

Exodus Psalms – Psalm 78: God Chose David

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Session 2

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Abstract

Psalm 78 is the second-longest psalm in the biblical Psalter, structured around a wisdom framework that deliberately sacrifices strict chronological sequence to emphasize theological and pedagogical themes. Through two main redactional strata, the psalm highlights the necessity of learning from ancestral history to avoid repeating past rebellions and validates the divine election of David and Judah over the rejected northern kingdom of Ephraim. The text elevates God's direct miraculous interventions—such as splitting the sea, providing the "bread of angels," and executing seven plagues—while conspicuously omitting human figures like Moses and Aaron until David is introduced as God's chosen shepherd.

Outline

I. Introduction to Psalm 78 and Its Wisdom Framework

A. Position and Literary Character

1. Second longest psalm in the Psalter (after Psalm 119)
2. Dedicated to the Exodus motif within a wisdom framework (resembling Proverbs and Ecclesiastes)

B. Non-Chronological Arrangement as a Pedagogical Tool

1. Intentional sacrifice of chronological sequence to prioritize theological instruction
2. Principle of ancient biblical literature: thematic arrangement over linear historical narrative

C. Two Core Redactional Strata and Themes

1. Learning from history: instructing future generations not to repeat ancestral failures
2. Selection of David and Judah: establishing the southern kingdom and rejecting Ephraim

II. Structural Organization and Chiastic Design

A. Major Structural Units

1. Verses 1–8: Call to recount God's deeds and instruct children
2. Verses 9–11: Summary of Ephraim's unfaithfulness
3. Verses 12–33: First recital of Israel's faithlessness vs. God's kindness
4. Verses 34–41: Psalmist's central summary of rebellion and warning
5. Verses 42–55: Second recital focused on the Egyptian plagues and entry into Canaan

6. Verses 56–72: Historical trajectory culminating in Shiloh's fall and David's exaltation

B. Structural Dynamics

1. Central placement of the Psalmist's summary (Verses 34–41) as the emphatic core
2. Climactic positioning at the end to leave a lasting theological impression

III. Wisdom Vocabulary and Historical Allusions

A. Linguistic Connections to Wisdom Literature

1. Use of "Torah" (verse 1) in the sense of "instruction" and guidance rather than legalistic law
2. Psalm superscription "Maskil" derived from sekel (wisdom, understanding)
3. Wisdom terms: mashal (proverb), chida (riddle), and "words of my mouth"
4. Pedagogical emphasis through fourfold repetition of "children" and explicit command to teach

B. Extrabiblical Traditions and Allusions

1. Mysterious retreat of the sons of Ephraim in battle (echoed in Targum Psalms)
2. Poetic adoption of Exodus 15 (Song of the Sea) rather than prose narratives
3. Manna described as heavenly "bread of angels" (niflaot miracle terminology)
4. Opening of the "windows of heaven" (rakia firmament imagery)

IV. The Recitals of Plagues and Wilderness Miracles

A. Comparison of Plague Traditions

1. Seven-plague tradition in Psalm 78 vs. ten-plague tradition in Exodus (both symbolizing completeness)
2. Specific plague details: arov (swarms/wild beasts devouring), frogs destroying, hail affecting agriculture, pestilence, and death of the firstborn
3. Reordered chronology placing plagues after wilderness events for thematic emphasis

B. Elevation of Divine Power

1. Direct actions by God without human intermediaries (Moses and Aaron omitted)
2. Absence of Pharaoh and his army to keep focus purely on God's power and Israel's response

V. Israel's Rebellion, Divine Judgment, and the Rise of David

A. Cycle of Disobedience in Canaan

1. Testing God through high places and idolatry
2. Abandonment of Shiloh and captivity of the Ark of the Covenant (oz)
3. Fall of the priesthood (allusion to Hophni, Phinehas, and Phinehas's unmourned widow)

B. Anthropomorphic Awakening of God

1. Imagery of God awakening like a warrior or sleeper overcome by wine
2. Dramatic intervention to rescue Israel despite their unfaithfulness

C. Rejection of Ephraim and Exaltation of David

1. Divine rejection of the northern sanctuary and Ephraimite leadership
2. Selection of the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, and Jerusalem

3. Unique naming of David: God hands over His shepherd leadership of Israel to David