Because of the significant difference in content and tone between the two halves of Psalm 77 (vv. 1-11 and 12-21), the psalm’s genre continues to be debated. Some scholars, basing their classification on 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). Others, like Mays and Gerstenberger 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.”

Although Psalm 77 appears disjointed and although it seems to lack a clear genre, both problems can be resolved by translating the psalm’s cohortative verbs in a volitive mode. The cohortative appears eight times in the psalm (six times in the first half: vv. 2, 4, and 7), twice in the second: vv. 12-13) and is commonly translated in the past tense or with an imperfect sense (see, e.g., NRSV’s v. 1a: “I cry aloud to God”). Such translations eliminate key components of the lament genre because they change the nuances of tone and the relationship between the psalmist and God. However, when the cohortative is translated in its more typical volitive mode, most of the characteristics of the lament genre appear. Additionally, the second half of the psalm (the hymn) becomes one of the otherwise missing characteristics of the lament genre. Thus, through the fresh analysis that I propose, it is possible to classify Psalm 77 as a whole as a lament psalm. Moreover, as a result, one can see more clearly what this particular lament accomplishes.