Psalm 77
Translated by Keren Klein
Hebrew according to the Masoretic Text

**A**
1 For the conductor: on Yedutun.
   Of Asaph, a psalm:
2 My voice to God—let me cry out!
   My voice to God—and listen to me!
3 During the time of my trouble, I sought my Master.
   My hand was outstretched all night and did not grow numb.
   My being refused to be comforted.

**B**
4 Let me remember, God, and let me moan.
   Let me contemplate, though my spirit will grow faint. Selah.
5 You grasped the lids of my eyes;
   I was troubled but would not speak.
6 I calculated the days of old,
   An eternity of years.

**C**
7 Let me remember my playing music in the night with my heart;
   Let me contemplate and my spirit will search.
8 Will my Master reject forever?
   And will He not be pleased anymore?
9 Has He ended forever His faithfulness,
   Finished His word for all generations?
10 Has God forgotten how to show grace?
   Has He withheld His compassion in anger? Selah.
11 And I said, “It is my weakness
   That changed the right hand of The Most High.”
12 I will remember the deeds of Yah,
   Indeed, I will remember Your wonders of old.
13 And I will reflect on all Your works,
   And all Your deeds I will contemplate.
14 God, your way is in holiness.
   Which god is as great as God?
15 You are the God who does wonders;
   You have made known Your might among the peoples.
16 You redeemed with Your arm Your people,
   The descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah.

**B’**
17 The waters saw You, God.
   The waters saw You—they trembled—
   Even the depths of the sea shook.
18 Clouds poured out water,
   Skies made sound,
   Even Your bolts went back and forth.
19 The sound of Your thundering was in the whirlwind,
   The lightning lit up the world,
   The earth quaked and shook
   In the sea was Your way,
   And Your path was in the gushing waters,
   But your footprints could not be known.
20 You guided Your people like sheep
   In the hand of Moses and Aaron.
Hope in Memory: Structural Outline of Psalm 77

I. Superscription (77:1)

II. Description of Disorientation:¹ Seeking God Without Success (77:2-10)
   a. “My Voice to God”: Address & Introductory Petition (77:2)²
   b. “Let Me Remember”: Petition for Remembering Part I (77:3-4)³
   c. “Let Me Remember”: Petition for Remembering Part II (77:5-7)⁴
   d. “Has God Forgotten?”: Core Complaint (77:8-10)

III. Transition (77:11)
   a. “It Is My Weakness”: Self-Assessment to Identify Cause of Disorientation (77:11a)
   b. “That Changed the Right Hand of the Most High”: Transition to Memory of Situation Before Disorientation (77:11b)

IV. Attempted Reorientation: Memory as an Affirmation of Trust in God (77:12-21)
   a. “I Will Remember”: Assertion of Will to Remember God’s Great Deeds (77:12-13)⁵
   b. “Which God Is as Great as God?”: Memory of God’s Great Deeds with Allusions to the Exodus (77:14-16)

V. Conclusion: Final Reassurance of God’s Presence and Plan (77:21)

¹ “Disorientation” and “reorientation” are descriptions coined by Walter Brueggemann in The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
² Key word: קולי (my voice)
³ Key words: קולתי (let me remember), עזרתי (let me contemplate), ודתי (I sought)
⁴ Key words: קולתי (let me remember), עזרתי (let me contemplate), ויחפש (search)
⁵ Key words: ז.כ.ר. (remember), עזרתי (let me contemplate), ע ל.ד. (deed), פועל (work)
⁶ Key words: ראת (they saw You), קול (water), קול (voice)
Breaking news! “Congress Threatens to Leave D.C. Unless New Capitol Is Built. Calling the current U.S. Capitol ‘inadequate and obsolete,’ Congress will relocate to Charlotte or Memphis if its demands for a new, state-of-the-art facility are not met.” Real news? Or fake news? Hopefully you recognized that the opening lines of this 2002 article from the satirical newspaper *The Onion* were not true; members of Congress did not really threaten to move out of the Capitol unless a retractable dome was put in.¹ But a Chinese newspaper picked up this article and reported it as real news.² Had the Chinese reporter known the genre of *The Onion*, he or she would not have mistaken the satirical article for serious news. Thus, in order to properly understand a text, one must know the genre. The same holds true for biblical passages, including the psalms.³

Scholars continue to debate the genre of Psalm 77 because of the significant difference in content and tone between the two halves of Psalm 77 (the first half, verses 1-11, laments a difficult situation and the second half, verses 12-21, praises God’s deeds). Thus, the intent of the psalm—its usage and meaning—remains unclear. Some scholars, basing their classification on Hermann Gunkel’s work, assign a different genre to each of the two parts: the first part (they claim) consists of an individual lament that was likely used in a communal setting, and the second part comprises a hymn that includes a theophany (so Weiser). Additionally, Mays, Gerstenberger, and others each argue that the psalm lacks a majority of the characteristics that make up a complaint or lament psalm, despite its appearance as such. Mays does not suggest an alternate genre, but Gerstenberger calls the whole psalm a “meditative hymn.”
It is clear from the psalm itself and from the way that commentators describe it that Psalm 77 falls under Walter Brueggemann’s category of “psalms of disorientation.” Psalms of disorientation reflect a life “savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry.”⁴ The author of Psalm 77 clearly relates an experience of all three of these disorienting qualities. Yet does this psalm constitute a lament in full or in part, or does it fall into a different genre entirely?

Mays, Westermann, and Limberg each suggest variations on the same idea of what constitutes a lament (Mays: “prayer for help;” Westermann: “petition”). The six essential components that these scholars identify include (1) a direct address of God, (2) a petition, (3) a lament or complaint, (4) a request for help, (5) an affirmation of trust and confidence, and (6) a vow of praise.⁵ According to Mays, additional components include a reference to enemies, a reason for why the psalmist’s prayer should be heard, and the psalmist’s self-assessment, which attempts to understand the source of the psalmist’s current situation.⁶

When utilizing most translations of Psalm 77, one would search in vain for many of the above elements. Of the essential components, the psalm contains no direct address of God,⁷ no petition, no request for help, only a hint of affirmation of trust and confidence, and no vow of praise.⁸ None of the additional components of a lament psalm can be found either. Only the complaint in verses 8-10 connects Psalm 77 to a lament. Despite this apparent dearth in the requisite elements of a lament psalm, Psalm 77 does, in fact, contain most of the essential components and one of the additional components. The key is in the translation of the cohortative verb form.

The cohortative appears eight times in Psalm 77 (starred in the translation on the handout), six times in the first half (verses 2, 4, and 7) and twice in the second (verses 12-13).
Two of the psalm’s key words, אֶזְכְּרָה and אָשִׂיחָה (whose roots mean “remember” and “contemplate,” respectively), appear three times apiece in the cohortative (letters B and C on the handout). The frequency with which the cohortative is used, especially with key words, highlights the importance of properly translating the cohortative form. Most translations, including the ones used by Gerstenberger and Mays, treat the cohortative as past tense or with an imperfect sense. For example, NKJV on v. 1a (Masoretic Text: v. 2a) uses the past tense: “I cried out to God with my voice” (see the insert at the top of the translation), and NRSV uses the present: “I cry aloud to God.” In comparison, I translate the cohortative with a volitive tone, in a way that expresses the psalmist’s desire to do something (v. 2a: “My voice to God—let me cry out!”).

According to Paul Joüon, the volitive tone in the first person future expresses “either a manifestation of the speaker’s will, or an appeal to someone else’s will.” He adds, “The volitive nuance is sometimes optative” In other words, it expresses the speaker’s wish to do something. Using the model root קטל, meaning “to kill,” Joüon explains, “When the speaker manifests his will in a way which is dependent on someone else’s will…the nuance is I would like to kill, let me kill, allow me to kill.” In the context of Psalm 77, I emphasize this desire to cry out, to remember, to contemplate by translating most instances of the cohortative as “let me….”

Certainly, there is ambiguity in the cohortative form. Joüon writes, “the volitive nuance is often very weak and does not always need to be translated.” In a footnote Joüon also suggests that the cohortative may have been used for emphasis or that it may have been misused by biblical writers who “were attracted to the cohortative as an eminently archaic feature.” While all three of these suggestions—that the volitive nuance is weak, that the cohortative was used for emphasis, or that it was misused—are reasonable possibilities for the cohortative in Psalm 77,
the psalm remains disjointed and confusing when translators ignore or overlook the importance of the cohortative. When the cohortative is translated with a volitive nuance, however, Psalm 77, as a whole, functions as a cohesive lament. Let us see how.

Despite the seemingly third person reference to God in verse 2 (אֶל-אֱלֹהִים), the opening cry contains both the direct address and the beginnings of the petition (on the back of the handout, in the structural outline, see part II-a). God is the unspoken “You” that appears when translating the cohortative as “let me cry out” rather than “I cry aloud to God” or “I cried out.” Similarly, the imperative “and listen to me” contains the unspoken “You” that has been overlooked when the translation renders the reference to God in the third person. Thus, instead of “I cry aloud to God; I cry to God that He may give ear to me,” verse 2 implies a reading of, “My voice goes out to You, God—let me cry out! My voice goes out to You, God—and listen to me!”

In addition to the direct address of God, verse 2 begins the petition with a request for permission to cry out and a plea for God to listen. The psalmist’s petition continues through verse 7, and is interwoven with a lament of the situation that led to this moment of crying out. Both subsections of the petition (verses 3-4 and verses 5-7, sections II-b and II-c in the outline) begin with the lamenting description and conclude with a petition. Each of these two petitions contains the key words אֶזְכְּרָה and אָשִׂיחָה (“let me remember” and “let me contemplate”), creating a repeated request for memory, which becomes the focus of the second half of the psalm.

In verse 8 the psalmist states the complaint (section II-d in the outline). As in other lament psalms, the use of questions in verses 8-10 both highlights the distress of the psalmist’s current situation and indicates some assurance that God will respond. Surely God would not allow such questioning, such an attack on God’s own covenantal loyalty, to go unanswered! Surely God would defend the judgment or reverse the decree in response to the psalmist’s
repentance or assertion of innocence! Unlike most lament psalms, however, this psalmist complains in the third person. According to the lament in the previous five verses, the psalmist has tried evoking a response from God. Yet God has remained distant, silent. Either God has not listened or God has rejected the psalmist outright. In the ancient world, God’s silence indicated abandonment. The third-person complaint emphasizes God’s lack of response to the petition; there is no use crying out to a God who no longer cares about the worshipper.

The psalmist’s response to God’s silence is self-assessment, one of the additional components of a lament psalm (see Part III-a in the outline). To the psalmist, God would not reject anyone unless the person had strayed far from God. Certainly God would not abandon a true follower. When God tries or tests individuals, as with Abraham and Job, God’s presence is painfully apparent. Similarly, when God punishes the author of Psalm 39, the psalmist pleas for God look away from him lest he die. In Psalm 77, however, God’s presence is not manifest in any way—neither through pain nor comfort. The psalmist only experiences God’s absence. So the psalmist turns inward to reflect on what might have caused God’s rejection and God’s silence. “It is my weakness,” reflects the psalmist, “that changed the right hand of the Most High” (verse 11).

The most significant difference between Psalm 77 and typical lament psalms can be found in vv. 12-21. Whereas most lament psalms would conclude with an affirmation of trust and confidence that God will hear the prayer and a vow to praise God in the future, Psalm 77 turns to memory. Rather than explicitly confirming assurance that God will indeed help, in verses 12-13 the psalmist petitions himself to bring God (or, at least, the idea of God) close through memory. Although verses 12-13 use language nearly identical to the earlier requests, the
nuance is slightly different because of God’s unresponsiveness. As a result, the psalmist needs to assert his own will to remember rather than petitioning God for the ability to remember.

To account for this particularly strong volitive nuance, I translated the cohortative in verses 12-13 (letter C in the translation) as “I will….” The word “will” in my translation is italicized to differentiate between the typical English translation of the future tense (“I will remember”) from the cohortative expression of the psalmist’s will (“I will remember). In these verses, the psalmist tries to convince himself to remember God’s deeds by asserting his desire and will to remember. God’s present silence in the face of trouble can be counteracted, if only minimally, by the memory of God’s complete and unrivaled presence and action during a prior time of trouble.

This memory, which is described in verses 14-21, functions in place of both the affirmation of trust and confidence and the vow of praise, as Mays suggests. Though the memory does not explicitly affirm the psalmist’s confidence that God will help, the psalmist seems to use these memories of God’s power, goodness, and presence to try to invoke his own trust and confidence in God. In other words, rather than describing his trust that God will help bring him out of his time of trouble, the psalmist reminds himself of another time when God seemed distant, but answered the cries of those who suffer. God heeded the cries of the Israelites suffering in Egypt, so perhaps God will also respond to the psalmist.

In Egypt, the Israelites’ situation seemed hopeless; they did not know that God had heard their pleas. Only when Moses and Aaron acted as the hands and mouth of God did the Israelites come to recognize God’s presence. Although they could not see God, the Israelites were able to experience God’s presence and power—even before the exodus took place. Then, at the shore of the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptians getting closer and closer, God once again seemed absent.
But with the help of Moses and Aaron, God’s power manifested in the splitting of the sea. Even so, as our psalmist says in verse 20, God’s “footprints were not known.” That is to say, the Israelites experienced God’s redemptive power without being able to fully know God’s presence.

Even beyond offering a reminder that God might actually be present, the goal of a memory such as the Exodus is hope. In the depths of despair, the psalmist needs a glimmer of hope to keep on going. By paralleling his experience with the Exodus, the psalmist can hope that God is present despite his inability to see or know God. With this hope, the psalmist can reassure himself that God will, at some point, respond to his pleas. With this hope, the psalmist can answer the questions with which he challenges God—no, God has not rejected him; yes, God can be pleased; no, God’s faithfulness has not ended; no, God has not forgotten how to show compassion; no, God is not withholding compassion in anger. With this hope based on a long history encapsulated in memory, the psalmist can feel that his prayers are not futile—that his lament will be heard by God, even if God seems so very distant.

3 As Robert Alter notes, for example, a psalm of thanksgiving includes some of the same components as a lament, but their purpose is vastly different (Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry 112).
4 Brueggemann 51.
5 Mays 21, Westermann 66-67, Limberg 532.
6 Mays 251-2.
7 Using translations that understand the cohortative as a form of future tense, the psalm lacks the repeated petitions of “let me….” Similarly, the language used to address God appears in the 3rd person when the many cohortative verbs are translated as “I will;” “let me” has an assumed subject of “you” that, here, must be God.
8 Mays 251-2, Gerstenberger 88.
9 Joüon-Muraoka §114b.
10 Ibid.
11 Joüon-Muraoka fn 3 in §114c.
12 Clifford 41.
Bibliography:


