

OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

Psalm 77: A Study in Faith and History¹

PAT GRAHAM
Abilene, Texas

INTRODUCTION

Most Christians realize that at least a part of their faith has to do with historical events. The death and resurrection of Christ are recognized as particularly important. Such a connection between faith and history, however, did not originate with primitive Christianity. Its roots go much deeper into the past. The purpose of this paper is to show that faith and history were intimately and vitally related in the Old Testament period. Psalm 77 vividly illustrates this point. The psalmist reveals that Israelites gained strength and comfort by planting their faith firmly in the God who worked in history. This article deals with four items connected with a study of Psalm 77: date, unity, exegesis, and theology of history.

Date

Most psalms are difficult to date because they lack adequate historical references. Frequently the psalms were phrased in general language so that, just as in the case of contemporary hymns, they could be used in worship services throughout all generations.² Although some scholars date Psalm 77 after the

¹ Verse numbers are those in English versions.

² Sigmund Mowinckel, "Psalm Criticism between 1900 and 1935," *Vetus Testamentum*, 5 (1955), 16-17.

destruction of Jerusalem,³ a date before 586 B.C. seems most likely. There is evidence to suggest that Psalm 77 and the other psalms in the Asaphite collection arose in North Israelite Levitical circles and were later carried into Judah. The references to "Joseph" (vs. 15) and "Aaron" (vs. 10; if Aaron may be viewed as a North Israelite hero) in Psalm 77 also argue for a North Israelite provenance and hence a date before 721 B.C.⁴ More convincing evidence comes from a linguistic comparison of Psalm 77 with Ugaritic materials. The tricola pattern (groups of three clauses with an equal number of beats in each clause) of verses 16-19, the vocabulary of the psalm, and the absence of *matres lectiones* point to an early date (surely before 586 B.C. and perhaps as early as the tenth century).⁵ Whether Psalm 77 arose in Judah or in North Israel, some type of national setback (probably a military defeat) prompted it (cf. vss. 1-2).

Unity

Psalm 77 has two major parts: a lament (vss. 1-10) and a hymn (vss. 11-20).⁶ Since verses 16-19 of the hymn are written in tricola (bicola dominates the rest of the psalm) and since these verses depict the Creator's triumph over the primeval flood (this theme is found nowhere else in Psalm 77), most scholars regard verses

³ Moses Bottenwieser links Ps. 77 with Ps. 74 and Isa. 63:7-64:11, and he notes similarities between Ps. 77:4, 5, 10, 12 and Ps. 143:5,6. *The Psalms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), pp. 626-630. Bottenwieser's arguments are not convincing, because the exodus tradition of Ps. 77, Ps. 74, and Isa. 63-64 was employed throughout Israel's history and because the plea of Ps. 143 is too general to be fixed precisely at 344 B.C.

⁴ M. J. Buss, "Psalms of Asaph and Korah," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 82 (1963), 386. Since vs. 15 also mentions Jacob, several scholars rule out a definite North Israelite origin for the psalm. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen*. Biblischer Kommentar zum alten Testament, ed. Martin Noth and Hans Walter Wolff, Vol. 1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1966), p. 532.

⁵ On the tricola pattern, cf. W. F. Albright, "The Psalm of Habakkuk," *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, ed. H. N. Rowley (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), pp. 6, 9. On Ugaritic and other ancient parallels, cf. Helen G. Jefferson, "Psalm LXXVII," *Vetus Testamentum*, 13 (1963), 87-91. Also, cf. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*. The Anchor Bible, ed. W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, Vol. 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966), p. 224.

⁶ There is some argument over whether vs. 10 belongs in the lament or in the hymn. This paper follows the practice of the RSV and includes it in the lament. For arguments on its placement, see the exegesis. Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), p. 333. Although the psalmist speaks in the first person in the lament, he may be representing his people, as their priest or king. For the structure of the national lament and a discussion of the people's representative, cf. K. Galling, "Psalmen," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, V (1961), 677-678.

16-19 as a self-contained unit. These verses are also set apart from the rest of Psalm 77 by the absence of "selah" after verse 15 and the change in mood from contemplation (vss. 1-15) to exultation (vss. 16-19).⁷ Verse 20 appears to be an editorial attempt to relate verses 16-19 to the crossing of the Red Sea and, thus, to make it fit well with verses 11-15.⁸ Therefore, because verses 16-19 are a unit and because structure, vocabulary, and subject matter unite verses 1-15 and 20, it is most likely that the psalmist borrowed the description of a theophany (vss. 16-19) to help express his message. He added verse 20 to relate the theophany to the exodus event (vs. 15).

Exegesis

The author of Psalm 77 begins by lamenting his nation's disaster as a personal catastrophe.⁹ Verses 1 and 2 describe the psalmist's severe struggle as he sought God. He verbally (*qoli*) calls out for God's attention (vs. 1). His intense longing for God's presence is symbolized by his outstretched hand (cf. Ps. 143:5-6). He rejects superficial, inadequate attempts at consolation. His questionings are deep and earnest, because his faith itself has been challenged.¹⁰

The psalmist then tells how his gloom increased when he mentally contrasted the present situation with his nation's glorious history as God's elect (vss. 2, 4). The psalmist may have thought specifically of Yahweh's saving acts, or he may have had in mind the more general idea of God's blessing through his continual presence and providential activity, or both.¹¹ His agitation grew

⁷ Dahood, *Psalms*, 2, p. 231; W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: SPCK Press, 1955), pp. 344-348. The bicola (3+3) meter of Ps. 77 is the most common in Hebrew poetry. Mixed meter (as in Ps. 77) is frequently an indication of redactional activity. Th. H. Robinson, "Some Principles of Hebrew Metrics," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 54 (1936), 35, 39.

⁸ Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. The International Critical Commentary, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), pp. 175-176.

⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 139.

¹⁰ Kraus, *Psalmen*, 1, p. 531. The significance of the psalmist's phrase "refuses to be comforted" may be grasped when one meets it in Jacob's grief over a dead (or so he thought) son (Gen. 37:35) and in the women of Ramah mourning over their dead children (Jer. 31:15).

¹¹ On the relation of God's mighty deeds to his blessing, see the excellent article by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "The Blessing of God," *Interpretation*, 29 (1975), 240-251.

as he meditated, and he was unable to sleep because of it. He graphically describes this as God seizing his eyelids, because God's rejection had brought it all about.¹² Verse 4b may mean that his agony left him speechless¹³ or that he restrained himself from remonstrating against God.¹⁴ Either of the two fits the context, and even some combination of the two is possible.

Verse 6 introduces the questions that plagued the psalmist.¹⁵ Verses 7-9 present the questions in terminology that is common to laments in the Psalms (cf. Ps. 79:5; 85:5; 89:46). These verses show that the crucial problem for the author of Psalm 77 is his feeling that God had abandoned his people.¹⁶ Verses 7 and 8 ask in effect, "How long will Yahweh reject his people?" Because of "steadfast love" (*chesedh*) in verse 8, *'omar* should be seen as a covenantal term, too, and be translated "promise."¹⁷ Verse 9 asks whether God's rejection is due to his forgetfulness or anger. For God to forget someone is for him to "hide his face" from him and cause the person to feel crushed (cf. Ps. 10:11; 13:1; 42:9).

The turning point of the psalm occurs after verse 10, where the psalmist gives final expression to his despondency. The verse is problematic because of two terms in the Hebrew: *chalothi* ("grief" in the RSV) and *shenoth* ("changed" in the RSV). Three alternatives for the first term are reviewed and two for the second. Briggs interprets *chaloth* as the hiphil perfect of *chalal*, "to begin," and finds support in the LXX. He translates *shenoth* as in verse 6, "years," to read: "Then I said: I have begun with this/ The years of the right hand of 'Elyon.'"¹⁸ This translation of verse 10 describes the psalmist's meditation on Yahweh's mighty acts.

¹² Vss. 2, 4, and 6 show that the psalmist's meditation and prayer went on day and night. I Sam. 3:2-4 may indicate that in times of distress or silence on God's part the temple personnel stayed in the sanctuary to wait for a word from Yahweh. Ps. 63:6 is another instance of nighttime meditation.

¹³ Hans Schmidt, *Die Psalmen. Handbuch zum alten Testament*, ed. Otto Eissfeldt (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1934), p. 147.

¹⁴ Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 531.

¹⁵ The RSV reflects the emendation in BH3 from "my music" to "I commune." This receives support from the LXX and the parallelism in the second half of the verse.

¹⁶ Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 531.

¹⁷ RSV ; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 57. (Hereafter, abbreviated BOB.) Siegfried Wagner, "amar," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, I (1974), 342.

¹⁸ Briggs, *Psalms*, 2, pp. 171-177. KJV also translates "years."

The RSV takes *chalothi* as the qal infinitive of *chalal*, "it is my grief."¹⁹ *Shenoth* is read as it stands in the MT, the qal infinitive construct of *shanah*, "to change."²⁰ Therefore, the RSV translates, "And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'" This agrees with the preceding verses and reiterates the psalmist's complaint that God no longer behaved toward Israel as he once did.²¹

Weiser regards *chaloth* as the piel infinitive of *chalah* and views *shenoth* as the RSV does. He translates verse 10, "Then I said: The illness from which I suffer is this/ that the right hand of the Most High has changed." Weiser thinks that in verse 10 the psalmist realized that his previous lament was wrong (his sickness was to think that God had changed) and that it had only led him to focus on himself and his own affliction. This realization came after the psalmist had witnessed a cultic presentation of God's mighty acts in Israel's history.²²

Each of these three major views makes sense in Psalm 77, although Briggs' expression "years of the right hand" appears a bit peculiar, and Weiser is forced to add "to think" to the beginning of the second line of verse 10. The translation of the RSV seems to offer the best solution to the difficult problems of verse 10. Verses 11-15 recall the mighty acts of God in Israel's history, probably referring to the exodus from Egypt. Verses 11 and 1.2 present the psalmist's intention to meditate on God's saving deeds and are similar to verses 5 and 6 in vocabulary and purpose. They help to unite the two parts of Psalm 77. "I will call to mind" (RSV) is not the best rendering of the MT. It is better to translate, "I will mention" or "I will proclaim."²³ This may refer to the

¹⁹ BDB, p. 319, renders it literally as "it is my piercing," "wound," or "woe," Several ancient versions concur.

²⁰ This interpretation of *shenoth* is also held by LXX, ASV, and Gunkel, *Psalmen*, p. 333.

²¹ This interpretation is also held by Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel. Studies in Biblical Theology*, No. 37 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1962), pp. 61-63.

²² Artur Weiser, *The Psalms. The Old Testament Library*, trans. Herbert Hartwell; ed. G. E. Wright et al., (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 531-532.

²³ The *Kethibh* (*'azkir*) is preferred over the *Qere* (*'ezkor*), because the former (a hiphil) requires no change in the consonantal text, but the latter form drops the *yod*. In addition to this, the hiphil form, "to cause to remember" or "to proclaim," describes precisely what the psalmist did in the ensuing lines. BDB, p. 271; cf. also A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms. New Century Bible*, ed. Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black, Vol. 2 (London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 559.

cultic proclamation of God's mighty deeds in history.²⁴ Verses 13-15 record the psalmist's reaction to God's activity in Israel's salvation history. Verse 13 confesses God's greatness and holiness and is similar to Exodus 15:11.²⁵ Verses 14 and 15 acknowledge God as the one who revealed his power to all the nations by redeeming Israel from Egypt (cf. Ex. 15:13ff.). "Jacob and Joseph" is probably a way of including both North Israel and Judah.²⁶

Verses 16-19 are a brief song, describing a theophany in archaic, mythological language.²⁷ These verses use language associated with the Creator's victory over chaos, but the creation theme is in the background and not of major importance. The psalmist was primarily concerned with the portrayal of Yahweh's activity in the exodus. Even though this mythological terminology of creation occurs in verses 16-19, the poem may describe a theophany in a thunderstorm (as in Ps. 29), or originally, it may have referred to the thunder and lightning at Sinai (vss. 16-18) and to God's leading his people through the Red Sea (vs. 19).²⁸ There is not enough information to determine its origin. The mythopoetic language (vss. 16-19), however, serves to make the description of God's theophany more vivid. This is particularly appropriate for a

²⁴ Helmer Ringgren, *Faith of the Psalmists* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 56-57.

²⁵ Kraus aptly observes that the psalmist's consciousness of God's holiness is derived, not from an idea of a great distance between men and a hidden God, but from his encounter with God's self-revelation in Israel's history by his saving acts. *Psalmen*, pp. 533-534.

²⁶ Most scholars recognize that "Joseph" refers to North Israel, and some think that this is the North Israelite way of speaking; Judeans would refer to both the northern and southern kingdoms by "Israel and Judah." Gunkel, *Psalmen*, p. 335; Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 532; G. W. Anderson, "The Psalms," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1972), p. 429. However, "Jacob" is vague. It may refer to Judah (Micah 3:1,8; Obed. 10; Isa. 65:9) or to North Israel (Amos 7:2, 5; Hosea 12:13; Micah 1:5). BDB, p. 785.

²⁷ Dahood, *Psalms*, 2, p. 231; F. N. Jasper, "Early Israelite Traditions and the Psalter, *Vetus Testamentum*, 17 (1967), 57. These verses are closely parallel to Hab. 3 (cf. also Ex. 15 and Ps. 114). On the matter of vss. 16-19, cf. note five, above.

²⁸ The problem in vs. 18 over the meaning of *bagalgal* is moot. Some think it refers to a "whirlwind." RSV; Briggs, *Psalms*, p. 178. Others think it refers to some type of divine chariot, such as the ones of Flab. 3:8 and Ezek. 3:13; 10:2, 6. Gunkel, *Psalmen*, p. 337; Schmidt, *Psalmen*, p. 147; Kraus, *Psalmen*, p. 533. BDB, p. 166, is sensitive to the difficulty and merely lists the possibilities: "wheel" and "whirlwind." Cf. vs. 18 with Ps. 97:4.

worship service, since it would impress the psalmist's message more forcefully on the cultic community.²⁹

Verse 20 reaches back to verse 16 and relates the section to the exodus event. The final verse of Psalm 77 is a confession of Israel's faith that Yahweh led and cared for his people as a shepherd for his sheep. Verse 20 has special significance when seen with verse 19; together they proclaim the psalmist's new confidence in Yahweh's guidance and care, even though his presence may not always be evident.³⁰

Theology of History

Psalm 77 presents the severe testing of the worshippers' faith. While under the afflictions of present disaster, the cultic community recalls the favorable promises and acts of Yahweh in the past. Their faith wavers and a multitude of questions arise, because God is not acting as their theology required.³¹ God appears to be hidden from them. The bridge between the *deus absconditus* of a faltering faith and the *deus revelatus* of an exultant faith is the actualization of the exodus event. The psalmist reaches into Israel's past to the event and re-presents it to the despairing congregation to offer them hope and to strengthen their faith. In this the people see themselves involved in the event, and thus it becomes a proclamation of their own salvation and of God's presence with them. It is in this re-presentation that the people encounter Yahweh (vss. 16-19) and come to the realization that God acts in his own, mysterious—sometimes hidden—ways

²⁹G. Widengren, "Early Hebrew Myths and Their Interpretation," *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. Samuel H. Hooke (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 164. This paragraph is taken from my M.A. thesis, "The Use of Historical Events in the Psalms" (Abilene Christian College, 1974), pp. 14-15.

³⁰Weiser, *Psalms*, pp. 529-533. This paragraph is taken from my thesis, pp. 15-16. "Lead" and "flock" in vs. 20 are shepherd terms and were commonly used in descriptions of the exodus and wilderness wanderings. Cf. Ex. 15:13; Ps. 78:52, 74:1, also 23:3. Lienhard Delekat, *Asylie and Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 59. Although some might think Ps. 77 ends too abruptly, a sudden ending is striking and shows the psalmist's skill in producing a strong effect. Cf. the endings of Ps. 78 and 110. Gunkel, *Psalmen*, p. 334; Anderson, *Psalms*, 2, p. 561.

³¹Weiser, *Psalms*, pp. 529-533. Vss. 8-10 arise from a theology that sees Israel's present affliction as a contradiction to God's previous gracious acts and promises.

that are not always obvious to men.³² The plain message to Israel is "Trust in Yahweh's care even when you cannot understand his movements in history." It seems most likely that the psalmist chose to use the exodus tradition in his work because it was the initial and supreme act of Yahweh's election of Israel as a people and characterized his favorable attitude toward her. So, for the psalmist, history is the field in which Yahweh acts to reveal himself in saving deeds for his people, and the exodus event is a tremendous aid to strengthen a stumbling faith by bringing it into an encounter with Yahweh.³³

³² Kraus, *Psalmen*, 1, pp. 533-534. The theophany of vss. 16-19 brings out a point made by Wallace I. Wolverton about God's presence. The psalmists show no evidence that they believed in God's immanence. On the contrary, they apparently maintained that Yahweh's presence was the result of his advent. "The Psalmists' Belief in God's Presence," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), 93.

³³ This paragraph is taken from my thesis, pp. 16-17.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:
Restoration Quarterly Corporation
P. O. Box 28227
Abilene, TX 79699-8227
www.restorationquarterly.org

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu