

Exodus Psalms — Psalm 136, Antiphonal Liturgy

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Abstract

In this introductory lecture on the Exodus Psalms, Dr. David Emanuel examines the centrality of the Exodus motif across biblical literature and outlines a six-part methodological framework for studying its presence in the Psalter. Selecting Psalm 136 as a foundational case study, Emanuel analyzes its antiphonal liturgical structure and its recurring refrain emphasizing God's everlasting covenant love (hesed). He demonstrates how the psalm portrays God as a divine warrior king who acts decisively on behalf of a completely passive Israel, weaving together motifs of creation, plague judgments, and the conquest of Transjordanian rulers. Ultimately, Emanuel illustrates how biblical psalmists creatively adapted historical traditions and text-reuse mechanisms to serve distinct theological and liturgical purposes.

Outline

I. Introduction and Speaker Background

A. Academic Background and Journey

1. Former computer scientist who transitioned to biblical scholarship.
2. Completed eleven years of study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem focusing on the Hebrew Bible, ancient Near East, and Hebrew poetry.
3. Faculty member at Nyack College and Alliance Theological Seminary.

B. Context and Scope of the Lecture Series

1. Exploration of the Exodus motif in the Psalter.
2. Focus on five selected primary Psalms: Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136 (with Psalm 136 serving as the starting case study).
3. Acknowledgment of minor Exodus references in other psalms (e.g., Psalms 23, 66, 77, 95, 114) that fall outside the primary lecture scope.

II. The Primacy of the Exodus Motif in Biblical Literature

A. Extent and Dominance Across Scripture

1. Spans from Genesis through Revelation as the most influential tradition in the Bible.

2. Academic thesis advisor's correction: the Exodus motif is the most dominant motif, not merely 'one of' the most dominant.

B. Genre and Literary Characteristics

1. Cross-genre tradition: affects multiple Psalm genres (laments, praise, thanksgiving) rather than being restricted to a single form.
2. Echoes in non-Exodus contexts (e.g., Psalm 23's shepherd imagery mirroring wilderness guidance and land settlement).

III. Methodological Framework for Analyzing Exodus Psalms

A. Structural Analysis and Content Roadmap

1. Outlining each psalm to establish a structural overview and content roadmap.

B. Determination of Purpose

1. Identifying why the psalm was written to understand why specific historical elements were selected or neglected.

C. Intertextual Connections

1. Mapping linguistic and thematic links to Pentateuchal narratives (Exodus and Numbers).

D. Analysis of Notable Omissions

1. Examining why major biblical narrative events were intentionally excluded based on the psalmist's purpose.

E. Hebrew Poetics and Style

1. Re-evaluating narrative and historical psalms against criticisms of being 'less poetic.'
2. Examining emphatic structures, wordplay, and poetic devices.

F. Biblical Interpretation and Textual Reuse

1. Investigating how psalmists adapted older traditions, source materials, or pre-existing liturgical units.

IV. Components of the Biblical Exodus Motif

A. Progression from Clan to Nation

1. Descent of Jacob's extended family (70 souls) to Egypt to escape famine.
2. Multiplication, subsequent enslavement under a new Pharaoh, and oppression.

B. Divine Deliverance and Miracles

1. The ten plagues in Egypt culminating in the death of the firstborn.
2. The miraculous crossing of the sea amidst Israelite panic and rebellion.

C. Wilderness Wanderings and Provisions

1. Provision of water, manna (bread), and quail (meat).
2. Israelite murmuring, rebellion against leadership, and Moses's intercessory role.

D. Sinai Covenant and Lawgiving

1. Ascent of Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

E. Transjordanian Conquest

1. Initial military conquest of Amorite territories under Og, king of Bashan, and Sihon, king of the Amorites, prior to crossing the Jordan River.

V. Detailed Exegesis of Psalm 136

A. Genre and Liturgical Structure

1. Antiphonal liturgical hymn with a repeating congregational refrain: ki le'olam hasdo ('for His covenant love is everlasting').
2. Annual liturgical use during Passover celebrations.
3. Textual debate over whether the refrain is organic or a later liturgical insertion (supported by Qumran Psalm 145 evidence).

B. Key Themes and Theological Portrayal

1. God portrayed primarily as a divine warrior king fighting on behalf of Israel.
2. Total passivity of Israel: the people display no agency, decisions, or rebellion in this specific psalm.
3. Qualification of hesed: everlasting covenant love directed specifically toward Israel, manifesting as judgment against Egypt.

C. Section-by-Section Structural Breakdown

1. Introductory Call to Praise (Verses 1–3):
 - a. Use of Hodu L'Adonai ('Give thanks to the Lord').
 - b. Affirmation of God as 'God of gods' (Elohei Elohim), drawing an intertextual allusion to Deuteronomy 10:17.
2. God's Work in Creation (Verses 4–9):
 - a. Divine miracles (nifla'ot, gedolot, pele): actions beyond human capacity, reflecting the ancient two-tier cosmology (Creator and created, with no independent 'Mother Nature').
 - b. Wisdom influence: creation of heavens with understanding (tevunah).
 - c. Explicit naming of sun and moon, clarifying the implicit 'greater and lesser lights' of Genesis 1.
3. God's Work in the Exodus and Deliverance (Verses 10–16):
 - a. Judgment on Egyptian firstborn and abbreviated plague tradition.
 - b. Miraculous sea split (le-gozer gezarim), echoing the covenant ceremony between the pieces in Genesis 15:17.
 - c. Direct attack and overthrow of Pharaoh and his army.
4. Conquest of Transjordanian Kings (Verses 17–22):
 - a. Skipping 40 years of wilderness wandering to highlight the defeat of Sihon and Og.

- b. Stopping at Transjordan indicates the psalmist's primary reliance on the written scope of the Pentateuch/Torah.
 - c. Terraced poetic structure (A-B-B-C) regarding land inheritance, interrupted by the liturgical refrain.
- 5. Conclusion and Summary Praise (Verses 23–26):
 - a. Remembrance in 'lowly estate' (alluding to Exodus slavery or Babylonian Exile).
 - b. Framing inclusion returning to Hodu ('Give thanks').

VI. Canonical Context and Editorial Design of the Psalter

A. Principles of Association and Juxtaposition

- 1. Deliberate clustering of Exodus Psalms in pairs/groups (e.g., Psalms 77–78, 105–106, 135–136).
- 2. Rejection of random placement in favor of purposeful canonical redaction.

B. Theological Summary of Session 1

- 1. Prioritization of theological messaging over strict chronological sequence.
- 2. Demonstration of how liturgical performance re-enacts foundational history.