

Memory

Psalms 77:10-15

Dr. Pierre Cannings

Closest to the formulation here, from among the manifold recollections of the exodus, are Exod 15:13

I. Present Pain

a. Grief –

- i. Infirmary, empty space, distress and sorrow- Emotional suffering brought on by bereavement, mishap, or disaster. To grieve is either to cause or feel sorrow or distress
- ii. *The second complaint* (77:6–11). The painful depression of the speaker has been described in vv 2–5; a troubled distress which comes from unanswered prayer and pondering about God. The process of remembering and pondering (שִׁיחַ and זָכַר) continues in vv 6–11 with more description and with the troubling questions in vv 8–10.
- iii. The complaints in vv 2–11 focus on the hurt of a person whose anguish stems from unanswered prayer and doubt about God. The pain is too great for speaking (v 5), and the night has become a time not for sleeping but a time of constant pondering and seeking for the answers to disturbing questions. The possibility of God's desertion from his people and the end of his loyal-love is confronted in the dark hours of sleepless night. The reader can hardly miss the references to night in vv 3 and 7. The speaker knows of spiritual terror at night (cf. Ps 91:5)

b. Right Hand Has Changed

- i. Right Hand- Since right-handedness is most common, one would expect references to the strongest hand and the most skillful hand to refer to the right hand, and such is precisely the case. It is the right hand which holds the arrow, while the left holds the bow (Ezek 39:3)
- ii. The right hand of Yahweh was that which delivered Israel, shattering the enemy (Exod 15:6). Yahweh's right hand gains mighty victories for his people

The apparent absence of God in the present leads to meditation about the past, when divine love and protection were evident. This makes the present look even worse as the speaker remembers the favor, lovingkindness, graciousness, and compassion of the former days. Even God's eternal promises seem to have come to an end. In sorrow and abandonment the speaker ponders on the disturbing questions in vv 8–10. The confident songs of praise, sung in the past, evoke dire questions about the present. This complaint reaches a climax in v 11 when the speaker laments the wounding which has resulted from the "changing of the right hand of the Most High." In v 11 the speaker attributes a weakened/grieving condition to the failure of God to use his right hand for the defense and deliverance of his people. cf. v 16, which recalls how God (Yahweh) redeemed his people with his arm. The "songs" in v 7a probably refers to the songs of thanksgiving and praise which had been sung in happier times.

In this approach, God becomes the center of attention as the speaker shifts away from "I" to "thou" (vv 13–21). The speaker's remembering of the past "takes the mind off the hopelessness of the self" and "conceptualizes present hurt, as yet unresolved" (138). The remembering of the speaker is aided by identification with "your people" (vv 16, 21); the remembering and the identification allow present trouble to be "recontextualized and thereby transformed

77:10–15. Asaph decided to recall (**remember ... meditate ... consider**, vv. 11–12) God's **miracles** (v. 11) performed in the past by His **right hand** (v. 10, i.e., in power; cf. "arm," v. 15). Asaph based his **appeal** on those **works** and **deeds**. His immediate reflection led him to praise the incomparably **holy** and **great ... God** as Redeemer (vv. 13–15). God is incomparable because he **performs** miraculous, **mighty** deeds, such as the redemption (deliverance) of His people from Egypt by His **arm** (i.e., strength). The question, **What god is so great as our God?** does not imply that other gods live. It indicates that God far exceeds every false god people worship (cf. similar questions in 35:10; 71:19; 89:6; 113:5; Ex. 15:11; Micah 7:18).

Verse 11 turns back and draws a balance from what has gone before. The petitioner diagnoses his own theological suffering, the alteration in God's attitude.

II. Historical Clarity

- a. Remember - to **call to mind** tech. Both worship and tradition served this memory. Through the great festivals with their rituals and songs, the people participated in both establishing and remembering the meaningful history of Israel and thus understood themselves better in the light of that meaningful past.
 - i. Deeds - **unusual, miracle**, b. divine miracle
 - 1. With the double verse 12–13- stylistically linked to form a tetracolon (see Analysis above), the petitioner turns from lamenting and toward the past history that revealed a brighter

hue. He desires to remember the “deeds of YH” (shortened form of YHWH). This use of the proper name in the middle of this otherwise Elohist psalm could be the deliberate adoption of a technical term in the style of Exod 15:2 (“Song of YH”) and 17:16

ii. Wonders of Old

1. The speaker in this psalm voices great personal distress caused by the unrelieved condition of Israel. The psalm is a prayer of unanswered lament. Nevertheless there is a feeling of expectancy about it. The reader knows what the speaker in the psalm can only seek in perplexity and reflection: God has surely not rejected his people forever; his promises will be kept. At the close of the psalm the reader senses that a theophanic intervention of the wonder-working God of creation and exodus is imminent, though the worshiper waits for it to come.

b. Meditate

i. Meditate - to **read in an undertone- to mutter**

1. Work - The internal members emphasize the miraculous deeds at the beginning of history (cf. v. 6). In light of the parallels in Exod 15:11 Pss 78:12 (88:11); 66:5 and 44:2 one thinks of the deeds of the exodus, here allusively introduced. The petitioner does not break forth in praise, but remains in an internal monologue or an inward reflection and meditation; only the basic mood has been decisively altered. The switches have been set for the hymnic prayer that follows.

ii. Muse - loud, enthusiastic, emotionally laden speech to meditate with thanks and praise

1. Deeds
2. It seems to me, however, that Dahood makes better sense. Dahood reads v 12 as a positive affirmation of intention (“I will recite your magnificent deeds ...”), but he argues that the purpose of the song about God’s primordial deeds is “to persuade God to repeat such feats on Israel’s behalf” (II, 78).
3. The psalmist’s comfort and hope came from his musing on God’s great deliverance of Israel at the Exodus

III. God of All Time

a. Your Way

- i. Way - They derive from the fact that one on a public path becomes known and his goal and purposes are revealed by the road he takes. Most important is the sense of God's purposes and will,
 - 1. begins with theologically intended statements about God's activity (v. 14) The first statement combines "way" terminology with the qualification "in holiness." God's way is, on the one hand, part of the implied reminiscence of the Exodus, but on the other hand it can encompass the whole course of history (cf., e.g., Deut 32:4
 - ii. Holy - **holiness** associated with God (calling for special consideration
 - 1. The three principal concepts that describe God's nature in terms of a present deficit (steadfast love, compassion, mercy) refer again to the so-called graciousness formula in Exod 34:6 (God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness). The dual ארך אפים "patience," in the Hebrew plays on אף "wrath." The nature of God asserted in the confession in Exod 34:6 has broken off.
 - 2. Holiness is attributed to God as a quality or is applied to the Temple or even to the heavenly city; here it refers to the quality of God that emphasizes God's transcendence. The parallel most likely to have inspired this is Exod 15:11
 - iii. Incomparable
 - 1. The following statement about God's incomparability is no longer monolatrous (the uniqueness of God among the gods), Exodus 15:11 18:11
- b. God who Work
 - i. Wonders
- c. Made Known
 - i. Strength Among Peoples
 - ii. Your power- is one of the manifestations of the God-king
 - 1. Redeemed your people
 - 2. However, it is one of the acknowledged peculiarities of the Asaph psalms that they pay particular attention to Jacob and Joseph, which—as is traditionally suggested—has to do with the continuing influence of the traditions of the Northern Kingdom

Word Studies

Grief – Infirmity, empty space, distress and sorrow- Emotional suffering brought on by bereavement, mishap, or disaster. To grieve is either to cause or feel sorrow or distress.

Right Hand - Since right-handedness is most common, one would expect references to the strongest hand and the most skillful hand to refer to the right hand, and such is precisely the

case. It is the right hand which holds the arrow, while the left holds the bow (Ezek 39:3). The right hand also apparently played the lyre while the left hand held it (Ps 137:5). The right hand of Yahweh was that which delivered Israel, shattering the enemy (Exod 15:6). Yahweh's right hand gains mighty victories for his people¹

Changed

Remember - to **remember**, to **call to mind** tech. expression in legislation² Ps 105:5; 143:5. Both worship and tradition served this memory. Through the great festivals with their rituals and songs, the people participated in both establishing and remembering the meaningful history of Israel and thus understood themselves better in the light of that meaningful past. Memory provided community and continuity. The Passover, for example, which Israel was to "remember" (that is, observe, Exod 13:3), was itself a "remembrance" (Heb *zikkārôn*, Exod 12:14) of God's deliverance of them from Egypt. By ritual and celebration subsequent generations made that story their own (cf. the Passover Haggadah; *m. Pesah*. 10:4–6). Similarly, the Feast of Unleavened Bread was observed to "remember" the Exodus (Exod 13:8–10; Deut 16:3; consider also the Feast of Booths, Lev 23:43). New Year's Day is also described as a memorial (Heb *zikkārôn*; Lev 23:24), presumably of God's creative activity and sovereignty. Later commemorative festivals might also be mentioned: Purim (cf. Esth 9:28) and Hanukkah (1 Macc 4:52, 59). Even the wearing of phylacteries (Deut 6:8; 11:18; Exod 13:9) and tassels (Num 15:39) served as a memory of God's works and law. Thus Israel "remembered" the Lord. (At the same time, of course, the cultic ceremonies and prayers served to bring the people to God's remembrance.)³

Wonders **unusual, miracle**, b. divine miracle מִלְאָה Ps 77:12⁴

¹ Joel F. Jr. Drinkard, "[Right, Right Hand,](#)" in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 724.

² Ludwig Koehler et al., [The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 270.

Pesah Pesahim

. *Pesahim*

³ Allen Verhey, "[Remember, Remembrance,](#)" in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 668.

⁴ Ludwig Koehler et al., [The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 928.

Meditate - to **read in an undertone** (Koehler ZAW 32:240) Ps 1:2 with ,א Jos 1:8; d) to **mutter** while meditating⁵

Muse - loud, enthusiastic, emotionally laden speech⁶to meditate with thanks and praise⁷

Deeds - actually deeds that are only words, meaning groundless, fictitious⁸

Way They derive from the fact that one on a public path becomes known and his goal and purposes are revealed by the road he takes. Most important is the sense of God's purposes and will, e.g. Ex. 33:13; Jb. 21:14, 31; Ps. 67:2; Pr. 8:22; Ezk. 18:25. There follows the idea of God's commandments, cf. especially Ps. 119. 'Way' is used generally of man's conduct, good or bad, and even of that p 1233 of animals, e.g. Ps. 1:1⁹

Holy - **holiness** associated with God (calling for special consideration)¹⁰

ZAW Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

⁵ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 237.

⁶ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1320.

⁷ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1320.

⁸ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 833.

⁹ H. L. Ellison, "[*Way*](#)," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1232–1233.

¹⁰ Ludwig Koehler et al., [*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1077.

Background

Form/Structure/Setting

This is not an easy psalm to read because of the uncertainty about the tenses and modes of the verbs. The translation above assumes that the psalm belongs to the broad genre of lament, which is within a well-established interpretative tradition. However, it is possible to read the psalm in terms of thanksgiving, with the verbs in vv 2–4 read in past tense and recalling a time of lament (as in the thanksgiving psalms; e.g., Ps 30), with vv 15–16 expressing a deliverance by God. In this reading, vv 17–21 would be hymnic praise of the God who has saved his people. Thus,

J. Gray ("The Kingship of God in the Prophets and Psalms," *VT* 11 [1961] 9) designates the psalm as "a public thanksgiving after relief from distress." The translations in LXX, KJV, and NIV are compatible with this interpretation. Nevertheless, the language of the psalm seems to indicate a situation of present distress existing for the speaker, a prayer which waits for an answer.

Ps 77 is sometimes read as a composition of two originally independent psalms, or parts of psalms. The psalm is usually divided into vv 2–10 and 11–21 or 2–11 and 12–21. Thus Gunkel (333–34) calls vv 2–10 a lament by form and content and describes vv 11–21 as hymnic. A. A. Anderson (II, 55), though defending the literary unity of the psalm, says that vv 2–11 can be taken as having the form of an individual lament, while vv 12–21 resemble a hymn. Kraus (*Psalms* 60–150, 114) finds a prayer song of an individual person (speaking for the community) in vv 2–10, with vv 11–21 as a retrospection on the great deeds of Yahweh in the form of hymnic address, and with vv 17–20 being an independent description of a theophany. Cohen (246–48) follows the *selah* division of the psalm, which divides it into vv 2–4, 5–10, 11–21 (reading v 11 with vv 11–16 and as meaning: "The cause of all my mental and spiritual distress is that I dare to imagine that God is capable of such a change of purpose with respect to Israel").

The formation of the psalm could be the result of an intended liturgical usage or fashioned after the form of a liturgy. For example, StuhlmueLLer (II, 22) suggests that the individual lament in vv 2–10 (following the *selah*) expresses loneliness and separation from God, while vv 11–16 is a confession of faith that "God's ways do not change," with a meditation by the worshiper on God's redemptive acts set forth in the liturgies and confessions of faith, and vv 17–21 form a hymn which points toward a new creation/exodus for Israel and continued leadership. A. Weiser (532) argues that the hymn in vv 12–21 "presupposes a cultic situation, and it may be assumed that the whole psalm was recited in such a context." Weiser argues that the change in the speaker's attitude "is not to be accounted for only by the newly gained knowledge that he walked in the wrong way as he doubted God" (532, Weiser assumes that v 12 reflects an inward change in the speaker's attitude; "I will tell of all thy work...."), but the knowledge itself goes back to a living encounter with God in worship, which constrains the speaker to bear witness to the congregation of God's wonderful deeds. Weiser thinks his case is strengthened by the nature of vv 17–20 as a description of theophany (assuming that theophanic experiences were a major element in worship). J. Jeremias (*Theophanie*, 26–27) agrees that vv 17–20 form a description of a theophany. On the whole, however, attempts to explain this psalm on the basis of liturgy do not seem to be very successful.¹¹

VT Vetus Testamentum

LXX The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT

KJV King James Version (1611) = AV

NIV The New International Version (1978)

¹¹ Marvin E. Tate, [Psalms 51–100](#), vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 271–272.

J. Kselman (*JANESCU* 52 [1983] 51–58) has drawn together an impressive array of evidence pointing toward the rhetorical unity of the psalm and to the probability that it is “the literary creation of a single poet” (57). The major features in his analysis are as follows:

A. Structural features:

1. The word קולי (“my voice”) in v 2 forms an inclusion with קול in v 18 and 19—the voice of lament in v 2 is answered by the “voice” of God’s thunder in vv 18–19 and the theophany of vv 17–20.
2. Another inclusion is formed by the extended hand of the speaker in v 3 and the hands of Moses and Aaron in v 21. Also, the lament in vv 2–11 is marked off by the use of יד (“hand”) in v 3 and ימין (“right hand”) in v 11.
3. The fourfold use of the root זכר (“remember”) binds the psalm together: once in v 4, once in v 7, and twice in v 12 at the beginning of the hymn section. Between the “remember” in vv 4 and 7 and the “remember” (2x) in v 12, the antonym השכח (“forget”) is found in v 10.
4. Kselman (57) refers to אשיחה (“I ponder/think about”) in vv 4, 7, and 13 as a “fusing device”: vv 4 and 7 use it in lament; v 13 uses it in praise
5. The psalm is marked by the use of concentric, chiasmic structure that cuts across the division of the lament and hymn:

A vv 9–10 Questioning of creedal tradition

B v 11 End of lament: God’s right has changed

C vv 12–14 Beginning of the hymn: the incomparability of God

B¹ vv 15–16 The answer to B: God still redeems

A¹ vv 17–21 The answer to A: God is still the God who redeemed Israel.

B. Content:

1. Kselman argues that the questions in vv 9–10, which with v 11 culminate the lament, are answered by “the hymnic representation of God’s mastery over the sea” (53) in vv 17–20.
2. As part of his case, he contends that the questions in vv 9–10 are framed in terms of the creedal statement found in Exod 34:6:

Yahweh, Yahweh
El Compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abundant in kindness and fidelity

3. In effect, Kselman thinks that vv 9–10 are a commentary on Exod 34:6, questioning each point of the formula:

Has his loyal-love ceased forever?
Will his promise fail?
Has El (God) forgotten to be gracious?
Has he locked up his compassion in anger?

(For Exod 34:6 in the Psalter, see Pss 86:15; 103:9–13; 145:8). The argument is that the speaker answers the questions posed in vv 9–10 by calling to mind the great acts of wonder and power in Yahweh's victory over Egypt and his mastery of the sea in the defeat of the chariots and soldiers of Pharaoh (see Exod 15): "The God who delivered Israel from Egypt can deliver the psalmist from the present distress as well" (Kselman, 53). Thus the questions in vv 9–10 are answered by recalling the demonstration of the truth of the creedal statement in Exod 34:6, in his gracious act of salvation, and in the display of his faithful love.

Kselman's analysis seems to offer the best reading of Ps 77, and I would modify his approach only in minor ways. I agree that the questions in vv 8–10 (v 8 should be included) form the heart of the psalm and raise the questions of the basic character of Yahweh and the continuation of his love. These are the questions which the speaker ponders day and night (vv 6–7). Can Yahweh still be declared to be compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loyal-love? The initial response of the speaker is in v 11: "I am wounded by the changing of the right hand of Yahweh." The mighty right hand of Yahweh, famed for its punishing power against such foes as the Egyptians, is no longer active—or is it?

Kselman seems to think that the psalm affirms the incomparability of Yahweh and provides a positive answer to the troubling questions: "Yes, I can still affirm the old credo!" The psalm certainly moves in this direction, but it seems to me that the psalm has no change of mood; the questions are left open. Will the God who did such marvelous things in the past do them again? Will his loyal-love continue? Will he never be favorable to us again? Has he locked up his compassion in unending anger? Must the groaning and the sleepless pondering (vv 4–5) go on forever? These questions hang unanswered in the psalm. The reader must answer—though there is little doubt that the psalm is intended to prompt the reader to respond with "No" to the questions in vv 8–10.

Commentators are wont to argue that Ps 77 is old, or at least some sections are old (e.g., Dahood, Jacquet). The reasons given are primarily linguistic in nature. H. Jefferson (*VT* 13 [1963] 87–91) argues that tricolons in vv 17–20, which is like the ABC/ABD pattern characteristic of Ugaritic literature, combined with the nature of their vocabulary, points to a very archaic origin; finding thirteen words in these verses used less than fifty times in the OT. A high percentage of the uncommon words are found in Ps 18:8–16, which is judged to be early (ninth or eighth centuries or even tenth century B.C.E.): 52 percent of the vocabulary in 77:17–20 is found in Ps 18:8–18 (45 percent of the vocabulary of 77:17–20 is used in Hab 3:10–12) and 57 percent of the vocabulary of 77:17–20 has Ugaritic parallels. Jefferson also argues for a close literary relationship between 77:12–15 and Exod 15:11–13 (note the use of "working wonders," עֲשֶׂה ,פִּלָּא in both passages). This kind of argumentation must be allowed some weight and it points to

the high probability that Ps 77 is composed of older material, much of it traditional. However, the common vocabulary may be due in large measure to a common literary genre. Ps 18:6–18 is a description of a theophany as is 77:17–20 and it is not surprising that they share common language, because they are part of a common tradition. It is possible that the reference to “the sons of Jacob and Joseph” (v 16) may point to an origin in the Northern Israelite Kingdom before 722 B.C.E. However, the present psalm seems more at home in the time of the exile (after 587 B.C.E.) and especially in the post-exilic period. The speaker is likely to speak for the perplexed and fearful Israelite communities in the great catastrophe of the exile and its aftermath.¹²

Commentary Study

The second complaint (77:6–11). The painful depression of the speaker has been described in vv 2–5; a troubled distress which comes from unanswered prayer and pondering about God. The process of remembering and pondering (שיח and זכר) continues in vv 6–11 with more description and with the troubling questions in vv 8–10.

The apparent absence of God in the present leads to meditation about the past, when divine love and protection were evident. This makes the present look even worse as the speaker remembers the favor, lovingkindness, graciousness, and compassion of the former days. Even God’s eternal promises seem to have come to an end. In sorrow and abandonment the speaker ponders on the disturbing questions in vv 8–10. The confident songs of praise, sung in the past, evoke dire questions about the present. This complaint reaches a climax in v 11 when the speaker laments the wounding which has resulted from the “changing of the right hand of the Most High.” In v 11 the speaker attributes a weakened/grieving condition to the failure of God to use his right hand for the defense and deliverance of his people. cf. v 16, which recalls how God (Yahweh) redeemed his people with his arm. The “songs” in v 7a probably refers to the songs of thanksgiving and praise which had been sung in happier times.

A meditation on the deeds of God (77:12–16). Several commentators read these verses as expressing a change of mood in the speaker from lament to confidence (see the references above to Stuhlmueller and Weiser; also Kraus, II, 695–96). A sudden change of mood is found in some

¹² Marvin E. Tate, [Psalms 51–100](#), vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 272–274.

laments and it is possible here. It seems to me, however, that Dahood makes better sense. Dahood reads v 12 as a positive affirmation of intention (“I will recite your magnificent deeds ...”), but he argues that the purpose of the song about God’s primordial deeds is “to persuade God to repeat such feats on Israel’s behalf” (II, 78).

I prefer to read these verses as continuing the painful reflection of vv 4–11 on God’s failure to duplicate his great works in the present. The recall of God’s wonderful works of the past—culminating in the deliverance of Israel in v 16—is the counterpoint to the divine passivity in the present. Note the use of the verb *חַשַּׁב* (“muse/reflect/ponder”) in vv 7 and 13. The pondering of inscrutable questions continues—even in reflection (indeed, more so) on God’s holiness and greatness (v 14). How can Yahweh maintain his holy way with Israel while refusing to use his great arm and powerful right hand for her deliverance?

A description of a theophany (77:17–21). The distressful meditation of vv 12–16 is intensified by the description of the demonstration of God’s power in theophanic intervention (cf. Ps 18:8–18). The language of v 17 reflects the ancient motif of a divine struggle with chaotic forces in bringing forth creation. The turbulent waters of the great primeval seas writhed before the presence of God and the deeps roiled, so great was his power. The language draws from the widely spread myth of the primeval conquest of the waters of chaos (see the discussion of 74:12–17; 104:2–7; J. Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 96–97). However, in this context the chaos struggle has been adapted to divine intervention for deliverance (as in Pss 18:8–18; 93) and the historization of the myth in the description of divine action in the Exodus (see Isa 51:9–11; Exod 15:5–10; Ps 114:3–5; Isa 63:12–14). The descriptive elements in these verses reflect various religious traditions from the ancient Near East (see Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 116–17; Day, 96–101, for details and references). The shepherd motif in v 21 is a common one in the Bible (see, e.g., Pss 78:52–53; 95:7–11; 100; cf. Pss 23; 80:2; Ezek 34).

Explanation

The speaker in this psalm voices great personal distress caused by the unrelieved condition of Israel. The psalm is a prayer of unanswered lament. Nevertheless there is a feeling of expectancy about it. The reader knows what the speaker in the psalm can only seek in perplexity and reflection: God has surely not rejected his people forever; his promises will be kept. At the close of the psalm the reader senses that a theophanic intervention of the wonder-working God of creation and exodus is imminent, though the worshiper waits for it to come.

The complaints in vv 2–11 focus on the hurt of a person whose anguish stems from unanswered prayer and doubt about God. The pain is too great for speaking (v 5), and the night has become a time not for sleeping but a time of constant pondering and seeking for the answers to disturbing questions. The possibility of God’s desertion from his people and the end of his loyal-love is confronted in the dark hours of sleepless night. The reader can hardly miss the references to night in vv 3 and 7. The speaker knows of spiritual terror at night (cf. Ps 91:5). The recall of God’s power and greatness in vv 12–21 does not bring an immediate end to doubt and waiting. The psalm seems to suggest that God moves on his own schedule and often the faithful must endure the anguish of waiting. Perhaps we should read the psalm with a passage like Isa 40:31:

They who wait for the LORD
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (RSV)

Those who wait pray, “Come Lord!”

As noted above, most commentators read this psalm with a major shift of mood in v 12. In this case, a different explanation is required for the text. For a vigorous exposition of the psalm along these lines, see W. Brueggemann (*Israel's Praise*, 137–40). Brueggemann reads the psalm in the context of “Pain as the Matrix of Praise” (136) and argues that a connection between “canonical memory of credo and concrete pain” is articulated in its content (137). In this approach, God becomes the center of attention as the speaker shifts away from “I” to “thou” (vv 13–21). The speaker’s remembering of the past “takes the mind off the hopelessness of the self” and “conceptualizes present hurt, as yet unresolved” (138). The remembering of the speaker is aided by identification with “your people” (vv 16, 21); the remembering and the identification allow present trouble to be “recontextualized and thereby transformed” (138)—“The trouble has been set in the context of remembered praise.” There is much in this exposition with which to agree. However, it seems to me that the recontextualization and transformation in this psalm is incomplete; the speaker is at the threshold of a new understanding but has not entered, and the reader is left to ponder his or her own willingness to enter. The speaker and the reader wait for a new revealing of the unperceived steps of God through the great waters (v 20), which will become a new mystery, a reality not discoverable by ordinary observation. The psalm invites us as readers to ponder the mystery of the “unknown tracks” of God in the midst of our distress. Has his loyal-love (v 9) failed? Can we still trust his promises? Vv 12–21 give us the basis for an affirmative answer, but the decision is ours.¹³

RSV Revised Standard Version (NT 1946, OT 1952, Apoc 1957)

¹³ Marvin E. Tate, [*Psalms 51–100*](#), vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 274–276.

A. *The problem (77:1–9)*

77:1–3. Asaph related that he **cried** earnestly all **night** for **God to hear** him, but was disquieted and confused when he **remembered ... God** (cf. vv. 6–7). Apparently his effort to find comfort from prayer failed.

77:4–6. Then the psalmist told how he searched his **spirit** for comfort. As God **troubled** him by keeping him awake, he **thought about the former days** when he could sing **in the night** about God's deliverances. But now he was perplexed (**mused**; cf. v. 3) because he had no occasion for praise.

77:7–9. Asaph was perplexed because he seemed to be abandoned by **the LORD**. He wondered if God had cast Israel off, by discontinuing **His favor love** (*hesed*, "loyal love"), and **promise** and by withholding His mercy and **compassion** because of His **anger**.

Apparently, then, the nation was in distress. God had not answered their prayers, which greatly troubled the psalmist's soul.

B. *The solution (77:10–20)*

The psalmist's comfort and hope came from his musing on God's great deliverance of Israel at the Exodus.

77:10–15. Asaph decided to recall (**remember ... meditate ... consider**, vv. 11–12) God's **miracles** (v. 11) performed in the past by His **right hand** (v. 10, i.e., in power; cf. "arm," v. 15). Asaph based his **appeal** on those **works** and **deeds**. His immediate reflection led him to praise the incomparably **holy** and **great ... God** as Redeemer (vv. 13–15). God is incomparable because he **performs** miraculous, **mighty** deeds, such as the redemption (deliverance) of His people from Egypt by His **arm** (i.e., strength). The question, **What god is so great as our God?** does not imply that other gods live. It indicates that God far exceeds every false god people worship (cf. similar questions in 35:10; 71:19; 89:6; 113:5; Ex. 15:11; Micah 7:18).

77:16–18. Asaph vividly described the phenomena that accompanied the display of power when God redeemed His people from Egypt. **Waters** responded to Him (at the crossing of the Red Sea), and **clouds ... thunder ... lightning (Your arrows)**, and earthquakes revealed His power (cf. 68:7–9; 97:2–5).

77:19–20. God used **Moses and Aaron** to lead His people miraculously out of danger **through the Red Sea** as if they were a **flock** of sheep (cf. 78:52; 79:13; 100:3).

So the implication of this praise-filled meditation is that God will again miraculously rescue His **people**, people whom He has redeemed to Himself.¹⁴

¹⁴ Allen P. Ross, "[Psalms](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 850.

■ 9* The next double questions (v. 9*) indicate central deficiencies in the present: God's steadfast love/goodness seems to have come to an end. "Steadfast love," or "graciousness" (חסד) is a primary concept within the God–relationship; cf. the so-called graciousness formula in Exod 34:6*, its function as a key concept in Hosea's theology, and its frequent appearance in the language of the Psalms; thus, analogously, the poor person's Ps 12:2* laments the absence of the godly, the Hasidim. In parallel, the "promise" that has accompanied the generations has vanished. "Promise" or "word" (אמר) can refer metaphorically to the testimony of the heavens to shifting times (19:3–4*), but that testimony is constant and does not cease. According to

*⁸ Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time?

Psalm 77:8 (NRSV)

*⁸ Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time?

Psalm 77:8 (NRSV)

*⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:6 (NRSV)

*¹ To the leader: according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David. Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind.

Psalm 12:1 (NRSV)

*² Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

68:12* it represents the (prophetic) word announcing victory (cf. war prophecy or court prophecy). The close context of the ladder of questions also votes for understanding this as a word of salvation. Lamentations 2:9* can be appropriately cited in this connection; prophets no longer see the face of God/any vision. The indication of a deficit in prophecy confirms the sensitivity of the Asaph psalms to prophetic phenomena, as indicated in Ps 74:9*. The absence of prophecies of salvation shows that contact with God has been broken.

■ 10* The double question that ends the strophe (v. 10*) touches the theological point: there is a rift in the divine essence. Has God forgotten his steadfast love? The new name El/God can be interpreted as a *nomen rectum* with the infinitive construct; in that case the subject, the “Lord” from v. 8*, would have displaced the divine graciousness, which would strengthen the reference, certainly present here, to the graciousness formula from Exod 34:6*. Otherwise the posterior naming of the divine subject would be an anticipation of the name “the Most High” in

Psalm 19:2–3 (NRSV)

* 11 The Lord gives the command; great is the company of those who bore the tidings:

Psalm 68:11 (NRSV)

* 9 Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; guidance is no more, and her prophets obtain no vision from the Lord.

Lamentations 2:9 (NRSV)

* 9 We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long.

Psalm 74:9 (NRSV)

* 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” *Selah*

Psalm 77:9 (NRSV)

* 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” *Selah*

Psalm 77:9 (NRSV)

* 7 “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?

Psalm 77:7 (NRSV)

* 6 The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:6 (NRSV)

v. 11*, which could be closer to both, as in Pss 73:11* and 78:35*, (56*). In either case the infinitive construct recalls Exod 33:19* and 34:6*. The singular image of the sealing of divine mercy in wrath (an unusual combination of concrete verb with abstracts) laments the immunization of the divine nature itself, God's loving affection in graciousness and mercy. The three principal concepts that describe God's nature in terms of a present deficit (steadfast love, compassion, mercy) refer again to the so-called graciousness formula in Exod 34:6* (God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness). The dual ארך אפים, "patience," in the Hebrew plays on אף "wrath." The nature of God asserted in the confession in Exod 34:6* has broken off.

* ¹⁰ And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

Psalm 77:10 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

Psalm 73:11 (NRSV)

* ³⁵ They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer.

Psalm 78:35 (NRSV)

* ⁵⁶ Yet they tested the Most High God, and rebelled against him. They did not observe his decrees,

Psalm 78:56 (NRSV)

* ¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

Exodus 33:19 (NRSV)

* ⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:6 (NRSV)

* ⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:6 (NRSV)

* ⁶ The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Exodus 34:6 (NRSV)

■ **11*** The fourth strophe (vv. 11–13*) has a Janus face. Verse 11* turns back and draws a balance from what has gone before. The petitioner diagnoses his own theological suffering, the alteration in God’s attitude. This alteration contradicts God’s fidelity and constancy; cf. the parallel Ps 89:35*. The divine attitude is described with the aid of the image of the “right hand” uplifted to help, a poetic variant of or allusion to the exodus formula (leading out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm), as we find it in the Song at the Sea (Exod 15:6*, 12*) and in Pss 44:4* and 78:54*. The third divine title now introduced (after “Lord” in vv. 3* and 8*,

* ¹⁰ And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

Psalm 77:10 (NRSV)

* ¹⁰ And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

Psalm 77:10–12 (NRSV)

* ¹⁰ And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

Psalm 77:10 (NRSV)

* ³⁴ I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips.

Psalm 89:34 (NRSV)

* ⁶ Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power— your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.

Exodus 15:6 (NRSV)

* ¹² You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.

Exodus 15:12 (NRSV)

* ³ for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

Psalm 44:3 (NRSV)

* ⁵⁴ And he brought them to his holy hill, to the mountain that his right hand had won.

Psalm 78:54 (NRSV)

* ² In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

Psalm 77:2 (NRSV)

* ⁷ “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?

and “El” in v. 10*), “Most High,” is part of the ancient Jerusalem cultic tradition and is one of the names for God characteristic of the Asaph psalms.¹²

■ **12–13*** With the double verse 12–13*, stylistically linked to form a tetracolon (see Analysis above), the petitioner turns from lamenting and toward the past history that revealed a brighter hue. He desires to remember the “deeds of YH” (shortened form of YHWH). This use of the proper name in the middle of this otherwise Elohistic psalm could be the deliberate adoption of a technical term in the style of Exod 15:2* (“Song of YH”) and 17:16* (“Banner of YH”). The external members of the macrochiasm have linguistic links to the discourse style of Deuteronomistically colored parts of the book of Ezekiel (cf. Ezek 36:31*), or they follow the

Psalm 77:7 (NRSV)

* ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” *Selah*

Psalm 77:9 (NRSV)

¹² See 50:14*; 73:11*; 78:17*, 35*, 56*; 82:6*; 83:19*.

* ¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

Psalm 77:11–12 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

Psalm 77:11–12 (NRSV)

* ² The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

Exodus 15:2 (NRSV)

* ¹⁶ He said, “A hand upon the banner of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

Exodus 17:16 (NRSV)

* ³¹ Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds.

Ezekiel 36:31 (NRSV)

diction typical of Ezekiel (cf. Ezek 20:43*; 21:29*). The internal members emphasize the miraculous deeds at the beginning of history (cf. v. 6*). In light of the parallels in Exod 15:11*; Pss 78:12*; (88:11*); 66:5*; and 44:2*, one thinks of the deeds of the exodus, here allusively introduced. The petitioner does not break forth in praise, but remains in an internal monologue or an inward reflection and meditation; only the basic mood has been decisively altered. The switches have been set for the hymnic prayer that follows.

* ⁴³ There you shall remember your ways and all the deeds by which you have polluted yourselves; and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed.

Ezekiel 20:43 (NRSV)

* ²⁴ Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have brought your guilt to remembrance, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to remembrance, you shall be taken in hand.

Ezekiel 21:24 (NRSV)

* ⁵ I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago.

Psalms 77:5 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

Exodus 15:11 (NRSV)

* ¹² In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

Psalms 78:12 (NRSV)

* ¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? *Selah*

Psalms 88:10 (NRSV)

* ⁵ Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

Psalms 66:5 (NRSV)

* ¹ To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Maskil. We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:

Psalms 44:1 (NRSV)

■ **14*** The fifth strophe (vv. 14–16*) begins with thetically intended statements about God’s activity (v. 14*). The first statement combines “way” terminology with the qualification “in holiness.” God’s way is, on the one hand, part of the implied reminiscence of the Exodus, but on the other hand it can encompass the whole course of history (cf., e.g., Deut 32:4* or Isa 55:8–11*). The association with God’s holiness is less common. Holiness is attributed to God as a quality or is applied to the Temple or even to the heavenly city; here it refers to the quality of God that emphasizes God’s transcendence. The parallel most likely to have inspired this is Exod 15:11* (cf. the analogous combination of God’s incomparability and holiness), but there are

* ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?

Psalm 77:13 (NRSV)

* ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.

¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Psalm 77:13–15 (NRSV)

* ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?

Psalm 77:13 (NRSV)

* ⁴ The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he;

Deuteronomy 32:4 (NRSV)

* ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:8–11 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

Exodus 15:11 (NRSV)

also 1 Sam 2:2*; Isa 40:25*; Hab 1:12*. The following statement about God's incomparability is no longer monolatrous (the uniqueness of God among the gods), as in Exod 15:11* or Exod 18:11*, but approaches a monotheistic incomparability like that in Ps 18:32* (the unique God is the only God). The point of comparison is the "greatness of God," a characteristic attributed to God in connection with the Jerusalem notion of kingship (47:3*; 95:3*; 96:4*; 99:2*).

* ² "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

1 Samuel 2:2 (NRSV)

* ²⁵ To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Isaiah 40:25 (NRSV)

* ¹² Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O Lord, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

Habakkuk 1:12 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

Exodus 15:11 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them."

Exodus 18:11 (NRSV)

* ³¹ For who is God except the Lord? And who is a rock besides our God?—

Psalms 18:31 (NRSV)

* ² For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

Psalms 47:2 (NRSV)

* ³ For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalms 95:3 (NRSV)

* ⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

Psalms 96:4 (NRSV)

* ² The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

Psalms 99:2 (NRSV)

■ **15*** Verse 15a* makes two statements: God is *the* God pure and simple—cf. v. 10*—and God is a “wonder worker,” as Exod 15:11*; Pss 78:12*; and 88:11* describe him. Verse 15b* moves to the naming of individual deeds in history. The exodus took place before the eyes of concrete

* ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.

Psalm 77:14 (NRSV)

* ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.

Psalm 77:14 (NRSV)

* ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” *Selah*

Psalm 77:9 (NRSV)

* ¹¹ “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

Exodus 15:11 (NRSV)

* ¹² In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

Psalm 78:12 (NRSV)

* ¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? *Selah*

Psalm 88:10 (NRSV)

* ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.

Psalm 77:14 (NRSV)

nations: Exod 15:14–16*. This is here interpreted as a proclamation (cf. Pss 9:17*; 88:13*), as the closest parallel, 98:2*, recalls. “Power” is one of the manifestations of the God–king.¹³

■ 16* Verse 16* refers most concretely to the exodus tradition. Closest to the formulation here, from among the manifold recollections of the exodus, are Exod 15:13* (liberation of the people) and the exodus proclamation from the Priestly writing, Exod 6:6b* (liberation of the people through the outstretched arm); in the nearby context of the basic Priestly writing there

* 14 The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.

15 Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.

16 Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone until your people, O Lord, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by.

Exodus 15:14–16 (NRSV)

* 16 The Lord has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. *Higgaion. Selah*

Psalms 9:16 (NRSV)

* 12 Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

Psalms 88:12 (NRSV)

* 2 The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

Psalms 98:2 (NRSV)

13 Cf. 29:1*; 93:1*; 96:7*; and, e.g., 21:2*, 14*.

* 15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Psalms 77:15 (NRSV)

* 15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Psalms 77:15 (NRSV)

* 13 “In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Exodus 15:13 (NRSV)

* 6 Say therefore to the Israelites, ‘I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.

Exodus 6:6 (NRSV)

is mention of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 6:3*). The identification of the people of God as the children of Jacob and Joseph (v. 16b*) is unique. However, it is one of the acknowledged peculiarities of the Asaph psalms that they pay particular attention to Jacob and Joseph,¹⁴ which—as is traditionally suggested—has to do with the continuing influence of the traditions of the Northern Kingdom.¹⁵

* ³ I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The Lord’ I did not make myself known to them.

Exodus 6:3 (NRSV)

* ¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Psalms 77:15 (NRSV)

¹⁴ For Jacob see Pss 75:10*; 76:7*; 78:5*, 21*, 71*; 79:7*; 81:2*, 5*; for Joseph, 78:67*; 80:2*; 81:6*; cf. also 105:17*.

¹⁵ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, [*Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*](#), ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 277–279.