Psalm 78 | Religious Tradition

Session 2 · October 16, 2025 · Singing in the Dark · Epiphany Seattle

Context — When, Where, and Who

- **Book:** Book III (Psalms 73–89) — the darkest book, shaped by exile. Psalm 78 is unusual here: it ends in hope, with David.
- **Date:** Debated. Most likely 10th to 9th century BCE, during or just after the Davidic monarchy. A post-922 BCE date has been argued because of the psalm's treatment of Ephraim.
- **Author:** Asaph — chief musician under David, appointed by David, described in 2 Chronicles 29:30 as a prophet. Asaph speaks for God as much as to God.
- **Type:** Maskil (teaching psalm) + Historical Recitation. The longest historical psalm in the Psalter — 72 verses, from Egypt to David.

The psalm begins with Ephraim (v.9) and ends with God rejecting Ephraim (v.67) in favor of Judah and David. This is politically charged: Ephraim held the birthright of Joseph. Scholars debate whether the psalm justifies the Davidic monarchy or condemns the northern kingdom after its 922 BCE secession.

Poetic Structure — How the Psalm Is Built

- **Form:** Predominantly synthetic parallelism. Line 2 extends and completes line 1. The effect is narrative drive: history accumulates, pressure builds.
- **Movement:** Three-part cycle, repeated twice: God's mighty acts, Israel's rebellion, God's response. Each cycle ends not in punishment but in renewed faithfulness. The mercy is structurally inevitable.
- **Sounds Like:** In conversation with Deuteronomy 32 (Song of Moses) and Exodus 12 to 20. Same events, different angle: this is catechesis, not law.
- **Notice:** Moses is barely named. David ends the psalm as a shepherd, not a king. Only God is constant across the whole sweep.

The double telling is deliberate: vv.9–39 cover the wilderness period; vv.40–55 return to Egypt. Rhetorical repetition in ancient literature creates emphasis. The psalm says it twice because it matters twice.

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Maskil (superscription)

Teaching / instruction / meditation. From the root sakal: to look at carefully, to scrutinize, to understand through deep consideration. This is formal, deliberate formation — not casual storytelling.

Mashal (v.2)

"I will open my mouth in a mashal." Parable / proverb / riddle. Broader than the NT sense: includes proverbs, riddles, and instructive narratives that encode truth requiring active interpretation. Matthew 13:35 quotes this verse as fulfilled in Jesus. His parable-teaching completes Asaph's mashal tradition.

Chidoth (v.2)

Dark sayings / hidden things / riddles. Not obscure mysteries but profound lessons from history requiring interpretation to unlock. The events happened; the meaning is encoded; the psalm is the decoding key.

Zakar (vv.35, 42)

To remember / to call to mind. Appears repeatedly as a structural marker. Israel forgets (vv.11, 42); then they remember (v.35). God remembers their frailty (v.39). The psalm is itself an act of zakar: a structured, communal refusal to forget. In Hebrew, to remember is not merely cognitive — it is to re-enact, to make present.

The Shape of the Psalm — Into the Text

- **vv.1–8 The Teacher Speaks:** Asaph opens as teacher, not priest. Goal: that coming generations would know, remember, and not repeat the failures of their parents. Strikingly anti-nostalgic.
- **vv.9–39 Exodus and the Wilderness:** Egypt, the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna, quail — and throughout, Israel's rebellion. They tested God. They forgot. They cried out, God relented, they forgot again. The cycle is relentless.
- **vv.40–55 Egypt Retold:** The psalm circles back to Egypt, this time the plagues in detail. Two tellings of the same history — not careless editing but deliberate rhetorical emphasis.
- **vv.56–64 The Land and Its Losses:** Israel in Canaan, still rebelling. God abandons Shiloh — the first location of the Ark. The Ark is captured. The priests die. Zion falls silent. God is not bound to the building.
- **vv.65–72 The Awakening and David:** God awakes "like a warrior shouting because of wine" — one of the most startling images in the Psalter. God rejects Ephraim, chooses Judah. David is taken from the sheepfold to shepherd Jacob his people.

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Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Psalm 78

The Mashal Fulfilled in Jesus

Matthew 13:35 quotes Psalm 78:2 directly and applies it to Jesus: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." Matthew calls Asaph a prophet. Jesus is not inventing a new teaching method. He is completing Asaph's mashal tradition: encoding divine truth in narrative form for those with ears to hear.

When Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven is like..." he is standing in Asaph's lineage. Both Asaph and Jesus teach in ways that divide: some understand, some do not. The Psalms gave Jesus his teaching method.

The Bread of Angels and the Eucharist

"Mortals ate the bread of angels" (v.25) — lechem abbir, bread of the mighty ones, bread of heaven. John 6:31 quotes Psalm 78:24 directly: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." Jesus responds: "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven."

John 6 is a sustained meditation on Psalm 78:24. The bread of angels becomes the bread of life. The manna trajectory runs directly from this psalm to the Eucharist. Orthodox liturgy uses Psalm 78:65–68 as the communion hymn on Holy Saturday, linking Christ's resurrection with the food of angels.

The Shepherd-King and Christ

Verse 72: "He shepherded them with integrity of heart and guided them with skillful hands." David as shepherd-king becomes the dominant Christological image of the New Testament.

John 10:11: "I am the good shepherd." Ezekiel 34 promises that God himself will shepherd Israel when the human shepherds fail. Jesus names himself the fulfillment of that promise. Psalm 78 ends with a shepherd. The New Testament ends with the Lamb on the throne. The image holds the whole arc.

The Holy Spirit

Asaph is described in 2 Chronicles 29:30 as prophesying under the Spirit — "the words of David and of the seer Asaph" are placed in parallel. The Spirit that moved the prophets also moved the psalmists. When the church reads Psalm 78 as Scripture, it is receiving the Spirit's interpretation of Israel's history, not merely Asaph's personal recollection.

The BCP Translation — A Note

Coverdale renders "dark sayings from of old" (NRSV) as "mysteries of ancient times." The difference is significant: "dark sayings" keeps the sense of something encoded, requiring interpretation; "mysteries" suggests hidden divine secrets being unveiled from above. Both are defensible readings of chidoth. The BCP version tends to make the psalm feel more liturgical and elevated; the NRSV keeps the pedagogical rawness of the Hebrew.

Coverdale's "we will not hide them from their children" (v.4) is slightly more explicit about intergenerational responsibility than the NRSV. A small difference but worth noting: the BCP version makes the transmission imperative more personal.

The Honest Telling — A Distinctive Feature

Psalm 78 is remarkable in the ancient world for its unflinching honesty about Israel's failure. Most national religious texts celebrate national virtue. Psalm 78 does the opposite: it tells the full story, failures and all, as the primary vehicle of faith transmission.

Johann Baptist Metz coined the term "dangerous memory" for exactly this kind of honest intergenerational recitation — memories of suffering and liberation that challenge the present order rather than comforting it. Psalm 78 is a dangerous memory. It refuses both amnesia and nostalgia. That refusal is itself a theological act.

The Key Question

"We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD... so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (vv.4, 7)

The question Psalm 78 puts to every generation of the church: how are we doing this? Is our telling honest enough? Does it include the failures? Does it reach the children? Does it form people capable of recognizing God's provision when it appears — even when it looks like manna in a desert, or bread broken at a table?

A Word to Take Home

"How do you pass faith down? Not doctrine. Faith. The living, complicated, honest thing. Israel's answer is a story — the whole story, failures included. That story, kept alive in worship, is what forms a people capable of recognizing the bread of angels when it appears."

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