



he had put a new song in my mouth

Psalm 40

Introduction

Psalm 40 begins with a remembrance. The Psalmist speaks of an earlier encounter—was it his first?—with God. It began with a horrible threat against the Psalmist. This was followed by an expectant plea. It ended with new-found confidence in God, expressed in song and a commitment to act as witness to God’s power and goodness. We look, first, at the threat.

An horrible pit... miry clay

The Psalmist describes the threat in verse 2a, b.

“He lifted me out of the menacing pit;
lifted me from the mire’s downward pull...”¹

This threat is not an uncommon one in the Psalter. There are many passages that speak of the “pit,” and its associated “mire.” Psalm 69 in one such psalm.

“Save me, O God;

¹ This is the author’s translation

for the waters are come in unto my soul.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no standing:
I am come into deep waters,
where the floods overflow me.
I am weary of my crying:
my throat is dried:
mine eyes fail
while I wait for my God.
Deliver me out of the mire,
and let me not sink:
let me be delivered from them that hate me,
and out of the deep waters.
Let not the waterflood overflow me,
neither let the deep swallow me up,
and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me.”²

At some point in the future we will want to examine this imagery more thoroughly. For now, we will point out that in two psalms, the “pit,” *bôr*, is associated with death, the grave, the world of the dead, or “hell” (*šē ’ôl*).³ There has been much discussion about the nature of the Old Testament’s *šē ’ôl*, often imagined as a pit. Some see it simply as the world of the dead without any connotations of imposed suffering and punishment. Others think that they see suggestions that *šē ’ôl* is viewed more in terms of the Christian “hell” with its attendant, deserved, and imposed suffering. The fact is, the Old Testament itself is not utterly consistent. It possesses a variety of views concerning *šē ’ôl*.

That said, we can say with some certainty that God is not to be found in *šē ’ôl*, so often portrayed as a pit. In Psalm 28, for example, the Psalmist wishes to avoid becoming “like them that go down into the pit,” a place where God is “silent.”⁴ While speaking of the pit in

² Psalm 69.^{1-3, 14-15}

³ Psalm 30.³ and 88.³⁻⁷

⁴ Psalm 28.¹

association with the grave and death in Psalm 88, the Psalmists worries about being

“Free among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
whom thou rememberest no more:
and they are cut off from thy hand.”⁵

Not only is God absent from *šē’ōl* to such an extent that those who dwell there are forgotten by God, but God is forgotten by those who dwell there: there is “no remembrance of God.”⁶ Whether the Psalmist thinks that God’s absence from *šē’ōl* is due simply to His being alive, or due to His displeasure with those who inhabit the place is not entirely clear.

The other thing we can be sure of is the Psalmist’s desire and need for God’s presence in his life (or death). The Psalmist does not want to experience life or death without Him. So, it may not be so much “death” that worries and threatens the Psalmist as it is living without God; without God’s presence—whether in life or death. So, when the Psalmist complains of the threat of *šē’ōl*, imagined as a pit, he is quite possibly expressing anxiety about God’s absence.

At the same time, it may not be utterly outlandish to suggest that the Psalmist’s experience of *šē’ōl* is, at times at least, due to God’s displeasure with the Psalmist. We return to Psalm 88.

“For my soul is full of troubles:
and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.
I am counted with them that go down into the pit:
I am as a man that hath no strength:
Free among the dead,

⁵ Psalm 88.⁵

⁶ Psalm 6.⁵ In reading this, the literalist might draw all sorts of conclusions about hell. These may become infallible “dogmas” of truth. Ink and blood might be spilled to defend such positions. To me, at least, it seems unlikely that the Psalmist is “doing theology” here. It seems unlikely that he is attempting a literally description of “hell.” Rather, we should see a poet at work. The poet is attempting to put very real feelings and impressions into words. God’s presence and influence is felt to be absent such that he cannot even be brought to mind. This reflects a deep and profound absence.

like the slain that lie in the grave,
whom thou rememberest no more:
and they are cut off from thy hand.
Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit,
in darkness, in the deeps.
Thy wrath lieth hard upon me,
and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves.”⁷

Again, we have the pit and *šē’ōl*. Here, these dangerous and watery environs seem imposed upon the Psalmist. It seems that they are viewed by the Psalmist as a manifestation of God’s displeasure or “wrath.” The Psalmist is without God in his life (or death), while God Himself gives no thought to the Psalmist. It is as if the Psalmist has ceased to exist in the mind of God.

It may be that in Psalm 40 the Psalmists found himself at some point in the past experiencing life without God, presumably because of God’s displeasure with him. Later in the Psalm, the Psalmist will speak of his sins and his desperate need for rescue.

“When evils without number encircle me;
when my guilt catches up to me,
so that I am unable to see anything else;
when there are more of them than hairs on my head
so that my heart condemns me;
find it in you, YHWH, to deliver me.
O Yahweh, come to my aid quickly.”⁸

All of this, and much more, leads us to at least consider the possibility that the threat faced by the Psalmist in Psalm 40, at least as he felt it, was God’s absence due to the Psalmist’s sins. He felt that he was without God in this life. I cannot help but think of Alma the Younger’s instruction to his son, Corianton.

⁷ Psalm 88.³⁻⁷

⁸ Verses 12-13, author’s translation

“And now, my son, all men that are in a state of nature, or I would say, in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; they are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness.”⁹

This is one aspect of hell, this Godly absence. It is likened to a deep pit in which the threat of drowning is ever present. It is likened to a pit, the mire of which sucks the occupant down, down, down, quicksand like, until the victim is suffocated, his lungs filled not with air but muck.

י waited, fully expectant, for yahweh

The Psalmist confidently cries out to God for help. He fully expects Him to reply. We do not know what has so powerfully persuaded him of God’s faithfulness. Was it instruction he received from another? Was it his own personal and previous experiences? However it came, the Psalmist’s confidence in God is very, very strong.

We had a look at the Psalmist’s “wait” when discussing Psalm 130. There, if you remember, the Psalmist “waits” upon the Lord “more than they that watch for the morning.”¹⁰ In other words, the Psalmist’s expects the Lord’s help with the same degree of confidence that he expects the sun to rise the next morning!

We see the same confidence in God reflected in Psalm 40.¹ The word used for “wait” is *qāwah*. I am persuaded by the opinion that the focus of this word is less on the actual waiting, or the passage of time, than on the goal or expectation of the waiting. There is an emotional difference between simply waiting for someone to arrive and expecting someone to arrive. The simple act of waiting may or may not be accompanied by confidence concerning the outcome. But this Hebrew word, it seems to me, suggests confidence in the

⁹ Alma 41.¹¹

¹⁰ Psalm 130.⁶

outcome. There can be a “wondering when” in this word, but there is no “wondering if.”

he put a new song in my mouth

True to the Psalmist’s expectation, God delivers the Psalmist from the pit. But it is no ordinary rescue, this. It, in fact, exceeds our expectations. God might have delivered the Psalmist by simply keeping his head above the water and muck. Or, even more assertively, he might have simply lifted him out of the “menacing pit,” free of the “mire’s downward pull” to place him safely on the lip of the pit. But the Psalmist’s God is more extravagantly helpful than this. The Psalmist’s God does nothing half way. God pulled the Psalmist out of the pit and then raised him up, up, upward until he was securely settled in an inaccessibly high and safe place.

The word used here for the place of safety is *selā’*. This is, in the first and most literal sense, a cleft, or cave in a mountain side. But, we want to ask, what association did such places have in the mind of the Israelite Psalmist? What did he see when he looked upon such a place?

The Old Testament informs us several times that in times of foreign invasion, Israelites often abandoned their cities and villages and headed off into the hills where they found refuge in caves with difficult access.¹¹ So we can imagine the Psalmist surveying local mountains looking for a place of safety; looking for a place that the enemy would find difficult to assail. It is just such a place that comes to the Psalmist’s mind, when he reports how very, very secure that place was in which God settled him after the dangers of *šē’ōl*.

The Psalmist responds with a song of praise. He has “felt to sing the song of redeeming love.”¹² King Benjamin looks forward to the day when his “immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God.”¹³ Later, Mormon will speak of the

¹¹ See, for example, Judges 6.²

¹² See Alma 5.²⁶

¹³ Mosiah 2.²⁸

response of those who are “found guiltless” before God: they will “sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴ In his great vision of the degrees of glory, Joseph Smith saw “the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before [God’s] throne, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever.” Further, he saw that “all things bow in humble reverence, and give him glory forever and ever.”¹⁵

Such passages remind us of the truth spoken by the Psalmist. God, he tells us “inhabite[s] the praises of Israel.”¹⁶ This inspiration to “praise,” declares the Psalmist, “is comely.”¹⁷ Such desires and inspiration flow from a personal encounter with God. Those who feel otherwise, must not have ever met Him who is the Greatest of All.

I do not hide your fidelity

The Psalmist does not limit his expressions of love and gratitude to those expressed directly to God. He tells all who will hear about the God who rescues.

“It is not animal and cereal offerings that you most desire,
you have brought me to understand.”¹⁸

It is not whole offerings or sin offerings for which you ask.
For this reason I say, “You see how I come,
a message written upon me.
To do what pleases you, My God, is what I desire.
Your Torah is in the very depths of my being.

¹⁴ Mormon 7.⁷

¹⁵ DC 76.^{21 & 93}

¹⁶ Psalm 22.³

¹⁷ Psalm 33.¹

¹⁸ Literally this is something like, “you have dug out [my] ears for me.” This is as good an example as any of my approach to translation. A more literal translation such as that which the KJV offers seems rather pointless.

Now, one could, I suppose, read this as a statement of the Lord’s creating the ear. After all, one could think of the ear as a hole [dug] in the head. But there is a context here, and creation does not seem to fit, however important it may be in other contexts. So I take it here as a metaphor for “opening the ear,” though, it is true, this is the only such usage in the O.T.

I gladden the large assembly of worshippers with the message of your righteousness.

You see how my lips are unrestrained, YHWH.

You witness it!

¹⁰I do not keep your righteousness hidden away in my heart.

Your commitment to me and your rescue of me, I have made public.

I do not hide your fidelity,

or your faithfulness, during important solemn assemblies.¹⁹

While parts of this passage are textually corrupt, thus making translation difficult, the overall meaning is relatively clear. God has made it known to the Psalmist that he has a responsibility to do more than offer sacrifice when mingling with others at the temple. Having personally experienced the Lord's deliverance, and thus having confirmed in the deepest parts of his soul the realities about which scripture speaks—God is righteous, committed, faithful, and acts as deliverer—the Psalmist is to share his witness of God and His willingness and ability to rescue.

There is no describing them!

The Psalmist responds faithfully to the Lord's invitation. He does not hold back. In witnessing of his own deliverance and the greatness of God, the Psalmist finds just one difficulty.

“Innumerable and unimaginable are the things that you,
even You, Yahweh, my God, have done
and purposed for us.

There is no describing them!

I try to make them comprehensible and put them into words,
but they are too expansive for words.²⁰

¹⁹ Again, this is the author's translation.

²⁰ Author's translation

God is always thinking about us. He is always making plans for our deliverance, our growth, our advancement. And his plans are not small. He has big plans for us. We do not, cannot fully appreciate them. Whatever we might say about them will be insufficient.

This is a common testimony of scripture. You will remember the Apostle Paul's testimony concerning the love of God: It "passeth knowledge." When it comes to God's plans for us, and his desire and ability to work in our lives, Paul testifies that God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."²¹ As we have done before, and will most likely do again in the future, we call to mind Ammon's exultant witness:

"Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel. Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state?"²²

We simply cannot imagine what great things God can do in our lives today, and what plans he has for us in the eternities. A tremendous humility is called for when speaking of such things. We must both acknowledge the expansiveness of God's plans for us and confess our inability to comprehend them in their fullness, let alone accomplish them on our own.

They rejoice and find happiness in you

Though neither we, who boast of God, nor those who hear such boasts, fully comprehend the extent of his doings in our behalf, such boasts have a positive and saving impact.

"Many, seeing what he has done for me, will revere him
and come to trust YHWH.

Happy is the one who places his trust in YHWH

²¹ Ephesians 3.¹⁹⁻²⁰

²² Alma 26.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

rather than turning to those who make wild [unfounded] boastful claims [of help]²³—
who are lying seducers.²⁴

They rejoice and find happiness in you,
who seek you.

They always declare:

‘YHWH shows himself to be great,’
who come to appreciate your power of deliverance.”²⁵

The Psalmist hopes that those who hear his testimony about God’s deliverance will turn to God themselves, find their own deliverance in Him, and learn to trust in Him as the Psalmist has learned to do. As elsewhere, we see, here, the Psalmist in his role as “evangelist.”

Though i am afflicted and destitute

God is no fertility god. We should not expect a carefree life of ease because of God’s presence in our life. There will be trials. These trials will often be a blessing. This is a paradox with which Nephi begins his book.

“...Having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days...”²⁶

²³ Hebrew *r^ehābîm*. The word has a breadth of meaning. It can mean “to rage,” “to be stormy,” “to tremble,” “to be boisterous/noisy,” “to be proud,” “to be fearsome or alarming,” etc. The question arises, what kind of “noise” are these others making? What is the nature of their “pride”? What do they say that makes the heart “fear” or “tremble”? My translation seeks to explain this in the context of this particular Psalm. See also the next note.

²⁴ It is very tempting to translate the two direct objects, *r^ehābîm* and *sātê kâzab*, as many translations do, as idols—of one kind or another. This may very well be the meaning. Idols are things, people, or institutions that replace God in the hearts and minds of people. However, in our modern world, where idols are everywhere present but never identified as such, another translation may be in order. The KJV’s “proud,” are not simply hyper self-confident. They are not simply boastful. In the context of this Psalm it is clear that these are they who make claims about themselves that stand in competition with God. They claim to be as trustworthy, reliable, dependable, and capable as God, or nearly so. Their empty boasts are lies that seduce the unwary. Again, we think of the Psalmist’s claim that the Lord’s name “alone is excellent” (148.¹³). We remember that “vain is the help of man” (60.¹¹).

²⁵ This is, again, the author’s translation of 3-4 and 16.

²⁶ 1 Nephi 1.¹

The Psalmist ends this Psalm with such a testimony, followed by his final statement of confidence and request.

“Though I am afflicted and destitute,
my Lord is mindful of me.
You are my helper and my safe place of escape.
O my God, do not delay.”²⁷

Many years ago, a friend and I used to sit and explore principles of the gospel. We would often come to points of disagreement. We would arrive at places of uncertainty. I would acknowledge in such moments that I couldn't be sure about this or that, but I did know... I then would speak of the Savior's grace in my life. More than once he complained that I “hid in Christ.”

It was true, I did. I hid in Christ then. I hide in Christ today. I hope I will hide in Christ forever. His love and fidelity and commitment to me is the surest thing I know. This is the song He has put in my mouth.

²⁷ Author's translation.