

Psalm 78:41-72: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 78 verses 41 to 72 They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe, when he performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan.

He turned their rivers to blood so that they could not drink of their streams. He sent among them swarms of flies which devoured them and frogs which destroyed them. He gave their crops to the destroying locust and the fruit of their labour to the locust.

He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost. He gave over their cattle to the hail and their flocks to thunderbolts. He let loose on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation and distress, a company of destroying angels.

He made a path for his anger. He did not spare them from death but gave their lives over to the plague. He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham. Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. He led them in safety so that they were not afraid. But the sea overwhelmed their enemies and he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won.

[1 : 18] He drove out nations before them. He apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents. Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers.

They twisted like a deceitful bow, for they provoked him to anger with their high places. They moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel, he forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe.

He gave his people over to the sword, and vented his wrath on his heritage. Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song. Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.

Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting because of wine, and he put his adversaries to rout. He put them to everlasting shame. He rejected the tent of Joseph.

He did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which he has founded forever.

[2 : 35] He chose David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds, from following the nursing ewes he brought him, to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them, and guided them with his skilful hand.

Psalm 78 is an epic historical psalm, moving through Israel's history from the Exodus to the raising up of David, and the establishment of God's presence upon Mount Zion. It tells the foundational story of Israel as a lesson in God's great works and grace, and Israel's forgetfulness and rebellion. Richard Clifford argues for a twice-repeated pattern, moving from God's acts to Israel's rebellion, to God's response, and concluding with God's grace. He sees the second recital of this pattern, running from verse 40 to verse 72, divided as follows, God's acts in verses 40 to 55, rebellion in verses 56 to 58, God's response in verses 59 to 64, God's grace in verses 65 to 72.

The first recital of the pattern Clifford identifies focuses upon the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness. However, although much of this second section retells the story of the plagues in Egypt, the pivotal rebellion actually comes much later in Israel's history.

It's the rebellion that led to the removal of Shiloh, a rebellion that occurred in Ephraimite territory. The recounting of the story of the plagues, the Exodus, and God's planting of his people within his land, is intended to function as the backdrop for Israel's rebellion against God in that very land into which he had so graciously brought them.

[4 : 15] In response to their rebellion, God forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, and gave his people up to their enemies. However, the psalm ends with God raising up David and the establishment of his dwelling place on Mount Zion.

Israel are supposed to learn by reflecting upon this history, learning not only from God's mighty works, but also from his people's rebellious responses. This section of the psalm begins by emphasizing the insistence and the recurrence of Israel's rebellion against God.

This was not a single occurrence, but a repeated one. Numbers chapter 14 verse 22 speaks of putting God to the test ten times. Whether that number is specific or non-specific, it underlines the fact that Israel's problem with rebellion was not superficial, but deep and ingrained, and difficult either to address or to eradicate.

The failure of Israel is traced back to their failure to remember the Lord's power or the day of his deliverance. The specific thing that they have failed to remember is the greatness of the works of God by which he brought them out of Egypt and planted them in the promised land.

The psalmist describes a number of the plagues in various detail and somewhat out of their chronological sequence, though not that significantly. The point is the overall effect of the plagues, not the exact order.

[5 : 35] More particularly, the psalmist mentions the first plague, the water being turned to blood, followed by the fourth plague, the flies, followed by the second plague, the frogs. Then he moves on to the locusts, the eighth plague, and then the thunder and the hail, the seventh plague.

Many have also seen a reference to the fifth plague in verse 48. God subjected Egypt to his wrath. He sent upon them a company of destroying angels, not just the single destroyer spoken of in Exodus chapter 12 verse 23.

The list of the plagues climaxes with the death of the firstborn, the final great plague. After this plague, God led his people out like a flock through the wilderness, protecting and guiding them. He destroyed the Egyptians at the Red Sea, then led his people through the wilderness to his holy land. Earlier in the psalm, the psalmist had mentioned several of God's mighty deeds in the wilderness, while on this second recital, his accent is upon what occurred before and after the wilderness wanderings, how God brought them out, and how he brought them in, and somewhat less upon how he led them through.

The Exodus is about God's bringing his people out and leading them to the mountain, not Sinai, but Zion. We see something similar in Exodus chapter 15 verse 17 in the great song of Moses after the crossing of the Red Sea.

[6 : 56] You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. Gordon Wenham remarks, I think that it is reasonable to say that the Psalms certainly know the law giving at Sinai, even though they do not make much of it.

This may be because for the Psalms, Zion is the new Sinai, the holy mountain where God reveals himself. However, the pattern is of God's mighty and gracious deeds being followed by Israel's rebellion, and this is precisely what happens on this occasion.

God the Lord is the most high God, but Israel treated him like a tribal or regional deity, turning to the idolatrous practices of the people of the land and establishing high places to worship false gods.

All of this provoked God to jealousy, as his people are committing spiritual adultery. God judged his people Israel by stripping them of his protection. He abandoned Shiloh, allowed the Ark of the Covenant, the great symbol of his presence in their midst, to be taken by the Philistines in battle at Aphek, going into exile from his people, and giving them over to a terrible defeat.

Haphnai, Phinehas, and Eli, the priests, all died as a result of this battle. The lamentation, as Alan Ross notes, was for the loss of the Ark, not so much for the deaths of Haphnai and Phinehas themselves.

[8 : 19] The psalm ends, however, not with judgment, but with grace. The psalmist employs the most arresting and remarkable anthropomorphic imagery as the Lord is compared to a strong man waking up after drinking heavily, ready to get rowdy and throw his weight around.

He struck down his enemies. He rejected the tent of Joseph, presumably the tabernacle of Shiloh. He then chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, and David his servant.

The Lord had shepherded Israel through the wilderness. Now he chooses a faithful shepherd, David, to lead his people. The psalm ends with David shepherding Israel uprightly and skillfully.

The threefold establishment of David, Jerusalem, and God's dwelling on Mount Zion was the inauguration of a new era, one grounded purely in grace, a grace that overcame the stubborn rebellion of the nation.

A question to consider. Why might the rejection of Shiloh and the loss of the Battle of Aphek be seen as such a paradigmatic and decisive judgment?

[9 : 23] A question to consider.