



# HISTORICAL PSALMS

**Definition:** The historical psalms are those basing their message on the history of God's dealings with His people. They are in two general classes:

- Those using a historical narrative of some part of Israel's history ... such as Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136
- Those using a personal reflection or meditation that is based on a historical reality ... such as Psalms 44, 66, 89, 107, etc.

In this defining process do not confuse the character of a historical psalm with the historical background that may be seen for other psalms (i.e. titles).

**Content and Purpose:** The content and purpose of the historical psalms may be seen on three lines:

- To review some particular aspect of God's dealings with His people for the purpose of correction and/ or revival
- To remind God's people of His faithfulness and covenant in the face of their own challenges
- To renew allegiance and loyalty

In general, the great purpose of history in the past is to guide us in living more fully today. It does not mean much, however, if it is not laid to heart.

**Analyzing the Historical Psalms:** Our procedure is about the same for each section. Some procedural points are omitted if they have not reference of significance. Others may be introduced. The psalms are different so occasionally the methodology varies in a small way.

## Psalms 78

**Maschil of Asaph.** This is rightly entitled an instructive Psalm. It is not a mere recapitulation of important events in the Israelites' history, but is intended to be viewed as a parable setting forth the conduct and experience of believers in all ages. This is the other form of an historical psalm: one in which the message is cushioned against a narration of some historical event or, in some cases, against the total history of Israel.

Division:

- Verses 1-8: may be viewed as a preface, setting forth the Psalmist's object in the epic that he is composing.
- Verses 9-41: the theme is Israel in the wilderness;
- Verses 42-52: then intervenes an account of the Lord's preceding goodness towards his people in bringing them out of Egypt by plagues and wonders.
- Verses 53-66: The history of the tribes is resumed
- Verses 67-72: the removal of the ark to Zion, and the transference of the leadership of Israel from Ephraim to Judah.
- Mark the emphasis on David!

**Material arrangement:** The arrangement is made in a logical way to prove a point and illustrate aspects of history. Hence it is internally repetitive to stress the guidance of God, the national sin, the reality of judgment, and the eventual establishment of the Kingdom. The whole is given in an admonishing tone and this is dramatized by the foreword. Note how the rebellion and judgment sequences "grow" as they are treated through the psalm.

**Historical background:** While we do not know for what occasion it is written, we may adduce that it is written early in the kingdom period. Observe how thoroughly it weaves the history of Israel into the message. Just this one sequence will show us this:

- Verse 12 ... Exodus 7-12
- Verse 13 ... Exodus 14:21, 15:98
- Verse 14 ... Exodus 13:21
- Verse 15 ... Exodus 17:6
- Verse 16 ... Numbers 20:8
- Verse 17 ... Numbers 14, et al
- Verse 18 ... Exodus 16:2
- Verse 19 ... Exodus 16:3
- Verse 20 ... Exodus 17:6
- Verse 21 ... Numbers 11:1

And that may be continued in other sections as well.

**Historical point:** Take a lesson from the Fathers!

## Psalms 105

This historical Psalm was evidently composed by King David, for Psalm 105:1-15 was used as a hymn at the carrying up of the ark from the house of Obed-edom, and we read in 1 Chronicles 16:7. "Then on that day David delivered first this Psalm, to thank the Lord, into the hand of Asaph and his brethren." Such a song was suitable for the occasion, for it describes the movements of the Lord's people and his guardian care over them in every place, and all this on account of the covenant of which the ark was a symbol. Our last Psalm sang the opening chapters of Genesis, and this takes up its closing chapters

and conducts us into Exodus and Numbers.

- The first verses are full of joyful praise, and call upon the people to extol Jehovah. Psalm 105:1-7;
- then the earliest days of the infant nation are described,
- Psalm 105:8-15
- the going into Egypt, Psalm 105:16-23, the coming forth from it with the Lord's outstretched arm, Psalm 105:24-38, the journeying through the wilderness and the entrance into Canaan.

## Psalms 106

**General Remarks** - This Psalm begins and ends with Hallelujah - "Praise ye the Lord." The space between these two descriptions of praise is filled up with the mournful details of Israel's sin, and the extraordinary patience of God. This sacred song is occupied with the historical part of the Old Testament, and is one of many which are thus composed:

Surely this should be a sufficient rebuke to those who speak slightly of the historical Scriptures; it ill becomes a child of God to think lightly of that which the Holy Spirit so frequently uses for our instruction.

Israel's history is here written with the View of showing human sin, even as the preceding Psalm was composed to magnify divine goodness. It is, in fact, a national confession, and includes an acknowledgment of the transgressions of Israel in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in Canaan, with devout petitions for forgiveness such as rendered the Psalm suitable for use in all succeeding generations, and especially in times of national captivity. It was probably written by David, - at any rate its first and last two verses are to be found in that sacred song which David delivered to Asaph when he brought up the ark of the Lord (1 Chronicles 16:34, 1 Chronicles 16:35, 1 Chronicles 16:36).

While we are studying this holy Psalm, let us all along see ourselves in the Lord's ancient people, and bemoan our own provocations of the Most High, at the same time admiring his infinite patience, and adoring him because of it. May the Holy Spirit sanctify it to the promotion of humility and gratitude.

### **Division**

- Praise and prayer are blended in the introduction (Psalm 106:1-5)
- Then comes the story of the nation's sins, which continues till the closing prayer and praise of Psalm 106:47-48
- While making confession the Psalmist acknowledges the sins committed in Egypt and at the Red Sea (Psalm 106:6-12)
- the lusting in the wilderness (Psalm 106:13-15)
- the envying of Moses and Aaron (Psalm 106:16-18)
- the worship of the golden calf (Psalm 106:19-23)
- the despising of the promised land (Psalm 106:24-27)
- the iniquity of Baal-Peor (Psalm 106:28-30)
- and the waters of Meribah (Psalm 106:32-33)
- Then he owns the failure of Israel when settled in Canaan, and mentions their consequent chastisements (Psalm 106:34-44),
- Together with the quick compassion which came to their relief when they were brought low (Psalm 106:44-46).
- The closing prayer and doxology fill up the remaining verses.

## **Psalms 107**

This is the first psalm in the last book of psalms. In spite of that it has a unique relationship with Psalms 105, 106 (and in some ways 104). Psalm 105 shows Israel given the land, Psalm 106 shows the dispersion from the land and Psalm 107 shows the re-gathering in the land. It is an interesting arrangement and this is one of the reflective historical psalms rather than a narrative piece. We say it is historical because it reflects on the ways of God and shows how He has operated in many different situations for the blessing of His people.

**Subject:** This is a choice song for the redeemed of the Lord (Psalm 107:2). Although it celebrates providential deliverances, and therefore may be sung by any man whose life has been preserved in time of danger; yet, under cover of this, it mainly magnifies the Lord for spiritual blessings, of which temporal favors are but types and shadows. The theme is thanksgiving, and the motives for it. The construction of the Psalm is highly poetical, Repetition is the "mother" of learning and the cyclic way in which this is developed is instructive.

### **Division**

- The Psalmist commences by dedicating his poem to the redeemed who have been gathered from captivity, Psalm 107:1-3;
- he then likens their history to that of travelers lost in the desert, Psalm 107:4-9;
- to that of prisoners in iron bondage, Psalm 107:10-16;
- to that of sick men, Psalm 107:17-22;
- and to that of mariners tossed with tempest, Psalm 107:23-32.
- In the closing verses the judgment of God on the rebellious, and the mercies of God to his own afflicted people are made the burden of the song, Psalm 107:33-42;
- and then the Psalm closes with a sort of summing up, in Psalm 107:43, which declares that those who study the works and ways of the Lord shall be sure to see and praise his goodness.

**Historical Point:** The power of God is always available as His people trust.

## **Psalms 136**

We know not by whom this Psalm was written, but we do know that it was sung in Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 7:3, 2 Chronicles 7:6), and by the armies of Jehoshaphat when they sang themselves into victory in the wilderness of Tekoa. From the striking form of it we should infer that it was a popular hymn among the Lord's ancient people. Most hymns with a solid, simple chorus become favorites with congregations, and this is sure to have been one of the best beloved. It contains nothing but praise. It is tuned to rapture, and can only be fully enjoyed by a devoutly grateful heart.

- It commences with a three-fold praise to the Triune Lord (Psalm 136:1-3),
- then it gives us six notes of praise to the Creator (Psalm 136:4-9),
- six more upon deliverance from Egypt (Psalm 136:10-15), and seven upon the journey through the wilderness and the entrance into Canaan.
- Then we have two happy verses of personal gratitude for present mercy (Psalm 136:23-24),
- one (Psalm 136:25) to tell of the Lord's universal providence, and Psalm 136:26 to excite to never-ending praise.

