

The Shepherd's Unseen Footprints:  
Divine and Human Remembrance in Psalm 77

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Claus Westermann (1974, 22) writes that the Lord's saving acts always involve a verbal exchange or dialogue between God and man, including "both the cry of man in distress and the response of praise which the saved make to God." Nowhere is this dialogue more readily apparent in Scripture than in the Book of Psalms. Lament, supplication, confession, intercession, statements of trust, thanksgiving, and praise each weave their way through the songs of the Psalter, molding the hearts of believers to comprehend and follow the gospel pattern of anticipation and fulfillment, or the *Verbondsgeschiedenis* or "promise and deliverance" described by S.G. DeGraaf (1979). Some of the most poignant expressions of the tension between the promises and their fulfillment come to us through the laments in Book III of the psalter, among them Psalm 77. Taking upon himself the burden of his people in distress, the author of Psalm 77 turns to the history of Israel's Exodus to derive comfort that the Lord has not forgotten to be gracious but will surely continue to lead his people like a flock.

While a variety of methods could be used to study Psalm 77, the primary concern of this paper is to survey the psalm from the perspective of rhetorical criticism advanced by Muilenberg (1969) and others. According to Muilenberg, rhetorical criticism is "understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole" (8). Rhetorical analysis takes note of literary clues like inclusios and groupings of strophes, while searching for patterns of movement and transition in the poetry as a unit. While its examination

of Hebrew poetry will be necessarily less vigorous than Muilenberg's approach, this paper will seek to discern the interwoven themes of Psalm 77 that reflect broader patterns throughout redemptive history, particularly through the concept of memory. In the midst of personal and national distress, the psalmist in Psalm 77 cultivates the faculty of human remembrance to renew his assurance that Yahweh will exhibit divine remembrance in faithfulness to his covenant—a faithfulness that endures even when Yahweh's footprints are unseen. The paper will first study Psalm 77 by itself before placing the psalm in its literary and historical context and finally applying the psalm to the Christian life today.

#### Psalm 77 in Itself

The designation of Psalm 77 as “a psalm of Asaph” could mean one of several things. 1 Chronicles 6 identifies Asaph as one of the chief musicians under David, and thus the psalms ascribed to him could have been written during the Davidic monarchy. However, Firth (2008, 25) proposes that the “Asaph guild,” a group of musicians that continued in Israelite worship until at least the time of Nehemiah, might have been responsible for composing the Asaph psalms at this or some later date. This would help to explain the exilic or even post-exilic crisis that seems to be in view in Psalm 77, as well as in many of the other Asaph psalms. Nevertheless, Firth rejects suggestions that Asaph was merely “invented” as a senior musician to justify the existence of a collection of much later northern psalms. Perhaps the simplest solution is to follow Firth's example of ascribing the psalm to an “Asaph guild” (thus interpreting the title to mean something like “à la Asaph”) at a time of crisis near or during the exile. At the same time, the psalm could have applied to many occasions in Israel's troubled history. Corporately as

well as individually, Israelites endured many afflictions that might cause them to ask, “Has God forgotten to be gracious?”

The identity of the “Jeduthun” mentioned in the title (along with Psalms 39 and 62) raises further questions. Some commentators, particularly in the early church, imagined Jeduthun as a literal or representative individual; Augustine takes him allegorically to be “the leaper” who leaps over the things of this world for the purpose of communion with God himself (2002, 73). Brueggeman (2008, 620) identifies Jeduthun with Ethan, another of David’s chief musicians (1 Chron. 15:17), and suggests that the psalm was thus to be sung “by the Jeduthun choir, or according to a Jeduthun style or tune.” Recently, scholars have contended that “Jeduthun” is more likely a term used to designate the psalm’s liturgical purpose or use in worship. With Mowinckel, Eaton concludes that the title is best translated “for confession” (2005, 170). In any case, the three “Jeduthun” psalms (39, 62, and 77) resemble one another in their treatment of the brevity and frailty of human life when separated from the Lord’s sustaining hand. In particular, both Psalms 39 and 77 retell the psalmists’ troubled silence giving vent to soul-searching reflections on the Lord’s faithfulness. Amid the crises of divine judgment or attack by enemies, however, all three of the Jeduthun psalms include statements of personal trust in the Lord’s steadfast love as well (39:7, 62:1, 77:10ff). Whether “Jeduthun” was the name of a musician, the name of a choir, or a liturgical notation for confession, the title links Psalm 77 with broader themes of crisis and comfort in the Psalter.

Kselman (1983) and VanGemeran (1991, 499) both suggest a five-part chiastic structure for Psalm 77, with a few differences. VanGemeran identifies (A) a cry for help in vv. 1-2; (B) a remembrance of God in hymns of the night in vv. 3-6; (C) a set of questions in vv. 7-9; (B’) a remembrance of God’s mighty deeds in vv. 10-12; and (A’) an expression of confidence in

God's help in vv. 13-20. Kselman, on the other hand, aligns the chiasmic structure with the psalm's transition between lament and hymn, giving (A) the questioning of the creedal tradition in vv. 8-9, (B) the changing of God's right hand in v. 10; (C) the hymn beginning with the incomparability of God in vv. 11-13; (B') demonstration that God's right hand has not changed in vv. 14-15; and (A') a return to the creedal tradition in vv. 16-20 (Tate 1990, 272). A simpler thematic outline might divide the psalm into four interconnected sections: remembering and moaning (vv. 1-3), remembering and doubting (vv. 4-9), remembering and searching (vv. 10-12), and remembering and resting (vv. 13-20).

In all of the structures proposed here, the psalm's momentum can be observed to press forward to a climax of questions in vv. 7-9 before a turning point in v. 10, calling to mind Westermann's comment (1974, 26-27) that Biblical laments are defined by their transition into praise or petition and Muilenberg's remark (1969, 16) that rhetorical questions often occur at the climax of a particular discourse. If a lament, is Psalm 77 individual or communal? Kraus (1993a, 51) identifies it as a community prayer song, a persuasive view when correlated with Westermann's comment that national laments often turn to God's former acts of salvation in order to express the contrast with the present situation (1974, 31). On the other hand, Firth (2008, 26) and VanGemeren (1991, 499) both associate the psalm with individual lament, while noting that communal aspects are in view as well as the psalmist questions God's promises to his people. Anderson (2000, 56) opts for a middle ground since in Psalm 77 "the individual identifies with the affliction of Israel and laments for and with the community." Similarly, Tate (1990, 274) harmonizes the communal and individual perspectives by stating that "the distress of the people oppresses the individual who shares it with them." Overall it seems that the individual-communal distinction can be pressed to the point of unhelpfulness in studying this

psalm, particularly since “the psalmist could not see himself as an individual apart from Israel” (Bullock 2001, 52). If anything, the singer of Psalm 77 sets a remarkable example for today’s reader in the depth of his self-association with the people of God.

Although its crisis-response pattern strongly favors classifying it as a lament, Psalm 77’s equally present themes of thanksgiving and historical recollection have given rise to several alternative interpretations. For example, although many contemporary English translations render the psalmist’s reflections in the present (as does Kraus 1993b, 115), Tate (1990, 271) offers a reading in which vv. 1-3 are interpreted in past tense to refer to a previous time of lament in light of present praise. Others such as Gunkel divide the psalm into two separate compositions, a lament in vv. 1-9 and a hymn of praise in vv. 10-20. Such an interpretation, however, generates significant problems for interpreting Psalm 77 as a single rhetorical act and neglects the significance of its place within the psalter, particularly within the Asaph collection. Kselman (1983) makes a convincing case for the psalm’s rhetorical unity by connecting the questions in its first half with answers appealing to the Lord’s steadfast love in the second half (summarized in Tate 1990, 272-273).

Merely asserting the integrity of Psalm 77 as a literary unit does not resolve all problems of interpretation. The translation is complicated by the considerable ambiguity present in the Hebrew, throughout the text but especially in v. 10. Compare, for example, the New International Version with the translation provided by Tate (1990, 268): “Then I thought, ‘To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand’” (NIV), or “And so I say, ‘My sorrow is this: the changing of the right hand of the Most High!’” (Tate). If v. 10 is interpreted along the lines of “Then I thought . . .” it marks a fundamental shift from worry to trust in the psalmist’s attitude (reminiscent of Psalm 73:17). If, on the other hand, v. 10 is

translated to convey the sense of grief suggested by Tate, the psalm must be understood to continue on its original path of lament without a perceivable shift to praise. In the first interpretation the psalm's second half turns from grief to a peaceful, even enraptured recollection of the Lord's past deeds; in the second, the rest of the psalm only adds to the intensity of the lament by contrasting God's past faithfulness with his present silence. How the psalm's climactic questions and statement of appeal in vv. 7-10 are interpreted both shapes and is shaped by observations about the rhetorical significance of the psalm's progression of thought.

In passing, at least two primary themes within the text of the psalm ought to be considered: the effect of the psalmist's questions and the effect of remembering the Lord's mighty deeds, particularly in light of the "unseen footprints" mentioned in v. 19. According to VanGemeran (1991, 500), the psalmist's questioning remembrance in vv. 1-9 is primarily despairing, provoking "groaning and spiritual exhaustion." When the psalmist reflects on the past, he concludes that the present looks even more bleak as God's promises seem to have come to an end (Tate 1990, 275). Yet VanGemeran (with Kselman) takes the overall effect of the psalmist's remembrance as hopeful: "In asking these questions and in expressing his doubts, the heart of the psalmist comes to rest; for he knows that the God of Abraham cannot deny himself and cut himself off from his own people" (501). Meanwhile, Tate (1990, 273) views the psalm as more hesitant to offer a conclusion about God's faithfulness; the questions posed in Psalm 77 are thus left to "hang unanswered" so that they might be answered by each individual reader and singer. In either case it is evident that the rhetorical questions in the first part of Psalm 77 are intended to provoke soul-searching on the part of later worshipers in addition to conveying the grief of the original author.

What, then, of the historical reflection in the second half of the psalm? Tate (1990, 275) views the recollection of the Lord's past deeds as an implicit continuation of the psalmist's earlier questioning. The effect is rhetorical dissonance: Given Yahweh's holiness as revealed in previous deliverance, how can he stay aloof from helping his despairing people? "The psalm is a prayer of unanswered lament. Nevertheless there is a feeling of expectancy about it." God's intervention is immanent, but his people are left waiting for it. On the other hand, Eaton (2005, 278) describes vv. 11-20 as "the devout rehearsal of sacred tradition which brings the light of the ancient salvation to bear upon the present." The Lord is asserted to remain unchanging, as emphasized by Kraus's note (1993b, 116) that "verse 13 is to be considered a perception immediately valid for the present time." In this view, Yahweh's deliverance is invoked by the recollection of his past mercy. Remembrance serves to connect Israel's present situation with similar occasions in the past, with the hope that the Lord's steadfast love will shine on one as it already shone on the other.

The purpose of historical reflection in Psalm 77 is further developed by the psalmist's reference to the Lord's unseen footprints in v. 19: "Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen" (NIV). Almost certainly the event in view is the crossing of the Red Sea as recounted in Exodus 14, a miraculous occasion to which the people of Israel often turned in times of questioning (cf. Pss. 78, 106, 114). Most simply, the metaphor of unseen footprints may suggest the Israelites' belief that the Lord went through the sea *with them*, so that his footprints, like theirs, were covered by the waters when they returned to their normal place (Eaton 2005, 276). Nevertheless, the comment still seems unexpected here, especially since the evident purpose of the historical recollection has been to call attention to the Lord's very obvious ways of delivering his people (writhing waters, pouring

clouds, audible thunder, visible lightning, and palpable earthquakes). The rhetorical effect of the “unseen footprints” is anticlimactic at best, especially when followed by the pastoral image of the people being led like a flock (v. 20).

Kraus (1992, 66) notes based on this phrase that “all the creative miracles of Israel’s God bear the mark of concealment,” again a paradoxical remark given the very revealed character of the natural phenomena just described. But he elaborates: “Being near ‘without footprints’—without the visible proofs of his coming—that is God’s way of dealing with his people” (1993b, 117). The Lord’s holiness may be displayed through his mighty acts in view of all the nations, as suggested by vv. 14-18, yet it also takes shape in the mysterious “other-ness” which veils him from human view. Such an explanation of v. 19 allows the interpreter to glimpse the intent of this apparently anomalous phrase with respect to the salvation history recounted in Psalm 77.

But is it possible that v. 19 delves even deeper in its intent? At least three additional implications from this phrase are possible. First, it provides a ray of hope that the Lord may indeed be working within his people’s present distress as well, albeit with unseen footprints. His provident protection endures through times of affliction, even when it cannot be perceived as such. Second, the phrase may suggest a sinful forgetfulness on the part of God’s people, one which refuses to take note of his footprints even in miraculous occurrences like the crossing of the Red Sea or the providing of manna. As will be discussed later, accusations that Israel has forgotten the Lord’s works weave their way through many of the Asaph psalms and through much of the Old Testament. Finally, even for the faithful, the description of the Lord’s deeds as “unseen” acknowledges that the perception of his presence originates in a human vantage point. Although Psalm 77 stops far short of explicitly stating this as such, an undercurrent of hope

weaves its way through this section of the psalm: Perhaps the problem lies in the singer's ability to *see* rather than in God's ability to *act*.

In this sense, the activity of remembering is a corrective exercise which tunes the spiritual eyes to glimpse the Lord's redemptive work more clearly. Remembering and forgetting thus emerge as dichotomous focal points of Psalm 77 which surprise the reader with their rhetorical implications. While the psalm begins with a complaint that God has forgotten his steadfast love, by its end an unexpected reversal has become apparent: perhaps it is not the Lord but the psalmist that has forgotten. Years of affliction and a national culture of unbelief have dimmed the singer's spiritual eyesight, leaving him uncertain of the form or presence of Yahweh in his dark situation. But by recounting the mighty deeds of the Lord—a story he has only *heard* rather than seen—the psalmist is able to restore his confidence that the steadfast love displayed in the exodus from Egypt will continue to be displayed, even if subtly and imperceptibly, into the future. Such a conclusion is possible because God's faculty of remembering is inextricably bound up in his covenant with Abraham (Seevers 2008, 646)—because he is “not a human being, that he should change his mind” (Numbers 23:19). The psalmist takes comfort: God remembers!

#### Psalm 77 in Redemptive History

Having established the centrality of recollection to the psalmist's hope in Psalm 77, it is fitting to spend some time setting the psalm itself within the context of redemptive history from the Old Testament to today. Kraus (1992, 60) roots the Psalms' interest in history not in the pursuit of a particular thought-form but rather in “the present basis of existence on which the people of God stand.” While historical remembrance provides many groups of people with a sense of connection to their past, Israel derived hope for their nation's future from the

recollection of Yahweh's past acts. Such a recollection has been a part of Christian worship and practice until the present day as well.

Specifically, the history of God's people exhibits a universal progression from oppression to deliverance. Anderson (2000, 35) writes, "The ancient confession of faith opens, like a symphony *pathetique*, in a minor mode that expresses sorrow and lamentation, but these heavy minor chords modulate into the major key of praise to the God who opens a way into the future out of a no-exit situation." Such a pattern is present in the typical structure of a community lament according to Gunkel (1967, 14), as well as in the character of the Old Testament as a whole. The retelling of past deliverance informs and forms the community of faith in each new generation, in contrast to the apathetic forgetfulness which leads to unfaithfulness and rebellion (Seevers 2008, 645).

One can make several fascinating connections between Psalm 77 and its immediate neighbors in the Psalter. Firth (2008, 26) has noted that the Asaph psalms are generally marked by a unique interest in history. This may be explained with reference to McCann's thesis (2014, 355-356; citing Wilson and Burnett) that Book III of the Psalter was composed or collected in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant. To assure themselves that Yahweh's promises had not "failed for all time" (Psalm 77:8), faithful Israelites would have sought to recall the former prosperity of their people and, more fundamentally, the Lord's covenant with them.

Jones (2014) has conducted an extensive study on the Asaphite collection within Book 3 of the Psalter. She notes that God's past deeds are described with salvific words in all but three of the Asaph psalms, reinforcing the intimate connection between Israelite history and its larger story of redemption. With the kingdom in crisis, the Asaph psalms tend to return to fundamental

tenets of history such as creation (74:16,17) and the Exodus (77:19) in order to restore faith in God's present power. History is studied on the largest scale in Psalm 78, the centerpiece of the Asaph psalms, though it earns at least a few verses in most of the collection's other songs as well. In all of these cases, "the remembrance of and hope for salvation assures the reader that God is capable and willing to deliver once again" (75). Jones identifies "the faithful" as playing a significant role in the Asaph psalms, referring to current Israelites who recount God's past deeds in their grief over national defeat. The task of the faithful is to ask the poignant question "How long?", and Jones points out that "the deeds of God are recounted before and after the psalms that bear this difficult question" (77). In fact, Psalm 77 can be thought of as an extended meditation on this question.

While national crisis and historical recollection are two overarching themes of the Asaph psalms, a few more specific similarities are worth mentioning as well. Bullock (2001, 78) suggests that Psalms 73 and 77 address the same problem (the affliction of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked) but propose different solutions: in Psalm 73, a return to the sanctuary; in Psalm 77, a return to redemptive history. Jones (2014, 78) summarizes the central problem of both psalms thus: "Life is not as it should be." The "near loss of faith" described in Psalm 73 (Firth 2008, 25) is echoed by the psalmist's piercing questions in 77. If the latter half of 77 is taken as a newfound expression of historically-based praise, Psalms 73 and 77 could even be likened on the grounds of their similar turning points (73:15-17, 77:7-10). In both cases meditation brings deep distress until a divine perspective is brought to bear on the present situation.

Psalm 74 bears even closer similarities to 77 in its structure: an opening lament raising the key questions "Has God forgotten?" and "How long?" (74:1-11), a climax appealing to

God's deeds from "long ago" (v. 12), and a recollection of this history (vv. 13-17), which returns once again to a plea for the Lord's remembrance in vv. 18-23. Jones (2014, 78) writes, "Psalm 74 elaborates on the confusion presented at the beginning of Ps 73 by communicating the distress of the people in the face of the destruction of the sanctuary." The structural and thematic similarity of the two psalms provides strong evidence for associating them along with the other Asaph psalms in the same setting of national crisis.

As Firth (2008, 26) suggests, it is possible to trace a uniform progression of thought through the Asaph psalms. If Psalms 73 and 74 set the context for the people's distress by conveying the prosperity of the wicked and the destruction of the temple, respectively, the rest of the collection forms the people's dialogue with each other and with the Lord about whether such a crisis can be resolved. Psalms 75 and 76 offer exultant meditations on God's mighty deeds for Israel, which Firth interprets to refer to the past. Informed by this recollection, Psalm 77 raises the question of God's continued faithfulness given how bleak the nation's situation has become, yet also posits a remembrance of the mighty acts of the Lord as the only way to restore faith in his promises. Psalm 78, the centerpiece, responds to Psalm 77 by recounting Israel's history, a recollection that reveals how the Lord was "consistently faithful in the face of national faithlessness" (Firth 2008, 26). As foreshadowed in Psalm 77, Psalm 78 identifies human forgetfulness of the Lord's mercy rather than divine forgetfulness of human need as the central problem confronting Israel. With the problem revealed, Psalms 79 and 80 serve as prayers of confession and intercession for the Lord's people. It is particularly noteworthy that Psalm 80 leverages the metaphor of the Lord (and his Anointed) as Israel's shepherd, an image that first appeared at the ends of both Psalm 77 and Psalm 78. Finally, before the concluding statements of

Psalms 82 and 83, Psalm 81 turns the question of “How long?” back upon the people as God calls them to account for their unfaithfulness (Jones 2014, 81).

Throughout the Asaph psalms, “the faithful” grieve over Israel’s defeat, consider their people’s history, recognize the depth of their sinful forgetfulness, and humbly intercede for their nation that Yahweh would once again show his mercy despite Israel’s sin. Thus, the kerygmatic value of the Asaphite psalms is twofold. “Trust in your God who so ably and mercifully provided in the past” (Jones 2014, 78), but also: Remember and repent! Commenting on Psalm 78, Eaton (2005, 286) brings the central proclamation of Psalm 77 to bear as well:

Remember, remember, urges the psalmist, and hand on the remembrance unfaithfully, how the Lord came to save his people, and ever be their shepherd; let your eyes and your heart be fixed upon him, and so you will be kept in trust and faithfulness; you yourselves will know how he cleaves the rock to give you the water of life, and sends down the bread of heaven, that you may eat, and hunger no more.

Approaching the beginning of the New Testament era, it is easy to imagine Psalm 77 continuing to speak powerfully to “the faithful,” especially in the 400 “silent years” between the last Old Testament prophecies and the birth of Jesus. The Jews could well wonder whether God’s promises to Israel were “at an end for all time” (v. 8). With harsh persecution pressing in, they would have seen a stark contrast between his “wonders of old” for them (v. 11) and his current silence. Jesus’ birth was a long-sought revelation of “good news” (Luke 2:10) to God’s people after this time of dispersion and affliction. And what good news it was: the same Christ who led his people like a flock in the hands of Moses and Aaron (v. 20) would himself come as the Good Shepherd, from whose hand no sheep can be snatched (John 10).

Sadly, that same Christ would also be rejected by the very people he came to save, those who had failed to heed this psalm’s injunction to remember but had forgotten God’s promises to send a Messiah. Augustine (2002, 88) draws an intriguing parallel between the unseen footprints

in Psalm 77:19 and the account of Christ walking on the water in Matthew 14:22-33. According to Augustine, the same lack of faith that prevented the Israelites from perceiving God's footprints through the Red Sea also prevented the disciples from understanding Jesus' actions as he walked on the water. At the same time, Christ's response to Peter's doubt exhibited above all his immeasurable compassion even toward the forgetful: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31). How comforting it is to imagine Christ speaking the same words to every sincere but doubting believer who, like the psalmist, questions the continuing validity of God's promises. If the Psalms are any indication, the Lord in fact encourages his people to cry out to him in lament during times of great distress, pleading for him as the great Shepherd to right all of earth's wrongs. Westermann comments, "It would be a worthwhile task to ascertain how it happened that in Western Christendom the lament has been totally excluded from man's relationship with God" (1974, 25). Perhaps Psalm 77 represents a mode of song the church of Jesus Christ ought to reclaim, a mode that laments the persecution faced by the people of God and longs for the consummation of the heavenly kingdom. Even today, however, we are also enjoined to remember how the Lord fulfills his promises:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:8-9)

#### Psalm 77 Today

Kraus (1993b, 115) comments, "Psalm 77 lets us discern a seriousness and a depth of inquiry after God that amazes us again and again." Indeed, the psalm's introspective inquiry regarding God's apparent distance makes it eminently suitable for Christian devotional use, especially when individuals or communities face adversity. Calvin urges believers to take note of

the psalmist's example of faith in the midst of trial. In times of affliction, drawing near to God may seem to provoke pain rather than peace, aggravating the gnawing questions of whether his promises have failed for all time (Psalm 77:8). Yet the psalmist sets himself steadfastly to make a diligent inquiry (v. 6) in search of his "songs in the night" and the Lord's "miracles of long ago" (v. 11). Even when an answer to the crisis seems desperately distant, Calvin takes it as a mark of faith that the psalmist "continued to set God before his view" (1949, 3:217).

In a similar vein, Augustine expounds the opening verses of Psalm 77 to remind believers that in times of trouble they ought to seek God for all he is, rather than merely to pray for answers to their specific needs (2002, 75). Even in the depth of his distress the psalmist does not stop at asking for personal restoration, but takes care to place himself within God's covenant and redemptive purposes for his people. Nicewander (2005) cites the use of Psalm 77 in a counseling situation to encourage a patient to look beyond themselves and instead focus on God's faithfulness. When hounded by grief and trouble from every side, it is hard to imagine the faith expressed by the statement "Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?" (v. 13). If we have the spiritual maturity to receive it, Psalm 77 teaches us by example to reflect on the person and acts of the Lord even when nearly blinded by the adversity that afflicts us.

While Psalm 77 is suitable for reading in one's personal devotions, it was first meant to be taken up on the lips of God's people in song, a practice that ought to be continued today. The poetic beauty of the psalmist's "songs in the night" (v. 6), his poignant rhetorical questions in v. 9, and his praise of the God who "performs miracles" (v. 14) suggest a variety of musical possibilities in setting Psalm 77. In closing this paper will highlight a few of the ways Psalm 77 is represented in contemporary English metrical psalters and introduce a new setting that attempts to continue this lineage.

In the heritage of the Genevan Psalter shared by continental Reformed churches in several countries, the first tune for Psalm 77 appeared in the 1562 edition of the Genevan Psalter, a duplication of the tune for Psalm 86 from the 1551 edition (Brink and Polman 1998).

GENEVAN 77 is noteworthy for the plaintive, lilting melody so characteristic of the Genevan psalm tunes (when sung properly). Its text has been set in English at least three times: in William Kuiper's 1931 translation from the Dutch (1934 and 1959/1976 *Psalter Hymnal*, CRC Publications), in Helen Otte's 1985 setting (1987 *Psalter Hymnal*, CRC Publications), and in the various editions of the Canadian Reformed *Book of Praise*, most recently the 2014 edition (Standing Committee 2014, pp. 190-191). Kuiper's re-translation ought to be forgotten as quickly as possible; it obscures the psalm's otherwise clear train of thought while neglecting several key themes (no reference to Moses and Aaron or even a shepherd at the end of stz. 5) and adding others (the "dew on arid land" in stz. 4). In a tight space, Otte's paraphrase captures more of the poetic beauty of Psalm 77, but renders the critical questions of vv. 7-9 too individualistically ("Am I from God's mercy severed?") and again excludes Moses and Aaron at the end of stz. 4. The finest and most thorough of the Genevan settings is that of the *Book of Praise*, which renders the psalm text in seven stanzas of contemporary yet beautiful English: "Will he not forgive transgression/But, forgetting his compassion,/Let his burning wrath replace/His unfailing love and grace?" Note that the versifiers of the *Book of Praise* favored the translation of v. 10 suggested by Tate (1990, 268) and others: "Then I said, 'This is what hurts me,'" etc. Within the family of Genevan psalm settings, the *Book of Praise's* Psalm 77 is a worthy selection that ought to find a favored place in English-speaking churches even today.

A much more complicated genealogy exists for settings of Psalm 77 in the Scottish metrical tradition of psalmody. Only four will be considered: the settings of the 1912 United

Presbyterian *Psalter*, the settings of the 1914 Reformed Presbyterian *Psalter*, the version in *The Book of Psalms for Worship* (2010), and the setting from the new *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* being co-produced by the United Reformed and Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (expected to be published in 2017). In the 1912 *Psalter* the psalm is set in long meter and partially in common meter, utilizing the tunes SESSIONS, FILLMORE, YOAKLEY, SAXONY, and most interestingly AULD LANG SYNE. FILLMORE and SAXONY were inherited by the 1959/1976 CRC *Psalter Hymnal*, along with the addition of the chorale tune VATER UNSER for the second half of Psalm 77's long-meter setting. Of these the most successful setting is vv. 1-12 set to the tune FILLMORE. Though a paraphrase, this version treats the text carefully and poetically: "With sleepless eyes and speechless pain/My fainting spirit grieved in vain." Again, however, the questions in vv. 7-9 are taken to refer to the individual rather than the community of believers: "Will God forsake me in distress? . . . Has he in anger hopelessly/Removed his love and grace from me?" On the theme of remembrance, AULD LANG SYNE also marks a fascinating, though perhaps tenuous, approach to setting Psalm 77.

The 1914 Reformed Presbyterian split-leaf *Psalter* includes two common-meter settings of Psalm 77, one directly from the Scottish Metrical Psalter and a slightly emended version. Not as wooden as some settings that prefer formal-equivalence translations, these versions are commendable for preserving the direct references to the people of God rather than simply the individual in the questions of vv. 7-9 and in reference to Aaron and Moses in v. 20. By contrast, the modernized long-meter setting in the *Book of Psalms for Worship* seems unnecessarily modified from the 1912 *Psalter* setting it probably derives from, and the stanza structure creates awkward pauses in the flow of thought. "The days of old I think upon," "Deep seas shook when You came in view," and "Across the sky tornadoes roared" are three examples of metrical lines

that seem not to work. The tune HE LEADETH ME for 77A fails to grasp the character of lamentation in the early part of the psalm, though WAREHAM seems suitable for 77B. Among common-meter settings, the provisional version of Psalm 77 from the forthcoming *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* of the United Reformed and Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (2017) seems the most promising, though some of the poetry could still use some smoothing. In that collection, the tune RESIGNATION captures the plaintive mood of Psalm 77 much more fully.

The new psalm setting that accompanies this paper does not attempt to address all of the problems present in existing metrical versions, but it does strive to emulate the best features of each. In general the style of versification most closely imitates the *Book of Praise*, and a few rhymes are directly borrowed since the metrical patterns are somewhat similar. The danger in a strict rhyming scheme is in creating seemingly forced or trite rhymes, a risk that can never fully be avoided. Nevertheless, this setting attempts to end as many lines as possible with a long vowel sound, which helps the text to remain smooth. Additionally, the new version is unique for the repetition of the last two lines at the end of each stanza, an addition that attempts to capture the repetitive, pondering nature of the psalmist's reflection. The new tune, SHEPHERD'S PATH, hovers around several tonal centers and exploits the contrast between major and minor modalities, calling to mind the psalm's fervent questioning of whether or not the Lord will be favorable toward his people. Unavoidably, some awkward poetry remains ("By Moses' and Aaron's hand"), yet it is hoped that this setting can serve as further inspiration to explore the wide range of possibilities that can be leveraged to set Psalm 77 to music effectively.

## Conclusion

At the end of his essay on rhetorical criticism, Muilenberg (1969, 18) raises an unanswered question. “From whom did the poets and prophets of Israel acquire their styles and literary habits?” The answer should be simple, of course: from the all-knowing inspiration of the Holy Spirit who provided the words of Psalm 77, as well as every other Scripture, for our encouragement. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). The hope provided by Psalm 77 is that the Lord both knows and lovingly responds to our forgetfulness. What a mercy it is that despite this spiritual amnesia, he gently and lovingly guides us by his Word to places where we can pause and reflect on his steadfast love. In the various situations of human life, forgetting is all too possible. The danger is twofold: forgetting past mercies in light of present affliction, or forgetting past afflictions in light of present mercies. Yet in the dark valleys of life’s path, in the times when we fail to see Christ’s footprints, Psalm 77 remains a gentle and wise guide, teaching us slowly but surely to remember the unfailing love of the Lord, so that when deliverance comes we may be sure to “forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2).

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