

Dr. David Emanuel, Psalms of the Exodus,

Session 5: Psalm 135 - The LORD's Supremacy

6-min. Video Overview

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Hey everyone, so today we're going to take a deep dive into a text you probably think you know, Psalm 135. But here's the thing: this psalm is hiding a pretty wild secret in its very construction. A secret that honestly changes how we think about the creative process behind some of the Bible's most famous lines.

So what is this big secret? Well, you can see it in the nickname some scholars have given this text: a Frankenstein psalm. And that's really the question we're going to tackle today. I mean, what on earth could a sacred text do to earn a name like that? Well, that nickname comes from an analysis like this from Dr. David Emanuel.

The whole idea is that Psalm 135 isn't some brand new original piece of writing, not at all. Instead, it's this brilliant piece of, well, literary surgery. It's a text that's been carefully stitched together from the spare parts of a bunch of other biblical texts.

It's like a collage or a mosaic. Our job is to figure out how it was built and maybe more importantly, why? Okay, so to get to the why, we first have to understand the argument the psalmist is even trying to make. The first part of the psalm works almost like a divine resume for the God of Israel.

It's laying out this super powerful case for God's qualifications, not with, you know, abstract ideas, but with a straight-up list of concrete achievements. And the key thing to notice here is the focus on action. This resume isn't about what God could do.

It's about what God has provably done. The God we see here isn't some distant creator who just set things in motion and then checked out. Nope.

This God is an active manager of the planet, sending lightning, making it rain. This God gets directly involved in human history, striking down enemies, toppling powerful kings, and handing over their land. The main takeaway is simple.

This is a God who does things. So after laying out this impressive resume, the psalmist then pivots and looks at the competition. He starts to lay out the resume, if you can even call it that, of the idols that other nations were worshiping.

And this is where the central argument of the whole psalm just snaps into focus. And boom, this right here nails the psalmist's entire argument in one clean comparison. You have the God of Israel who has no physical image, no known features.

He is defined entirely by his function, by what he does. And then you have the idols of the nations, which are the complete opposite. They are all about their physical features, but they have absolutely zero function.

And you can just feel the psalmist mocking these things. Sure, they're made of silver and gold. Yeah, they've got these perfectly carved mouths and eyes and ears.

But so what? Their mouths can't talk, their eyes can't see, their ears can't hear. There's literally no breath in them. They're just expensive, useless statues.

All features, absolutely no function. All right. So that's the argument.

A God of action versus idols that do nothing. But now we get to the really juicy part, the Frankenstein part. How do we actually know this psalm was pieced together from other sources? Well, let's look at the evidence because the psalmist left behind a very clear trail.

You might even call it a smoking gun. Let's start right here. On the left, you've got Psalm 135 describing God's control over the weather.

On the right, a passage from the prophet Jeremiah. You guys, it's practically a word-for-word copy. The language about God making lightning for the rain and bringing wind from his storehouses.

It's just lifted straight from an earlier book. And it doesn't stop there. Remember that part of God's resume about defeating those two kings, Sihon and Og, and then giving their land to Israel? Well, it turns out that whole section was basically borrowed from the psalm right next door.

Psalm 136. It's the exact same phrasing used to make the exact same point. And this, this is the big one.

That whole powerful, devastating critique of idols, you know, the part about them being silver and gold with useless mouths and eyes and ears. That wasn't written for Psalm 135. It's a huge multiverse chunk that was lifted almost perfectly from another psalm, Psalm 115.

I mean, this pretty much seals the deal. The psalmist is clearly and deliberately building his case using preexisting material. So we've seen the argument, and now we've seen the evidence of all this borrowing.

What's the verdict here? How are we supposed to think about the author of the psalm? Is this just some ancient cut-and-paste job? That's the question that immediately pops into your head, right? Because in our world today, yeah, this looks a whole lot like plagiarism. But to really get what's going on, we have to kind of shift our whole perspective and think about who this author was and what their goal really was. See, the author probably wasn't just a songwriter.

They were what you'd call a biblical exegete. And that's just a fancy term for a scholar who dives deep into existing texts, interprets them, and then reshapes these familiar stories to make a new point. They weren't trying to hide their sources.

They were using their sources to build a new argument that already had built-in authority. And this final thought from Dr. Emanuel just brings it all home so perfectly. We shouldn't be picturing the psalmist sitting on a hill with a harp.

No, the better image is of them in a library, surrounded by scrolls, carefully choosing, editing, and weaving together these powerful phrases from Jeremiah and other psalms. They were creating something totally new and powerful from old pieces, not to trick anyone, but to teach. And that really leaves us with a fascinating question, doesn't it? How does knowing a text is a Frankenstein creation actually change the way we see its power and its purpose?