

Dr. David Emanuel, Psalms of the Exodus,

Session 2: Psalm 78 God Chose David

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're going to crack open one of the Bible's longest and, frankly, most mysterious poems, Psalm 78. Now, at first glance, it reads like a really jumbled history.

But as we're about to see, it might just be the most sophisticated political ad ever written. So, you might know Psalm 119 is the longest one in the book. Well, this one is the runner-up.

And for a poem this long and this important, it is incredibly weird. But what looks like, you know, a confusing mess at first is actually this brilliant piece of literary engineering. It's all designed to deliver a single knockout punchline.

Alright, so let's get into it. First, we've got to look at the clues that make this Psalm so puzzling. We need to see why it feels so strange before we can really appreciate just how clever it is.

Yeah, right off the bat, things are just out of order. The Psalm scrambles historical events. Like, it puts the plagues of Egypt after the Israelites are already in the desert.

What? It mentions battles we've never even heard of, it leaves out huge leaders like Moses, and it even changes the details of famous miracles. It's kind of like watching a highlight reel that was edited by someone who's never actually seen the movie. And this is the absolute key right here.

This is not a mistake. The author is deliberately breaking the rules. They're sacrificing the timeline because they're not trying to teach a history lesson.

Nope, they're building a legal case, an argument, and the order of their evidence is absolutely crucial. Okay, let's start with our first big clue, and it's hiding in the Psalm's central theme. This history lesson just seems to be stuck on repeat, drilling one single idea into your head over and over and over again.

So the Psalmist hammers home this relentless pattern. It goes like this. God does something amazing.

Then the people are ungrateful and rebel. God punishes them, but then shows mercy and, you guessed it, they're ungrateful again. This cycle just repeats and repeats, establishing this long, undeniable history of Israel's faithlessness, and by extension, the total failure of its past leadership.

And check out how the author amplifies the story. They're not just retelling the miracle of manna; they're basically upgrading it. In the original Exodus story, manna is described as a fine, flake-like thing on the ground, but in Psalm 78, oh no, it becomes the bread of angels, this divine food straight from the storehouses of heaven.

See what that does? It makes God's power seem even more magnificent, and it makes Israel's rebellion look even worse. And then you've got to ask, who's missing from this picture? The great heroes of the Exodus, right? Moses and Aaron? They are completely erased from this version of the story. The Psalmist does this on purpose, removing the human leaders to reframe history.

It's now a direct conflict between an all-powerful God and a constantly rebellious nation. No human hero gets to share the spotlight. So how does the author actually build this case? Well, the next clue isn't just in the words they use; it's in the very structure of the poem.

The author uses this really sophisticated literary trick to hide their main point right there in plain sight. It's called a chiasmic structure, which I know sounds super complicated, but just think of it like a literary sandwich. Seriously.

The author puts supporting points on the outside; those are your two slices of bread, and then they put the most important, the most emphatic part of their message, the real meat of the argument, right in the very center. And you can see exactly how this works in Psalm 78. You get a chunk of history, then another chunk of history, and sandwiched right in the middle is the Psalmist's main point: Israel's constant, unending failure.

Because of where it's placed, it's structurally the loudest part of the whole poem. And the structural choices don't stop there. When it's time to talk about the plagues of Egypt, the Psalm doesn't list the ten plagues we all know.

It only gives us seven. And again, this is not the author getting it wrong. They are intentionally reshaping the story.

They pick, they reorder, and they even re-describe the plagues to get maximum dramatic effect, really emphasizing destruction and severity. They skip plagues like boils in darkness, probably to craft a more streamlined, punchier narrative of God's power. It's all about the message, not about getting every historical detail exactly right.

Okay, so let's recap. We have a long history of national failure. All the traditional heroes are gone.

The stories themselves have been reshaped to make God look all-powerful, and Israel look sinful. All of this has been building to a single powerful political punchline, one that's rooted in the deep rivalry between Israel's northern and southern kingdoms. And here it is, the first big political move: the Psalm straight up rejects Ephraim.

Now, Ephraim was the most influential tribe, basically the representative for the entire northern kingdom. So with one line, boom, a huge part of the nation is disqualified from leadership. Next up, by just completely ignoring every past hero, especially a giant figure like Moses, the author creates this massive leadership vacuum.

The stage has been systematically cleared of every single contender for the role of Israel's true leader. So after 66 verses of anonymous history, rebellion, and failure, the author is finally ready to reveal their candidate. Think about it.

In this entire epic, 72-verse poem about Israel's past, only one human leader is ever mentioned by name. And there it is, the punchline we've been waiting for. The entire Psalm has been this masterful, carefully constructed argument that after centuries of failure, God finally made his choice.

He chose David from the southern tribe of Judah to be the one to lead. So the ultimate takeaway is this. The poem shows God acting as Israel's shepherd all through the desert, right? But at the very end, God hands that responsibility, that shepherd's crook, directly to David.

This isn't just some nice poem. It's a powerful theological and political document. And it was designed specifically to cement David's divine right to rule over the whole nation.

I mean, it's an absolutely incredible piece of literary persuasion. And it really makes you wonder, doesn't it? How many other brilliant arguments are hiding in plain sight, just waiting for us to solve their puzzle?