

Locking and Locked Spaces in Psalm 88: Sheol and Suffocating Waters

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Abstract

In Psalm 88, the psalmist complains of being taken to a place from which he cannot escape (vv. 4-6), an action which has a locking effect on him. He later finds himself actually locked in (vv. 7-8, 16-17), in a place of turbulence and pain.

The first set of metaphors are associated with “the pit”, Sheol, and the place of the dead, a place that is dark and very deep. His companions are those already in the netherworld. The second set of metaphors indicate that, although he is not yet dead, he is unable to return to life for he is caught in the sweeping power of overwhelming waves, pressed in, totally trapped by divine pressure.

This paper studies these metaphors, their original contexts, and their intertextual usages, to gain a better understanding of the significance of place in Psalm 88 for both the psalmist’s inner state, and his relationship with God.

Keywords: Lament; Sheol; Metaphors; Psalm 88; Intertextual; Place

Introduction

Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study engages biblical exegesis, linguistic theory, and psychological research¹ in the reading of Psalm 88, a biblical lament that has caught the imagination of many scholars for its intensity of emotion. It has been studied from many different perspectives, but one perspective that offers new insights, is from the view of *place*, and the psalmist’s relationship to the places described in the poem.

Place has not only physical qualities but also social attributes (Viviers 2023:332). Related to its materiality is a human (or spiritual) dimension. Thus, it is of interest to consider Psalm 88 from the viewpoint of its physicality as well as its spiritual message. There are two main locations which feature in this lament: a place of confinement (“the pit”), and a place of confusion (where he feels that he is being thrown about by overwhelming waves).

¹ The application of psychological understanding to biblical exegesis has been in use since the sixth century CE (Van der Zwan 2023:2). According to Van der Zwan (2023:4), this shows “the variety and wealth that psychological interpretations can bring to ancient biblical texts and themes”.

Role of Psalms (particularly Psalm 88) in the cult in Jerusalem

Baker (2018:159-161) claims that there is sufficient biblical evidence to suggest that, during the time of the pre-exilic² cult in Jerusalem, the psalms would have been performed aloud (probably sung) rather than read silently in private. Such performances would shape identities and social relationships for participants (Schechner 2013:35, 75-80). Through performing a selected psalm together, those battling in their faith would be guided by the community in their relationship with YHWH.

It is particularly significant that Psalm 88 (with its complaints, accusations, and ongoing despair) was permitted to retain its place among the many voices in the Jerusalem cult. Although the psalmist expresses confusion and disappointment with God, he longs for YHWH's presence to be a reality to him again (Brueggemann 1995:56). Thus, being able to pray the psalm as part of corporate³ worship meant that even those battling their faith would be recognised and accepted as part of the religious community (Baker 2018:154-155).

Goldingay (2007:645) agrees that this was the main purpose of Psalm 88 in the Jerusalem cult. He suggests that it might have been composed especially for those in need – as a liturgical composition to articulate together with family and friends. As Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:381) observe, this psalm serves as “an honest acknowledgment in ancient Israel that prayers sometimes remain unanswered”.⁴ It was not necessary for a person to voice a hope that they did not feel. Rather, the repeated performance of this psalm would facilitate social cohesion and give those who were struggling, a place to belong, even in their inability to make sense of their experience. Baker (2018:155-156) further suggests that Psalm 88 would have served as a “catalyst for a deeper psychological process that transpires when a disoriented experience is performed”. In modern times many people have found this to be the case.⁵

It is possible that Psalm 88 and Psalm 89 would have been performed together. Psalm 89 includes communal lament but also communal praise. Some scholars (e.g., Coleman 2017) view Psalm 89 as a concluding encouragement to the ancient Israelites – to lament, but also to praise with hope. Performance of Psalm 88 would have had a cathartic effect; followed by Psalm 89, the people would have been encouraged to hold on to the covenant.^{6 7}

Psalm 88 must also be understood within the bigger canvas of the canon. It is one of the last psalms in Book 3 and serves to highlight the problems of an exilic Israel

² The Jerusalem cult usually refers to that period before the exile when psalms belonged to ceremonial activities in the Temple (i.e. corporate, liturgical worship) and were perhaps used as elements in dramatic performances at festivals (Clines 1967, 106-107).

³ Although it is an individual lament (with the language in the first-person form), it was used as a communal psalm (Theodoret, 2:81-84), giving corporate voice to pain (even though it may have belonged to the few at any time).

⁴ Within the context of the canon, Psalm 88 provides a nuancing of over-simplified truth (as in Psalm 1).

⁵ See Dickie 2023:14-15; Mandolfo 2007:7, 18; Barclay 2012.

⁶ In many respects, the message of Psalm 88 is “to hold on to the covenant relationship” when all else fails (Dickie 2025).

⁷ This is true if one only reads the first 29 verses of Psalm 89. Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:397) suggest that, moving from Psalm 88 to Psalm 89, there is actually an intensification in the problem – no longer is just the individual at peril, but the community too. However, Goldingay (2007:69) makes the observation that Psalm 88 and Psalm 89 both have a single prayer to YHWH: “Remember” (88:2b; 89:47, 50). He concludes: “If YHWH will only do that, everything else will follow.”

searching for answers (having lost the Temple, the land, the Davidic monarchy, and Zion). It does this by its focus on God's silence (Wallace 2010:2, 12). Yet this is coupled with invocation of the covenant name in the psalmist's performative cry. Thus, the seeming lack of God's presence results not in despair but in an underlying hope.⁸

Outline of paper

Section 2 gives an overview of the psalm, and Section 3 introduces the first metaphor (the pit, or Sheol). Section 4 deals with the second metaphor, that of waves sent by God. These waves are waters of the sea; thus, it first gives a background to the Israelite conception of the cosmos, and the sea within it. Thereafter two psalms are considered, Psalms 104 and 107, as these both use similar vocabulary to that used in Psalm 88 with reference to *the waters*. Section 5 then draws together the two metaphors by reference to several biblical texts (Psalm 69 in particular) which include the term *deep* which several scholars claim refers to both watery places and to Sheol.

Section 6 looks at linguistic elements (especially the use of metaphors) and how these relate to the psalmist's perceived reality. In particular, space metaphors are considered as symbols of various emotions. Then, in Section 7, attention is given to three responses of the psalmist to his perceptions (feeling extremely isolated, physically confined, and out of control). The metaphors used in the psalm are seen to emphasise the fearful nature of how the psalmist perceives his life – being locked (in), as in the liminal place of Sheol, the place he is unable to escape, the locked place of inescapable waves.

Introduction to the metaphors of Psalm 88

Psalm 88 is the prayer of an individual in trouble. No answer is given, but the sufferer has opportunity to cry out to God. What is amazing, is that the psalmist does not give up the relationship (despite no apparent response from YHWH). He holds on to what he knows of God (YHWH's characteristics, as remembered in vv. 10-12), and his covenant relationship with YHWH (apparent in his use of the covenant name as a form of address in v. 1). The very fact that he cries out, acting out his pain (making it external), is an active movement on his part towards God.

The psalm is usually identified as having three stanzas (e.g., Goldingay 2007:646-658), delineated by the verb *to cry/call* (in vv. 1-2; 9b; 13). The first stanza (vv. 1-9a) and the third stanza (vv. 13-18) are parallel (with 21 expressions in common) and with an intensification from the first to third stanza (e.g., v. 8 cf. v. 18). Stanza 2 (vv. 9b-12) is totally different, consisting mainly of a string of rhetorical questions.

After an initial cry to God for a hearing (in vv. 1-2), the psalmist introduces his complaint with various metaphors related to his sense of being in a place near Sheol or the netherworld (vv. 3-6). In v. 7, he introduces the metaphor of waves which are afflicting him, and in v. 8, he complains about being imprisoned, far from his friends. Many of the relevant metaphors appear in vv. 3-8; thus, the Hebrew text of these verses follows, along with a back-translation.

⁸ Two psalms at the beginning of Book 4 build on Psalm 88's message. First, Ps 92:5b indicates that humanity is not able to plummet *the depths of God's thoughts* (Bluj 2015:82). Second, Ps 91:15 implies that we can only trust God's presence with us, even in the darkest experience. Thus, within the context of the Psalter, Psalm 88 seems to function as a significant turning point from YHWH's "doubted *hesed*" to "trusted *hesed*" (Brueggemann 1991:81).

	3	כִּי־שָׁבְעָה בְרַעוֹת נַפְשִׁי וְחַיִּי לַשְּׁאוֹל הִגִּיעוּ:
	4	גָּחַשְׁבֹּתִי עִם־וְרֵדֵי בּוֹר הַחַיִּים כַּגִּבּוֹר אֵי־אֶגֶל:
	5	בַּמָּתִים אֶחְפְּשִׁי אֶפְמוֹ תְּלָלִים אֶשְׁכְּבִי קִבְרֵ אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתֶּם עוֹד אֶתְמָה מִדָּדָה נִגְזְרוּ:
	6	אֶשְׁתַּנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתּוֹת בְּמַחְשָׁפִים בַּמַּצְלוֹת: ⁹
	7	עָלִי סַמְכָה תַּמְתַּד וְכָל־מִשְׁבְּרֵיךָ עָנִיתָ סָלָה:
	8	הֲרַתַּקְתָּ מִדְּעִי מִמְּנִי שְׁתַּנִּי תוֹעֵבוֹת לָמוּ כִּלְאֵי וְלֹא אֲצֵא:

- ³ For my being is replete with trouble, my life has reached Sheol.
- ⁴ I am reckoned with those who go down to the Pit. I have become *like* a doomed man
- ⁵ loosed among the dead, *like* the slain who lie in the grave whom you remember no more and who are cut off from your hand.
- ⁶ You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the dark places, in the depths.
- ⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and with all your waves you have afflicted (me). Selah.
- ⁸ You have distanced my friends from me; you have set me as abominable to them – imprisoned, and I cannot get out.

At first he considers himself to be in a dark, deep, place (the Pit or the netherworld), “among the dead”. However, is he one of the dead? The comparative word *like* is used twice (vv. 4, 5), implying he feels he is similar to them, but he is not yet dead. He is locked away, but the key has not quite been thrown away.

The next three verses (vv. 5c-d, 6a, 7a) include four accusations against God, holding YHWH responsible for putting him in this place of desolation, of locking him away. He asserts that he is being treated “like those whom you remember no more” because they are “cut off from your hand” (vv. 5c-d). The comparative word is then dropped to make a direct accusation: “You have put me in the depths of the pit” (v. 6). And he states his understanding of the reason for this: “Your wrath lies heavy upon me” (v. 7a).

In v. 7b, the next metaphor is introduced, that of waves, said to be those of YHWH. Verse 8a-b then explains (in non-metaphoric language) his problem – he is being shunned by his friends. The last part of the same verse (v. 8c) returns to the metaphor of being locked in, imprisoned and not able to get out. After further accusations (without a metaphor), the psalmist continues with the water metaphor in vv. 15-17 and then concludes in v. 18 with another final complaint against God for taking away his friends (or hiding them in darkness).

Both the pit metaphor and that of overwhelming waters are linked to places of confinement. The pit has connotations of the underworld, a halfway-place to total death, where he is locked in (with the slightest possibility of being able to escape, should outside help be provided). In contrast, the chaos of the waves is a place which locks him in, leaving him unable to breathe; thus, from which there is no escape.

Not only do these metaphors aid understanding of complex spiritual ideas (by using familiar experiences with which the reader can identify), they also add emotional weight, making the meaning more memorable.

⁹ במצ' לוח: It is probable that the original term (at least through the time of the LXX) was actually בצלמות (in deep gloom) (Baker 2018:137, note f).

Metaphors of the underworld (the pit, Sheol)

The interest in this paper in Sheol is that Psalm 88 has the greatest density of netherworld metaphors anywhere in the Psalter (Watson 2005:90). The pit, a place deep and dark where dwell the dead (or those forgotten by God), is referred in ten cola in Psalm 88.

Pits are mentioned in various contexts in the biblical text. For example, Joseph was thrown into a dry, empty pit by his brothers (Gen 37:23-28). Presumably this was a deep hole, but as the story indicates, it was possible to escape (with assistance) from such a pit. Pit is also associated with *grave* in Isa 14:15, 19, and in Jer 41:7, 9 a pit was used to dispose of the corpses of murderers. However, in the biblical text, *the pit* usually refers to the underworld, Sheol, the place of the dead. Isaiah 14:15 makes this clear when it declares that Sheol is at “the far reaches of *the pit*”. The pit was imagined as a vast subterranean cave with a narrow mouth like a well (Cooke 1936:293). The mouth suggested the opening to the domain of Sheol. Isaiah 5:14 describes it thus: “Sheol has enlarged its appetite and *opened its mouth* beyond measure” (ESV). Psalm 69:15c (ESV) uses similar language: “(let not) the pit *close its mouth over me*”. Psalm 141:7 also refers to “the *mouth* of Sheol” as a place where bones are scattered. It is a metaphor of desolation, and stillness.

In Ps 88:6, the psalmist accuses God: “You have put me in the depths of the pit”, and then in v. 8, he asserts that he is imprisoned. The association of imprisonment with dark places and the eternally dead is also noted in Lam 3:6-7a (“He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape”). Psalm 88:6 also combines the verb “imprisoned” with “cannot get out”. These last two verbs in v. 8 (אָסַר אֶת־נַפְשִׁי אֲשֶׁר־לֹא־יֵצֵא) appear in the biblical text only here (Ps 88:8) and in Isa 42:7. In the latter, they occur in the context of prisoners being freed from a place of confinement. But the psalmist complains that *he* cannot escape his confinement. Moreover, confinement is linked to death in Jonah 2:6 (“I went down to the land whose *bars closed upon me* forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit”); here again the complainant is freed from his confinement (and death). The psalmist is strongly accusing God for he is not receiving the same response from God in his confinement.

Metaphor of waves (of the sea)

In contrast to the static metaphor of the pit, the second set of metaphors shows violent movement, portraying the psalmist caught by enormous waves that are throwing him about, leaving him unable to breathe, and very frightened. This too is a place (or a state of being), one of turbulence and extreme fear. He feels overwhelmed by the full power of God’s waves (“*all your waves*”, v. 7b), “afflicted and close to death” (v. 15c), terrified and helpless (v. 15d), swept over by God’s anger (v. 16a), assaulted in a way that causes dread and destruction (v. 16b). Moreover, these terrors are “like a flood” (not just one terrible wave, but an ongoing succession of waves) and continue “all day long”, making him feel “closed in” (v. 17b), implying a lack of breathing-space, all these waves coming at him “together” (v. 17b). It is a very frightening place to be!

To understand the usage of the term *water(s)* in the biblical text, we go back to “the beginning”. Genesis begins with a summary statement of the creation in v. 1:1 and then follows with the details. There was much water, not yet an “earth”, and great darkness. Then light was created (Gen 1:3-5) followed by heaven, positioned between “the waters above” and “the waters below” (Gen 1:6-8). Thereafter, the waters below were gathered

into seas, leaving dry land, and permitting the earth to appear (Gen 1:9-10). Thus, for early Israel, the sea was not a place for human habitation, but hostile towards them (Cho 2019:79). It took many years, and the lived experience of seafarers, to eventually help Israel rethink the nature of the sea, and the relationship of humanity and of God to it (Cho 2019:80). This process is detailed in the next section.

Initial Israelite conception of the cosmos, and the sea within it

In ancient times the most common Israelite understanding of the cosmos was that it had three tiers (heaven, earth, and the underworld/Sheol). This is clearly seen in Ex 20:4. Others in ancient Israel thought it consisted of four tiers, adding the sea to the original three. These four distinct places are evident in Job 11:8-9, and in Ps 139:8-9 (with earth being implicit).

They understood the sea to consist of an upper sea and a lower sea, with the firmament between (e.g., Gen 1:6-8; Ezek 1:22-26; Job 26:11). The earth was thought to be a flat disc floating on the lower sea, below the firmament (e.g., Isa 40:22; cf. Ps 136:6). The sea surrounding the earth was considered to be the top of the lower sea. Thus, earth was conceived of as having water above, below, and all around (Cho 2019:82-83).

They further believed that, in primordial time, YHWH battled and defeated the sea (e.g., Pss 29:3; 74:13-15; 93:3-4; Isa 51:9-11). But it was not a permanent defeat, and thus, in historical time, the deity must continue to fight and expel the (chaotic) sea from the earth (Levenson 1988). To them the worldwide flood (at the time of Noah) was evidence of this ongoing battle. With the sea continuing to threaten life on earth, God was required to maintain a boundary between sea and land, as is apparent in Ps 104:9.

Although too much water (overwhelming the earth) is problematic for humanity, a lack of water is too. Thus, God was understood to also release water in a controlled and measured way, from the upper sea (opening “windows”, to allow rain and snow) and pushing up water from the lower sea (through wells, springs, rivers, and lakes), thereby enabling human life to flourish (Cho 2019:84). The sea around the earth marked the ends of the earth (Zech 9:10b; Ps 72:8). Thus, it was considered a terrifying place, not part of everyday space. Noth (1960:13) observes: “Wherever the sea is mentioned in the Old Testament it appears as a menace on the edge of the inhabited world.”

This Israelite view of the sea persisted for a long period because they were not a seafaring people. Some historians (Ahoroni 1962:9; Noth 1960:13) consider this a result of geography – Israel did not have harbours on the Mediterranean coast. Furthermore, by the time of the monarchy, Israel had lost access to both the Mediterranean and Red Seas, thus it was landlocked (Cho 2019:86-87). Consequently, Smith (1966:105) claims that, for the Israelites, “the sea was a barrier and not a highway”. But Stieglitz (1971:11) disagrees vehemently. He develops the work of Yeivin (1960) and Gordon (1963:31) to argue that “The sea played a most significant role in the history of ancient Israel.”

The majority of scholars believe that, by the time of David, Israel had lost control over the coast, leaving the nation without access to the Mediterranean Sea. However, through David’s military success, Israel was able to conclude an alliance with Tyre, the nation most prominent in seafaring and trade (Cho 2019:88). Furthermore, Israel gained access to the two major seas of the Near East. Thus, for a small group of Israelites, seafaring was a lived reality (Cho 2019:90-91). Psalms 104 and 107 indicate how the nation of Israel changed their perception of the sea, from a chaotic enemy to one that

could be used to bring them trading wealth. These psalms will be discussed in the light of this.

Psalm 104

Psalm 104 includes a reference to “the waters” in v. 3, stating that “the beams of [YHWH’s] chambers are on the waters”, thereby suggesting the notion in Gen 1:7 (of heaven positioned between the upper and lower seas). The clouds are also noted to be “his chariots”, perhaps transporting the rain and snow from the windows of the upper sea.

YHWH’s rule over the water and the earth is further described in v. 5: “He set the earth on its foundations so that it should never be moved.” The psalm continues to say that the LORD covered (the earth) with the deep (i.e. waters), and that “the waters stood above the mountains”. Moreover, when God “rebuked” them, the waters fled, and God “set a boundary that they (might) not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth” (ESV). Clearly now YHWH is in command of the sea.

Verse 10 continues to describe how YHWH “opens” the lower waters through providing springs, so that the earth is “watered abundantly” (v. 16). YHWH clearly directs both the upper waters (from which comes the rain) and the lower waters (from which he releases life-giving moisture in springs and other forms of ground water).

However, the next reference to the sea in Psalm 104 is quite different. Verses 25-26 read: “Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable ... There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play with” (ESV). In these verses, the sea (around the earth) is spoken of in an unemotional tone, as the dwelling place of many creatures. Secondly, the following reference is to ships (supposedly carrying people), indicating that humanity can now traverse the sea without danger. No longer is the sea a barrier, but a conduit to other places of interest. And thirdly, Leviathan, the previously feared sea-monster, is now a plaything of YHWH.¹⁰ Every anxiety associated with the sea has been tamed by YHWH.

Psalm 107

The psalm begins with three verses of thanksgiving, acknowledging the steadfast love of the LORD, redeeming those in various perilous situations. The first group is described as “Some [who] wandered in desert wastes” (vv. 4-9); the second as “some [who] sat in darkness and in the shadow of death” (vv. 10-16); and the third as “some [who] were fools through their sinful ways” (vv. 17-22).

Then comes the section of interest (vv. 23-30, ESV):

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters;

²⁴ they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep.

²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.

²⁶ They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths;

¹⁰ The fact that Leviathan and the sea are distinguished as separate elements shows a big change in Israelite thinking. “The ability to conceive of the sea as a space distinct from the sea monster is an important first step toward the full demythologization of the sea” (Cho 2019:94-95).

- their courage melted away in their evil plight;
 27 they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end.
 28 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their
 distress.
 29 He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.
 30 Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their
 desired haven.

It is interesting to note the progression of descriptions of the “some” who were redeemed when “they cried to the LORD in their trouble” (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28). First, there are those lost in the desert, then those sitting in a place of death, and third, those who sinned. How does “those going down to the sea in ships” relate to this sequence? Are they an example of “fools” following their “sinful ways”? A brief review of Ezek 28:2, 6, 8 gives some clarity to this passage. This text is a prophecy spoken to the king of Tyre, the nation most powerful and wealthy in terms of nautical trade: “Because your heart is proud ... therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because you make your heart like the heart of a god, I will bring foreigners upon you. ... I will bring foreigners upon you, and you shall die the death of the slain in the heart of the seas.’”

The prophecy predicts that the king of Tyre will die (moreover, in the heart of the seas) because of his pride (in Tyre’s maritime-trade success). Thus, it seems that those going down to the sea in ships might refer to people proud of their own success. If so, they would be an example of the foolish ones who, because of their sin, drew near to the gates of death (Ps 107:18).

In the section of Psalm 107 referring to these people who “went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters”, v. 24 asserts that “they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep”. These include “the stormy wind, lifting up the waves of the sea [which] mounted up to heaven ... [and] went down to the depths” (vv. 25-26). Having seen God’s power over the waves, it seems they were humbled (if they, like the king of Tyre, were proud of their own efforts). Or perhaps they were just desperate, for the text says “they were at their wits’ end” (v. 27). Whatever the cause, they called upon God to save them, and again God showed his power over the waves, and “stilled them” (v. 29). This clearly shows that by this time the sea had been “defanged of its mythic ferocity” (Cho 2019:95). It is now just a physical space of water, and appears as a “container” for a variety of creatures (Ibid).

By the end of Psalm 107, the sea is understood to be a place of “everyday space” (Cho 2019:98).¹¹ Previously it was considered a place of cosmic, mythic (chaotic) space as indicated by the words used to describe the sea in vv. 23-25, viz. “the great waters”, “the deep”, and “the depths”. Further, the presence of ships indicates that the sea is no longer hostile to human beings, but a place suitable for human travel.

Moreover, the Israelite conception of YHWH has changed, through the progression of Psalm 107. Throughout most of the Hebrew Bible, YHWH *defeats* the chaos-sea (e.g., Ps 74; Ps 93:4; Isa 51:10), rebukes it, and keeps it at bay (Ps 104). He establishes the earth on it (Ps 93), manipulates it (Ex 14-15), and even receives praise from it (Ps 148).

¹¹ Although the sea in biblical texts does not have mythological associations, there are exceptions when the waves seem to be identified with Sheol (e.g., Jonah 2:5; Ps 42:8).

But he is rarely depicted as stirring the sea into a state of chaos as he is in Ps 107:25: “He commanded and *raised* the stormy wind, which *lifted up the waves* of the sea.”

Previously, the sea was generally thought to cause the problematic waves, to be an enemy of God, distinct from him. Hossfeld and Zenger (2011:107) seem to support this view when they argue that the main message of Ps 107:23-32 is that “YHWH can defeat the sea’s chaos.” But Cho (2019:100) contends that YHWH alone is responsible for the sea’s actions, whether it be chaos or calm. This is very clear in Psalm 107. The sea is inert substance with no agency of its own. It roars, or quietens down, only as the consequence of divine action. In Psalm 107 (vv. 4-9; 23-32), it is clear that not only the desert, but also the sea, are instruments of God, with no innate power of their own.

Theologically this notion is vitally important. No space is outside of YHWH’s control. Many other texts in the psalms also indicate God’s control of the waves (as used in Ps 88:7b). For example, Ps 65:5, 7 declare: “O God of our salvation, the one ... who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves.” Similarly, Ps 89:8-9 says, “O LORD ... You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.”¹²

Watery places and Sheol

“The deep” (and its link with waters and Sheol)

The term *deep* in Ps 88:6 is said to connote both watery depths and an association with Sheol and the underworld (Watson 2005:103). This will be verified by consideration of several psalmic texts.

First, the link between deep and watery depths (or turbulent waters) is established by considering again Ps 107:24-26. There it is noted that “[YHWH’s] wondrous works in *the deep*’ (v. 24) are revealed in “the stormy wind, *lifting up the waves* of the sea”. Next, Ps 69:15 not only links the deep with the flood of turbulent waters, but also with the pit (Sheol): “Let not the *flood* sweep over me, or *the deep* swallow me up, or *the pit* close its mouth over me.”

These texts offer insight into the implications of the deep in Ps 88:6: “You have put me in the *depths of the pit*, in the regions dark and *deep*” (ESV). The reference to the pit (Sheol) is clear. The regions dark and deep clearly refer to the depths of the sea, where the psalmist finds himself overwhelmed by waves sent by God.

This association (between waters, deep, and Sheol) is also made in Ps 69:1-2, 14-15 (ESV):

- ¹ Save me, O God! For *the waters* have come up to my neck.
- ² I sink in *deep mire*, where there is no foothold;
I have come into *deep waters*, and the *flood* sweeps over me.
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from sinking in the *mire*;
let me be delivered from my enemies and from the *deep waters*.
- ¹⁵ Let not the *flood* sweep over me, or *the deep* swallow me up,
or *the pit* close its mouth over me.

Deep waters (waters up to the neck, v. 1; and deep waters, v. 2b) is linked with “deep mire” (v. 2a), into which the psalmist is sinking. The word mire appears twice in these

¹² See also Jer 5:22 and Job 38:8-11.

verses. Mire is also used in Ps 40:2: “He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the *miry bog*, and set my feet upon a rock.” Here (in Ps 40:2), the pit and the miry bog are parallel, referring to the same location, thereby implying that mire is closely associated with the pit. Indeed, it appears that all the watery words in Psalm 69 (indicated above) point to the same place, the underworld.

Psalm 69:15b further refers to overflowing waters “swallowing”. So too does Ps 124:3-4 where “they would have swallowed us up alive” is parallel to “the flood would have swept us away”. The term swallow is strongly associated with Sheol (Watson 2005:91). Although swallow is not used in Psalm 88, v. 17a suggests something very similar: “they close in on me together”.

God’s wrath (sending the waters, and the result)

In Ps 88:7, the psalmist accuses God: “Your *wrath* lies heavy upon me, and you *overwhelm me* with all your waves.” This is similar to his accusation in Ps 42:7, which claims: “All *your breakers* and *your waves* have gone over me.” Likewise, Jonah 2:3 reproaches: “For *you* cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all *your waves* and *your billows* passed over me.” God is very strongly seen to be behind the terrible watery experience of the writer in all these texts.

From 2 Sam 22:5-6 can be concluded that such overwhelming waves sent by God usually result in death. Four times in this text, such a final, locked experience is described as the speaker’s end: “For the *waves of death* encompassed me, the *torrents of destruction* assailed me; the cords of *Sheol* entangled me; the *snares of death* confronted me.”

These texts all ascribe the destructive waves to YHWH. Moreover, the psalmist suggests the motive for YHWH sending such suffocating waters. Twice (vv. 7, 16) he claims that the overwhelming waves are the result of God’s wrath. Perhaps this was the only way he could make sense of his experience of God’s pressure upon him. Why else would YHWH have inflicted what feels like flood waters pressing in on him, squeezing the life out of him (v. 17)? His covenant partner, the one who always had him in memory, now remembers him no more (v. 5c); the one who stretched out his hand to help him has “cut off” (the psalmist) from his hand (v. 5d) – despite the psalmist spreading out his hands to YHWH (v. 9c). His pain is so severe that it feels that it has always been his experience (v. 15: “... afflicted and close to death from my youth up”).

There is nothing in the psalm to indicate what the psalmist understands to have caused this divine hostility towards him. From his side, he is still in covenant with God, as indicated by his use of the covenant name (YHWH) in v. 1. Throughout the psalm, he acts like a covenant partner, and engages with YHWH. He does not just give up the relationship and walk away from it.

Psalm 124:3-5 also refers to anger leading to flood and raging waters (using the same words as in Ps 88:7a, 17a, 7b, ESV):

³ ... then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their *anger* was kindled against us;

⁴ ... the *flood* would have swept us away ... would have gone over us;

⁵ then over us would have gone the *raging waters*.

In Ps 88:10-12, the psalmist mentions consequences of vv. 7-9 (if he remains locked up in Sheol) – he will not experience the wonders of YHWH, he will not testify to God’s steadfast love and faithfulness and righteousness, and he will not “rise up” (supposedly to the world of the living) to praise God.

The underworld, and God’s relation to it

In Psalm 69 (above), the psalmist appeals to God to save him from the underworld three times (vv. 1, 14, 15). This implies that the underworld is under God’s jurisdiction. It is God who brings people to such a place, and keeps them there. In most cases, going to Sheol was a locked experience, with no way out. For example, Ex 15:4-5 (ESV) says: “Pharaoh’s chariots ... and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went *down* into the depths like a stone.”

Similarly, in Ezek 26:19-20, God uses water (i.e. drowning) to take people down to Sheol. “When I bring up the deep over you, and the great waters cover you, then I will make you *go down* with those who go down to the pit ... and I will make you to dwell in the world below ... with those who go down to the pit.”

However, there are cases in the biblical text where God reverses the locking of someone in Sheol, as is apparent in Jonah 2:5-6: “The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; I went *down* to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you [YHWH] brought up my life from *the pit*.” The metaphors in this text are very vivid in terms of the pit as a place of locking (“bars closed upon me forever”). And yet, God brought him up from Sheol.

These texts help determine the location where the psalmist in Ps 88:6b accuses God of placing him (“You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep.”). It has been concluded that the pit refers to Sheol,¹³ and “the regions ... deep” is also the afterworld. The regions dark can be assumed by parallelism to also refer to Sheol. Further, v. 12 in Psalm 88 (“Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?”) places darkness parallel with “the land of forgetfulness”, which is another term for Sheol. Thus, it seems convincing that the psalmist is accusing God of taking him down to Sheol, and leaving him locked up there.

Linguistic exegesis of Psalm 88

Linguistic exegesis of Psalm 88 centres on the relationship between metaphors and the psalmist’s perceived reality.

Metaphor and reality

Fifty years ago, metaphors were regarded as decorative devices limited to the realm of poetry. However, recent work in cognitive linguistics has shown that metaphors form an essential part of cognition. Systems of metaphor underlie our daily interaction with others and form the basis of our conceptualisation of reality (Janeke 1995:129). Already in 1980, Verbrugge asserts “Metaphor is a powerful vehicle for recasting identity.” This notion can be extended today to claim that metaphor recasts *reality* for an individual. Metaphor is no longer perceived to be distant from reality (Van Peursen 1992:165).

¹³ Ps 86:13b (“the depths of Sheol”) suggests that the depths and Sheol are equivalent.

Thus, the psalmist's use of certain metaphors, in particular, those of feeling isolated (without friends), confined (with limited control over his environment), and plagued by overwhelming waves, reveal how he perceives reality in his life. The fact that he is not literally holed up in a tiny space, unable to move, or being bashed about by crashing waves, is irrelevant. The emotional impact of his perceptions is the same as it would be in the case of a real situation. Consequently, the impact of such feelings on cognition and psychological condition is vivid, even though he is not literally experiencing such confinement. Thus, research on the cognitive functioning of someone physically suffering such conditions is helpful to understand how the psalmist in Psalm 88 is responding to his perceptions.

Space metaphors as symbols of various emotions

Space metaphors are frequently used to express emotions; thus, a study of their usage in Psalm 88 can help identify the psalmist's emotional state. Five dimensions of space are commonly associated with emotions:

- Spatial orientations (e.g., positioned up or down) often express positive and negative feelings respectively. For example, Ps 88:6 refers to the lowest regions of the pit (an extreme position of being literally down), implying his perception of severe misery.
- Containment metaphors can represent feelings of being trapped or controlled, e.g., Ps 88:8c: "I am trapped and cannot get free" (NET). Similarly, in Ps 88:17 he feels "surrounded" and "encircled".
- Movement (up or down) can imply changing feelings (becoming more positive or more negative respectively), e.g., Ps 88:4: "descend into the grave" (NET) indicates his worsening negative emotion.
- Distance between persons can represent emotional distance or alienation, e.g., Ps 88:8: "you cause those who know me to keep their distance" (NET). This is repeated in v. 18, and intensified in that those who keep their distance are his friends and neighbours (NET). Conversely, geographical proximity or closeness can signify intimacy or connection (but may also possibly represent a sense of feeling overwhelmed), e.g., Ps 88:5 ("adrift among ...", NET) gives a sense of being out of control.
- Spaciousness or crowdedness is also indicative of emotion. Positive emotions are often associated with open areas, whereas negative emotions are often linked to cramped, confined, or cluttered spaces, e.g., Ps 88:7: "your anger bears down on me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves" (NET). In contrast, the psalmist's "spread[ing] out my hands in prayer" (Ps 88:9c, NET) suggests he is showing a positive attitude to YHWH (but being rebuffed).

The kind of metaphor used (ego-moving or active, in contrast to time-moving or passive) may also indicate a person's emotional state. When a person feels in control, they may prefer ego-moving metaphors where they are in control of the action (e.g., "We are approaching the holidays"). However, if they feel that they have less control, they may use time-moving metaphors (e.g., "Exams are coming up"). In Ps 88:3, he complains: "My life is filled with troubles" (NET), a passive expression indicating his lack of control and negative attitude. Similarly, Ps 88:3b states "My life has drawn near to Sheol"

(NASB). Indeed, all the verbs in vv. 5-9 indicate that the psalmist feels acted upon. He is a passive recipient, implying his depressed state, unable to take control of his life. This sense of being out of control of his life continues in vv. 14-18. In v. 13a, the psalmist displays some agency (“I have cried out to you”) but immediately reverts to being a passive participant in the activity (“my prayer” becoming the agent in v. 13b, NASB).

Psychological exegesis of Psalm 88

Three conditions of the psalmist in Psalm 88 are identified, viz. feeling isolated, (physically) confined, and out of control. Each of these is now described, along with psychological findings of the impact of such conditions on a person.

Feeling isolated

The psalmist’s emotional pain and estrangement from his covenant-partner are evident throughout Psalm 88. His accusations escalate in the latter verses, when he accuses YHWH of rejecting him (v. 14) and treating him with anger (v. 16), thereby leaving him feeling abandoned by his closest ally. At the end of the psalm (v. 18), he declares his sense of total isolation, of being without any companion or confidant.

The psalmist in Psalm 88 is suffering *emotional* loneliness (the absence of close, intimate relationships). He feels his former friends have shunned him. This is particularly evident in the last verse when he expresses his deep sense of social isolation:

הַרְתַּקְתָּ מִמִּנִּי אֶת־בְּרֵעִי מִיָּדַי מִתְּשׁוּבָה:

which can translate to: “You have distanced from me companion and neighbour; my friends darkness”.

The meaning of these final words has been long debated. Even the earliest translations differ in their interpretations (and possibly also in the Hebrew accepted as the source text). The LXX reads καὶ τοὺς γινωστούς μου ἀπὸ τῆς ταλαιπωρίας (and my friends from/because of [my] despair/distress/misery). The Targum reads (with variants of the final word) “and I am darkened before/in the mouth of my friends”. This perhaps echoes the impression given in v. 8 that the speaker’s situation has made him abominable to his former companions.

Modern translations of the Masoretic Text (MT) take a wide range of approaches to Ps 88:19b. For example, JPS states “[You have put friend and neighbor far from me] and my companions out of my sight”. NASB suggests “my acquaintances are in darkness”, and NIV offers “the darkness is my closest friend”. This is also motivated by Dahood (1968:307) but it does require a re-pointing of מִיָּדַי to a singular form (contra the plural of Ps 88:9, and early evidence of the LXX and Targum). Hossfeld and Zenger (2005:390-391) read the final word as an independent clause that stands as the rhetorical climax of the psalm: “(for me everywhere is) darkness!”. Baker (2018:135) suggests that one can understand the last words as meaning “[you have concealed] my friends [in] darkness”. What is clear, is that the writer ends his poem with the final word *darkness*, which either represents his state, or his only friend, or his inability to perceive any sign of friendship within the surrounding darkness.

He also experiences *social* loneliness (the lack of a desired social network, or a feeling of not belonging in a group). Franklin and Tranter (2021:57) note that such a

sense of not belonging is strongly related to particular spaces. Initially the psalmist feels himself to be alone in a deep, dark pit, with only dead people as his companions. Later he has left even them, as he feels alone, thrown about by turbulent waves. Such a place of being out of control becomes symbolical of his isolation.

Apart from emotional and social loneliness, he also experiences *existential* loneliness (a lack of anyone with whom to share his experiences and inner life). The latter results from his sense of being shunned by YHWH, his care-giver and the one he feels is his last ally. Throughout the psalm, he complains about how YHWH is not responding to his cries. However, he still continues to call out to YHWH, implying that he has not given up on the relationship.¹⁴

The psychological impact of feeling isolated

Neuroscience shows that extended periods of isolation can result in significant physical, emotional, and cognitive deterioration. Isolation leads to an increased stress response characterised by elevated cortisol levels, heightened blood pressure, and inflammation. Prolonged stress adversely affects the hippocampus, a region crucial for memory, spatial cognition, and emotional regulation. Consequently, individuals enduring social isolation often encounter memory deficits, cognitive deterioration, depressive symptoms, and perceptual distortions (McLemore 2024).

Haney (2018:365-366) also notes the very high psychological distress suffered by prisoners held in isolation. Without human company, they become very self-protective, more so than prisoners not held in isolation. The psalmist's self-protective behaviour is evident in his becoming very fearful of outside danger. His fears are expressed through the metaphors of first being confined in a pit, and then being tossed about by forces beyond his control.

Svendsen (2017:68) offers insight into the psalmist's feeling of being shunned by others (repeated in vv. 8 and 18). The psalmist does not feel he can trust his former companions – he assumes their feelings towards him are negative. As Svendsen points out, those suffering extreme loneliness battle to trust others, and this could well be the root of his feeling shunned by his former friends.

In the course of the psalm, being unable to determine why he is so alone, he possibly becomes increasingly frustrated (which has an element of anger) at the injustice of it all. But he cannot own such anger, given his state of psychological distress, and so he transfers it to God. This is in line with the research of Fromm-Reichmann (1959:7) who claims: "Those who suffer from perpetual loneliness are stripped of their sense of self-orientation in relation to [others]." Thus, in his distorted view, the psalmist imagines his problem to be the result of God's anger (of which he accuses God in vv. 7 and 16). This only increases his sense of isolation, seeing himself as further estranged from his covenant partner.

Feeling so isolated intensifies the psalmist's negative thinking. As Lieberman (2013) notes, if the need for human connection is thwarted, psychological well-being is seriously impacted, with an increase in death-related thinking. This concern with death is very prominent in the psalm, with 20 allusions or references to death.¹⁵

¹⁴ For more content on the psalmist's existential loneliness in Psalm 88, see Dickie (2025).

¹⁵ Ps 88:3, 4, 5 (x4), 6 (x2), 7, 8c, 10 (x2), 11 (x2), 12 (x2), 15a, 16b, 17 (x2).

Feeling physically confined

As noted in Section 6.2, various metaphors of containment strongly indicate that the psalmist feels restricted in his movement; confined within the space around him.

Giuliani (2003:158) shows the relationship between emotions and physical space (particularly that space where one feels at home). However, home is understood to be “a relationship or experiential phenomenon rather than a building” (Dovey 1985:34), a situation where one feels “secure and comfortable” (Tuan 1980:5) – not confined in any way.

Human psychology and physiology are significantly altered by physical confinement, with typical symptoms including neurocognitive changes. For example, Pagel (2016:1449) notes that during the extreme bodily confinement of long-term spaceflight, there is a significant decline in cognitive performance, including memory loss. Consequently, the psalmist is probably not able to remember the many instances when YHWH has “come through” for him – he can only remember the immediate negative situation.

There is also an increased alertness to potential harm from others and (over the course of time confined) an increase in anger (Lasse et al. 2022). The psalmist does seem to show a growing sensitivity to harm from God, and a growing anger against YHWH.

Feeling out of control

The psalmist’s sense of lacking control of his movement and agency is very apparent. He repeatedly complains about his dissatisfaction with his situation, as noted in v. 8c: “I cannot go out.” Even when he shows a small element of self-determination (v. 13a: “I have cried out to you”), his next statement (v. 13b) suggests that again he is only a passive recipient of someone else’s activity (or not).

A study of the agents in vv. 6-8 reveals this pattern: YHWH is asserted to be the agent, acting upon the psalmist.

v. 6a: *You* have put me ...

v. 7a: *Your* wrath has rested upon me,

v. 7b: *You* have afflicted me

v. 8a: *You* have removed my acquaintances

v. 8b: *You* have made me an object of loathing ...

In contrast, the psalmist is acted upon, a passive recipient of YHWH’s actions. This is noted again in the following verses:

v. 8b: I am *shut up* ...

v. 9a: My eye has *wasted* away ...

Further, in vv.15b and 16a, the psalmist receives YHWH’s actions which he describes as “*Your* terrors” and “*Your* burning anger”. Clearly the psalmist does not feel he has any control over his life.

A feeling of being out of control can be attributed to the operation of visceral factors, which include moods, emotions (e.g., fear, anger), and pain (Loewenstein 1996:272).

Decision Theory makes no distinction between visceral factors and tastes¹⁶ and thus does not recognise the special impact of visceral factors on behaviour. Thus, it is not able to clearly explain the discrepancies between self-interest and behaviour. Consequently, a person experiencing fear or anger (or emotional pain) is often not able to act in their best interest, and may succumb to impulses (such as passivity in the face of a “stronger” person).

This seems to be the case with the psalmist in Psalm 88. Although the psalmist in other psalms often stands up to YHWH, calling for justice (e.g., Ps 13:1-3a), in Psalm 88 he appears defeated. He accuses (e.g., vv. 13-18) and asks why? (v. 14), but only once (v. 2) does he call upon YHWH to act. Thereafter, he seems to give up. Perhaps his emotional state arising from exhaustion, as well as the existential pain (confusion) of being abandoned by his covenant partner, has led him to feeling unable to move forward. Hence the psalm ends, unusually, without resolution and in apparent despair.

Conclusion

Psalm 88 shows an intensification in emotion and metaphor as the psalmist moves from feeling locked in (vv. 1-9) to a sense that the escape-hatch has now been locked (vv. 15-18)!¹⁷ The static pit has become violent waters – not contained, and thus more frightening.

There are many facets to this intriguing psalm, and seemingly endless ways of appropriating truth from its 18 verses. In this study, the viewpoint taken differs from others. It shows that the role of place in a poem can be enlightening, showing the relationship of location with emotion. Thus, place is another factor to consider when seeking to interpret a psalm.

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¹⁶ Tastes, in contrast to visceral factors, consist of information stored in memory concerning the relative desirability of different goods and activities.

¹⁷ Note the intensifying language from Stanza 1 to Stanza 3: v. 3 cf. vv. 14-15; v. 7 cf. v. 16; v. 8 cf. v. 18.

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