



Is the Psalmist Angry at God? Psalm 88 and the Absent Nose

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INTRODUCTION¹

“It’s okay to be angry at God.” Pastors, homileticians, and chaplains use these or similar words to encourage suffering people to express their anger at God. Walter Brueggemann and others have argued that the lament psalms communicate anger at God, forming a biblical precedent for the faithful of today to vent their fury at the divine.² Psalm 88 has often been enlisted in such pastoral encouragements. It has been said that this psalm is a poem in which “words of fear and anger appear

¹ It is with joy that I offer this essay in honor of Mark Throntveit. Mark impacted many students’ journeys to becoming pastors or scholars (not least in the echoes of “Rubber Ducky” that we hear whenever a *dagesh* is discussed). Mark’s gifts to the academy and the church were made manifest every time he stepped into a classroom: he was generous in teaching, sharp in exegesis, focused in Lutheran theology, always quick with a word of humor. The testament to Mark’s service and scholarship lives in the many pastors who, when faced with a prophetic passage, reach yet again for their seminary notes from his classes. It is an honor to number among them.

² Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 98–111.

Biblical scholars have only recently begun to explore the uses of emotion in understanding the Scriptures, and how the analysis of emotion furthers the understanding of the biblical texts. As an emotion, anger can express both disappointment with God and desire for God’s presence.

as sacred Scripture.”³ Yet these arguments are unclear about what specific elements of Psalm 88 actually communicate anger. Biblical emotion is a relatively recent area of study, so discussion of how emotions function in the Bible, including in the Psalms, often lack precision.⁴ In this article, I attend to the ways anger is portrayed in the Bible and in the Psalms. This attention provides a more precise way of describing human emotions in poems such as Psalm 88, a precision that will aid ministers in choosing scripture appropriate for their parishioners’ situations.

ANGER IN THE PSALMS AND PSALMS SCHOLARSHIP

The Psalms have long been understood to represent a vast swath of human existence. In the fourth century, Athanasius argued that “the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter.”⁵ The psalmist describes many emotions: joy, exultation, shame, even terror. Surprisingly, however, the psalmist rarely employs specific terminology for anger.⁶ One of the most common biblical expressions for anger involves the word *’ap*, the Hebrew word for “nose.” Specifically, when one is said to be angry, one’s nose burns hot.⁷ Both mortal and divine noses burn in the Hebrew Bible and the Psalms. Yet the psalmist’s own nose is nowhere to be found. Broadening the search to include other biblical Hebrew terms for anger demonstrates that the psalmist is the subject of anger exactly once, in Psalm 119:53: “Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, / those who forsake your Torah.”⁸ Considering solely the evidence of biblical Hebrew words for anger gives the impression that, despite a wide variety of emotions felt and expressed by the psalmist, anger was not one of them.

Despite this lack of anger on behalf of the psalmist, Brueggemann has argued that anger in the Psalms is a precious resource for modern worshippers. He compares the laments to the “freedom of speech in therapy of regression,” where “any

³ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf. A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 673.

⁴ For a brief overview of the history and current state of biblical emotions scholarship, see F. Scott Spencer, ed., *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature*, RBS 90 (Atlanta: SBL, 2017).

⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. and ed. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), 126.

⁶ Biblical Hebrew words for anger are words that describe the embodied reactions of characters who perceive they have been wronged by another (see Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis*, Siphut 7 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 54). These words range from those most common to scenarios of anger to others that are associated less often with anger but can still be used at times to depict fury.

⁷ This idiom may be strange to our modern American ears. It is one of several biblical idioms related to parts of the body. Such idioms encompass more than just the body part mentioned. For example, the Hebrew word *yād* most often connotes the hand, but can be extended to include the wrist and forearm. It can be further extended idiomatically to refer to power, control, and authority. Likewise, *’ap* refers to the organ of the nose or nostrils. It can also be extended as a reference to the face more generally (Gen 19:1). As such, the expression “the nose burns” may refer to the flush of heat that floods across one’s nose and upper cheeks in a fit of rage.

⁸ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Versification comes from NRSV.

language and any speech are appropriate”—including Israel’s “deepest anger.”¹⁰ This language, according to Brueggemann, is essential for modern worshippers. Without it, the modern church experiences a deep and serious lack in the nature and sincerity of its relationship to God.

While Brueggemann’s arguments for the church’s reappropriation of lament are powerful, these arguments are characterized by a certain subjectivity. Assuming the presence of anger in ancient texts without demonstrating what, exactly, denotes anger in the text places the interpreter in the role of subjective judge: whatever “sounds” angry must be so, and by extension, the psalmist must be angry because what they say “feels” angry. While assigning anger to texts based on our read of their tone may feel intuitively correct, it runs the risk of imposing a Western, modern understanding of emotion on the text.¹¹ While scholars generally accept that anger is universal to the human species, each culture expresses it differently.¹² Without careful attention to what anger looks like in the Bible, we risk imposing our own understanding onto the text and missing what it actually says. The question then becomes, Can one find examples in the Bible of humans who are angry at God?

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THOSE WHO BURN AT GOD

While the writer of Psalm 88 never uses a word for anger in expressing emotion to God, the Bible identifies several places where humans are said to experience (though not express) an angry response to a divine action. The first example comes from the first book of the Bible.

Genesis 4 depicts a conversation between God and Cain after the divine rejection of Cain’s offering:

But YHWH had no regard for Cain and his offering. Cain burned hot with anger, and his face fell. YHWH said to Cain, “Why do you burn hot with anger, and why has your face fallen?” (Gen 4:5–6)

⁹ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 20.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 68.

¹¹ See esp. David A. Lambert, “Mourning over Sin/Affliction and the Problem of ‘Emotion’ as a Category in the Hebrew Bible,” in Spencer, *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions*, 139–60.

¹² See Wolfgang Aichhorn and Helmut Kronberger, “The Nature of Emotions,” in *Emotions from Ben Sira to Paul*, DCL, ed. Renate Egger-Wenzel and Jeremy Corley (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 516.

The text conveys Cain's emotional state clearly, stating not only that Cain was angry, but that he was *very* angry. In this and other biblical texts that describe human anger in reference to the deity, the human is said to be angry, but the precise object of their rage is never explicitly stated. Cain never verbally expresses his anger, yet God somehow notices it and speaks about it directly to Cain, without condemnation or punishment.

In the second example, the prophet Samuel becomes angry in response to God's action:

The word of YHWH came to Samuel: "I regret that I crowned Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and he has not established my command." Samuel burned with anger and he cried out to YHWH all night long. (1 Sam 15:10–11)

In a text reminiscent of some lament psalms, Samuel burns with anger and cries out to YHWH throughout the night. The only logical object of the prophet's anger in this text is God. Patrick Miller calls Samuel's prayer "a prayer of complaint by one who felt betrayed and frustrated at God's change of mind after having instructed Samuel to anoint Saul as king earlier."¹³ Yet, as with Cain, that anger is never *explicitly* named "out loud," from the individual to God.

In 2 Samuel 6, David is explicitly said to be angry due to an action of God:¹⁴

They came to the threshing floor of Nacon. Reaching out, Uzzah grasped the Ark of God, for the oxen had stumbled. The anger of YHWH burned against Uzzah, and God smote him there because of his negligence. He died there beside the Ark. David burned with anger because of YHWH's violent outburst against Uzzah. (2 Sam 6:6–8a)

As with Samuel, God acts, and David becomes angry, a connection made explicit in 2 Samuel 6:8. David does not go on to address God, as Samuel does, but instead attempts to separate from God, diverting the Ark to a local home while he licks his royal wounds and comes up with a new plan.

A final example of human anger at God comes from Jonah, a prophet so explosive and cartoon-esque that Mark Throntveit was wont to call him Yosemite Sam:

But [the divine forgiveness of Nineveh] displeased Jonah greatly, and he burned with anger. Then he prayed to YHWH, "Ah, Lord! Did I not say this very thing when I was in my own land? This is why I fled to

¹³ Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 383 fn. 71.

¹⁴ While the two accounts contain slight differences (grammatical and wording differences, a preference for the Tetragrammaton in 2 Sam vs. "Elohim" in Chronicles), for the purposes of this study, the differences are negligible. Most notably, David's reactions to YHWH's outburst are consistent in the various renderings: anger (אָרָה), fear (פֶּחַד), and the diversion (פְּתִיחַ) of the Ark to the home of Obed-Edom. Here I have translated 2 Sam 6:6–10.

Tarshish in the first place, for I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, renouncing punishment. And now, oh Lord, please, take my life away, for death is better than life. The Lord replied, “Is it good for you to burn with anger?” (Jonah 4:1–4)

Jonah’s interaction with God confirms several elements that are consistently present when a biblical individual becomes angry with God. First, the same Hebrew verb, “to burn” (*charah*), is utilized to describe human anger at the divine in all four scenarios. One could argue that the men are angry simply because of the event—a slighted offering, a rejected king, a senseless death, a bush’s demise. Yet here is where it is so important to understand anger on its biblical terms. Scholars of biblical emotion maintain that anger at “impersonal events” is a modern phenomenon and not found in the Bible.¹⁵ When one is angry in the Bible, one is angry at *someone*, not merely *something*. And in these cases, the most logical being that could be the object of human anger is God.

Second, none of the men explicitly, verbally express anger against God. Never in the Bible, including in the Psalms, does an individual say to God anything along the lines of “I am angry,” “I am irritated,” or “I am enraged.” And yet, despite this silence, in the above examples, *God still understands them to be angry*. With both Cain and Jonah, God names their anger out loud and directly to them. While we are not told what God said in response to Samuel’s nightly raging, the text at least suggests that the Divine One heard it. And never does God offer divine retribution in response to the men’s anger.

How to discern that anger? That is a more difficult question as we are appropriately cautioned from assuming anger in poems that “sound” angry to modern ears. Determining the psalmist’s anger must come from an analysis of the psalm itself.

Finally, all of the above texts demonstrate that the angry human desires separation from God. Matthew Schlimm has demonstrated that the most common result of anger in the Bible is “separation of some sort.”¹⁶ These results range from verbal confrontation to violence, but all betray a desire to separate from the offender in some way.¹⁷ We find separation in Cain’s lies to the deity, David’s diversion of the Ark, and Yosemite Jonah’s penchant for stomping his pouting self out to a broom tree. While we may not be privy to the actual words said, the description of Samuel’s nighttime raging evokes Schlimm’s concept of separation through

¹⁵ Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 57.

¹⁶ Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 63.

¹⁷ Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 63–64.

verbal confrontation. In other words, all of the men desire distance from the deity in their anger.

In sum, the testimony of the broader Bible suggests that individuals can and do experience anger at God. We may thus feel confident in assuming that there are times when the psalmist experiences anger at God. How to discern that anger? That is a more difficult question as we are appropriately cautioned from assuming anger in poems that “sound” angry to modern ears. Determining the psalmist’s anger must come from an analysis of the psalm itself, and whether or not the poem demonstrates other markers of anger outside of biblical Hebrew words for anger.

The simplest method for discerning the psalmist’s anger would be to examine a psalm for the markers of anger discussed above: the presence of the Hebrew verb “to burn” (*charah*); anger that is felt but not expressed; a divine response to anger that acknowledges but does not condemn it. Yet here is where the psalm genre complicates such quests. The individual psalmist speaks from a first-person perspective, yet *never* in the Hebrew Bible does a person use a word of anger in first-person communication with God. Further, we are rarely, if ever, granted insight into the divine response to psalmic petitions. The only consistent pattern to the above examples that may help us discern anger in the Psalms is the angry human’s desired result: separation from the deity. Does Psalm 88 betray the psalmist’s desire to separate from God?

PSALMIC ANGER: IS THE SPEAKER ANGRY AT GOD IN PSALM 88?

An examination of Psalm 88 shows that the psalmist does not desire separation from God. In fact, the psalmist consistently begs the deity to draw ever nearer. This desired closeness becomes apparent when one examines the structure of body imagery throughout Psalm 88:

STRUCTURE OF BODY WORDS IN PSALM 88

Verse	Body Imagery	God’s Body	Psalmist’s Body	Humanity in General
Ps 88:2	face	x		
Ps 88:2	ear	x		
Ps 88:3	throat/mortal core		x	
Ps 88:3	life		x	
Ps 88:5	dead ones			x
Ps 88:5	slain ones, pierced ones			x
Ps 88:5	hand	x		
Ps 88:9	eye		x	

Ps 88:9	palms		x	
Ps 88:10	dead ones			x
Ps 88:10	sunken ones (ghosts)			x
Ps 88:14	throat/mortal core		x	
Ps 88:14	face	x		
Ps 88:15	dying			

The first body mentioned in the psalm is the deity's, twice within 88:2: "let my prayer reach your face" (translated in NRSV as "presence") and "incline your ear to my cry." Attention in the poem is immediately focused upon the deity's body and the desired movement of that body closer to the psalmist. The psalmist's prayer reaches out to the face of God, a divine body part that is often said to give life and salvation in the Psalms (see, for example, Ps 16:11). The psalmist begs for attention from God's ear, the divine body part that registers the faithful's cry for help. The imagery conjures up the picture of a person of lower status—a bowing servant, a humble petitioner—asking for the descent and attention of a person of higher status.

The body imagery in 88:2–3 describes the psalmist's situation that so requires the nearness and attention of God. Immediately following the two divine body parts of 88:2, the psalmist says that their "soul is full of troubles" (NRSV). The Hebrew word here translated as "soul" is *nefesh*. *Nefesh* actually refers to a specific place on the human body: the throat. When tracked throughout the Psalms and the Bible, the *nefesh* eats, drinks, gasps, pants, and sobs.¹⁸ It is an essential body part for the basics of human life: taking in sustenance and breathing. Thus, a better translation of *nefesh* actually moves away from the notion of an ethereal soul that exists beyond life on earth and toward an embodied, mortal core, the thing without which we cease to be. "My throat is choking on evil" better captures this concept and signals the desperate reality of the psalmist. The dramatic character of this statement is affirmed by the intensity of the second half of the verse: "For my throat is choking on evil / and my life is close to Sheol [death]."

As the psalm progresses, the verses become littered with images of death: dead ones (88:5), slain/pierced ones (88:5), dead ones (88:10), sunken ones/ghosts (88:10). The specter of death looms large throughout the psalm. One might even say that death is the psalmist's main concern. What the psalmist desires, then, is not separation from God but nearness, since the close presence of the deity brings life. Three times throughout the psalm, the psalmist attempts to approach the deity:

Ps 88:2 Let my prayer *come before you (your face)*
 incline your ear to my cry

¹⁸ Interestingly enough, a different Hebrew word is typically used to describe the word-producing throat.

- Ps 88:9 I call out to you, YHWH, all the day long
 I *spread out my palms to you*
- Ps 88:13 As for me, I cry out to you, YHWH
 And in the morning my prayer is *in front of you*

Five times, the deity's choice to stay separate and cause further isolation to the psalmist is lamented:

- Ps 88:5 [I am] like those who are abandoned with the dead
 like the slain ones lying in the grave
 of whom you are mindful no more
 and *they are cut off* from your hand (care)
- Ps 88:6 *You have put me* at the bottom of the Pit
 in the darkest places, the depths
- Ps 88:8 You have placed my companions *far away from me*
- Ps 88:14 Why, O YHWH, do you reject me,
 hide your face from me?
- Ps 88:18 You have placed friend and neighbor *far away from me*

Separation from the deity is not the psalmist's desire. Separation is the cause of the psalmist's suffering. Hossfeld and Zenger note that the retreating deity is represented in the very syntax of the poem. The Tetragrammaton (the holy name of God) appears at the beginning of each of the psalm's three sections: v. 1, v. 9b, and v. 13. The first time the name appears in the initial position of the verse. The second time it is the second word. The third time, the holy name has retreated to the third word of the sentence. According to the authors, this regression "underscores the intensifying drama by having the Tetragrammaton move backward one place in the sequence of words each time."¹⁹ In this way, they write, "the hiding of YHWH's face that is complained of in v. [14] is literally put into words."²⁰

In a final attempt to achieve union with the deity, the psalmist draws together YHWH's face and the psalmist's *nefesh* in 88:14, the last verse of the psalm that mentions bodies. Their occurrence together is notable as they break the pattern that body imagery has followed almost perfectly throughout Psalm 88. In the psalm, body imagery that occurs within the same verse generally refers to the same body: God's in 88:2, the psalmist's in 88:3, humanity in general in 88:5, the psalmist's again in 88:9, and humanity in general again in 88:10. This pattern of concentrating the same body within the same verse is due in part to the parallelistic nature

¹⁹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 393.

²⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 393.

of Hebrew poetry. Yet the sudden fracture of this pattern in 88:14 heightens the desperate nature of the interaction between the psalmist and the deity:

Ps 88:14 Why, O YHWH, do you reject my *nefesh*,
 hide your face from me?

Here, in the final occurrence of body imagery in the psalm, the psalmist repeats the very first body images of both YHWH and the psalmist (88:2 and 88:3, respectively) and places them in direct relationship with each other. It is not separation that this psalm desires. Instead, the psalmist's mortal core is desperately reaching out for the life-giving face of the deity. Without this reunion, the psalm suggests, the psalmist's fate leads only to death and darkness, the final word of the poem.

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CONCLUSION

In this article, I have cautioned against subjectively assigning anger as an emotional aspect of lament psalms. Further, I have demonstrated that Psalm 88 does not betray a desire for separation from the deity, one of the typical markers of biblical anger. One protest immediately arises: Cannot one be angry at the deity and desire the deity's presence at the same time? The answer is, of course, yes. Psalm 37 presents an interesting case study in anger at the absence of God. In the first section of the psalm, the congregation is exhorted away from their anger:

Ps 37:7 Be silent before YHWH,
 and wait patiently for him.
 Do not be angry because of those who prosper in their way,
 because of the doers of evil devices.

Ps 37:8 Refrain from wrath and abandon rage;
 do not be angry—it only leads to evil.

The psalm suggests that the congregation's anger has been provoked by the prosperity of the wicked. While the object of the congregation's anger is never explicitly stated, other places in the Psalms suggest that the wicked are allowed to flourish precisely because of the absence of God. (For example, the wicked boast in Psalm 10:4 that the absence of divine accounting has allowed for their oppression of the lowly to flourish unchecked.) Thus in Psalm 37, the psalmist desires YHWH's presence to curb the thriving wicked, even while the congregation appears to be pulling away from God in their anger.

The Psalter thus witnesses to both human anger at God and a human desire for the presence of the deity in the midst of disaster. Both are faithful responses to catastrophe, preserved in Scripture. Ministers will need to use different scriptures to tend to each. The closer we can listen to the Bible's and the Psalter's witness to human emotion, the better we can know which sacred scripture may help meet the needs of God's suffering people. At the moment of writing these words, the world is frozen in shock at the menace of a disease that spreads fear and death in its wake. Some watch and rail at the seeming absence of God that allows this pestilence to flourish. Others cry out from the bottom of their *nefesh*, begging for the divine body to come closer, closer, and for the divine face to again shine and save. Both reactions of God's people are present in the Psalter. Psalm 88 would be a fitting pastoral scripture for those on the brink of despair. ⊕

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