a focus on the divine king, and there is a change in the notion of ‘covenant’. (YHWH remembers his covenant with the *patriarchs*, not David, and shows ‘covenant love’ to the whole of Israel, Ps 105:8–10).

Book IV opens with a lament (Ps 90) followed by a divine answer (Ps 91) and thanksgiving (Ps 92). The opening psalm of this book seems to respond to the issues

¹⁸ 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” (Schaefer 2001:217).

¹⁹ In Ps 89:24, the psalmist explains that YHWH's *hesed* and faithfulness are manifested in the covenant and expressed in the relation with David, the anointed one, and the Davidic dynasty (Gosse 2012:482).

raised in Ps 88. It begins with prayer for the community which faces a situation analogous to that of the psalmist in Ps 88 (90:5–7 cf. 88:6–7). Although it is admitted that YHWH afflicted the community (90:15), the *qatal* form is used, indicating that these events are in the *past*. The psalmist asks that the community be gladdened (90:15 cf. 89:42) and that YHWH satiate his people (90:14 cf. Ps 88:3a) in the morning (90:14a cf. Ps 88:13b). Thus by repeating roots (used in a negative sense in Ps 88, but in a positive way in Ps 90), the redactor is indicating that Book IV is reversing the horrors of Book III.

However, Book IV is not simply restoring the promises of Book I. As noted, Ps 1 presents a picture of the life experienced by a believer, but this is nuanced in Book IV by psalms such as Ps 88.²⁰ In Ps 92:16, the claim is made that there is *no injustice* in God. How then is there undeserved human suffering if God is omnipotent and righteous? An answer is suggested in Ps 92:5b, viz. humanity is not able to plummet *the depths of God's thoughts* (Bluj 2015:82). These two new elements add to our understanding of God, suggesting that, within our limited capacity, we can only trust God's presence with us, even in the darkest experience (Ps 91:15). Thus, within the context of the complete Psalter, it would seem that Ps 88 functions as a significant turning point from YHWH's "doubted *hesed*" to "trusted *hesed*" (Brueggemann 1991:81).

Within the OT

Outside the Psalter, other biblical texts seem to speak to the issues raised in Ps 88. In particular, several scholars link Ps 88 with the life of Job.²¹ (For example, Job 3:23 and 19:13 can be seen as giving a response to Ps 88:8). It is possible that the dates of Ps 88 and the book of Job could match: Job is thought to have been composed between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE (Davison 2003:704). Also, the speaker in Ps 88 (like Job) complains that he is suffering terrors inflicted by YHWH (Ps 88:15 cf. Job 6:4; 13:21 – all these verses use the noun בעוֹתִים 'terrors') and both speakers claim to be close to death (Job 10:20–22 cf. Ps 88:3–6, 10–12). Both experienced the 'hiddenness' of God, a punishment only God's enemies were worthy of receiving (Job 13:24 cf. Ps 88:14, Thornhill 2015:55). Neither received help from God nor from friends (Job 19:7–22 cf. Ps 88:8, 18). Also, neither Job nor the psalmist includes any admission of guilt, and both reflect the same sense of despair (Chenowith 2011:52–53).

Lamentations also contains imagery similar to that of Ps 88 (Thornhill 2015:55). The prophet, like the psalmist, experienced darkness and accused YHWH as the source of his affliction (Lam. 3:2–6). He also felt confined and ignored by YHWH (3:7–9), and was placed into a deep pit by none other than God himself (3:55–57).

Jonah's poetic descriptions of his 'journey' at sea are also reminiscent of the psalmist's lament. He cried out to YHWH from Sheol (Jonah 2:2), and was swept under the deep and dark waters by the mighty waves of YHWH (2:3). He was at the very gates of the nether world before his cry was heard and he was rescued by God (2:5–6).

In spite of these numerous similarities, however, Job and Jonah received a response to their cry, and were eventually rescued and restored by YHWH (Thornhill 2015:55). The psalmist, however, gives no indication that he experienced any resolution to his

²⁰ Ps 1:3 states that the one who "delights in the law of the LORD . . . prospers in all that he does". This could suggest a lack of suffering, but Ps 88 helps one see that this is not the case.

²¹ E.g. Illmann (1991:119) describes Ps 88 as "the story of Job half-told".

plight. Thus, Kidner (1975:319) maintains that Ps 88 testifies to ‘the possibility of unrelieved suffering as a believer’s earthly lot’.

Within the complete Bible

Thornhill (2015:56) claims that there is only one allusion to Ps 88 in the New Testament, viz. Lk 23:49, *all his acquaintances and the women . . . stood at a distance* (as they watched Jesus’ crucifixion). This roughly parallels Ps 88 (LXX): You removed *the ones who knew me far from me*. Thornhill (Ibid) argues that this is significant in showing that, although the Psalmist’s complaints (in Ps 88) were not resolved, Jesus has provided an answer to the problem of human suffering. I would disagree that the problem of suffering has been solved, but this text in Luke gives weight to Ps 88’s position of “innocent suffering”, and reveals that Jesus is clearly a *fellow-sufferer*, who is able to identify fully with us.

Although not a citation from Ps 88, Jesus’ cry from the cross (e.g., Mk 15:34 citing Ps 22:1) recalls the sense of abandonment of Ps 88 (e.g. vv.6, 8, 14b). These verses from Ps 88 could well have been on the lips of Jesus at Golgotha or in the Garden of Gethsemane, although this cannot be substantiated. However, as Ho (2019:21) notes, Jesus declared (in Lk 24:44) that “All things written about me in the Psalms must be fulfilled”, and it is easy to imagine Jesus praying Ps 88 the night before his crucifixion.²² Regardless, the important element is that the level of desperation and the sense of being cut off from the presence of God experienced by Jesus (as can be understood from the passion narrative) is reflected in the words of Ps 88. Thus contemporary sufferers are given a prayer (‘authorised in the Holy Scriptures’) to bring their extreme pain and confusion to God.

Context of the modern reader

The modern person is seldom exposed to Ps 88, as it does not appear in lectionaries and is rarely (if ever) the topic for a sermon. Sadly so! For those who have explored its message have found deep consolation when facing problems which a waterproof theology cannot answer.

In this section, Ps 88 is first appraised in the light of much modern theological thinking. The difficult questions raised in the psalm (such as “Where is the God of love and power when innocent people are treated badly?”) become accentuated with the horror of the Holocaust. This requires new perspectives about unjust suffering, which Ps 88 can help reveal. The psalm is also of value for those facing very difficult circumstances, such as living with the ongoing crisis of chronic illness. A third modern view is that revealed by psychological theories addressing “abandonment” and “betrayal” by a significant other. These shed light on understanding the emotional issues faced by the psalmist in Ps 88.

Ps 88 and its theology in modern times

Many scholars are uncomfortable addressing the theological implications of Ps 88 (Mandolfo 2007:5). For example, Graber (1990) argues that the whole psalm should be

²² A friend mentions that when she visited the “House of Caiaphas” in Jerusalem (where presumably Jesus was kept the night before his death), the guide read Ps 88 as fitting the context.

understood as a confession of trust in the Lord. Similarly, Tate (1990b) claims that, in Ps 88, praise is never far from its cry of despair. Further, he asserts that Ps 88 is appropriately read as a model of Christ's suffering, and should provide comfort to Christians experiencing similar tribulations. As Linafelt (2000:2) notes, "Critical reading in the modern era has almost unanimously attempted to tone down, expunge, or belittle the language of lament and anguish."

However, Jewish scholars who read Ps 88 from a post-Holocaust perspective have helped move interpretation away from theodicy with its pat answers and justifications (Mandolfo 2007:7). Indeed, the refusal to justify God has enabled it to be read as "one of the most meaningful prayers ever uttered, or . . . that can be uttered" (Mandolfo 2007:7). Indeed, "Psalm 88, with its lack of finality should be regarded as the only prayer in the Bible that pays proper homage to . . . the victims of all atrocities that defy meaning making" (Mandolfo 2007:18).²³ The reason that Ps 88 is "particularly suitable for post-Holocaust theological consideration [is that] there is no attempt to render the supplicant's suffering [as] meaningful" (Mandolfo 2007:2). Indeed, "survival literature" refuses to squeeze meaning out of suffering (Linafelt 2000:24–25). Instead, "experience takes precedence" (Mandolfo 2007:4), and is allowed to stand without being compromised to fit an "acceptable (official) theology".

Several Jewish scholars (e.g., Fackenheim 1982; Berkovits 1973) have contributed significantly to making sense *in* suffering, but not *of* suffering (Mandolfo 2007:11). For example, Berkovits (1973:85) asks if affirmations of faith may be made when God is silent in the face of terrible, unjust suffering. Similarly, Greenberg (1982:11) questions if "even those who believe . . . dare to talk about God who loves and cares, without making a mockery of those who suffered." Indeed, "Auschwitz is a theological point of no return" (Braiterman 1998:5). He continues (Braiterman 1998:118): "Not to question God in the presence of burning children would amount to blasphemy." Indeed, the notion of "covenant" requires that humans contend with the divine and hold God accountable (Berkovits 1979:128).

Psalm 88 shows a human asking the hard questions. In v.15, the psalmist seeks real answers to why God has abandoned him. But he gets no response. As Mandolfo (2007:14, n.44) notes, "The psalm refuses such meaning-making." Many who have suffered enormous pain find that this element of Ps 88 meets their experience. They find it important to hold on to the reality of the suffering, to protest it but not to try to understand it. For example, Fackenheim (1982:239) contends that only by holding fast to the horrific reality of the Holocaust (and what should not be) can one survive, but one must resist. Further, the search for meaning in a post-Shoah age is not only futile but also an insult to the victims. He asserts (Fackenheim 1982:193): "We cannot comprehend [the Shoah] but only comprehend its incomprehensibility."

Mandolfo (2007:15) asks if in a post-Shoah context, one can believe without trusting. If not, what would it mean to "believe" in a God that is untrustworthy? Berkovits (1973:77) suggests that perhaps one can trust God's statutes, but not God's deeds. In this way, he manages to maintain a fragile faith in the God of history while at the same time refusing to justify what happened in the Shoah. He does not imply that the victims were to blame, but neither does he question God's omnipotence. In the midst of this "difficulty

²³ Mandolfo's linking of Ps 88 with "victims" is helpful in emphasising that Ps 88 presents suffering as not punishment for sin, but a reality of a broken world.

in understanding”, the notion of “covenant as of essential value” is maintained. For example, Des Pres (1976:92) describes how, in one of the death camps, the simple recital of Kol Nidre (a prayer based on Mishnah) completely revived the spirits of a barracks full of men who were more dead than alive. Perhaps being able to express one’s pain, based on the covenant relationship with God (as does the psalmist in Ps 88) is helpful in itself.

Berkovits (1973:115) shows a post-Shoah faith “caught between trust and protest”. Ps 88:7–9 shows the same bold proclamation of innocence as well as insistence on God’s omnipotence. Thus, Ps 88 warrants a position at the heart of post-Shoah discourse because it unequivocally refuses to place blame with the victim. It is situated in the liminal space between the tragedy of a broken covenant, and the faith of a voice still lifted to the author (Mandolfo 2007:16).

Mandolfo (2007:17–18) concludes that “Psalm 88, with its lack of finality should be regarded as the only prayer in the Bible that pays proper homage to those who perished and survived the ‘final solution’, as well as the victims of all atrocities that defy meaning making. This is not to say that we do not yearn for an eventual answer—only that at present there is no answer.”²⁴ Fackenheim (1982:250) makes a similar assertion: “We need a new departure and a new category because the Holocaust is not a ‘relapse’ [but] a total rupture.” Indeed, an entirely new answer is required. Could Ps 88 contribute significantly to that need?

Buber (1952:15) refers to “our cruel and merciful God”. Mandolfo (2007:19) suggests that God’s response of silence in Ps 88 could be part of such mercy, “better than what Job got. Perhaps even God recognizes the enormity of what has happened, and chooses not to answer so as not to belittle the suffering of the victims.” As Braiterman (1998:31) notes, traditional texts inculcate a psychology of self-blame before a guiltless deity. Ps 88 resists this, refusing to offer an “answer” (Mandolfo 2007:20). This requires us to “listen with brand new ears to the biblical text” (Fackenheim 1990:vii–viii.).

Braiterman (1998, 9) posits that postmodern vocabulary allows us “to critically assess the deep tensions that rend traditions” and consider the “potentially reorienting significance of the . . . fragment.” Mandolfo (2007:10, n.26) proposes that within the canonical context, Ps 88 is the “fragment” that can help us reorient our worldview.

Chronic illness

Aileen Barclay (2012:88) describes the power of Ps 88 as a pastoral resource for churches. Utilising Martin Luther’s theology of the cross and Simone Weil’s concept of affliction, she offers a practical theological reaction to a diagnosis of dementia. She writes: “The profound importance of Psalm 88 as an outpouring of deep and apparently unresolved lament has cathartic potential for those who suffer the living bereavement of Alzheimer’s disease.”

²⁴ Linafelt(2000:143), referring to the book of Lamentations, characterises this yearning in terms applicable to Psalm 88: the absence continues to demand that the suffering of children be accounted for, “even as such absence stands as a critique of every attempt to do so.” Furthermore, my reading should not be understood as an argument for the “desirability” of anger as a viable theological stance, only the necessity of it in the present circumstances. Behind my reading is always the hope for a world in which there will be no more need for lamentation of any kind (At the end of Linafelt (2000) is a wonderful story about how a group of Jews burn the Tisha b’Av texts every year at the end of the liturgy in the hopes that the coming of the messiah will make it unnecessary to use them again next year.)

From her experience, Barclay contends that “Psalm 88 speaks directly to the place of chaos and despair so familiar to many who do the caring, as well as to those who are cared for.” For many grappling with the difficulties associated with a family member being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, crying out to a God who does not seem to hear may often seem pointless. However, it still offers a glimmer of light in an apparently otherwise desolate situation.

Verses from Ps 88 seem to speak directly to those enduring the trauma of Alzheimer’s. For example, v.3 speaks to the severe exclusion for both the patient and the carer (“being ignored” or treated “as if [the patient] is already dead”, Volf 1996; Barclay 2012:92). Similarly vv.10–14 remind Barclay “of Job from his ash pit questioning God, and of his so-called friends offering him ‘good’ advice” (Job 42:7–9). Further, vv.15–18 remind her of her weaknesses and her dependence on the LORD. Like the psalmist in Ps 88, it never occurs to Barclay to stop praying, even though there is no instant revelation from above. For her, Ps 88 provides a safe place where she can cry out to God all the hurt and wretchedness she feels. She maintains (92–94): “Lament is the way I can continue with my grievances without destroying myself. I know God is alongside me in the darkness where no one else can reach me. God is not condemning me.”

Perhaps the particular strength of Ps 88 is in reminding us that human reason cannot comprehend all the mysteries that life brings. Ps 92:5b (within Book IV, which as noted, brings “answers” to the problems raised in Book III) asserts: “Your thoughts are very deep.”²⁵ Recognising the failure to discern “meaning” in such pain, the sufferer can be comforted from the words of struggle and lament in Ps 88, and “find solace from a fellow traveler who has already been there” (Barclay 2012:96). Further, such a sufferer then has something to offer others in pain.²⁶

Psychological hermeneutics

In Ps 88, the speaker complains of perceived betrayal by a significant other, viz. his covenant partner (also his God and patron). Betrayal Trauma Theory is useful to evaluate the impact of such a trauma on the victim’s psychological well-being. Gagnon et al. (2017:375) conclude that this depends largely on the survivor’s “meaning making” (or “appraisal”) of the events.

“High trauma” resulting from betrayal is revealed by strong feelings of disappointment, confusion, and alienation. There may also be dissociation (Platt and Freyd 2015), which is “a disintegration of thoughts, emotions, physiological sensations, and behaviors that are normally integrated” (Moskowitz et al 2009). It also includes depersonalisation and identity confusion (Kruger and Mace 2002). Dissociation is more likely to occur following betrayal by someone close to the victim (Freyd 1996).

The way in which the victim processes the betrayal depends on whether he/she is in a dependency relationship with the betrayer or not. If so, it seems that the person feels (unconsciously) pressured to adapt to the abuse in ways that preserve the relationship (Gagnon et al 2017:374). Freyd (1994:312–313) proposes that this “betrayal blindness” is an adaptive mechanism that arises in order to maintain a necessary (or apparently

²⁵ This psalm (Ps 92:2) also affirms God’s *steadfast love* and *faithfulness* (as does Ps 89:1–2, 5, 8, 14, 28, 33, 37 – but then questions such characteristics in v.49), characteristics of YHWH which were mentioned in Ps 88:11 (but not affirmed as being experienced).

²⁶ There is a strong link between affliction and compassion (Weil 2010).

necessary) relationship. The abuse is re-interpreted to absolve the perpetrator. Sometimes the victim may even *expect* abuse to be a normal part of relationships (Lee et al. 2015). He/she may not even label the “betrayal” as such, but may instead blame themselves (Gagnon et al 2017:375).

In Ps 88, this is not the case. The speaker protests against the betrayal by YHWH and claims to be innocent of wrong-doing. He clearly is suffering “high trauma” with the symptoms mentioned above, and seems also to reveal dissociation. However, he is *not* experiencing “identity confusion”. He argues that he is in covenant with YHWH and consequently YHWH has commitments to him. He does recognise his dependence on YHWH, but he is not prepared to be untrue to himself or to blame himself. Instead, he understands that biblical lament is the way the people of God interact with YHWH when they are confused or frustrated. And so that is what he does. He does not change his understanding of the covenant relationship in order to allow his experience to “make sense”. Rather he admits that he does not know the answer, he is in darkness.

Summary of insights from various contexts

The following lists only the major points discussed in the various sections. This is to help consolidate the thinking, and use the different contexts to consider a unifying pattern of interpretation.

Main insights from the historical context

The speaker could be sick but could also be a priest speaking on behalf of the people in the post-exilic experience.

Main insights from the literary context

Affliction results largely from not being able to see the end of the suffering, and from the adversarial relationship between the psalmist and YHWH, with the former moving toward God and the latter moving away from the complainant. The problem is getting bigger, and the peak of the psalm seems to be the final word, ‘darkness’. But the accumulation of poetic features in the middle section indicates that remembrance of the character of God, those attributes of YHWH implicit in the covenant, is significant in the matter.

Main insights from the canonical context

Within the Psalter, Ps 88 functions to speak against a simplistic understanding of the ‘blessed’ life, as suggested in Ps 1:3. Also, as one of the final psalms in Book III, it serves to question God’s involvement in the history of Israel, and whether YHWH’s faithfulness and loyalty are as expected. Ps 88 seems to function as a significant turning point from the people doubting YHWH’s *hesed* to trusting it (with Book IV reversing many of the horrors of Book III). Two verses in Ps 92 (vv.16 and 5b) give some answer to Ps 88, viz. there is no injustice in God, but humanity is not able to plummet the depths of God’s thoughts. Within the whole canon, we see that both Job and Jesus suffer undeservedly, but both are finally restored. However, Jesus is presented as a *fellow-sufferer* who also does not understand what God was doing (Mk 15:34) and cries out in lament to God (as did the psalmist in Ps 88). Moreover, “The psalm adds its voice to the

Psalm 88 within its Contexts (Historical, Literary, Canonical, Modern, and Psychological) 17
'groaning in travail' [Rom 8:22] which forbids us to accept the present order as final" (Wendland 2016:6).

Main insights from the modern context

Much suffering is beyond understanding and may not be the result of sin. We should protest or try to understand it. Ps 88 speaks directly to the place of chaos and despair, providing a safe place where the sufferer can be real.

Common and unique insights from the various contexts

The literary, canonical, modern, and psychological contexts all view the sufferer as a victim (rather than as one who is being chastised for wrong-doing), one who is increasingly disturbed because he cannot see the end of the problem. They also agree that the problem has no answer (although the canonical context suggests an idea which might be helpful to the sufferer, viz. that God is not unjust – rather the situation is beyond our ability as humans to comprehend). The canonical context also offers Jesus as a fellow-sufferer, God sharing our pain. The modern context adds the notion that it is important to protest innocent suffering, and Ps 88 is a good model to help us do that.

Conclusion

The theological implications of Ps 88 are disruptive to those who like a theology which is straight-forward, without nuances and supposed contradictions. The major 'problem' in the psalm is that there is no indication that the sufferer's plight has been relieved. This raises the possibility that prolonged, unmerited suffering may be a reality of believers' earthly life (Kidner 1975:319), which many people find uncomfortable. Consequently some scholars choose to avoid addressing theological issues that need to be considered in the light of such suffering.

Indeed, there are no easy answers to suffering.²⁷ Wolterstorff, mourning the death of his son, says, "My wound is an unanswered question." Similarly, Ps 88 indicates that there is no assurance that the darkness will disappear. Rather, the peak of the psalm seems to be the final word, 'darkness'. But the accumulation of poetic features in the middle section indicates that remembrance of the character of God is significant in the matter.

With regard to trying to construe meaning from situations of great suffering, Mandolfo (2007:17–18) observes: ". . . the search for meaning in a post-Shoah [post-Holocaust] age is not only futile, it is an insult to the victims." She cites Ivan Karamazov saying, "I don't want to understand anything now." Much suffering is beyond understanding.

But the psalm still has much to contribute. First, it "witnesses to the *pain* of people of faith" (Thornhill 2015:54; my emphasis). Wolterstorff (1987:34) notes how often people will not acknowledge the pain of others: "What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is." Answers are not necessarily needed. As Davidson (1998:292) notes, "We should not seek to scatter [the darkness] with glib theological answers." The lack of an answer in Ps 88 indicates that something beyond human understanding is at play. And perhaps, as the psalm suggests, the problem is not so much

²⁷ Mandolfo (2007:18) agrees: "At present there is no answer."

the 'darkness' or the sense of being 'almost dead' but rather the fact that the sufferer feels alone, 'not known', and not cared for.

Second, the psalm serves a theological purpose in that it shows the vital importance of lament in terms of the covenant. As the sufferer pours out his/her pain to God, recognising that there is nowhere else to turn, 'righteous behavior in the face of extreme suffering' is redefined. To suffer in silence would be an unrighteous response, but to continue to cry out to God in lament is what the covenant mandates (Berkovits 1973:120).

Third, Ps 88's lack of an answer (or the refusal to give a glib answer) shows respect to the one who bears pain innocently. As Wolterstorff (1987:81, 86) asks:

"Could it be that we have to mirror God in suffering (even as we are made in God's image)? . . . Instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it. In this epoch of the 'not yet', suffering is part of life, but those who have suffered greatly may in their suffering discern the anguish of God. [And] by this anguish they are comforted."

Similarly, Harper (nd:262) argues that "these uncomfortable bits of the Old Testament force us to think differently, because they challenge our sheltered theologies and expose our shallow view of God." Thornhill (2015:56) agrees, concluding that Ps 88 has great pastoral significance in times when theological neatness cannot be attempted. It is a reminder that unresolved suffering may be a part of the life of the righteous.²⁸ It also stands as a reminder, *contra* the friends of Job, that one should be slow to assume that the suffering of others is the result of God's judgement upon their sin. The needless suffering of the righteous is not resolved by the psalmist, but he stands as a signpost to the remedy of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, who stands victorious over death and suffering, a victory to be ultimately shared by those who put their trust in him.

In conclusion, then, Ps 88 serves an essential role in many contexts. The ancient psalm serves to nuance an understanding of life for a YHWH-follower. More recently, the Holocaust and other shocking tragic events in the modern world have reminded us that theology needs to be able to respond to the problem of innocent suffering. Psalm 88 is helpful in this regard, offering a necessary challenge to reorient our worldview concerning the nature of suffering, our response to those who suffer, and God's role in our suffering.

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²⁸ The Gospel of Luke may see the ultimate resolution as the victory won by Jesus, who entered into this suffering and was given victory over it.

- Psalm 88 within its Contexts (Historical, Literary, Canonical, Modern, and Psychological)* 19
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Appendix 1: Ps 88 translation used in this study (bold text shows slight variations to ESV, with ESV equivalent in brackets)

- 1 O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.
2 Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry!
3 For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength,
5 like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.
6 You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep.
7 Your anger lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.
Selah
8 You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; ⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my **palms** (hands) to you.
10 Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?
Selah
11 Is your **covenant** (steadfast) love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in **the place of destruction** (Abaddon)?
12 Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?
13 But I (O LORD) cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you, **O LORD**.
14 O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?
15 Since my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.
16 Your **anger** (wrath) has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me.
17 They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together.
18 You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.