PSALM 78: TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

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The book of Psalms has often been described as the songbook of ancient Israel, and with good reason. Surely this is one important function of the psalms. The calls to praise God and to worship indicate that Israel used the psalms to express their worship to the Lord. The Psalms are much more, however, than a songbook in the modern sense of that term.

The Psalms also contain prayers expressing anguish and grief. The Psalms call on the Lord in time of trouble and persecution. Recent studies have noted that these psalms of lament can be an important resource that has been largely ignored by modern readers.

This essay will examine another area of current study that may also be relevant to some of the psalms. Recent studies in the area of OT ethics have emphasized the importance of character development. How does a community model certain ethical behaviors and encourage the development of ethical character in its members? Bruce C. Birch has raised this question in a number of studies on ethics, emphasizing the importance of story in character development. Stories bind a community together, they also shape and preserve what is important for a community to remember and to pass on to the next generation. From a slightly different perspective, Waldemar

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1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Psalms The Prayer Book of the Bible (Minneapolis Augsburg 1970). Bonhoeffer uses the term "prayer book," but the idea is similar to songbook.


Janzen's work on *Old Testament Ethics* also emphasizes the important place of story in the ethics of the OT.4

This emphasis on story in OT ethics builds on the interest in narrative in OT studies in general. While the narratives of the OT have long been recognized as not the simple stories of naive folk, the past two decades have seen an explosion of interest and literature on the study of narrative in the OT.5 The application of narrative criticism has found new levels of sophistication in the stories of the OT. As Alter has noted, this narrative skill was not exercised in the OT as art for art's sake but was used to convey the meaning of the text.6 One of the significant advances in OT studies has been the use of narrative criticism to help elucidate the message of OT narratives.7

This study will consider the importance of story in another non-narrative setting. The material considered here is Psalm 78, one of the longest of the historical psalms. This psalm has been the subject of numerous studies in the past.8

Psalm 78 is often referred to as a didactic psalm, but little consideration has been given to some of the questions that characterization raises. H.-J. Kraus states, "The entire psalm carries a didactic accent."9 If it is a teaching psalm, what would be the context for that teaching? Where would this teaching be important, and who would be the audience in need of such

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6 Alter, 3–22.


teaching? Definitive answers will be difficult to provide, but clues in the
psalm itself should provide some interesting possibilities.

A recent work on Psalms 50, 73–78 by Michael D. Goulder has sug­
gested a specific setting for Psalm 78 as a part of the collection of the Psalms
of Asaph. This is the collection used in association with the long festival
celebrated at Bethel some time in the 720s B.C. Goulder’s argument is
interesting and imaginative, but is also quite speculative.

Richard J. Clifford has rejected the term didactic but with some impor­
tant qualifications. He writes of Psalm 78, “It is not didactic, unless didactic
be shorn of its school-masterish and non-liturgical overtones.” However,
this is precisely the sense of the term didactic that this article wishes to
advocate. Psalm 78 is didactic but without any school overtones, that is,
what modern education might characterize as “general education” connec­
tions. It is didactic, but it also clearly has liturgical or religious overtones.
Both of these limitations imposed by Clifford would fit well with the
suggestion of a catechetical model. Teaching is involved, but it is teaching
in a specific and limited religious setting with a particular purpose in mind.
A catechism intends to train initiates in the facts necessary for their growth
and development in the faith, but also in how to understand those facts in the
proper way. A catechism must present not only the facts, but also the
meaning behind those facts. In the faith of Israel, those two elements were
always closely bound together. One never gets “just the facts” without the
meaning or the message those facts are meant to convey.

At the opening of Psalm 78, the speaker calls on the audience to listen
to the instruction to follow. It is striking that the psalm presents almost no
instruction in the usual sense of that word. It has no command or specific
case law. What is given instead is a summary of some of the highlights of
what God has done for his people and the attitudes the people should display
in response.

In the second verse of the psalm, this instruction is characterized as a
mashal, or “parable.” This term carries a wide variety of meanings in the

10 James L. Crenshaw. “Education in Ancient Israel,” JBL 104· 601–15. gives
an overview of recent discussion of schools in Israel. He concludes that there is no
definitive proof of schools in ancient Israel. Much of the education of children
probably took place in homes although the existence of special schools cannot be
excluded. He concludes that “considerable diversity characterized education in
ancient Israel.”

11 Michael D. Goulder, The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch Studies in the
Psalter. 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. 1996).

12 Clifford, 137.


Hebrew Bible. In Ezek 17:1, it is used to describe a story with a symbolic meaning similar to an allegory. In other places this term is used to refer to wise sayings, as in 1 Kgs 5:12.15 One important issue here is what the psalm means by the term “parable.” What follows in the psalm is not an allegory, nor is it a collection of wise sayings. It is instruction, but it is drawn from selected events in Israel’s history.16 There are a number of warnings such as “they did not keep God’s covenant” (10), “they sinned still more against him” (17), “they had no faith in God” (22), “they still sinned” (32), and “they tested and rebelled against the Most High God, and did not observe his testimonies” (56). Clearly, these are warnings to avoid making these same mistakes. In every case, however, the warnings are linked to specific events in the story of Israel and its relationship with God. These are not abstract instructions or commands, but the words of the psalmist are connected with the content of the story of Israel. In order for the warnings to have any impact, the audience must know something of the history that is assumed to lie behind these events. This would fit with Weiser’s suggestion that Psalm 78 followed the presentation of the salvation history, although the psalm does contain significant elements of the salvation history and would not need to be preceded by a review of the history.17

Another important element of the introduction to this psalm is the terminology identifying the audience being addressed. The introduction to the psalm is usually identified as verses 1–11, and that is accepted here.18 In this introduction, the term “fathers” is used three times, two of which refer to traditions passed on from the fathers for the benefit of those who come later. The third reference, in verse 8, is a warning not to be like the fathers and not to make the same mistakes they made. Another important term in the introduction is “children,” found four times in these verses. The traditions are to be taught to the children in order that they may learn from the past and may be more faithful.

In the OT, the term “fathers” is often used of ancestors in general or even of previous generations without respect to family ties. In any case, however, it does suggest a difference in ages or generations. In the context of this psalm, it indicates a relationship between the teachers and the following generation in the community of faith. This new generation could refer to young people or to those whose understanding of their heritage was

17 Anderson. 561
18 Clifford. 127: Kraus. 125.
still incomplete. In either case, the role of instruction would be similar to the use of a catechism in modern communities.

Contributing to this sense of a generational shift is the use of the term "children" four times in the introduction. In verse 4, the traditions are not to be hidden from the children. In verse 5, the fathers are to teach this material to the children. The term is then found twice in verse 6 as the children yet unborn are to be taught in order that they in turn can pass these traditions on to their children. The term children can also be used in a figurative sense and does not always refer to those young in years. It certainly can refer to those young in years, but the reference here to those yet unborn would suggest that it could, at least in part, refer to young people in this context. If they are not young in years, they are certainly young in the faith of the community and in their understanding of the traditions of Israel.

The third important term in the introduction to Psalm 78 is the term "generation." This word occurs four times and strengthens the emphasis on teaching those to follow. In verses 4 and 6 the term is used in reference to those still to come in the future. The coming generation is to be taught the commands and the traditions of the past. They are to be taught in order that they will be able to make the proper response to God for what has been done for them. The last two uses of the term "generation" come in verse 8, where there is a warning. The previous generations are used as a negative example, and the young are to be warned not to follow their stubborn and rebellious ways.

The references to "fathers," "children," and "generation" all in the introduction to Psalm 78 reinforce the suggestion that this is intended as a teaching psalm which would have been used to instruct the community of faith. The content of that instruction, or at least an outline of the content, is found in the remainder of the psalm. In verse 4, the psalmist refers to this content as the "glorious deeds of the Lord" and then as "the wonders" which he has done. In this psalm, the emphasis is on the actions of the Lord on behalf of the people. Because of all that the Lord has done, the people are to respond to the Lord's covenant and keep God's commandments. The details of the commands are not given here since that is not the focus of the psalm.

The remainder of the psalm concentrates on two examples from Israel's story. The first is the work of God in caring for the people in the wilderness. After a brief reference to the Exodus in verses 12-13, the writer deals with the wilderness in verses 14-31. The writer is not concerned with giving a chronological listing of events, but is rather selecting these events for the purpose of illustration. The Lord had cared for the people in the wilderness

in all these ways, but in spite of this, the people were unfaithful. This ingratitude is detailed in verses 32–39. When God punished them for their ingratitude, even their repentance was insincere. They turned to God, but only momentarily and not with their whole hearts. Even here, God showed his gracious nature and did not destroy them. The psalmist uses this first example to show God's patience.

The second example is taken from the exodus, and perhaps is placed second in order to highlight the most important tradition in Israel's heritage. The exodus is recounted in some detail and was surely viewed as the ultimate illustration of God's action on behalf of the people. God sent the plagues, including the death of the first born, on the Egyptians in order to free the people from slavery. God brought them out, cared for them in the wilderness, and drove out the inhabitants of Canaan. In spite of all this, Israel was not true to the Lord. They turned away from God, and they were eventually rejected. Just as the first example in the psalm ended with a show of God's mercy and patience, so too, the second example ends with a display of God's long-suffering and graciousness. In spite of continued rejection, the Lord was patient with Judah. In both cases, the Lord acts to show divine love. That love is rejected, and the Lord responds with punishment, but it is punishment tempered with mercy and patience.

One important consideration is what could have been the setting for such a message in the OT period. A number of different historical settings have been suggested for Psalm 78. An early date for Psalm 78 has been suggested by Antony F. Campbell in an article where he argues for a 10th century date soon after the move from the sanctuary in Shiloh and the shift to Jerusalem. 20 This is in direct contrast to earlier scholars who had argued that the psalm was a late postexilic psalm because the use of the salvation history for the purpose of devotion and encouragement was assumed to be a late practice. 21 Gunkel also dates the psalm late and argues that it drew on the entire Pentateuch in its present form for the presentation of the history of Israel. 22

A middle position between these extreme dates is taken by H. Junker, who argues for connections between Psalm 78 and the deuteronomistic traditions. He contends that the psalm shows links with elements of the deuteronomistic material, but not in its final form. He argues rather that Psalm 78 is tied to the early stages of the deuteronomistic material which he dates to

the time of Hezekiah at the end of the eighth century B.C.\textsuperscript{23} This same time period is suggested by Johannes Schödelberger in his study of Psalm 78 and pentateuchal sources.\textsuperscript{24} John Day has also argued for a middle position, but he would argue that the psalm dates from before the fall of Samaria and reflects pre-deuteronomic references.\textsuperscript{25} As demonstrated by the wide range of opinions, it is difficult to give an exact date for the origin of the psalm. For the purposes of this article, an exact date is not crucial. The tone of the psalm does suggest to this writer a date sometime after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722, and perhaps considerably later since the psalm emphasizes that these events are from generations past.

In spite of uncertainties concerning the specific date of Psalm 78, there are a number of general observations about the purpose and message of the psalm which would be valid in a number of settings. Clearly, the psalmist is not interested in simply chronicling specific events in the history of Israel. There is a hidden lesson in this history which the psalmist wishes to make plain. In order to teach the lesson, however, the psalmist must relate the basic events in the history of God’s people, or at least the highlights of that history which are to serve as the basis for the lesson. It is crucial that both the psalmist and the audience accept the basic events if any message is to be drawn from them.

Although some modern scholarship has raised questions about almost every element of Israel’s history, that is not an issue to be considered here.\textsuperscript{26} In the OT, there are certain core elements of Israel’s heritage which are universally assumed to be a part of their history. Two key elements in that history were the Exodus from Egypt and the Lord’s care and guidance across the wilderness. It is these two core elements which form the basis of the message of this psalm. The purpose of the psalmist was not to teach the basic facts of these events, nor to argue for their reliability, which would have


\textsuperscript{25} John Day. “Pre-Deuteronomic Allusions to the Covenant in Hosea and Psalm LXXVI.” \textit{IT} 36 (1986): 1–12.

been assumed. The purpose was to review these well known events, and then to use them to draw a lesson for the present audience.

For Israel, there was not a sense of an objective or scientific history as modern society would understand it. For the psalmist, God's action was a real part of Israel's history, and a history without reference to the Lord would not have been a part of their world view. In just this sense, the historical psalms, such as Psalm 78, must be considered. The writer is selecting parts of their history and shaping the elements of that history for the purpose of the lesson to be taught. Some elements of the history are omitted, and not every detail is given in the usual order, but these issues are not really relevant. The writer is not disregarding the chronology or the details. This is simply not the primary concern of the psalmist.

The first lesson comes in verses 12–39 and deals with the unfaithfulness in the wilderness. The people forgot God's mercies. In spite of what they had seen, they questioned the Lord's power to deliver them and feed them in the desert. God responded by demonstrating his power and by providing what they needed. God also showed his wrath, however, and punished that rebellious and forgetful generation. This first lesson ends in verses 38–39 with God's mercy. God does not destroy them completely and does forgive them. The Lord does remember that they are weak and imperfect creatures.

In the second example, in verses 40–72, the psalmist reminds the audience of God's mighty works at the Exodus. Here is the ultimate example of God's power, but also of divine concern for the people of God. This review of the plagues begins in verse 44 with the water turned to blood. Then most, but not all, of the plagues are mentioned and the climax comes with the death of the first born in verse 51. In verses 53–55 the deliverance at the sea and the giving of the land conclude this overview.

Interspersed throughout the two examples from Israel's history are a series of observations, lessons, and warnings. In these the writer makes clear the reason for this overview of these elements from their story. At the beginning of the survey, the writer opens with a warning in verses 10 and 11. They did not keep the covenant, and the reason they did not is that they forgot what God had done for them. This opening caution sets the tone for the remainder of the psalm.

With this introduction, the writer makes clear the purpose of this look at their history. In verses 17 and 18, the writer reminds them that their ancestors sinned, rebelled, tested, and demanded. With two sets of parallel terms, the psalmist emphasizes their willful disobedience. This condemnation

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continues in verse 22 where the people "had no faith" and "did not trust." In verse 32, the link between their history and their sin is demonstrated again when the writer notes that "in spite of all this they still sinned; despite his wonders they did not believe. "It is clear from this reference that the writer believes that the works of God should have produced a response of faith, but that has not always happened. The people have forgotten or ignored what the Lord has done. As the psalmist observes in verse 37, "their heart was not steadfast, they were not true to his covenant." In the view of the psalmist this is unacceptable.

The second half of the psalm echoes this same theme. Verse 42 states, "They did not keep in mind his power." The psalm then goes on to enumerate some of the ways that God revealed this power in the plagues on the Egyptians. In spite of this, in verse 56 "they tested and rebelled... and did not observe his testimonies." Throughout both halves of the psalm, the writer emphasizes that there is a powerful lesson to be drawn from the history being repeated and that the audience of the psalm should learn from the mistakes of the past.29

The two parts of the psalm are linked by this repetition of the didactic theme but are also linked in another striking way. Near the beginning, in verse 9, and near the end in verse 67, there are negative references to Ephraim. Ephraim had turned away from God, and as a result of their unfaithfulness, they had been destroyed. The historic events behind verse 9 are a matter of ongoing study, and they cannot be explored here.30 In his recent work on OT theology, Bernhard Anderson suggests that the negative view of Ephraim and the positive view of Judah in verses 68-72 indicate a strong emphasis on the covenant of David.31

After the examples of the unfaithfulness of Israel, the psalm ends with an example of the faithfulness of God. In sharp contrast to their treachery, God is always loyal to his chosen. The psalm ends with a note of hope and encouragement. Because the Lord is trustworthy, the people should keep covenant and remain true to God.

One final point should be emphasized about the nature of the appeal made by the psalmist. If this is a didactic psalm in the particular sense of a catechism, as suggested in this essay, then the role of the history which is presented here is crucial. The audience must know and accept the basic events which are presumed to lie at the heart of Israel's relationship with

their God. This relationship is not based on some emotional or psychological need of the audience. This relationship does not appeal to the feelings of the audience, to use a term popular in some modern circles. The psalmist relates key events from the heritage of Israel with the belief that these are the foundation of Israel's faith. Without this foundation, there can be no proper response on the part of the people. An Israel which does not know these events will have no basis for proper faith. If they do not learn, or if they forget these key events, they will cease to be the people of God. They may maintain some kind of faith, but it will certainly not be the faith called for in the Psalms and in the other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

This relates to the concern for ethics and character development that was raised at the beginning of this essay. How did Israel pass on the ethics of the community to the next generation? How did it promote right behavior? This psalm suggests that Israel used the story of its history with God as a basis for moral living. How one lives is determined largely by how one responds to what God has done. The Lord has acted, and the people are to respond in gratitude. They demonstrate that gratitude by living lives of obedience to God's instructions. This obedience is worked out in practical terms in the morals and ethics that are a part of everyday life. In this way, character development is directly related to the teaching of Israel's relationship with God in its own history.

This final observation has profound impact on the faith of God's people today. In some circles, the tendency is to place less importance on learning the facts of Scripture and greater importance on an emotional relationship or on meeting one's own felt needs. Even the psalms are seen as reflections of inner emotional struggles with little relationship to events in Israel's history. Psalm 78 presents an important corrective to such misunderstandings.

Clearly, the psalms do reflect deep emotions at times. In the midst of struggles, however, the psalms never abandon the importance of a core foundation of information. God is a God of love, but that love is demonstrated in concrete events. God is a God of mercy, but that mercy is seen in how God has preserved Israel. Just as ancient Israel was encouraged to remember what the Lord had done, so too the modern community of faith must remember the core facts of God's work. If believers today ever abandon this link to the heritage of the past, there is the grave danger that the faith of the future will be quite different from the faith called for in Scriptures. Psalm 78 should encourage believers to continue to remember and to teach the importance of all that God has done.

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33 Tate, 289.