

PERSUADING GOD

RHETORICAL STUDIES OF FIRST-PERSON PSALMS

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Chapter 7

SELF-PERSUASION AND WISDOM

As public discourse, the psalms address multiple audiences. God, of course, is usually the direct addressee, but speakers often turn to address by-standers and opponents, an assembly that stands in for the community at large. Another key audience member is the speaker; composing or performing a psalm enables persuading one's self. At the outset of this book, I objected to approaches that reduce the purpose of the psalms to the therapeutic, that portray the psalms as a moment-by-moment flow of thoughts and feelings leading to revived faith and praise. Self-persuasion is a more complex process than expression. Working out the reasons for God to intervene on one's behalf rehearses and strengthens one's commitment to the community's core values and standards of behavior. The effects of self-persuasion are also more complex than relief of tension. Considering possible objections from hearers and selecting among the available arguments improves one's ability to take and judge alternative perspectives. As the psalms in this chapter will show, internal deliberation may supplant rather than supplement a direct appeal to God.

The process of self-persuasion and its moral consequences were well-known in ancient Athens. In her book on classical self-persuasion, Jean Nienkamp points to Isocrates as the first rhetorician to spell out 'a causal connection between internal rhetoric and ethical, wise behavior'.¹ Isocrates founded the first rhetoric academy with a fixed location in Athens in the early fourth century BCE. In his 'Hymn to Logos', Isocrates equates the ability to argue internally with arguing in public:

With this faculty [logos] we both contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown; for the same arguments which we use in persuading others when we speak in public, we employ also when we deliberate in our own thoughts; and, while we call eloquent those who are able to speak before a crowd, we regard as sage those who most skillfully debate their problems in their own minds (15.256).²

1. Jean Nienkamp, *Internal Rhetorics: Toward a History and Theory of Self-Persuasion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 20.

2. Isocrates, *Isocrates with an English Translation in Three Volumes* (trans. George Norlin; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1980).

For Isocrates, eloquence, a matter of verbal fluency and style, is of lesser value than sagacity which takes discipline and judgment. As Nienkamp explains, an eloquent public speaker may be ready instantly to respond to the demands of the immediate situation. But sagacity takes a ‘mental habit’ that goes beyond this mere opportunism: ‘mental discipline is required for grasping the larger significance of the situation—its possible consequences and moral import’.³ A key aspect of self-persuasion is the ability to consider the merits of alternative perspectives, alternative explanations, alternative courses of action.

Like persuasion of other people, self-persuasion combines appeals to rationality (logos) with varying degrees of passion (pathos). It may have a calm rational quality or the intense agonism of wrestling with an adversary. As a way to gain wisdom, James Crosswhite sees a calm process as most enlightening:

What we are at one moment, with our present desires and attainments and perspectives, can be challenged by other desires and attainments and perspectives, and the process can be one not of dissonance and fragmentation and psychic violence but one of conversation and transcendence toward our selves. This capacity for being hospitable to a rhetorical interaction of competing perspectives is associated with wisdom itself, and is a kind of peace.⁴

In the psalms considered in this chapter, internal debate yields wisdom but the process described is far from peaceful, being brought on by fundamental doubts about God’s faithfulness and commitment to justice. In Psalm 77, the speaker overcomes physical suffering by mentally rehearsing God’s deeds; in Psalm 73, the speaker conquers anger that God allows the wicked to prosper. In both cases, the turn in the speakers’ attitudes results from internal deliberation rather than appeals to God to intervene.

Psalm 77: Reimagining the Past

Psalm 77 has received little scholarly attention, in part because it resists easy classification and in part because it appears rough-edged—both its opening and ending seem abrupt and its two halves seem to shift in character. The first part has all the earmarks of a lament of an individual, a vivid expression of distress and distance from God. However, unlike most laments, the speaker says nothing of the source or nature of the problem, makes no call on God for rescue and makes no vows of public praise. The second part of the psalm has the character of a communal lament or hymn alluding to the narrative of the exodus from Egypt. However, the psalm concludes without calling on God to continue faithful action in the future.

3. Nienkamp, *Internal Rhetorics*, p. 134.

4. James Crosswhite, *Deep Rhetoric: Philosophy, Reason, Violence, Justice, Wisdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 141-42.

Most commentators see the two parts reflecting a shift in the speaker's outlook from despair to praise. In contrast, I will suggest that the speaker is throughout recounting, enacting and modeling an active form of self-persuasion. Rather than asking God to intervene to relieve his distress, the speaker actively calls to mind thoughts and images that change his own disposition and lead him to focus on God's historic faithfulness. In this way, the speaker uses both first-hand experience and imaginative recreations of such experiences as a way to build moral character, as a form of self-discipline or *habitus*.

PSALM 77⁵

- 1 For the lead player on [y'du-tun], an Asaph psalm.
- 2 My voice to God—let me cry out. My voice to God—and hearken to me.
- 3 In the day of my straits I sought the Master. My eye flows at night, it will not stop.⁶ I refused to be consoled.
- 4 I call God to mind and I moan. I speak and my spirit faints. Selah.
- 5 You held open my eyelids. I throbbed and could not speak.
- 6 I ponder the days of yore, the years long gone.
- 7 I call to mind my song in the night. To my own heart I speak, and my spirit inquires.
- 8 Will the Master forever abandon me, and never again look with favor?
- 9 Is His kindness gone for all time, His word done for time without end?
- 10 Has God forgotten to show grace, has He closed off in wrath His compassion? [selah]
- 11 And I said, it is my failing, that the High One's right hand has changed.
- 12 I call to mind the acts of Yah when I recall Your wonders of old.
- 13 I recite all your works, Your acts I rehearse.
- 14 God, Your way is in holiness. Who is a great god like God?
- 15 You are the god working wonders. You made known among peoples Your strength.
- 16 You redeemed with Your arm Your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah
- 17 The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You, they trembled, the depths themselves shuddered.
- 18 The clouds streamed water. The skies sounded with thunder. Your bolts, too, flew about.
- 19 Your thunder's sound under the wheel—lightning lit up the world. The earth shuddered and shook.
- 20 In the sea was Your way, and Your path in the mighty waters, and Your footsteps left no traces.
- 21 You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

5. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, pp. 268-71.

6. In v. 3, Alter (p. 268) emends 'my hand' to 'my eye', reading it as an allusion to Lam. 3.49, 'My eye flowed and was silent, without stop'. In a similar vein, the NJPS assumes more textual corruption and incorporates both hand and eye, 'with my hand [uplifted]; [my eyes] flow all night without respite'.

As shown in Figure 7.1, the psalm opens with an extremely brief address in v. 2. It includes three calls to God and one request for hearing. However, reconnecting with God does not seem to be the primary goal. The speaker mainly uses third person rather than second person to address God and does nothing to remind God of his or her character or their previous relationship. These elements are also absent from the complaint.

In the complaint (vv. 3-7), the speaker describes inconsolable, inarticulate, restless distress. The proximal cause for the suffering, whether defeat by enemies or physical illness, is left unstated. It may be God's absence itself that is keeping the speaker awake weeping all night. The speaker's effort to recall past times and past songs in vv. 6-7 enables him to start questioning what is happening.

Title	1	Title
Address	2	Address: Request to hear
	3	Nocturnal distress
	4	Nocturnal distress
	5	Nocturnal distress
	6	Nocturnal distress
Complaint	7	Nocturnal distress and start of inquiry
	8	Questioning God's faithfulness
	9	Questioning God's faithfulness
Inquiry	10	Questioning God's faithfulness
Realization	11	Realization
	12	Enacting cognitive processes
	13	Enacting cognitive processes
	14	Recounting God's wonders
	15	Recounting God's wonders
	16	Recounting: Redeeming children of Jacob and Joseph
	17	Recounting: Seas tremble and quake
	18	Recounting: Skies stream and storm
	19	Recounting: Skies thunder with lightning, quakes
	20	Recounting: God's presence at Sea of Reeds
Actualization	21	Recounting: Redeeming people via Moses and Aaron

Figure 7.1. *Structure of Psalm 77*

In the final two-thirds of the psalm, the speaker engages in a self-directed recovery composed of an inquiry, a realization and an inner process of actualizing the realization. In vv. 8-10, the speaker asks whether God's very essence has changed, raising the horrific possibility that God has closed off

all positive interaction—favor, kindness, grace, compassion. John Kselman sees allusions here to God’s self-proclaimed attributes in Exod. 34.6: ‘compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation’.⁷

Coming after such a vivid depiction of personal suffering, the questions may seem entirely personal. Brueggemann reads them as emerging ‘out of an overriding self-concern. They appear to ask about God’s faithfulness. But they really ask, what about me?’; Brueggemann views the speaker at this stage as consumed by narcissism.⁸ Alter’s translation also treats the questions as personal; he goes so far as to insert ‘me’ into the translation of v. 8 as the object of abandonment. But there is good reason to reject this insertion and read the complaint in broader terms. The direness of the crisis is amplified if the object of God’s neglect is the entire community. The phrasing certainly points well beyond the concerns of a single lifetime, with לעולמים (‘for all worlds’) in v. 8 and לנצח (‘altogether’/‘in perpetuity’) and לדור ודור (‘for all generations’) in v. 9. Together with the absence of personal information in the address and complaint, these elements weigh against seeing the speaker as self-absorbed. Rather, this is a speaker inquiring into the implications of God’s apparent absence from the community at large.

The turning point comes at the psalm’s half-way point in v. 11; the speaker realizes that he is responsible for the perception that God has changed. Commentators have debated just what onus the speaker has taken on. The obscure term הלותי that Alter translates as ‘my failing’ is translated as ‘my fault’ by the NJPS; as ‘my grief/sorrow’ by Kraus, the RSV, Kselman and Brueggemann; and as ‘my infirmity’ in the KJV. Rendering the term as ‘grief’ or ‘sorrow’ carries least blame, portraying the speaker as simply continuing to express dismay over the change in God without conveying a sense of self-criticism. On the other hand, the NJPS translation of the term as ‘my fault’ casts the verse as a confession of sinful wrong-doing that could justify God’s abandonment. Alter’s choice of ‘failing’ fits best with the speaker’s cognitive focus; the speaker is critiquing his own assumptions, realizing that the line of questioning is deluded.

The continuation of v. 11 with its reference to God changing is also obscure. Though Alter, like most commentators, translates the term שנוה as ‘has changed’, grammatically it might be translated as ‘repeated’ or even as ‘years of’ (an option taken in the KJV).⁹ Commentators have over-looked the

7. John S. Kselman, ‘Psalm 77 and the Book of Exodus’, *JANES* 15 (1983), pp. 51-58 (53).

8. Walter Brueggemann, ‘Psalm 77: The “Turn” from Self to God’, *Journal for Preachers* 6 (1983), pp. 8-14 (9); Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, pp. 332-33.

9. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 269.

co-occurrence of the same two problematic verb forms (שננות and הלל) in the perfectly clear Ps. 89.35, in which God renounces the possibility of changing toward the line of David, even if the people fall into sin:

- Ps. 77.10-11 And I said, it is my failing [הלותי], that the High One's right hand has changed [שננות].
- Ps. 89.34-35 Yet My steadfast kindness I will not revoke for him, and I will not betray My faithfulness. I will not profane [אחלל] My pact and My mouth's utterance I will not alter [אשנה].

Psalm 89 is another admixture of personal with communal, hymn with lament; it goes on to accuse God of violating this very promise and to plead for restoring the pact. Further connections between Psalm 89 and Psalm 77 will be discussed below. At this point, I am suggesting that Ps. 77.11 is a deliberate twist on the terms of Ps. 89.35. The speaker takes responsibility for impugning God's faithfulness by imagining that God's right hand could change. This realization leads into a cycle of recollection and rehearsal of God's historical relationship to the community, a recursive process that began early in the psalm.

Verses 12-13 focus on the speaker's thought processes, repeating many of the same verbs as in the early part of the complaint:

- v. 4 אזכרה 'I call to mind' [God] and אשיחה 'I speak'
- v. 5 לא אדבר 'I can't speak'/'I can't say a word'
- v. 6 חשבתי 'I ponder' [the past]
- v. 7 אזכרה 'I call to mind' [my song], אשיחה 'I speak' [to my own heart], and יחפש רוחי 'my spirit inquires'
- v. 11 אמר 'I said'
- v. 12 אזכור 'I call to mind' [God's acts] and אזכרה 'I recall' [God's wonders]
- v. 13 הגיתי 'I recite' [God's works] and אשיחה 'I speak'/'I rehearse' [God's acts]

The second time around, the process of recalling the past leads not to questioning but to reaffirmation. The intentional act of recalling God's wonders, God's works and God's acts in vv. 12-13 leads the speaker in vv. 14-15 to ask who can compare to God in greatness and holiness, working wonders to rescue the people, echoing the triumphant question of the Song of the Sea:

- Exod. 15.11-13 Who is like You, O LORD, among the celestials; who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders! You put out Your right hand, the earth swallowed them. In Your love You lead the people You redeemed; in Your strength You guide them to Your holy abode.

For Kselman, the references to the Song of the Sea are central to the meaning of the psalm, which he represents with a rather misshapen chiasm, as shown in Figure 7.2:¹⁰

- A vv. 9-10 questioning God's attributes
- B v. 11 questioning whether God's hand changed
- C vv. 12-14 allusion to Song of Sea
- B' vv. 15-16 reaffirming that God still redeems with mighty arm
- A' vv. 17-21 reaffirming God's attributes through hymnic theophany

Figure 7.2 Kselman's *Chiastic Structure of Questions and Answers in Psalm 77*

In Kselman's view, the fact that his chiasm cuts across the border usually drawn between the lament portion and the hymnic portion speaks to the overall unity of the psalm. What matters is the historical material rather than the speaker's mental struggle. As a result, he has little to say about the opening portion of the psalm. In contrast, Herbert Levine sees the unity of the psalm arising from the profusion of cognitive verbs; after a repeated cycle of meditation, the speaker can contemplate both lament and hymn at the same time.¹¹ My view aligns with Levine's. As the structure in Figure 7.1 suggests, this reading preserves the coherence of the complaint portion while placing the realization in v. 11 (rather than an allusion to the Song of the Sea) at the center of the psalm. My reading also suggests a larger purpose for the closing verses describing God's presence at the sea.

Verses 17-21 are filled with evocative description and poetic imagery. The theme—God's appearance at the edge of the sea with dramatic reactions from nature—is certainly relevant to the Song of the Sea but does not exactly reflect its imagery or the imagery of the narrative of the crossing. God appeared there in the form of a pillar of fire and cloud (Exod. 14.19-29). The imagery of a sky filled with thunder bolts and lightning and of the earth quaking more closely reflects the revelation at Sinai (Exod. 19.16-20). Kraus, while drawing connections to Psalm 29 among others, sees this theophany as a 'special independent element' that incorporates the 'essential characteristics of Baal' in Canaanite mythology.¹² Whatever its source, the passage is a further stage of mental action, starting from the initial intention of recalling God's wonders, works and acts in vv. 12-13, moving through the explicit declaration of God's historical wonders, works and acts in vv. 14-16, and culminating in an imaginative enactment of God's wonders, works and acts on earth.

10. Kselman, 'Psalm 77', p. 58.

11. Levine, *Sing unto God*, pp. 146-47.

12. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, pp. 116-17.

By activating the imagination, the speaker enlists emotion to support the previous rational efforts to cope with the loss of faith.¹³ Appeals to *pathos* (emotion) have been recognized since ancient times as among the powerful aids to persuasion. Among the emotional appeals, the most powerful is the use of *enargeia*, vivid description and imagery that evokes in hearers/readers the physical sensations and emotions of real-world experience. Psalm 77.17-21 evokes the sound of thunder, the flash of lightning, the feel of the earth quaking—awe-inspiring experiences shared by the waters themselves. Imagining and visualizing are powerful because, as neuro-psychologists have found, they activate areas of the brain associated with perceptual organs and motor activities.¹⁴ Yet the persuasive function of vivid passages such as this often goes unrecognized. They are treated as expressive, as a release or articulation of the speaker's feeling, rather than as persuasive, as a move to change the disposition or mood of a hearer, a reader, or even one's self. Changing the mood or disposition of an audience goes a long way toward increasing their willingness to entertain new ideas and opinions. Thus the final verses of Psalm 77, framed as they are by God's commitment to the community's patriarchs (Jacob and Joseph in v. 16) and leaders (Moses and Aaron in v. 21), cap the speaker's self-guided reintegration into stoic faithfulness. God's absence in the immediate crisis does not signal an essential change; rather the speaker's attitude to God's absence is transformed.

The nature of the immediate crisis cannot be pinned down but it is reasonable to take it as communal rather than entirely personal. Richard Clifford sees a connection between the extended hymnic portions of three psalms, Pss. 77.12-21; 78.52-54; and 89.2-38, going so far as to propose that they along with Psalm 44 belong in a subgenre that he calls the 'communal lament'.¹⁵ Clifford argues for the textual integrity of these psalms, which like Psalm 77 have been read as redactional agglomerations of communal hymns with individual laments. Clifford argues that a clue to the nature of the current crisis is the choice of ancestral triumphs to recite. He therefore takes the hymnic part of Psalm 77 as a sign that the speaker is responding to a national disaster.

Matthew Mitchell agrees with Clifford on the textual unity of these psalms and their thematic connections. However, he questions whether they

13. The appreciation of Classical rhetoricians for the tight connection between imagination and emotion is elaborated by Ruth Webb, 'Imagination and the Arousal of the Emotions in Greco-Roman Rhetoric', in Susanna Morton Braund and Christopher Gill (eds.), *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 112-27.

14. Zvyagintsev *et al.*, 'Brain Networks'.

15. Richard J. Clifford, 'Psalm 89: A Lament over the Davidic Ruler's Continued Failure', *HTR* 73 (1980), pp. 35-47; cited by Croft, *The Identity of the Individual*, p. 194.

fit a new form-critical type as closely as Clifford claims. Mitchell suggests that ‘there are, within this “tightly defined” genre of “communal laments”, accusatory as well as self-effacing types, and very different understandings of what the “communal” identity supposed to characterize them means’.¹⁶ Psalms 44 and 89 both use recitals of God’s past behavior and claims of current faithfulness to convince God to return to form; Psalm 78 uses its recital to warn the community to shun the behavior of ancestors whose rebellions and straying led to their punishment and defeat. Unlike the other psalms in the group, Psalm 77 lacks any specific reference to enemies or battle, so Mitchell sees Clifford’s claim that it relates to a national disaster as speculative.

Following Mitchell’s lead, I suggest that these psalms offer a range of ways to respond to God’s absence: by claiming innocence, by blaming sub-groups or by eschewing blame to focus on maintaining faithfulness despite God’s apparent abandonment. Like Levine, I see Psalm 77 as a didactic model of an extended process of meditation for listeners. However, whereas Levine argues that an individual’s story of deliverance has ‘far more lasting impact [on hearers] if it is aligned with a national story of deliverance’,¹⁷ I see the story of national deliverance as a powerful tool for an individual seeking to achieve a personal sense of deliverance.

Psalm 73: Speaking Internally and Externally

Whatever it was that triggered the speaker’s crisis of doubt in Psalm 77 is never identified. However, what roils the speaker’s faith in Psalm 73 is quite clear: the absence or at least the deferral of judgment on the wicked. Rather than being punished, the wicked live at ease, achieve material success and lead the people into apostasy. They make no effort to hide their deeds and even mock God’s failure of omniscience. The speaker feels envious and sorely tempted to deny God’s power. Dealing with these doubts is vital but voicing them would be a betrayal. Self-persuasion provides the way out.

No consensus has been reached about the setting and purpose of Psalm 73; though McCann notes that more than half a dozen possibilities have been advanced, most commentators identify it either as a didactic psalm—despite the lack of public address, or as a thanksgiving psalm—despite the absence of explicit thanks.¹⁸ Kraus sees it as ‘an autobiographical stylization’ rather than a real event in the speaker’s life; for didactic purposes,

16. Matthew W. Mitchell, ‘Genre Disputes and Communal Accusatory Laments: Reflections on the Genre of Psalm LXXXIX’, *VT* 55 (2005), pp. 511-27 (26).

17. Levine, *Sing unto God*, p. 147.

18. J. Clinton McCann, Jr, ‘Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology’, in K.G. Hoglund *et al.* (eds.), *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in*

the speaker describes, reports and confesses doubts but ends up giving thanks for achieving a level of ‘certainty’ that ‘overcame all affliction and temptation’. The didactic purpose is signaled by the psalm’s framing in which doubts are ‘embedded in the full certainty of salvation’.¹⁹

PSALM 73²⁰

- 1 An Asaph psalm. Only (78) good to Israel is God, to the pure of heart.
- 2 As for me, my feet had almost strayed, my steps had nearly tumbled.
- 3 For I envied the revelers, I saw the wicked’s well-being:
- 4 ‘For they are free of the fetters of death, and their body is healthy.
- 5 Of the torment of man they have no part, and they know not human afflictions’.
- 6 Thus haughtiness is their necklace, outrage, their garment, bedecks them.
- 7 Fat bulges round their eyes, imaginings spill from their heart.
- 8 They mock and speak with malice, from on high they speak out oppression.
- 9 They put their mouth up to the heavens, and their tongue goes over the earth.
- 10 Thus the people turn back to them, and they lap up their words.
- 11 And they say, ‘How could God know, and is there knowledge with the Most High?’
- 12 Look, such are the wicked, the ever complacent ones pile up wealth.
- 13 But (78) in vain have I kept my heart pure and in innocence washed my palms.
- 14 For I was afflicted all day long, and my chastisement, each new morning.
- 15 If I said, Let me talk like them. Look, Your sons’ band I would have betrayed.
- 16 When I thought to know these things, it was a torment in my eyes.
- 17 Till I came to the sanctuaries of God, understood what would be their end.
- 18 Yes (78), You set them on slippery ground, brought them down to destruction.
- 19 How they come to ruin in a moment, swept away, taken in terrors!
- 20 Like a dream upon waking, O Master, upon rising You despised their image.
- 21 When my heart was embittered, and my conscience stabbed with pain,
- 22 I was a dolt and knew nothing, like cattle I was with You.
- 23 Yet I was always with You, You grasped my right hand.
- 24 You guarded me with Your counsel, and toward glory You took me.
- 25 Whom else do I have in the heavens, and beside You whom would I want upon the earth?
- 26 Though my flesh and my heart waste away, God is my heart’s rock and my portion forever.
- 27 For, look, those far from you perish, You demolish all who go whoring from You.
- 28 But I—God’s closeness is good to me, I make the Master the LORD my shelter, to recount all Your works.

Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm (JSOTSup, 58; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 247-57.

19. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, p. 85.

20. Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, pp. 252-56.

Kraus thus reads Ps. 73.1 as a confident declaration of God's commitment to the good. He even reveals a parallelism underscoring the point; by breaking *ישראל* ('Israel') into the two words *ישר* ('upright') and *אל* ('El'), he reveals the verse as a chiasm: 'good to the upright [*yashar*] is El, God, to the pure of heart'. Given the absence of other communal references, Alter considers this a plausible option, though he retains 'Israel' in his translation.

The speaker's certainty in this declaration, however, is undermined by the term *אך* (*ach*) which as noted in the discussion of Psalm 62 usually has an adversative rather than an emphatic effect. This effect is not conveyed by Alter as he translates *אך* (*ach*) in Ps. 73.1 as 'only' as he did throughout Psalm 62 (though he does not follow suit in Ps. 17.13, 18). Reading *אך* (*ach*) as an adversative in Ps. 73.1, Snaith sees it as a signal that the speaker is opening with a hard-won conclusion.²¹ Even to serve this purpose, however, v. 1 must also be recognized as the claim that is at stake throughout the psalm; v. 1 states the premise that the speaker's recent experiences have called into doubt. At present, God seems to be good to the wicked.

As indicated in Figure 7.3, the brief opening is followed by a complaint describing the speaker's crisis of faith (vv. 2-12) that takes up nearly half the psalm.²² The speaker focuses on the opponents' appearance, behavior and material wealth but does not specify any harms they have inflicted on the speaker himself. Rather, the arrogant evil-doers simply flaunt their well-being, stirring the envy and emulation of others including the speaker. The speaker is led to the brink; in v. 3 he reports narrowly resisting straying, though he admits giving in to envy.

Psalm 17, discussed in Chapter 4, makes an interesting contrast to Psalm 73. In both psalms, the speaker dwells on the opponents' prosperity. However, the opening in Psalm 17 was far longer, including a confident assertion of the speaker's righteousness and innocence. There, the speaker associated himself with God by interposing his physical features with God's, setting up a contrast to the gross and beast-like appearance of the opponents. In Psalm 73, however, the speaker feels distant from God, omitting any direct address and depicting the opponents not as beastly but as otherworldly, even approaching the divine. They seem immune to death (v. 4), avoid the troubles of a mere mortal—*אנוש* 'man' or *אדם* 'human' (v. 5) and even speak from on high, with *פיהם* 'their mouths' and *לשונם* 'their tongues' in the heavens (vv. 8-9). The speaker dwells on their appearance, weaving their arrogance and violence into their garments but he barely describes any evil they do. Their worst comes in the form of thoughts and speeches: imaginings spilling from their hearts (v. 7), mockery, malicious and extortionate

21. Snaith, 'The Meaning of the Hebrew "אך"', p. 223.

22. As McCann does ('Psalm 73', p. 249), I take *אך* (*ach*) to signal section boundaries.

Title/Premise	1	Premise: 𐤆𐤍 God is good to the good
	2	I almost strayed
	3	I envied evil-doers
	4	Evil-doers prosper
	5	Evil-doers
	6	Evil-doers
	7	Evil-doers
	8	Evil-doers
	9	Evil-doers
	10	Evil-doers
	11	Evil-doers
Complaint	12	Evil-doers
	13	𐤆𐤍 Temptation
	14	Temptation
	15	Temptation
	16	Questioning
Inquiry	17	Questioning
	18	𐤆𐤍 Realization: God's trap for wicked
	19	Realization: God's trap for wicked
	20	Realization
	21	Realization: Self-criticism
Realization	22	Realization
	23	Actualizing God's help: Sensing God's presence
	24	God's presence/guidance
	25	God's presence
	26	God's presence
	27	Forecasting fate of wicked
Actualization	28	Forecasting fate of speaker

Figure 7.3. *Structure of Psalm 73*

speech (v. 8) and open challenges to God's omniscience (v. 11). No wonder people are drawn towards them, away from God's path.

The speaker's own drift is described in vv. 13-14. He becomes cynical towards his own behavior, seeing his efforts to remain pure as a waste and feeling constant anguish over the conflict between his beliefs; the doctrine that God reserves goodness for the good is undermined by his first-hand observation that God seems to have rewarded the wicked. In vv. 15-16, he describes exactly what he was tempted to do—not to join in wicked deeds but to speak out his loss of faith in righteous behavior. But he realizes that even so little would be a betrayal. As Levine notes, speech in these verses is an act with consequences; even adopting speech like the opponents' would

have corrupted the speaker.²³ Yet Levine maintains that considering such speech even hypothetically enables a process of self-persuasion to begin, opening a dialogue not only with the words of the wicked but with the almost-spoken words of the speaker's own. To explain this effect, Levine quotes Bakhtin:

A conversation with an internally persuasive word that one has begun to resist may continue, but it takes on another character: it is questioned, it is put in a new situation in order to expose its weak side, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object.²⁴

Rather than voicing his loss of faith aloud, in v. 16 the speaker applies his mind to understand the conflict between his beliefs and his experience, perplexing though it is. Alter and Kraus translate v. 16 as a continuation of the anguish that such thoughts cause the speaker; others however translate it as a contemplation of the difficulty of the inquiry:

Ps. 73.16	Alter	When I thought to know these things, it was a torment in my eyes.
	Kraus	And I pondered how I should understand this—it was torment in my eyes!
	NJPS	So I applied myself to understand this, but it seemed a hopeless task.
	Crenshaw	But when I pondered the way to understand this, it was burdensome in my sight. ²⁵

Insight comes next in v. 17 when the speaker enters God's holy precincts. From a place of ultimate closeness to the divine, he comprehends how distant from God his opponents must eventually end up. The location and nature of this insight are key to appreciating the speaker's struggle. Like most critics, Kraus and Crenshaw locate the speaker within the Jerusalem temple and identify the insight as an act of God that reveals some aspect of eternal redemption. For Kraus, 'the psalmist either received a divine revelation or was confronted by the reality of God in a theophany'; the speaker's inquiry is taken out of his hands: 'what in this world can no longer be demonstrated empirically is cleared up prophetically'.²⁶ While Crenshaw poses the possibilities less assertively using question form, he too sees the source of enlightenment as external, whether from 'a priestly oracle

23. Levine, *Sing unto God*, p. 124.

24. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 348.

25. James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 110.

26. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, p. 89.

of salvation’, ‘a prophetic mediator’ or an ‘assurance come directly to the worshipper’.²⁷

Levine agrees that the location at the Temple is key, but not because of the greater availability of priests, prophets or Godhead. Rather, he emphasizes the effect on the individual of such a change in place. By entering a sacred space, the speaker ‘momentarily assumes God’s perspective on timespace’; ‘the shift from human to divine temporal perspective, from profane to sacred ground, allows this psalmist to make his peace with the world in which he lives for as long as he can remain connected to God’. In contrast to Kraus and Crenshaw, Levine attributes the insight to the speaker’s ongoing cognitive efforts, not to a certainty implanted by revelation. For Levine, the life of ritual observance within a community prepares the way for connecting with the divine at sacred places through ‘patient meditative mindfulness’.²⁸

In many ways, Levine’s reading is akin to that of Martin Buber, who is probably the most influential modern interpreter of Psalm 73. Levine and Buber both focus on the mindful work of the individual. They differ, not surprisingly, on the role of ritual observance and on the referent of God’s sanctuaries in v. 17. For Buber, the location is not ‘the Temple precincts in Jerusalem, but the sphere of God’s holiness, the holy mysteries of God’.²⁹ An individual with a heart in the right frame can connect to the divine anywhere. For Buber, לֵב (‘heart’) which occurs six times, is the key term in Psalm 73; the speaker starts out merely going through the motions of innocence and purity (v. 13) but after affliction and struggle, his heart is purified enough to enter into communion with the divine and realize God’s continual presence.

Interpreting the nature of the insight has strong implications for identifying the purpose of the remainder of the psalm. Kraus and Crenshaw see the major work of the psalm as over as soon as the revelation occurs in v. 17—the rest is proclamation of the good news. In Kraus’s terms, as the speaker ‘inquires about God’s final dispositions, this unveiling has dawned so impressively, so immediately, that he announces, in prophetic style, in the form of a funeral song, the downfall of the רשעים [“wicked ones”] as already accomplished’. Kraus sees vv. 21-22 as rejecting human efforts at comprehension as delusory and painful. For Crenshaw, too, once the revelation occurs in v. 17, ‘the burden of trying to understand vanishes’; the

27. Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, p. 123.

28. Levine, *Sing unto God*, p. 173.

29. Martin Buber, ‘The Heart Determines (Psalm 73)’, in Nahum Glatzer (ed.), *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 199-210 (203-204). Buber is cited by Brueggemann, Kraus, Levine and McCann, among others.

speaker ‘as it were, takes a deep breath and shouts the discovery. The key is their fate.’³⁰

From another perspective, however, the speaker’s mental work is far from done at the moment of insight. The speaker has yet to work through its implications. The adversative אֲכִי (ach) in v. 18 signals the rejection of old assumptions about the stability of the wicked. A new view of the opponents becomes potent, real and actualized as he visualizes them slipping away, crumbling in destruction, evaporating as in an interrupted dream (vv. 18-20). Their seeming stability is illusory, liable to disappearing in an instant. It is only at this point in the psalm that the speaker begins to address God directly, using the second person. The previous view now appears to the speaker as doltish and bovine (vv. 21-22)—the speaker realizes that he was previously incapable of clear thought regarding either the opponents or God. The point is not that attempts to comprehend are useless; rather, once understanding is achieved, the previous view seems vastly inferior.

In the final section of the psalm (vv. 23-28), the speaker articulates his new understanding of what his relationship with God has been all along. It is not that God has changed proximity; God is always there, even during periods of struggle. It is the speaker whose perceptions and attitudes have changed. Struggling can now be seen as an aspect of God’s presence and guidance, a positive step on the road to renewed faith. In a similar way, struggle served as a prescription to the errant in Ps. 4.5 (as discussed in Chapter 2) and as a request to God for refinement in Ps. 26.2 (as discussed in Chapter 1). Buber emphasizes that God’s guidance does not take the form of ‘a constant oracle, who would exonerate [the speaker] from the duty of weighing up and deciding what he must do’.³¹ The speaker must still take and direct his own steps.

In the final verses, the speaker contrasts the inevitable destruction of those far from God with the constant security of God’s presence. As in Psalm 17, closeness to God is treasured above all else. After a long process of self-persuasion, the speaker is able to move on and, in the psalm’s final words, take on the task of telling God’s deeds—a task fulfilled through the psalm itself.

The power of the psalm derives from the public articulation of a dangerous internal debate. The crux of the psalm is not revelation but speech—speech that has been overheard, speech that has been contemplated but stifled, speech that is uttered only internally, and finally speech that is planned.

30. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, p. 89; Crenshaw, *The Psalms*, p. 123.

31. Buber, ‘The Heart Determines (Psalm 73)’, p. 206. For another reading that underscores the continuation of struggle in Psalm 73, see Carolyn Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 221-39.

Discipline and Persuasion

Psalms 73 and 77 have been difficult to fit into the usual categories of psalms because the speakers do not call on God directly for rescue. Rather, they rely on their own mental efforts. They struggle, they examine their beliefs, they question and they initiate an inquiry to understand the situation. They recall or envision God's deeds; they go to a place where God can be encountered. And their perspective is altered.

The depiction of self-persuasion in these psalms may have been intended to model mental processes within a scribal group or for the public at large. The ancient Greeks inculcated such habits much more actively through both physical and mental training. As Jeff Walker describes it, *meletê* 'practice' in the sense of 'exercise' or 'rehearsal' is

the cultivation of an acquired 'nature', *physis*, or indeed a *thymos* or 'heart' endowed with potentialities for emotions, intentions, and behaviors that will seem 'natural' or intuitive to the person acting but that also may be consciously, deliberately invoked and performed—or examined.³²

Debra Hawhee emphasizes that this kind of habit formation is 'intensely demanding'; it 'requires intensive attention and disciplined, painful, repeated exercise'.³³ More than most, Psalms 73 and 77 illustrate that the purpose of composing, performing and hearing the psalms is part of Israelite moral education.

Ultimately, admitting to a crisis in faith in public actually enhances the speakers' authority within the community rather than dissolving it. In a similar way to hearers of Psalms 4 and 62 discussed in Chapter 2, hearers can identify even more closely with someone who suffers doubts and temptations similar to their own. They learn from the psalms how to become more active in maintaining their own faith. In the case of Psalms 73 and 77, it is God who serves as by-stander, one whose eternal presence alone enables faith in the face of apparent absence.

32. Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, p. 148.

33. Hawhee, *Bodily Arts*, p. 146.