

# The Semantic Field of ‘Remembering’ in the Psalms

The language of ‘remembering’ occurs throughout the Psalms. Both God and congregation are frequently called upon to remember, and the Psalmist often describes his own remembering or that of others. In the Hebrew of the OT, remembering is theologically important and semantically complex.<sup>1</sup> What does this mean in the context of prayer in the Psalter?

I examine what it means to remember in the Psalms in prayer, employing a hermeneutic method informed by semantics.

## 1. Semantics and Biblical Hermeneutics

James Barr apparently delivered a blow to the use of semantic linguistics in Biblical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Yet his discrediting of much of the linguistics previously applied to the

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<sup>1</sup> Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), Schottroff, *'Gedenken' im alten Orient und im Alten Testament: die Wurzel zākar im semitischen Sprachkreis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1964), de Boer, *Gedenken und Gedächtnis in der Welt des Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1962), Kessler, *The Memory Motif in the God-Man Relationship of the Old Testament* (Northwestern University: University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961). He was responding to works such as Botterweck, et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, [1974-]), Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM, 1960), Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (eds. Friedrich and Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964). The

Bible rather refined the combination of semantics and hermeneutics. His pupil Samuel Balentine consequently developed semantic methods in Biblical interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Balentine's work on the semantic domain of 'hiding the face of God' in the OT provided an exemplar of how such semantics could be soundly applied, and what it might contribute to OT study in general. It offers important findings in terms of both the particular content of his study, and also the general relevance of such methods.

## **2. A study of 'Remembering' in the Psalter**

To follow Balentine's method closely, a lengthy analysis of the general semantic field of words for 'remember' in the OT would be required. Space prevents this here, and it has been treated elsewhere in other ways.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say, the Psalter is a major textual locus of the vocabulary of remembering and forgetting. I therefore deal here specifically with (a) the use of the central roots of remembering and forgetting in the particular

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debate was furthered by Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: studies in the semantics of soteriological terms* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967). Others took up Barr's insights: Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: collected works with new essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Balentine, *The Hidden God: the hiding of the face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Schottroff, 'Gedenken' im alten Orient und im Alten Testament: die Wurzel *zākar* im semitischen Sprachkreis (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1964), Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), de Boer, *Gedenken und Gedächtnis in der Welt des Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1962), Kessler, *The Memory Motif in the God-Man Relationship of the Old Testament* (Northwestern University: University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1956), Eising, "*zākar*, *zēker*, *zikkārôn*, *azkārâ*," in *TDOT* eds. Botterweck, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

context of the Psalms; and (b) semantic fields of ‘remember’-related words with reference to the Psalms.<sup>5</sup>

**a. The use of these words in the particular context of the Psalter**

Balentine’s methods would highlight just two major roots for remembering and forgetting in the Psalter, *zkr* and *škh* respectively (and their negations).<sup>6</sup> I treat each in turn.

*Zkr*: Remember

Taking into account subjects and objects of remembering, I offer a simple categorization of occurrences of *zkr* in the Psalms by distinguishing God’s remembrance of man; God’s remembrance of himself; man’s remembrance of God; man’s remembrance of man; and the occurrences where the noun is employed without indicating subject or object of remembrance.

Table 1: Who remembers whom? *Zkr*, subjects and objects in the Psalms<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For comparison of method, see Balentine, *The Hidden God: the hiding of the face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 16.

<sup>6</sup> See Daffern, et al., "Prayers for Remembering in the Psalms" (Oxford, 2014) 120-122.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Remembering God’ and ‘remembering the things of God’ may be grouped together, with respect to the poetic device of synecdoche. Likewise considering that an object to be remembered is prior to the one who (or that which) reminds, both remembering and reminding actions may also be conflated. I use the term ‘remembrance’ to refer to instances both of remembering and not remembering, and both of

God's remembrance of man	God's remembrance of God	Man's remembrance of God	Man's remembrance of man	'Memorial Offering'
8.5	25.6	6.6 (-)	109.15 (-)	38.1
9.7 (-)		20.8	109.16 (-)	70.1
9.13		22.28	111.4	
20.4		30.5	112.6	
25.7		42.5		
25.7 (-)		42.7		
34.17 (-)		45.18		
74.2		63.7		
74.18		71.16		
74.22		77.4		
78.39		77.7		
79.8 (-)		77.12 (Q/K)		
83.5 (-)		77.12		
87.4		78.35		
88.6 (-)		78.42 (-)		
89.48		97.12		
89.51		102.13		
98.3		103.18		
105.8		105.5		
105.42		106.7 (-)		
106.4		119.52		
106.45		119.55		
109.14		135.13		
111.5		137.1*		
115.12		137.6* (-)		
119.49		143.5		
132.1		145.7		
136.23				
137.7				

Of the 64<sup>8</sup> occurrences of the root *zkr* in 61 psalms in the MT Psalter, slightly more than half refer to God's remembering (or on six occasions not remembering) man. Yet this is

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remembering and reminding; (-) denotes where the verb is negated. I use the term 'man' to refer to both God's people and God's enemies (by extension the enemies of God's people). \* denotes instances where Jerusalem is remembered, and equated with God, hence the categorization. (Q/K) refers to kethib/qere variation.

<sup>8</sup> Two of these are a single pair of kethib/qere alternatives.

not significantly different: prayer is clearly the literary context where primarily man is remembering God.<sup>9</sup> Only five psalms have both God's remembering man and man's remembering God side by side. In prayer, however, both the expression of hope in God's remembering, and the expression of worship in man's remembering God are almost equal in weight. Indeed, simply mentioning God's remembering or not remembering is an expression of man's remembering God, the divine agent of remembering. Therefore the very meaning of remembering points to how the semantic content is only the starting-point. Phrases of man's remembering God could even be superfluous: the very existence of mention of God in any capacity in prayer is an implicit instance of man's remembering God.

Just once (Ps. 25.6), God is called upon simply to remember himself. Only here is there a clause not requiring man at the level of the text: God is both subject and object, remembering his own character. Yet at the level of the performance of the text, the text is written or spoken in the voice of man: it is man calling upon God to remember himself and his goodness. It is difficult to conceive of God as entirely self-sufficient within a text: the text has been mediated and passed on by man, and is now being read by man. Thus God's remembering in a text, particularly in a prayer text, cannot happen

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike other literary contexts where God remembers man but man does not remember God, e.g. Jer. 2.32 where God remembers man (he is speaking to them through the prophet) but man does not remember God.

by itself: its very existence in a text involves God being remembered by man at least at the point of reading, and indeed at the point of writing and transmission as well. By mentioning God's remembering, the Psalmist is himself somehow involved. Equally, insofar as the Psalms are a sacred text where God is either spoken of or spoken to, God is essentially involved in any instances of man's remembering, regardless of whether the divine is grammatical object, direct or indirect, or not.

What of specific occurrences of *zkr* in the Psalter? From a canonical viewpoint the root occurs fairly regularly: there is no one book of the Psalter that appears to use *zkr* considerably more than another; this root occurs in all psalmic genres. A psalm in which we find the root *zkr* is more often than not alongside another such psalm: yet this relatively insignificant observation serves simply to suggest that sometimes psalms which were similar or related were naturally aligned. The root *zkr* does not influence the organisation of the psalter; at most it may only have affected the juxtaposition of some psalms.

Two psalms, 38 and 70, have the Hiphil infinitive construct in the superscription *lēhazkîr*, commonly translated 'for the memorial offering'. The differences between the two are simply that Ps. 38 is labelled as 'A Psalm' and Ps. 70 is specifically dedicated 'For the leader'. Yet the subject, direct and indirect objects of *lēhazkîr* remain unclear.

*lēhazkîr* itself does not specify; at most it conveys an intention, the goal of remembrance.

This instances how the semantic content of *zkr* is effective and functional: it does not simply *mean* something but it *does* something.<sup>10</sup> Fundamentally, the author of the superscriptions – presuming just one author of both – points out the importance of remembering. Both psalms are petitions for God to help the speaker, implying the function that the pray-er hereby reminds God of his human need. The speaker hopes that by his speaking, by his *lēhazkîr*, God will remember.<sup>11</sup>

Primarily, then, the intention is that God remember man: the psalmist in his distress, the enemy in their success. Ps. 38.2, 5-6 amount to confession; both texts convey the neediness of the speaker (38.7-9, 70.6). The Psalmist appeals to God, reminding him of the speaker's neediness. The reminder of that neediness is also a persuasive reminder to God of both the speaker's human weakness and also God's attributes as one who remembers the poor and needy.

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<sup>10</sup> Thus recalling speech-act theory and linguistic pragmatics: c.f. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1969), Searle, *Speech Acts: an essay in the philosophy of language* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969). These foundations have been built upon in Biblical studies by e.g. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: collected works with new essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> The speaker is in the first person singular throughout; Ps. 70.5 referring to the third person plural of the righteous, but the speaker may number himself amongst these.

Perhaps the prayers were offered alongside a ritual offering; the superscription however does not necessitate this. A sacrificial object, whether a text spoken or written, or a physical offering, reminds God of his commitment to look after the poor and needy. It is also a reminder of former occasions of divine compassion. Such psalms are thus reminders not only *to* God, but also *of* God. The individual tone takes on communal significance. The text, passed on to future generations worshipping God, maintains the covenant. Future generations were to remember an individual's story as a communal response to suffering, a reminder of God's loving-kindness to the poor and needy.

There is no rubric indicating sacrificial actions within the psalms themselves.<sup>12</sup> More probably, the prayer itself is the memorial intending continued remembering. A spoken reminder is naturally repeated in time.<sup>13</sup> Both superscriptions claim Davidic connections;<sup>14</sup> whether or not David composed the psalms, their transmission indicates that they are to be repeated by others, and that David is an exemplar of one who was good at reminding God. Thus as the scribes and future pray-ers of these psalms repeat the prayers, so they also invoke the memory of David, the *tupos* of one reminding God of the things of which God apparently needed reminding. In reminding God, the addressee of both prayers, also of David, thus there is a double level of reminding

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<sup>12</sup> At most, repeated lamed-prefix 70.2 indicates some material thing *aiming at* deliverance and assistance.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. To say 'Will you remind me nearer the time?' implies that one reminder may not suffice.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *David in Distress: his portrait through the historical psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 38. David (presented in the superscriptions as the petitioner of Pss 38 and 70) may be not just a guide for individual prayer and spirituality, but an exemplar of remembering and remembrance.



enacted. As such, all Davidic psalms are effectively guiding future generations of Israelites in the way of worshipping God. Prayers of the psalms join a long line of God's people, observing ancestral wisdom in preserving their relationship with God. David is the spiritual leader, and renowned by the people.

Linguistically similar to Ps. 132.1, David is also to be renowned in God's eyes. To 'remember for David's sake' is also to call God to remember the covenant he enacted with David and committed to upholding if the people also upheld it. In remembering David's remembrance of God, the people are keeping the covenant. God is to remember David, and consequently also his descendants, all those who would speak the Psalms in future generations.

If the Hiphil infinitive construct superscriptions with *zkr* were so powerful, and central to Israelite prayer, it is perhaps surprising that they occur only twice. Space forbids a full comparison of Pss 38 and 70 with the whole Psalter; intuitively, they will not stand out so differently from other psalms. Compare Ps. 100.1, with superscription labelling the psalm as 'thanksgiving': this clearly does not mean that only a psalm with such a superscription is a thanksgiving – other psalms, without superscriptions, also convey thanksgiving. Likewise, it is doubtful that Ps. 102 is the only 'psalm of one afflicted, pleading before God' or Ps. 92 the only 'psalm that would have been sung on the

Sabbath day'. Thus superscriptions, while informative, do not necessarily distinguish one psalm from another: the absence of a particular superscription does not mean that a psalm is not of a particular type or content. The repetition of the superscription לְהַזְכִּיר (*lěhazkîr*) indicates that this was not simply an aberration: it is possible that other psalms were implicitly understood under such a heading.

Analysis of the superscriptions (the only occurrences of the Hiphil infinitive construct of *zkr* in the Psalter) leads to broader grammatical examination of the occurrences of *zkr*.

Table 2: Grammatical analysis of *zkr* in the Psalter<sup>15</sup>

Noun	Qal Perf	Qal Imperf	Waw-Cons Qal Imperf	Qal Imperat	Qal Partcp	Qal Infin Constr	Niph Imperf	Hiphil Imperf	Hiph Infin Constr
6.6 (-)	9.13	8.5	78.35	25.6	103.18	137.1	83.5 (-)	20.8	38.1
9.7 (-)	63.7	20.4(J)	78.39	25.7 (-)			109.14	45.18	70.1
30.5	78.42 (-)	22.28	106.45	74.2				71.16	
34.17 (-)	88.6 (-)	25.7 (J)		74.18				77.12 (K)	
97.12	98.3	42.5 (C)		74.22				87.4	
102.13	105.8	42.7		89.48					
109.15 (-)	105.42	77.4 (C)		89.51					
111.4	106.7 (-)	77.7 (C)		105.5					
112.6	109.16 (-)	77.12 (Q)		106.4					
135.13	115.12	77.12 (C)		119.49					
145.7	119.52	79.8 (J) (-)		132.1					
	119.55	111.5		137.7					
	136.23	137.6 (-)							

<sup>15</sup> Notes to Table 2: I use the familiar terms 'Qal Perfect', Waw-Consecutive' etc. in the understanding that these are limited but useful descriptions. Under the Qal Imperfect forms, (J) indicates a Jussive, (C) a Cohortative. (Q) denotes Qere, (K) denotes Kethib. As above, (-) denotes where the root is negated.

	143.5								
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The only other infinitive construct of *zkr* is the Qal in 137.1, with beth-prefix, ‘in our remembering you, Zion’. As one might expect, the Qal perfect and imperfect occur 14 times and 13 times respectively out of 64 instances of *zkr* throughout the psalms.

However, the Qal imperative occurs 12 times (notably negated only once) and of the Qal imperfects, seven have cohortative or jussive meaning. Clearly, reminding is a significant aspect of remembering in the psalms. Table 3 unfolds this further.

Table 3: Exhortations to Remember: *zkr* in the Psalms<sup>16</sup>

So that God remembers (and not)	So that self remembers	So that other remembers (and not)
20.4	42.5	30.5
25.6	77.4	97.12
25.7	77.7	105.5
25.7 (-)	77.12	109.15 (-)
74.2		
74.18		
74.22		
79.8 (-)		
89.48		
89.51		
106.4		
119.49		
132.1		
137.7		

<sup>16</sup> These are all the Cohortatives, Jussives, and Imperatives of *zkr* in the Psalms, and those nouns related to *zkr* in constructions with these verbal forms.

The addressee of the exhortations to remember (or not) is primarily God (11 times): the substance of the occurrences express desire for God to remember. Reference to self occurs four times (logically never negated), and other human addressees are directed to remember four times, three of which are noun clauses.<sup>17</sup>

Verb forms of *zkr* occur more frequently than noun forms. With just 11 noun forms of the 64 occurrences of *zkr*, one participle, and three infinitive constructs, in most cases *zkr* is an action rather than an object. Thus remembrance in the psalms, while sometimes a ritual offering or memorial object, is more likely to be the action, of the prayer itself. The use of *zkr* in the psalms indicates that the activity of prayer is the most powerful tool available to get God to remember.

A final grammatical observation is the somewhat surprising paucity of the waw-consecutive in the Psalmic occurrences of *zkr*: only thrice, and always with the Qal imperfect. Perhaps waw-consecutive forms do not regularly work in the particular language of poetic prayer; or perhaps *zkr* does not readily admit of formation with the waw-consecutive.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Škh*: Forget

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<sup>17</sup> 30.5, 97.12, 109.15.

<sup>18</sup> There is not scope here for discussion of whether or not some roots favour waw-consecutive forms.

As before, I offer a simple tabulation of occurrences of *škh* in the Psalms, according to subject and object of forgetting.

Table 4: Who forgets whom? *škh*, subjects and objects in the Psalms<sup>19</sup>

God's forgetting of man	God's forgetting of God	Man's forgetting of God	Man's forgetting of man
9.13 (-)	77.10	9.18	31.13
9.19		44.18 (-)	45.11
10.11		44.21	59.12
10.12 (-)		50.22	102.5
13.2		78.7 (-)	
42.10		78.11	
44.25		103.2 (-)	
74.19 (-)		106.13	
74.23 (-)		106.21	
		119.16 (-)	
		119.61 (-)	
		119.83 (-)	
		119.93 (-)	
		119.109 (-)	
		119.139	
		119.141 (-)	
		119.153 (-)	
		119.176 (-)	
		137.5	

*Zkr* was seen to occur negated twelve times out of the 64 occurrences in the Psalms: the proportion of *zkr* negated in the Psalter (19%) is little higher than the proportion of *zkr* negated in the entire OT (14%). The majority of these cases are either descriptions of

<sup>19</sup> Notes to Table 4: While 'forgetting' refers to instances both of forgetting and not forgetting (and both of forgetting and causing to forget) use of a negative is noted again by (-). 'Man' refers to both God's people and God's enemies (by extension the enemies of God's people). 'Of God' and 'of man' includes also the things of God, and the things of man, respectively. Finally, it is notable that there is no ready equivalent in *škh* of the noun forms of *zkr*.

sinful individuals or people who do not remember God, or petitions to God not to remember sins. In contrast, the antonym *škh* occurs 33 times in the Psalter, fifteen times in the negative.<sup>20</sup> This represents 45% of the occurrences of *škh* that are negated in the Psalter, compared with 36% of occurrences of *škh* negated in the whole OT. Not-forgetting in psalmic prayer is thus notably more common than in other OT literary genres.<sup>21</sup> The speaker reminds God that he himself never forgets, referring to God, his works, his commandments, his law: the act of reminding God of his not-forgetting is clearly akin to remembering God and thereby reminding God of the speaker himself.

Studying the negation or non-negation of *škh* is however limited since, for instance, an imperative to remember or not to forget does not adequately convey at what point the subject may or may not forget or remember, and this may be crucial to the very meaning of the word in its context. Consequently I next examine subjects and objects of the verb, and then I turn to grammatical analysis.

Strikingly, forgetting (and its negation) much more frequently involves the agency of man rather than God. The most common context is that of the righteous not forgetting God,<sup>22</sup> or praying for help in not forgetting God.<sup>23</sup> Since not-forgetting God is necessary

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<sup>20</sup> 9.13, 10.12, 44.18, 74.19, 74.23, 78.7, 103.2, and all but one of the occurrences in Ps. 119, i.e. 119.16, 61, 83, 93, 109, 141, 153, 176.

<sup>21</sup> This calculation however is arguably swayed by the lengthy and non-representative Ps. 119.

<sup>22</sup> 44.18, 21; 78.7; 103.2; 119.16, 61, 83, 93, 109, 141, 153, 176.

for prayer, so the very existence of the prayer distinguishes the righteous. Both remembering and praying are thus crucial aspects of being righteous: a further hint of the relationship of wisdom, prayer, and remembering.

Those who forget are either the sinful,<sup>24</sup> or – in the context of lament – God.<sup>25</sup> The sinful who forget God, his commandments and deeds, live without prayer, and without God's law. To forget God means not fearing him, not keeping the covenant, and not receiving God's covenant promises in return. It is hardly then surprising that it is only the sinful – the unwise who do not remember God and who is truly is – who think that God forgets their sins.<sup>26</sup>

Language of God forgetting expresses such a fear, and thus functions as a complex reminder to God. The lament of God's forgetting is voiced in order that God does *not* forget. The dismay at the idea of God's forgetting is balanced by assertions that God does *not* forget: he does not forget the righteous or the needy.<sup>27</sup> Such a statement itself functions in prayer as a reminder to God of himself, a reminder that it is not in his nature to forget the righteous or the needy.

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<sup>23</sup> 137.5

<sup>24</sup> 9.18, 50.22, 78.11, 106.13, 21, 119.139.

<sup>25</sup> 13.2, 31.13, 42.10, 44.25, 77.10.

<sup>26</sup> 10.11

<sup>27</sup> 9.13, 9.19, 10.12.

Thus prayer for God to forget not the poor<sup>28</sup> is effectively also a prayer that God remember himself, his own essence. Equally, the prayer for God to forget not his enemies, and the enemies of his people<sup>29</sup> is likewise a prayer that God remember his covenant, and the special relationship he has with his own people. The psalmist even prays that God *not* destroy the enemy, in order that the enemy, in their continuing existence, can remind God's people of a contrasting way of life, the sinful life that the enemy live. God's destruction of the enemy would lead to them being forgotten, the worst possible fate; yet the psalmist fears that if the enemy were to be totally forgotten, God's people may no longer learn from their enemies' mistakes.<sup>30</sup> The existence of the downtrodden enemy can act as a reminder also of the greatness of God.

The Psalmist fears either that he might forget God and the things of God, or that God might forget him. The root *škh* may be translated as so physical as to allow a further play on words. In Ps. 137.5, the 'withering' of the right hand is the curse against forgetting Jerusalem. The mourning described in Ps. 102.5 leads to forgetting to eat, and hence to the Psalmist's heart drying up and being parched like the grass. Forgetting can have physical effects. Just as forgetting food leads to bodily withering, so too forgetting the divine leads to both spiritual and physical withering.

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<sup>28</sup> 74.19

<sup>29</sup> 74.23

<sup>30</sup> 59.12



Table 5: Grammatical analysis of *škh* in the Psalter<sup>31</sup>

Qal Perfect	Qal Imperfect	Waw-Consec Qal Imperfect	Qal Imperative	Qal Participle	Niphal Perfect	Adjective
9.13 (-)	10.12 (J) (-)	78.11	45.10	50.22	31.13	9.18
10.11	13.2					
42.9	44.25					
44.18 (-)	59.12					
44.21	74.19 (J) (-)					
77.10	74.23 (J) (-)					
102.5	78.7 (-)					
106.13	103.2 (J) (-)					
106.21	119.16 (-)					
119.61 (-)	119.93					
119.83 (-)	137.5					
119.109 (-)	137.5 (J) (‘wither’?)					
119.139						
119.141 (-)						
119.153 (-)						
119.176						

The language of forgetting is less easily employed as a direct petition: there are fewer jussives or imperatives of *škh* in the Psalms than are seen of *zkr*. Indeed it is counterintuitive to command to forget: such a command paradoxically functions also as a reminder. *Škh* then is more naturally employed in narrative, where the action of forgetting and not forgetting together serves as a reminder.

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<sup>31</sup> Notes to Table 2 apply here also.

The other salient point to make here is that in contrast to *zkr* there are no comparable noun forms. There are no infinitives and no equivalent antonym in *škḥ* for the language of a ‘memorial’ or ‘remembrance’. Remembering is something concrete, while forgetting is an oblivion, obliteration, or indeed about consigning to nothingness or non-existence.

*Zkr* and *škḥ* are clearly the major verbal roots in the semantic domain of remembering/forgetting. However, as other scholars have pointed out, other vocabulary is related to these roots, even if the sense of ‘remember’ or ‘forget’ is not a primary meaning. Such semantic connections are made clear by their use with *zkr* or *škḥ* in the literature. Therefore I consider the semantic fields of ‘remember’-related roots in the Psalter.

#### **b. The semantic fields of ‘remember’-related words with reference to the Psalms**

Three particular verbal roots are used in close connection with *zkr* or *škḥ* in the Psalms: *śîaḥ*, *hāgâ*, and *pāqad*. Given that the meaning of a word is highlighted by the company it keeps, and *zkr* does not keep company with *škḥ* alone, I deal with each of these three

connected roots in turn below. Each are found a number of times with *zkr* or *škḥ* within a reasonable lexical span. Other verbs which are found in combination with *zkr* outside the Psalms are, for example, *sîm-* ‘*al-lēb*, *bîn*, *sālah*, *rāḥam*;<sup>32</sup> yet given that they do not arise within the semantic field of remembering within the Psalter, or indeed the context of prayer, I do not consider them further here.

### *Śîah* : Muse

Little has been said thus far of the tone of *zkr* and *škḥ* since the range is so broad. They are used across the different Psalmic genres, from petition to praise, from lament to thanksgiving, from confession to wisdom psalms.

The use of *śîah* by contrast particularly highlights the overtones of lament and complaint. Occurring nineteen times,<sup>33</sup> it overridingly expresses grief. It is found alongside all of *zkr*, *škḥ*, and *hāgâ* in Ps. 77; in Ps. 119 it is related to *zkr* and *škḥ*; and in Ps. 143 it sits beside *zkr* and *hāgâ*. Such notable evidence of parallelisms demonstrates that *śîah* may take its place in this semantic domain, even though it could not be described by Balentine as a ‘major root’, and despite the fact that it largely has negative connotations. Both the Qal and noun form convey a sense of ‘muse’, or ‘complain’; the

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<sup>32</sup> Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), Eising, “*zākar*, *zēker*, *zikkārôn*, *azkārâ*,” in *TDOT* eds. Botterweck, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> Like *škḥ* it occurs a notable six times in Ps. 119. Unlike the other roots here considered, its earliest canonical usage is halfway through Book 2.

only other verb form attested in the Psalter is the single occurrence of the *Polel*,<sup>34</sup> communicating the more upbeat ‘meditate’.

The noun, ‘complaint’, or ‘musing’, occurs five times,<sup>35</sup> and each time with a personal suffix, admitting to the emotive burden of the word. Accounting for more than half of the verbal occurrences of the lemma, the cohortative is the most common verb form,<sup>36</sup> always the first person common singular. This fits with the context of prayer: it is suggestive of formally requesting permission or the ability to complain, while the complaint is itself voiced. It is perhaps a form of courtesy to the infinitely more powerful divinity, a mannerism that pays heed to the inherent power imbalance.<sup>37</sup> Yet the cohortative speech act in this context strikes the reader as felicitous only in a timeless sense, as the expression of the cohortative, and of the complaint itself, is one and the same. Moreover, the recurrent and exclusive use of the singular form here indicates that this is an individual, more private form of prayer.

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<sup>34</sup> 143.5

<sup>35</sup> 55.3, 64.2, 102.1, 104.34, 142.3.

<sup>36</sup> 55.18; 77.4,7,13; 119.15,27,48; 145.5.

<sup>37</sup> On power dynamics in lament cf. Cottrill, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

A final observation on *śīah* : in the Psalms, it is used only of man.<sup>38</sup> God is never depicted in the Psalms as musing, or complaining. Perhaps this too is a mark of the power imbalance; or perhaps there is a sinful connotation to the one who dares to complain before God. If the latter were true, then the shame associated with it would confirm its more common usage in the private sphere, making the Psalter as a whole a book that attests to individual man's sinfulness, his need for God, and his need to confess his sins and brokenness.

#### Hāgā : Moan

This root arises just eleven times in the Psalter, and despite its close connection with this semantic field as noted above in Ps. 143.5 and Ps. 77, and its primary meaning of 'moan', in the Psalter it conveys something didactic, appearing in Pss 1 and 2 without any of the rest of the semantic domain under discussion. Twice it is associated with pondering at night-time, upon one's bed. Perhaps the dual sense of 'meditate' alongside 'remove' allows for a sense of the subject setting himself apart along with his thoughts on God, which suggests again an individual action. Yet also twice it has the 'tongue' as the subject<sup>39</sup> which indicates that whether the meditation was private or not, it was

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<sup>38</sup> Beyond the Psalms, however, it is worth noting 1 Kgs 18.27, where it is the action of Baal. There is a certain ambivalence expressed here with regard to Baal. While *śīah* therefore seems not to be the kind of thing that Yahweh does, one could accuse Baal of doing it and thereby express how un-divine he was.

<sup>39</sup> 35.28, 71.24.

spoken aloud, tying in with the context of other verbal occurrences. Only once is the root a noun, in a simile.<sup>40</sup>

Like *śiaḥ*, *hāgâ* too is only found with man as subject in the Psalms.<sup>41</sup> God is not depicted either lamenting or meditating. In Ps. 115.7 this is specifically given as a mark of idols which cannot make a sound in their throats. This verse suggests that *hāgâ* is a mark of disdain for pretend divinities: the true God does not *hāgâ*, but anthropomorphised idols lament as well as their human creators.

#### *Pāqad* : Attend to

*Zkr* is used in parallel with *pāqad* elsewhere in the OT; in the Psalms this conjoining is evidenced only twice out of nine occurrences. Nevertheless, in both instances the parallelism of the two verbs in Ps. 8.5 and Ps. 106.4 brings to the fore the sense of *zkr* as ‘being mindful’. Remembrance and attention are closely and poetically linked, making the semantic connection between the two particularly evident.

Furthermore, in Ps. 17.3 *pāqad* is used of God at night-time, and this clearly resonates with the notion of man and God communing in quietness, as seen above in Ps. 77 and

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<sup>40</sup> 90.9

<sup>41</sup> The exceptions in the OT where this verb is associated with God convey the rumbling of thunder (Job 37.2) and the blast of his wind (Is 27.8). Non-human agency is also expressed in Is 8.19, of the ‘familiar spirits’. These occurrences themselves suggest that *śiaḥ* is associated with spirituality, akin to Romans 8.26.

143.5 with *hāgā* in the night setting. Prayer and meditation is a two-way process: it is not just man who can be attentive to God at night-time, but God who also attends to man. Man is perhaps particularly aware of God's attention in the silence of night.

Of nine uses in the Psalms, *pāqad* is used only with negative connotations twice; otherwise it is simply beneficial to the object of attention. In Ps. 89.33 it refers to attention to punishment of transgressions; in Ps. 109.6 it concerns the enemies' wrongful treatment of the Psalmist. Yet in the former there is the sense that anyone who is a wrongdoer needs attention in order to correct him – a loving act in the end, given that God will not allow this to break the covenant; and in the latter it may not benefit the direct object of attention, the enemies, but it will benefit the Psalmist.

Contrary to *hāgā* and *śīah*, *pāqad* is a verb which is overwhelmingly used to refer to God's actions in the Psalms. Only one instance depicts man as the subject of *pāqad*, and this is in the context of committing himself into God's care (Ps. 31.6), with man's committing himself to God lexically paralleled with God's redemption of man. Thus *pāqad* is a divine action, a hope of man for God's beneficial care.<sup>42</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

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<sup>42</sup> It should however also be noted that the noun *pqdn* is used of man observing God's precepts, in a covenantal context (Ps. 103.18).

This semantic analysis has demonstrated that God's remembering and man's remembering are inextricably intertwined in prayer in the Psalms. Indeed, where nouns of remembrance are used, this observation enriches their semantic content: man as the reader or performer of the text is the agent of remembering, while God is the fundamentally most desirable agent of remembering. Prayer, then, involves both God and man both as effective agents of remembering, and also as the objects of memory. Furthermore, the text itself is understood to function as a memorial object, causing both God and man to remember. Such remembering is relational, involving not only God and an individual, but also those others who are of God's people who have gone before and will come after. Thus each prayer becomes an integral part of the chain of collective memory that defines a people in relationship with God. Memory then becomes integral to identity, both individual and communal. It is perhaps then unsurprising to find emphasis on remembrance as an act of reminding, for this is happening at multiple levels both of text and performance.

Remembering, or not forgetting, is more common than not remembering, or forgetting. Moreover, while sinful man may be expected on occasion to forget or fail to remember, for God – the primary agent of memory – to forget is truly striking and indeed lamentable. Prayer texts themselves inevitably seek to demonstrate present



remembrance of God, whatever past failures there may have been, and to call God himself to remember. Texts of God's forgetting thus go against the remembered logic of God: as such, they are a heavy blow both to God's people and to their understanding of God, or in irony may be used by man to awaken God's sensibilities. Prayer texts may be objects of remembrance, but they cannot be objects of forgetting; it is perhaps no surprise that in the Psalms there are nominal forms of remembrance but not of forgetting.

Other remember-related words help delineate the semantic field. Root *śîaḥ* is a fairly negative member of the wider domain; a grief-stricken, often private action, it is something that only man, and not God, does. Root *hāgâ* is similar: again only used of man, it too connotes a more individual lamenting tone. In contrast, root *pāqad* conveys an attending to, and is used overwhelmingly of God. These three roots, alongside *zkr* and *škḥ*, thus highlight the breadth and centrality of the two major roots, the richness of their function and meaning, and emphasise the double-aspect of agency of *zkr* and *škḥ*.

This semantic domain therefore covers mindfulness and attention through good and bad, remembering in praise and lament, and above all it signifies and plays a role in an indissoluble relationship. The covenant offers the theological convention from which man understands his relationship with God; two-way *zkr* is a mark of the successful

covenant and ongoing relationship between Creator and creature. The difficulty of separating out the agent of remembering is clear, while the theological richness derived from this is broadly relevant.

Remembering has a complex interaction with time which may be either implicit or explicit. Objects of remembering – records, memorials, and indeed texts in which acts of remembering are themselves passed down – prolong the act of remembering and thereby have ongoing effect.<sup>43</sup> The Biblical texts are not only records of remembering and being remembered, but an ongoing reminder. It becomes clear that ‘remember’ and ‘remind’ and their antonyms are sometimes difficult to separate in terms of their wider context. The Psalms, as both text and object, both remember and remind simultaneously, and seem to have the power thereby to affect individuals, community, and God.

These methods of analysis, informed by semantic study, have thus been seen to be fruitful and a firm starting-point for examination of how ‘remembering’ functions. Above all, this semantic field is relational and conveys something about the consequences of the act of remembering for all involved. The relational aspect of

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<sup>43</sup> The *mazkir* has the important role of causing names and events to be remembered by recording them in a book, a role which is even echoed today in the ‘Remembrancer’ of the city of London. Memorials themselves even prolong, as it were, the existence of a person after their death (e.g. 2 Sam. 18.18).

‘remembering’ with reference to God is related to both prayer and identity. Inextricably connected, to ask God to remember is firstly to have remembered God. It is an affirmation of relationship, a recognition that relationship exists, and a recognition of the kind of relationship it is. Calling upon God is a form of remembrance, and making mention of a name in one’s prayers is to call that person into God’s remembrance, and thus to ask for good for them. Thus to ask God to ‘remember’ is not just to affirm the existence of the one calling upon God, it is also to express something of the nature of that relationship as well, as creator and redeemer to creature and redeemed. Past tales of salvation, the covenant, the contrasting natures of God and man, are all recalled. God and man together need to live up to what is remembered, and that happens not simply by individual acts of remembering, but a community remembering that is taught and transmitted and continues to be performed.