# Remembered History in the Psalms as Reflected by their History of Reception

Memories of persons or events are frequently mentioned in the biblical psalms. Individual psalms that focus entirely on a historical review, on the other hand, are less common. The fact that these texts often did not receive the same attention as other psalms is probably due not only to the subject matter, but also to the different way they are presented (more reflective, less emotional communication with God). This assessment has changed in the context of the discourse on social and cultural memory. In this context, historical psalms are attributed a productive and constructive role in memory processes. Furthermore, as prayers, they play an important role in a continuing appropriation of the contents of memory they speak of and they enable temporal and social links within the community. How and in which situations ongoing memory discourses shaped historical psalms has been investigated several times. *Slide 2*

Similar to exegesis, literary studies turn more intensively to historical poems only in the context of memory discourses. An interesting point from this discussion is the emotional dimension. Poems not only remind us of the story, they also make it experienceable and enable the readers to relate to it emotionally. The function of this way to remember is thus less to convey detailed historical information than to fill a socially relevant event with emotion, and subsequently offer orientation for appropriate behaviour.

In this lecture I will ask: What happens when these psalms are handed down for centuries? How can these texts not only contribute to the perpetuation of culturally pre-existing memories, but also strengthen new memory concepts? In order to pursue this question, I will point out three aspects: the structure of communication, the selection and representation of events from one's own history, and the emotions depicted and evoked in the psalms. By means of selected examples I will give an insight into the reception history of these texts. *Slide 3*

## 1. Structure of Communication: Lyrical Speaker(s) and Addressees

*Slide 5*

The communication structure of the psalms offers their addressees two possibilities to participate: on the one hand, they are invited to join the lyrical I/we, i.e. in praising and remembering God; on the other hand, more reflective psalms address the hearers/readers directly and assign them a role as active listeners and learners.

The introduction of Ps 78 is quite elaborate compared to the other psalms. The lyrical speaker opens this psalm with an explicit invitation to listen (אזן), which is illustrated in a parallel bodily-spatial image ``incline your ear'' (הַטּוּ אָזְנְכֶם); the addressees are called ``my people'' (עַמִּי). This already points to an authoritative position of the speaker. It is further highlighted by the intention to offer sayings (מָשָׁל) and riddles (חִידָה) of the past, linking the speaker to wisdom traditions (cf. Ps 49:5). At the same time, these forms of speech point to the expected participation of the addressees, whose attention is once again demanded. V. 3 places this intention in a line of tradition with ``our fathers'' (cf. Ps 44:2). This we-group the lyrical speaker belongs to assumes a mediating role within the people (v. 4) and derives from it the claim and the task to pass on what they have heard. The addressees are ``their children'', i.e. the children of the fathers (see v. 5) and the following generations. What they have heard are glories, power and miracles of God, testimony and law of God (vv. 4–5). Thus the speaking we-group claims to act entirely in the sense of the original command. *Slide 6*

*In the history of interpretation,* the structure of communication is often used as a point of connection: the interpreter assumes the role of the informed speaker, and the addressees are identified with the listeners of one's own time. Rabbi David Kimchi (1160–1235), for example, identifies ``their sons'' with contemporaries of the speakers, who do not learn and do not know the tradition. This results in the obligation of the we-group to inform the others until they too tell their children. *Slide 7*
For the Christian tradition, it is a challenge to connect its own Christian history with the Old Testament traditions. Thus the Church Fathers frequently identify the ``coming generations'' only with Christians. More elaborately, Jerome explains that Ps 78:1–2 are the words of Christ, while rest of the psalm are the words of the apostles. To them, the secrets and parables were revealed, and they could then pass them on.

Interesting examples of identification with the speaker role can also be found in (medieval) psalm illustrations. In the initial letter of a psalm, different persons can be depicted in the role of the lyrical speaker; e.g. David, Christ, monks, but also women (Christina of Markyate, Margaret de Prés or Mary Magdalene). *Slide 8–12*

Similar interpretations continued during the time of Reformation. In the Christian tradition, the role of the renegade people was now frequently assigned to supporters of the Pope, in addition to the Jews. The role of the speaker as a teacher, instructing his audience in matters of faith, is emphasised more strongly during this period. (Example: lyrical translation of Ps 78 by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, 1561–1621). *Slide 13*

As these examples show, the role of the wise and authoritative lyrical speaker offers a possibility for identification. The role of the addressees, however, is not unfolded. *Slide 14*

## 2. Selection of the events displayed

*Slide 15*

If we assume that the addressees already know the events mentioned in the psalms from other traditions, they do not have to be unfolded in detail, rather mere hints suffice to call up the corresponding knowledge. However, the selection of the events presented in the psalms as well as the perspective from which they are presented is important. This is how the psalms set their own priorities and develop their line of argumentation for the questions of their own present.

Ps 78; 105; 106; 135; 136 remember events from the time of the matriarchs and patriarchs (Ps 136 even starting with creation) to the time of the exile. A clear emphasis is placed on the narratives of the Exodus from Egypt and the journey through the desert into the land. This time is presented as a paradigm for the relationship between the people and God. *Slide 16*

*The history of interpretation* explains, modifies and expands the events in different ways. The Jewish tradition adds numerous explanations, whereby connections and differences to the Torah are explained and related topics are discussed. For this purpose, additional illustrative examples are introduced, leading to new questions and opening further discussions. The Church Fathers also aim to explain the differences in the presentation of historical events in the psalms and other biblical books; and furthermore, they understand the differences as hints to search for a symbolic or allegoric interpretation, which mainly leads them to the field of ethics and morality. These interpretations are continued in the time of the Reformation, and in addition, the importance of the psalms' stories as a record of God's glorious deeds to strengthen the faith of both present and future generations is emphasised. *Slide 17*

Two examples: The illustration in the Utrecht Psalter (820–830) reduces Ps 78 to two topics, the communication situation and the election of David. In this way, not only is the goal of the psalm highlighted, but with David, associations with Christ also open up in a Christian perspective. *Slide 18*

Yehuda ha-Levi (c. 1075–1141) continues the tradition of the historical psalms in his poem ``Yom Le-Yabasha''. He combines references to Exod 15, Song of Songs, memories of repeated divine rescues (e.g. Isa 11) and the story of Tamar and Judah in Gen 38. The poem requests God's renewed help by comparing the seal and cord by which Judah recognised Tamar to the seal (circumcision) and cords (fringes/remembering the commandments) of God's people and thus calls on God to recognise these signs and act accordingly. *Slide 19*

To enable the readers to connect with the retrospective view of these psalms, the selection of the highlighted events is matched with current situations or discourses. By means of selective comments, certain aspects are emphasised, while others are ignored. *Slide 20*

## 3. Emotions

*Slide 21*

In order to ensure an experiential quality, it is necessary for the addressees to be able to participate emotionally. When they follow the voice of the lyrical I, they do not remain passive, but are challenged to classify what they hear, to evaluate it, and to relate to it on an emotional level. Those who pray with these psalms are attuned to a common reflection and evaluation of history,

and at the same time the knowledge of belonging to a particular group is enriched with emotional meanings.

The central emotion of Psalms 105; 135; 136 is joy and admiration. In Ps 105, for example, *Slide 22* readers are invited to witness God's protection and the divine promise being fulfilled. From a secure standpoint, the addressees can marvel at God's intervention even in the description of highly threatening situations and feel strengthened in their trust.

The review in Ps 78 recalls the powerful deeds of God and thus implicitly invokes the ex- *Slide 23* pected basic attitude of trust, admiration and joy, an expectation which, however, is not fulfilled, as is repeatedly emphasised. This depiction makes the emotional reaction of God, his anger, understandable, while the behaviour of the people evokes astonishment and rejection. The way the events are presented does not invite the addressees to see the suffering caused by God's punitive actions, but focuses entirely on the misbehaviour of the ancestors, to which the listeners are supposed to react. Nonetheless, the repeatedly emphasised devotion of God, his saving intervention, can inspire trust and admiration in the addressees.

Ps 106 also emphasises the systematic misconduct of the people towards God. The reader is *Slide 24* offered an interpretation of the story in retrospect that leads them to distance themselves from the behaviour depicted. Only vv. 44–46 change this pessimistic view by pointing to God's mercy.

*In the history of interpretation,* these expected emotions are confirmed. The call to strengthen *Slide 26* trust and hope as an emotional bond with God dominates. Thus, the Church Fathers but also, for example, Rabbi David Kimchi repeatedly emphasise that people, when they learn about the miracles of God and get to know the power of God, will put their trust in God and obey his commandments.

Throughout the centuries, the psalms 78 and 106 have attracted the special interest of commentators. The deterrent effect of the negative examples from the past is understood above all as a warning to the addressees to avoid these mistakes. (Example: Ps 78 by Mary Sidney) *Slide 27*

God's wrath has aroused particular interest and need for explanation. On the one hand, we can *Slide 28* see the effort to explain divine anger as justified and moderate, or to emphasise the abundance of mercy (strengthening trust), on the other hand, interpreters struggle not to inappropriately attribute the all too human emotion of anger to God.

A literary adaption of Ps 78 by Huub Oosterhuis shows that this question is still relevant in *Slide 29–* the 21st century. The poem presents an image of God, who overcame his wrath. From this, a *30* mission is derived for the Christian addressees of the poem today.

## 4. Conclusion

*Slide 31*

The exemplary look at the history of reception shows that the effort to make the text comprehensible and experienceable continues. The various explanations, sermons, lyrical translations, and poems attempt to make the texts accessible to their respective addressees not only intellectually, but also emotionally. The addressees are encouraged to remember the events described in the psalms, to evaluate them and to understand them with regard to their own situation. In this way, the events of a distant past become templates that promise to explain current challenges and questions.

The memories of the changing relationship between the people and God from the time of the matriarchs and patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt, and the journey through the desert to the land, have been used for centuries as a means of group-identification. The offer of identification with the lyrical I/we of the psalms, who has a reliable knowledge of the tradition and wants to pass it on, plays a special role. On the one hand, this can be a distinction, it can strengthen existing structures, but it has also repeatedly led to a definition of one's own group by setting it apart from others. Thus, in the reception of the texts, it becomes clear how cultural memory can also be an instrument of the struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation and, as a consequence, of social order and power.

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**List of Examples**

Slide 8: Theodore Psalter, Constantinople (1066), MS 19352 Ps 105 (fol. 140r) [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352]

Slide 9: Cuerden Psalter, Oxford (ca. 1270), MS M.756: Ps 78 (fol. 113v), Ps 105 (fol. 155v) [http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/141476]

Slide 10: Psalter from Paris (1495–1498), MS M.934: Ps 78 (fol. 114r) [http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/77003]

Slide 11: St. Albans Psalter, England (1120–1130) Ps 78 (S. 223); Ps 106 (S. 285) [https://www.albani-psalter.de/]

Slide 12: Psalter from Liège (1290–1305), MS M.155: Ps 78 (fol. 75r) [http://corsair.themorgan.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=355&recCount=50&recPointer=77&bibId=250584]

Slides 13, 27: Psalm 78 by Mary Sidney (1561–1621), in *The Sidney Psalter. The Psalms of Sir Philip and Mary Sidney.* Oxford 2009.

Slide 18: Utrecht Psalter, Reims (820–830): Ps 78 (fol. 45r) [https://psalter.library.uu.nl/page/97]

Slide 21: Wheel of emotions by Plutchik [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plutchik-wheel.svg]

Slides 29–30: Psalm 78 in *Huub Oosterhuis. 150 Psalmen vrij.* Utrecht 2011.

Slide 32: Nelly Sachs (1891–1970), "Aber deine Brunnen," in *Fahrt ins Staublose.* Frankfurt a. M. 1961.