

Recounting חידות מני-קדם in Psalm 78: What Are the "Riddles" About?

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RECOUNTING מני-קדם חידות IN PSALM 78: WHAT ARE THE “RIDDLES” ABOUT?

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“Form follows function.” Some forty years after the American sculptor H. Greenough expressed this insight in 1852, L. Sullivan, one of the representatives of the Chicago School, adapted and expanded it in his article “The tall office building artistically considered,” arguing that “it is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things super-human, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.”¹ If one were to turn his insight around, one could also assume that it is possible to deduce function from form. At almost the same time as Sullivan described the meaning of form for Visual Arts and Architecture, H. Gunkel (1862–1932) put forward the basic principles of form-critical investigation of the Hebrew Bible. Influenced by the insights of the emerging empirical sciences, as well as oriental studies, classical philology, and the first investigations of linguistic studies, he showed that it is possible to reconstruct the socio-historical background of texts by analyzing their form. Stressing the so-called *Sitz im Leben* of a given text, Gunkel demonstrated that the function of a text in its original social setting could be determined by studying the form of that text. It is the form that enables the intention of the author to be reconstructed because it is precisely the form that enables the message of the text to be situated within its social context. Insofar as the law expressed by Greenough is applicable to ancient texts, too, “form follows function.”

¹ L. Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” *Lippincott's Magazine* 57 (1896), 403–9 (408).

1. FORM AND METRIC STRUCTURE

The position advanced by Gunkel in “Schöpfung und Chaos” (1895),² “Grundprobleme der israelitischen Literaturgeschichte” (1906)³ and “Einleitung in die Psalmen” (1933)⁴ dominated genre criticism in the study of the Hebrew Bible for more than eighty years. Even though genre criticism later become a form of criticism that concentrated on the final form of a text,⁵ the question of the social (or literal) setting of a text remains relevant. Investigations of psalms and other songs focus, in particular, on describing and categorizing them by genre. In many cases the description of the form is determined by the content of the song, even if the song itself mentions a genre or form. In this case, one would assume that the genre or form should be interpreted according to the author’s own terms.

Concerning Ps 78, the subject of this investigation, the form-critical interpretation of this psalm has for a long time focused on its content. It has been described as a “historical psalm” in many studies. Its form has been compared to that of Ps 105 and Ps 106, two psalms that provide a reflection on history.⁶ While Ps 105 is a prayer of thanks for God’s salvation, Ps 106 expresses the people’s hope that God might remember his covenant once his anger has been allayed. By retelling the story of Israel and its past failures, the psalmist reveals his understanding of why God judged his people: Israel broke the conditions of the covenant and was exiled as a result. In this sense, Ps 105 and Ps 106 show the two sides of God’s story with his people by emphasizing both God’s grace and the failures of Israel.⁷ The end of Ps 106 strongly suggests that both

² H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen. 1 und Ap. Job. 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1895).

³ H. Gunkel, “Grundprobleme der israelitischen Literaturgeschichte,” *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 27 (1906), 1797–1800, 1861–66.

⁴ H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (completed and posthumously published by J. Begrich; *Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*. Ergänzungsband zur II. Abteilung; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

⁵ Cf. G.M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1971), 1–21.

⁶ Cf. M. Witte, “From Exodus to David—History and Historiography in Psalm 78,” in N. Caldich-Benages and J. Liesen (eds.), *History and Identity: How Israel’s Later Authors Viewed Its Earlier History* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook 2006; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 21–42 (30).

⁷ Cf. F. Hartenstein, “Zur Bedeutung der Schöpfung in den Geschichtspsalmen,” in R. Achenbach and M. Arneith (eds.), *Gerechtigkeit und Recht zu üben* (Gen 18,19): Studien zur altorientalischen und biblischen Rechtsgeschichte, zur Religionsgeschichte Israels und zur Religionssoziologie (BZAR, 13; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 335–50 (346). Emphasizing the meaning of sin in Ps 106, he wrote, “Ps 106 entfaltet das Sündenbekenntnis. Die Schuld Israels hat ihren Grund im ‘Nicht Begreifen’ (לאִהַשְׁכִּיל) der

psalms were written in times of exile when Israel was scattered among the nations. In accordance with the differing subjects of the two psalms we find two different forms: Ps 105 is a psalm of thanks (see esp. Ps 105:1–3), Ps 106 is a prayer for help (see esp. Ps 106:47–48). The entire composition changes from praising God and recounting his favorable actions towards Israel to a plea from the people to God, asking him to turn from judgment to salvation again. By acknowledging the error of their ways, God’s people have taken the necessary step towards securing this salvation; they are now willing to fulfill his torah. Finally, Ps 106 expresses in the form of a plea for help that Israel has learned from its history how it must behave in the future. In this respect, Ps 105 and Ps 106 have the didactic function of teaching Israel to thank God constantly for his salvation and never forget his saving acts.

Ps 78 differs slightly from other “historical psalms” and is not introduced with a call for praise,⁸ but it nevertheless shares the same intention as observed in Ps 105 and Ps 106; the author wants the audience to learn from history.⁹ Referring to the heading in v. 1a, which was added later, the entire psalm is called a “teaching play.”¹⁰ In v. 3 the author states that the people will understand

‘Wundertaten’ JHWHs, die doch zuletzt als seine ‘Gnade/Güte’ (חסד) erscheinen.”

⁸ Even if in v.1 the author is not calling upon his people to praise God by retelling his acts of salvation, he emphasizes the need to do so by frequently using סַפֵּר *Pi’el* “to report praisingly” (vv. 3, 4, 6). On the meaning of סַפֵּר *Pi’el* in Ps 78, see J. Gärtner, *Die Geschichtspsalmen: Eine Studie zu den Psalmen 78, 105, 106, 135 und 136 als hermeneutische Schlüsseltexte im Psalter* (FAT, 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 46. See further M.E. Tate (*Psalms 51–100* [WBC, 20; Dallas: Word 1990], 284) who stresses the difference between Ps 78 and other “Psalms of History,” arguing that “Although its subject matter is similar to those psalms that enumerate Yahweh’s activity in Israel’s history (cf. Pss 105, 114, 135, 136), Ps 78 does not seem interested in presenting a mere list of the events of Israel’s past.”

⁹ Cf. T. Hieke, “Weitergabe des Glaubens (Ps 78:1–8): Versuch zu Syntax und Struktur von Ps 78,” *BN 78* (1995), 49–62 (59). Hieke outlines the aims of the didactic process as follows: insight and passing on (v. 6), trust (v. 7), no oblivion (v. 7), obedience (v. 7) and no intractability (v. 8). See further N. Füglistner, “Psalm LXXXVIII [sic!]: Der Rätsel Lösung?,” in J.A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989* (VTSup, 43; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1991), 264–97 (267).

¹⁰ Cf. M. Dahood, *Psalms II* (AB, 17; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1968), 238; Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 281; F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100* (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 419–20. See also the comments of B. Weber (“Psalm 78: Geschichte mit Geschichte deuten,” *TZ 56* [2000], 193–214 [194]), “Er [Ps 78 TW] fügt sich in keine der angestammten Gattungen ein, sondern entlehnt Momente aus verschiedenen Bereichen wie der Geschichtserzählung, der Weisheit und auch der Prophetie. Er hat auf jeden Fall einen geschichtstheologischen Akzent. Ich würde ihn im Blick auf den Selbstanspruch in 1a, ‘Tora’ zu verkünden, als

what they have heard. What he offers is his “order” (תורתֵי), which he delivers as a “parable” (משל v. 2).¹¹ This parable is formed out of חידות מני־קדם (“riddles from former times,” v. 2).¹² These riddles contain תהלות (“praises”) of God and his acts for Israel (v. 4). They were passed on so that they might establish faith in God among the coming generations (v. 6) through the remembrance of God’s acts of salvation and observance of his orders. While the current generation may behave in this way, the ancestors failed to do so (v. 8). The introduction gives us a clue as to how we should interpret the psalm: it is the author’s teaching on how to understand history.¹³ In order to follow the author’s argumentation, it is important to observe the structure of the text.

The psalm consists mainly of bi-cola 3+3 stanzas. This metric structure is disrupted in thirteen verses which contain tri-cola (vv. 3, 4, 6, 7, 19, 20a, 21, 31, 34, 38a, 49, 50, 55, 71).¹⁴ Vv. 19, 20a and 71 differ from all the other tri-colon verses since they each contain a colon to which an original bi-colon was extended. The first colon in v. 19 introduces direct speech. The formula וידברו באלהים in combination with the following אמרו prefaces a question directed to God in the third person plural. V. 19 then continues with a question about God’s skills in the third person singular. From a literary-critical perspective this occurrence does not raise an issue. However, the editor of BHS proposes to delete the formula באלהים וידברו for metrical reasons. The word אמרו appears five times within the Psalms of Asaph (Ps 73–83; see Ps 73:11; 74:8; 78:19; 83:5; 83:13). In all cases אמרו introduces a word uttered by one of the wicked or God’s enemies. However, in all other cases אמרו appears without another introductory formula. Beside Ps 78:19 the combination of דבר and באלהים appears only once in the Hebrew Bible. In Num 21:5 the formula introduces the people’s question as to why God and Moses led them into the wilderness where they do not find any food or water. The statement of the psalmist in Ps

‘Geschichtsweisung’ bezeichnen wollen.”

¹¹ Cf. Dahood (*Psalms II*, 239), “The Hebrew word *māšāl* signifies properly ‘a comparison,’ then any proverb (see Ps xlix 5) or saying in which some deeper meaning lies, to be gleaned by means of the hidden comparison.”

¹² In general, חידה designates a “riddle,” that is, a mystery which can be decoded by the audience. In the book of Ezekiel the term is used synonymously with משל (cf. V. Hamp, “חידה *ḥidāh*,” *TWAT* [1977], 2:870–74). Thus the חידות are introduced as the content of a משל in Ps 78:2 and the terms are used to describe the form and content of what follows.

¹³ Cf. the remarks of A.F. Campbell (“Psalm 78: A Contribution to the Theology of Tenth Century Israel,” *CBQ* 41 [1979], 51–79 [60]), “The introduction sets forth its didactic purpose: to give instruction, involving enigmas from the past and the traditions of Yahweh’s saving wonders.”

¹⁴ For the determination of the tri-cola verses, cf. D. Mathias, *Die Geschichtstheologie der Geschichtssummarien in den Psalmen* (Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, 35; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), 48–53.

78:19 alludes to this situation by allowing the people to pose the question of whether God can furnish a table in the wilderness. Concerning Ps 78:19, it is obvious that **אמר** is used to emphasize Israel's sin of provoking God as an act that is committed by wicked people. In the context of the Psalms of Asaph, Israel's behavior in Ps 78 is identified with the disgraceful deeds committed by the infidel. The first colon containing **וידברו באלהים** was added later to relate v. 19 to the murmuring of the Israelites in Num 21:4–9.

In v. 20 God's provision of water is contrasted with the motif of YHWH giving bread and meat in the desert. Here the flooding of the wadis trumps the image of water emerging from a source in the waste land. The combination of "rock" (**צור**) and "water" (**מים**) appears a second time in Ps 78. In v. 15 the psalmist describes God initially "splitting rocks" in the wilderness (**יבקע צורים**) with the final result that "water will run down like rivers" (**ויורד מים כנהרות**). The combination of splitting rocks and streaming water in v. 20 follows on from the image used in vv. 15–16, with the redactor completing the image that appeared in the previous passage.

The third colon in v. 71 appears as another late addition since the distinction between Israel and Judah is reversed by the conquest of Israel by the House of David. God is reclaiming his **נחלה**, which he rejected before.¹⁵ With this requirement the last colon of v. 71 challenges the rejection of Israel and election of Judah, which dominates the final part of Ps 78. The psalmist indicates his desire to include northern Israel as part of the Davidic sphere of influence. This moves beyond the image of God rejecting Israel and electing Judah, Jerusalem, and the house of David, such that Israel becomes an object of God's election again.

All other tri-cola verses do not show any textual problems that would suggest the addition of a colon; they were formulated as tri-cola from the beginning. When studying these verses it becomes clear that the varying meter serves to subdivide the psalm into passages.

¹⁵ The insertion is a link to Ps 79:1–4 through the catchword **נחלה**. For the correlation of Ps 78 and Ps 79, cf. S. Holtmann, "Die Asaf-psalmen Spiegel der Geschichte Israels: Überlegungen zur Komposition von Ps 73–83. Teil 2," *BN* 123 (2004), 49–63.

Structure of Tri-Cola Sequences

1bc	bi-colon	32	bi-colon
2	bi-colon	33	bi-colon
3	tri-colon	34	tri-colon
4	tri-colon	35	bi-colon
5a	bi-colon	36	bi-colon
5b	bi-colon	37	bi-colon
6	tri-colon	38a	tri-colon
7	tri-colon	38b	bi-colon
8a	bi-colon	39	bi-colon
8b	bi-colon		
21	tri-colon	44	bi-colon
22	bi-colon	45	bi-colon
23	bi-colon	46	bi-colon
24	bi-colon	47	bi-colon
25	bi-colon	48	bi-colon
26	bi-colon	49	tri-colon
27	bi-colon	50	tri-colon
29	bi-colon	51	bi-colon
30	bi-colon	52	bi-colon
31	tri-colon	53	bi-colon
		54	bi-colon
		55	tri-colon

The first passage containing tri-cola verses is extended from vv. 1b–8, with tri-cola appearing in vv. 3, 4, 6 and 7. Taking into account that v. 1a is an introduction that was added later to the psalm, vv. 1b–8 form a closed metric unit of bi-cola and tri-cola sequences. Another unit formed by tri-cola is composed of vv. 21–27 and 29–31.¹⁶ In this case the tri-cola verses frame the entire passage. A third unit containing tri-cola sequences appears in vv. 32–39 that, like the first unit, sees the tri-cola surrounded by bi-cola verses. However, unlike the first sequence in vv. 1b–8, this passage is composed of two bi-cola—one tri-colon—three bi-cola—one tri-colon—two bi-cola. The fourth unit formed by a tri-cola sequence can be observed in vv. 44–55. This time the author dispenses with a ring structure and forms the sequence of five bi-cola, two tri-cola, four bi-cola, and one tri-colon.¹⁷

¹⁶ V. 28 is a later editorial addition containing a bi-colon with a 3+2 stanza. V. 28 repeats the image of the divine gift falling from heaven, as mentioned in v. 27 (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 422–23).

¹⁷ In forming the last tri-colon, the author uses material that appeared earlier in Ps 78. He stresses the position of Israel in contrast to the other nations by drawing specifically on material that occurs in v. 60 and v. 67 (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 424). The adoption of previous material points to a later addition of the tri-cola verse; an addition which depended on pre-existing textual material and expanded the passage in vv. 44–55.

2. THE TRI-COLA PASSAGES

The first tri-cola sequence in vv. 1b–8 is composed as a ring structure, in which vv. 3, 4, 6 and 7 are embedded in three bi-cola passages, each time consisting of two bi-cola.¹⁸ The tri-cola are used here to form inner links. Vv. 3, 4, 6 and 7 describe the process of a grateful passing on of the divine acts of salvation, with the תהלות and the נפלאות (v. 4b) being retold from generation to generation. By retelling the acts of salvation, Israel not only avoids forgetting them (v. 6) but also maintains trust in God (v. 7). Vv. 1bc, 2, 5 and 8 contain the call for praise (v. 1bc)¹⁹—the intention of the author being to teach by recounting a parable (v. 2)—and the erection of a testimony in Israel (v. 5), which was ignored by the forefathers (v. 8).²⁰ While the verses formed as tri-cola reflect on the requested process of passing on across the generations, v. 5 and v. 8 describe the disruption of tradition by a generation of the past. Two generations represent the contrast: the current generation behaves like their own fathers in continuing the praise of God, while their ancestors disrupted the line of tradition by forgetting about the תהלות and the נפלאות.

The second passage containing tri-cola sequences in vv. 21–31 retells the story of the heavenly bread that was given in the wilderness. Vv. 23–27 and 29–31 describe God’s acts of safeguarding and ends with the comment that he satisfied Israel’s needs but not their desires. This description is framed by the interpretation of Israel’s behavior in vv. 21–22 and 30–31.²¹ V. 21 and v. 31 are formed as tri-cola sequences introducing and completing the passage.²² In both verses the inflamed anger of God is mentioned. In v. 21 it is presented as the result of matters that are to follow, in v. 31 as a

¹⁸ Beyond the metrical structure, the change of subject from v. 8 to v. 9 hints at the separation of the two parts. Vv. 10–11 depend on v. 9 and therefore contain the same subject. Cf. Matthias, *Geschichtstheologie*, 55.

¹⁹ Several investigations emphasize the sapiential tradition by showing the similarities to and semantic correlations with Prov 1:6. Cf. A. Weiser, *Die Psalmen II: 61–150* (ATD, 15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1955), 366; R.P. Carroll, “Psalm LXXVIII: Vestigates of a Tribal Poem,” *VT* 21 (1971), 133–55 (133); H.P. Nasuti, *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph* (SBLDS, 88; Atlanta: SBL Press, 1988), 82; J. Schreiner, “Geschichte als Wegweisung: Psalm 78,” in J. Zmijewski (ed.), *Die alttestamentliche Botschaft als Wegweisung. Fest. H. Reinelt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 307–28 (321); Hieke, *Weitergabe*, 57.

²⁰ For the syntactical connection of vv. 1b–8, see Hieke, *Weitergabe*, 57–59. For the separation between v. 8 and v. 9, see Weber, *Psalm 78*, 194; S. Holtmann, “Die Asafpsalmen als Spiegel der Geschichte Israels: Überlegungen zur Komposition von Ps 73–83. Teil 1,” *BN* 122 (2004), 45–79 (48).

²¹ Cf. Campbell, *Psalm 78*, 55.

²² As Matthias (*Geschichtspsalmen*, 77) indicates, “Für die Zusammengehörigkeit von 21–31 spricht die Rahmung durch die Trikola 21 und 31 sowie die chiasmische Anordnung der gleichgebauten Kola 21.3 und 31.1 innerhalb dieser Verse.” See further Witte, *Exodus*, 24.

result of what happened in the wilderness. V. 22 adds the reason for Israel's behavior; they did not trust in God's acts of salvation (ישועתו). This is a crucial point of divergence from the final statement in v. 29 that Israel's desires were never satisfied. V. 30 repeats the motif of unsatisfied desires and v. 31 portrays the result of this process: God's anger is inflamed and he begins to slay the young Israelites. The close semantic and metrical correlation of v. 21 and v. 31, the inconsistency between vv. 21–22 and v. 29, and finally the textual coherence of v. 21 and v. 22, and of v. 30 and v. 31, are striking arguments in favor of reading these verses as later additions to a song about divine acts of salvation in the wilderness.

The report about the divine judgment against the young Israelites is continued in another passage that contains tri-cola sequences in vv. 32–39. In this passage tri-cola appear twice, each as a single colon. With the insertion of the tri-cola verses the author again shapes a ring structure. The two tri-cola verses express the relationship between God and his people. In v. 34 the author emphasizes that God killed his people when they forgot about him, and that whenever he did so, those who remained would return to him. V. 38a highlights God's mercy in forgiving the sins of Israel and ceasing the killing of his people. V. 34 and v. 38a mark turning points in the relationship between God and Israel. At the beginning God judged his people for forgetting about him, but after they had returned and deserted again he ceased to judge and instead acted in mercy.

The structure of the third tri-cola sequence in vv. 44–55 differs from all other passages with regard to its content. While these two tri-cola sequences include a turning point in the relationship between the generations (vv. 1b–8) and between God and Israel (vv. 32–38), this passage describes the fall of Egypt prior to the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Although the option for the Israelites to change their behavior is included in the first two tri-cola sequences, this possibility never existed for Egypt. This is expressed by the reduced length of the second part of the third tri-cola sequence. As in vv. 21–27 and 29–31, the reflective passages appear as later additions to a former song about God's acts of salvation towards the exodus generation.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM

In addition to the three tri-cola sequences, another correlation appears. Vv. 9–12 and 40–43 introduce the two parts that present God's acts of salvation for Israel. The introductory passages are connected by the keywords מצרים and שדה־צען as locations of God's נפלאות in vv. 12 and 43. A description of God's acts follows in both cases. The passages serve as an introduction to the psalter's presentation of history and, similar to the parts that contain tri-cola sequences, they offer a reflection on that history.

The identification of these six units reveals the structure of the psalm, as outlined in the overview below. The units identified are printed in italics:

v. 1a	Headline
<i>vv. 1b–8</i>	<i>Introduction of the psalm</i>
vv. 9–39	First part: God’s mercy towards Israel in the desert
<i>vv. 9–12</i>	<i>Introduction</i>
vv. 13–16	God’s miracles in the desert
<i>vv. 17–20</i>	<i>Israel’s demand</i>
<i>vv. 21–31</i>	<i>Israel’s faithlessness and God’s response</i>
vv. 40–67	Second part: God’s mercy towards Israel in Egypt and his punishment in Palestine
<i>vv. 40–43</i>	<i>Introduction</i>
<i>vv. 44–55</i>	<i>God’s punishment against Egypt and the deliverance of Israel</i>
vv. 56–67	God rejects Israel for neglecting his orders
vv. 68–72	Third part: the election of Judah, Jerusalem, and the House of David

4. SEMANTIC CORRELATIONS

In addition to these six passages, another sequence of the psalm contains an interpretation of Israel’s behavior that is closely connected to the discussed passages on account of their semantic correlations. In vv. 17–20 the terms **מרה** (v. 17), **חטא** (v. 17),²³ **עליון** (v. 17) and **נסה** (v. 18) appear. **מרה** “rebellious” is used in v. 8 and v. 40 to designate the sin of the forefathers. **נסה** “to tempt” appears in v. 41, too. Finally, the old epithet **עליון** occurs again in v. 35. Due to the epithet and the terms **מרה** and **נסה**, vv. 17–20 stand in close connection to v. 56, the first verse of the final passage of the second part. Other semantic correlations exist between vv. 8, 35 and v. 39, namely the use of **לא זכר** as a reason for sinning against God. In vv. 4, 11, 12 and 32 God’s acts of salvation are called **נפלאות**. In addition to these correlations mentioned here, further semantic correlations appear throughout the entire psalm:

²³ Cf. Holtmann (*Asafpsalmen 1*, 53 n. 27), “In literarischer Hinsicht bildet es [חטא] ein Signalwort, welches sofort verdeutlicht, dass es im Fortgang allein um die verfehlte Gottesbeziehung geht.”

Semantic Correlations by Passage

	מרה	חטא	עליון	נסה	לא זכר	נפלאות	מצרים	שדה־צען	אף
1b–8	X				X	X			
9–12						X	X	X	
13–16									
17–20	X	X	X	X					
21–31									X
32–39			X		X	X			X
40–43	X			X			X	X	
44–55									X
56–67	X		X	X					
68–72									

The above overview of semantic correlations demonstrates that the passages are indeed closely related to each other on account of their use of keywords, even if the metrical structure differs from sequence to sequence. The multiple occurrences of single words show a close relationship between certain passages. Vv. 1b–8 are closely related to vv. 32–39 through the keywords **לא זכר** and **נפלאות**. Both passages identify the failure to remember God’s miracles as the sin of the ancestors. As mentioned above, vv. 9–12 and 40–43 are linked by the keywords **מצרים** and **שדה־צען**. Vv. 40–43 and 56–67 remain in a close relationship with all three catchwords occurring in v. 56.²⁴ Vv. 21–31, 32–39 and 44–55 are connected by the term **אף**, but its syntactical function varies. While **אף** occurs as a subject in v. 21 and v. 31, it is used as an object in vv. 38, 49 and 50. In v. 21 **אף** stands in a *parallelismus membrorum* to YHWH; in v. 31 it appears as a status construct combined with the status absolute **יהוה**. As an object it is distinguished with a third person singular suffix in reference to God. Finally, the passages vv. 1b–8, 17–20, 40–43 and 56–67 are connected by the word **מרה** in describing the behavior of Israel towards God.

The coherence created by these semantic correlations, in addition to the distinct metrical structure of the tri-cola sequences of the psalm especially, suggest that the psalm in its final form is a composite, with the tri-cola sequences having been included later as a reflection on the happenings of former times. The introduction of the psalm in vv. 1b–8 is closely related to the passage in vv. 32–

²⁴ The concentration of keywords in vv. 17, 32, 40–42 and 56 leads Gärtner (*Geschichtspsalmen*, 46–49) to call these verses “Scharnierversen.”

39 by its metrical structure and keywords. Both passages contain keywords for the interpretation of Israel's history. The catchword **אָר** is the link to the third passage containing tri-cola sequences in vv. 44–55. Vv. 32–39 evoke the image of God behaving differently towards Israel when compared to his treatment of Egypt. While his anger flares up against Israel just for a short moment before it subsides, it burns mercilessly against Egypt. V. 31 presents God's anger as having caused the death of the leaders of Israel, but it is reduced to only a passing flare of anger in vv. 32–39. Lastly, the contrast between God's actions towards Israel and towards Egypt is established by vv. 49–50 and 54–55, which qualify God's punishment against Egypt and his acts towards Israel.

Since vv. 44–48 and 51–53 describe the plagues and the exodus in the terms of the narrative of Exodus, vv. 49–50 and 54–55 offer the reasons for God's historical actions. The difference between Israel and Egypt, as seen through the plague and exodus traditions, is expanded in the reflection on history, so as to explain the reason for God's behavior towards both groups. Whereas his anger flares up against Israel just for a while, Egypt is punished without mercy.

Finally, both the metrical and syntactical structure and the shared reflection on history in the tri-cola sequences, as signaled by the sharing of keywords, suggest that these are additions to poetic passages about the failures of Israel. The two poetic passages in vv. 13–31 and 44–67 are introduced and connected by vv. 9–12 and 40–43, which are linked by the keywords **מַצְרִים** and **שִׂדְה־צִעֵן**. From a redaction-critical perspective vv. 1b–8 and 32–39 appear as a closed textual and metrical passage formed by a single redactor.²⁵ The other reflective parts of the psalm appear as later extensions of older texts. They differ from their context in meter and in the keywords linking them to other verses containing reflective statements.²⁶ All these redactional constructions seem dependent on one redactor who reflects on history by formulating the introduction in vv. 1b–8 and the reflective passage in vv. 32–39, and finally expanding older poetic passages about God's acts of salvation with the sequences in vv. 21–22, 30–31, 49–50 and 54–55.²⁷

²⁵ Cf. Holtmann (*Asaffsalmen 1*, 64) who writes, “Das Interesse des Verfassers, der gemäß seiner ‘Vorrede’ in V. 1b–8 durch seine Geschichtsdarstellung lehren will, wird besonders in V. 32–39 deutlich.” See further the comments by M. Millard (“Die ‘Mitte des Psalters’: Ein möglicher Ansatz einer Theologie der Hebräischen Bibel,” in E. Ballhorn and G. Steins (eds.), *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Methodenreflexionen und Beispiele exegesen* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007], 252–60 [255]), “In V. 32–39 erreicht Ps 78 die vielleicht größte Reflexionstiefe. Vor allem hier wird Geschichte, wie in V. 1b angekündigt, zur belehrenden Unterweisung, zur Tora.”

²⁶ It is striking that vv. 1b–8 and 32–39 remain in an elevated position because they form the introduction and central part of the psalm respectively. Cf. Fuglister, *Psalm LXXXVIII*, 272.

²⁷ Matthias (*Geschichtstheologie*, 58–69) identifies a sapiential and deuter-

Thus the psalm ends with the threefold election of Judah, Jerusalem, and the House of David, and one could presume that the entire psalm intends to promote the southern kingdom by stressing its eternal election. From this perspective, the psalm is a praise of God's actions towards Judah that stresses the error in Israel's behaviour. It is their own fault that they lost their election. And yet, why does the author emphasize in the introduction that the forefathers behaved in a way that was wrong? And why does he call the entire psalm a parable composed of "riddles from former times"? "The 'riddle,' of course, is not immediately accessible. It is not even explicitly stated, but apparently its solution lies in telling the 'story' to those yet to come, a 'story' of Yahweh's wonderful deeds and Israel's failures."²⁸ Following the composition of the psalm, which has been outlined above, the author combines traditional poetic passages—and the plural **חִירוֹת** suggests that he used several former independent poetic passages—with his own interpretation by adding the tri-cola sequences. With this addition he does what he announced: he presents "riddles from former times." In interpreting history, the redactor uses the motif of God's flaring anger to offer an interpretation of history that is focused on how God reacts to the behavior of his people. In the end, these are not riddles, since the consequences have already happened in Israel's history. Yet, as he mentions in the introduction, he uses stories from ancient times as **משל** "parable." "This means that . . . history is considered from a functional perspective so that history, as a 'parable,' has a paradigmatic function for the present. Insofar as it presents 'mysteries,' it demands constant reflection."²⁹ To solve the riddle—what the riddles are about—the actual situation of the psalmist needs to be explained. Therefore, two things need to be asked in order to reveal the author's intention: 1) what is the literary function of the psalm within the Psalms of Asaph, and 2) what is its social function in the historical situation of the author?

onomistic use of language in Ps 78. The only sections in which this language is not present are vv. 12–16, 44–48 and 51–55. "Das läßt sich damit erklären, daß der Psalmist hier Traditionsgut unverändert aufnimmt" (ibid., 69). Even if a distinction between sapiential and deuteronomistic passages of the psalm is ultimately untenable, Matthias confirms the thesis that Ps 78 contains older passages upon which a later redactor has commented by inserting sequences that reflect on history. On the assumed deuteronomistic influence, cf. Campbell, *Psalm 78*, 52; Füglistner, *Psalm LXXXVIII*, 286–93; Holtmann, *Asafpsalmen 1*, 50–52.

²⁸ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 288.

²⁹ Witte, *Exodus*, 26. See further Campbell, *Psalm 78*, 78; K. Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT, I/15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 308; Weber, *Psalm 78*, 193; B. Weber, "Psalm 78 als 'Mitte' des Psalters?—ein Versuch," *Bib* 88 (2007), 305–25. As suggested by Weber ("Psalm 78 als 'Mitte' des Psalters?," 316), "Rätselrede sind die Gerichtsschilderungen und -deutungen insofern, als ihr Erstsinn reaktualisierend auf hintergründige Neudeutung(en) hin geöffnet werden."

5. THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF PSALM 78

When seeking to understand the literary function of Ps 78, one needs to investigate the structure of the Psalms of Asaph—the group of psalms that appear as a separate collection within the book of Psalms due to their dedication לאסף. Ps 73–83 constitute a well-planned composition, in which sapiential reflection (Ps 73 and 78), portrayal of divine judgment (Ps 75, 76, 81 and 82) and lamentations (Ps 74, 77, 79, 80 and 83) alternate.³⁰

The entire collection is connected by a thematic thread, which can be seen in the framing psalms, Ps 73 and Ps 83. Ps 73 highlights the divine goodness that is directed towards Israel (v. 1b, טוב לישראל) and towards those who have a pure heart (v. 1b, לברי לבב) despite the prosperity of the wicked (v. 3) and daily discomfort for the psalmist in particular (v. 14). While the author of Ps 73 describes his practice of blessing God under the depicted circumstances, in Ps 83 he prays for God to destroy all of his enemies (Ps 83:10–18). Ps 73 and Ps 83 express the need for the psalmist to overcome his present circumstances. This thematic thread raises the question of why the psalmist still trusts in God even if the experiences of his lifetime are unfavorable and he has to suffer a vast number of misfortunes.

In Ps 73:28 the psalmist ends his reflection on his life with the announcement that he will proclaim the acts of God, both those of the present time and also of former times. This is what he goes on to demonstrate in the psalms that follow. The Asaphitic psalter alternates lamentations towards God, pleading that he remember (Ps 74:2; 80:2) and shelter (Ps 79:9; 80:3) his community as well as judge the wicked (Ps 74:22–23; 79:6, 12; 83:10–18), with the call to the community to praise God by giving thanks (Ps 75:2), and to remember and proclaim his previous acts (Ps 73:28; 78:6–7). The outline and quotations provided above show that the call to judge the wicked frames the Psalms of Asaph (Ps 73:3–12, the prosperity for the wicked; Ps 83:10–18, the judgment of the wicked) whereas the call to remember God's actions towards Israel appears in the center of the composition.

The meaning of history for the Asaphitic psalter is already expressed by his announcement that he will proclaim God's acts so as to give him praise (Ps 73:28). In the lines that follow, history is used in a twofold manner: Ps 74:12–17 is formulated as a hymn, in which God's actions in Egypt and the wilderness are combined with the mythical image of the defeat of Leviathan to describe divine kingship. This means that God's acts of salvation towards Israel have become characteristic of his divinity. The decision to resort to mythical narrative shows that the mythical story is also considered to be part of history, and that such historical acts justify the reign of God and his adoration.³¹ As part of the psalmist's in-

³⁰ Cf. Holtmann, *Asafpsalmen 1*, 45.

³¹ Cf. Holtmann, *Asafpsalmen I*, 69. See also the remarks of Gärtner

sistence that one should proclaim divine acts even if the believer lives in deplorable conditions and the wicked in prosperity, he suggests that characterizing God on account of his previous acts enables the believer to trust in a renewal of divine salvation in the present time. In other words, history and myth are used in the same way so as to explain God's divinity to the community.³²

The psalmist resorts to history a second time in Ps 77–80. However, before describing the function of history in this section of the Psalms of Asaph, the relationship between these psalms needs to be investigated. As B. Weber showed in his study on Ps 77, there are several correlations between Ps 77 and Ps 78.³³ Semantic links occur in Ps 77:6, 12 and Ps 78:2 (קדם), Ps 77:4, 7, 12 and Ps 78:35, 39, 42 (זכר), Ps 77:10, 17 and Ps 78:21, 31, 38, 49 (אך), Ps 77:11 and Ps 78:17, 35, 56 (עליון), Ps 77:12, 15 and Ps 78:4, 11, 32 (נפלאות/פלא), and Ps 77:16 and Ps 78:35 (גאל). What is more, thematic connections are made by referring to the crossing of the sea during the exodus (Ps 77:20; 78:53), although the reference to what exactly happened at the sea are different, in so far as Ps 77 stresses Israel's crossing of the sea while Ps 78:53 emphasizes the drowning of the Egyptians. Taking into account that most of the semantic links that appear in Ps 78 are to passages which were identified as reflective, one should presume that the intention of the composer was also to relate Ps 78 to Ps 77.

Ps 77 is the lament of a single person complaining about his situation and his sense that God's mercy is no longer apparent. As Weber pointed out, the author of Ps 77 does not accentuate the guilt of the people, even though the topic will be raised imminently. The open ending of Ps 77 invites the reader to continue reading into Ps 78, and in this psalm the question of guilt is answered in the story of Israel mourning in the wilderness and worshipping other gods.³⁴ Finally, the fact that the central aim of Ps 77 and Ps 78 is to stress the rejection of the Ephraimites and Shilo and the election of Judah, Jerusalem, and the House of David strongly suggests that the two psalms originated in the late eighth or early seventh century.³⁵ However, this dating does not take into account that the

(*Geschichtspsalmen*, 118), “Dies spielt indirekt auf die Rettungstat Jhwhs am Schilfmeer an (vgl. Ex 14,16.21; Ps 78,13.15), so dass die Herrschaft Jhwhs über die chaotischen Wasser in eine heilsgeschichtliche Perspektive transformiert wird. In seinem paradigmatischen Geschichtshandeln erfahren die Beter auf diese Weise Jhwh als den Herrn der Wasser.”

³² Gärtner (*Geschichtspsalmen*, 120) highlights the importance of proclaiming the deity's reign in shaping the expectation of the reader, insisting, “Diese in der kosmischen Ordnung sichtbar werdende Präsenz Jhwhs begründet die Hoffnung der Beter auf sein erneutes Eingreifen in die geschichtlichen Abläufe des Volkes.”

³³ Cf. B. Weber, *Ps 77 und sein Umfeld: Eine poetologische Studie* (BBB, 103; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum 1995), 288–89; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 430.

³⁴ Cf. Gärtner, *Geschichtspsalmen*, 108.

³⁵ Cf. the decision of Weber (*Psalm 78*, 212) to date the origin of Ps 77

illustrated process of rejection and election does not contain any riddles.

There is another Psalm of Asaph in addition to Ps 77 that exhibits semantic and motivic similarities to Ps 78, since the image of the flaring anger that appears in the tri-cola sequences as the determining factor of history also occurs in Ps 79. In the passage found vv. 5–9 the psalmist laments the devastation of Jerusalem and asks how long God will continue to be furious.³⁶ The deity's anger was inflamed (v. 5) because of עוֹנוֹת רֵאשִׁימִים “the sins from former times.”³⁷ The community remembers God's miracles and observes his orders, but they ultimately still live with the consequences of their forefathers' guilt. This depicts the situation of the current generation mentioned in Ps 78:1b–8, since they also must live with the guilt of the ancestors and suffer God's anger despite having not caused it.³⁸ They observe the order to pass on the memory of God's acts of salvation in Israel's primeval times by retelling them in a spirit of praise. The psalmist thus presents a parable composed of “riddles of former times.” The text about former times tells the story of Israel losing its election by sinning against God. While the end of Ps 78 highlights the election of Judah, Jerusalem, and the House of David, Ps 79 gives the impression that the audience lives in a very difficult situation. It is obvious that have they lost their election because Jerusalem is devastated by its enemies and still in ashes.³⁹ They are wondering how their ancestors could have been

and Ps 78 to the time of King Hezekiah.

³⁶ Cf. the comments of Gärtner (*Geschichtspsalmen*, 112), “Die signifikanteste Verbindung zwischen beiden Psalmen ist die Ps 78 und 79 prägende Schuldthematik, die im Zusammenhang mit der Frage nach der Barmherzigkeit Gottes entfaltet wird.” Gärtner goes on to mention further aspects connecting Ps 78 and Ps 79. See also Holtmann (*Asaffsalmen* 2, 51–52), who suggests that Jer 7 and Jer 26 stand in the background of Ps 78:55–72 and Ps 79:1–2. He also highlights the relationship of Ps 77, 78, and 79, suggesting that,

Der etwas unvermittelt anmutende Hinweis auf die Führung durch Mose und Aaron in Ps 77,21 bildet die Entsprechung zur Erwähnung Davids in Ps 78,70–72. Zeigte nun die Geschichtsdarstellung in Ps 78, dass die Führung durch Mose und Aaron die Israeliten, besonders das Nordreich, offenbar nicht am Abfall hinderte, so könnte Ps 79 das strahlende Bild Davids aus Ps 78 dahingehend kontrastieren, dass auch seine sichere Führung das Südreich nicht am Abfall hinderte. (Ibid.)

³⁷ Cf. the comments of Hossfeld and Zenger (*Psalmen 51–100*, 431), “Was Ps 78 durchgehend anzeigt, nämlich die Schuld der Väter, wird in Ps 79,8 die ‘Schuld der Vorfahren’ genannt. Die Schuld der gegenwärtigen Generation wird in Ps 78 nicht behandelt, dagegen in Ps 79,8f. indiziert.” Hossfeld and Zenger also mention several semantic and thematic links between Ps 78 and Ps 79.

³⁸ Holtmann (*Asaffsalmen* 2, 52), understands Ps 79 as the community's liturgical answer to the monologue in Ps 78.

³⁹ Cf. Weber (*Mitte*, 318), who identifies the exile as a topic of the third part of the book of Psalms (Ps 73–89).

so foolish as to have evoked God's anger when they knew about God's punishment against Israel.⁴⁰

The reflection on history continues in Ps 80. The question of how long God will continue to be furious is repeated in v. 5. Unlike Ps 79:5 (יהוה תאנף לנצח) "How long, YHWH? Will you be angry forever?", the psalmist formulates the question to read עד-מתי עשנת ("How long will you smoke?"). Both verses relate to Ps 74:1aβ.b (למה אלהים זנחת לנצח יעשן אפך בצאן מרעיתך) "O God, why have you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?",⁴¹ by which the switching between praise, lamentation and reflection throughout history is introduced. With the image of God rejecting his people and letting his anger smoke in Ps 74:1, the varying expressions for God being furious against his people in Ps 79:5 and Ps 80:5 are connected within the Psalms of Asaph.

Ps 80 is another lamentation concerning the current situation of the author. It is connected to Ps 78 through the occurrence of the term סוג, which appears in Ps 80:19 and in Ps 78:57 in describing the apostasy of the Ephraimites.⁴² Unlike Ps 79, this psalm is dedicated to northern Israel (Ps 80:2–3). Vv. 9–12 describe the divine actions that took place in the wilderness and also in the chosen land, but the psalmist skips over the sins of the people. Instead he asks for salvation by highlighting that his community is worshipping God (v. 5). He emphasizes the call to God, asking that he might let his face shine so that his community might be saved again (see the refrain in vv. 4, 8, 20), as they are currently suffering in deplorable conditions. This plea to let his face shine ends the reflection on history in the Psalms of Asaph. This basically means that Ps 77–80 constitutes a closed unit, in which the fall of Israel and Judah is illustrated. The lamentations in Ps 79 and Ps 80 show that the course of history is used to explain the current situation of the community. The psalmist describes the divine acts towards Israel and Judah as acts of salvation until the divine anger was provoked, and his anger is described as still flaring. When attempting to gain an historical perspective on the question of what the riddles are about, the composition of Ps 77–80 at a first glance provides an answer: both Israel and Judah are still suffering from God's inflamed anger as a result of Israel having misbehaved in the wilderness and in the land, such that God left the sanctuary in Shilo, revoked the election of Israel, and appointed Judah in a threefold way by electing the Judeans, the sanctuary in Jerusalem, and the

⁴⁰ Cf. the remarks of H. Junker ("Die Entstehungszeit des Ps. 78 und des Deuteronomismus," *Bib* 34 (1953), 487–500 [490]), "Diese Väter, vor deren Beispiel der Psalmist seine jüdischen Zuhörer warnt, sind offenbar die Väter Judas . . ."

⁴¹ Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100*, 462.

⁴² Holtmann (*Asafpsalmen* 2, 55) emphasizes that, "auf der Ebene der Komposition in Ps 80 durchaus ein Bewusstsein für die Verfehlungen vorhanden ist, die dem Untergang vorausgingen."

Davidic kingship (Ps 78:68–70). Ps 79 presents God as having judged Judah, with the result that the country and the temple were still lying in ashes. The riddles, then, perform the literary function of encouraging the reader to contemplate the reasons for the fall of Judah. While this is not explicitly stated, it is obvious that the Judeans must have committed the same or similar transgressions as those of the Israelites, since God's flaring anger was provoked. When observed from a historical perspective, the Neo-Babylonian period is not necessarily the time during which the riddles were composed, even though this is the period in which this devastation actually occurred. Therefore, we come, finally, to investigate the social function of the psalm.

6. THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF PSALM 78

When investigating the social function of Ps 78, one needs to describe in more detail the community to which the psalmist refers in vv. 1b–8. The group is referred to as a generation that trusts in God and observes his orders (v. 7).⁴³ They are not like their fathers, a defiant and rebellious generation (v. 8). One could assume that the psalmist is talking about the generation living in the wilderness or the inhabitants of Ephraim while God settled in Shilo. And yet we learn from the end of the psalm that the Ephraimites were condemned (v. 67) and lost their election, with no remaining hope for mercy. The testimony erected in Israel, however, still survives to guide the coming generations in awareness of God's miracles for his people.

The description of this group and the meaning of the preserved tradition are strikingly similar to the image of Israel and the function of history preserved in Deut 31.⁴⁴ This chapter contains at least three layers. The first in vv. 1–8 anticipates Moses' death and Joshua's appointment. The second layer, which is of particular interest for the examination of Ps 78, consists of vv. 9–13, 16–22 and 24–27, and relates Moses' act of writing down the divine law and providing insight into what will happen in the future.⁴⁵ God expects his people to break the law of the covenant and to worship other deities. While this generation will be exterminated, the book of the law will be preserved for coming generations, who will probably learn from the history of their ancestors. In Deut 31 several keywords occur that are also found in Ps 78:1b–8:

- A. The correlation between the current audience and the group which experienced the exodus is expressed as a father-son relationship (אבות in Deut 31:20 and Ps 78:3, 5, 8).

⁴³ Holtmann (*Asafpsalmen 1*, 48) suggests, "In V. 7a wir das eigentliche Ziel dieser Weitergabe in dem Vertrauen (בטל) auf Jhwh gesehen."

⁴⁴ For the parallel cf. Witte, *Exodus*, 25.

⁴⁵ The third layer is a redactional addition in vv. 14–15, 23 and 28–30, which is dependant on the second layer.

- B. Deut 31:20 announces the entry of the current generation into the Promised Land. In the context of Deut 31 it means the return to the land after the devastation of the people by God's flaring anger (v. 17), an image that is used as an expression of God's punishment in Ps 78 several times, especially in vv. 21, 31, 38 and 50. Deut 31:12–13 describes the process of acquiring the former traditions.
- C. The priests are called upon to assemble the people every seven years to recite the divine orders. The people shall come, listen (שמע) and understand (ידע) the words of the law. The terms “to listen” (שמע) and “to understand” (ידע) appear in Ps 78:3 to describe the didactical process, too.
- D. The process of hearing and learning differs slightly; while the priests “announce” (נגד) the law, the older generation in Ps 78 passes on the songs of God's acts of salvation through “praise” (ספר *Piʿel*). Even if the form diverges, the process of transmission works in the same way: the older generation retells the tradition and the younger generation listens, understands and then becomes a part of the chain of tradition. They shall keep the memory of the divine acts towards his people by not forgetting about them (שכח in Deut 31:21 and Ps 78:7).

Given the similar description of divine punishment in both Ps 78 and Deut 31, and the several semantic links between the texts, they obviously refer to the same situation. The audience lives in the time after the divine judgment and is called upon to remember the former traditions (Deut 31:21; Ps 78:7) to avoid further punishment.⁴⁶ Finally both texts pursue the same aim, which Markus Witte explains in reference to Ps 78 as the following: “the actual aim of remembering history is to establish trust in God (vv. 7a α , 8b). This trust, in turn, shows itself in a continuous remembrance and keeping of God's commandments (v. 7b).”⁴⁷ The semantic equivalences, the similar situation of the group, and the analogous didactical process indicate that the audience addressed in Ps 78 is a group which the author calls upon to remember the former divine acts of salvation and so to put permanent trust in God. The didactical process of remembering and praising the divine acts of salvation—

⁴⁶ A further similarity is to be found between Ps 78:1b–8 and Deut 32, in that both texts are formulated as the speech of a single person to God's people (cf. Holtmann, *Asaßpsalmen 1*, 47). S. Kreuzer (*Die Frühgeschichte Israels in Bekenntnis und Verkündigung des Alten Testaments* [BZAW, 178; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1988], 236–37) suggests Deut 6:20–25 is referring to the same or a similar situation of the audience (and, in turn, Deut 6:20–25 reflects the same situation as the redactional addition in Deut 31).

⁴⁷ Witte, *Exodus*, 28.

expressing one's own faith and inviting the next generation to join the commemorative event—is expressed via the psalmist's call to his audience to listen and understand the “riddles from former times.”

The time period during which he addressed his audience remains uncertain; Ps 78 does not give any further information, but we can at least conclude that the psalmist dealt with texts which had to have been known in his era. As former investigations have shown, the author maintains the non-priestly Exodus tradition including the plague story,⁴⁸ the meal-tradition in Num 11 and the basic aspects of Deuteronomism.⁴⁹ Taking these facts into account, it seems that the author of Ps 78:1b–8 must have worked on the poem in post-exilic times. “Eindeutig haben wir es in den sogenannten Geschichtspsalmen jeweils mit einer *relecture* der Tora (teils auch der Vorderen Propheten) zu tun, wie sie außerhalb des Psalters noch in Neh 9 belegt ist.”⁵⁰ The literary dependency on various biblical traditions suggests that Ps 78 in its final form was written in later post-exilic times. This basically means that the experience of the devastated sanctuary in Jerusalem expressed in Ps 79 was already a literary motif used to describe unfavourable conditions.

When we return to the framing of the Psalms of Asaph, the meaning of the didactic process becomes clearer. The psalmist is complaining about the circumstances of the present period. He is living among the wicked and has to endure the disparity between the prosperity of the wicked and his own suffering in deplorable conditions. And yet he is keeping his faith, trusting in God, and proclaiming the acts of salvation of former times (Ps 73:23–28). He is one of the few who still remembers God's former actions, and he characterizes God by these actions (Ps 74:12–17). He laments the defilement and destruction wrought by the wicked upon God's sanctuary (Ps 74:4, 7). In the context of the Psalms of Asaph in their entirety, the riddles take on another meaning. While the psalmist expects to one day see divine judgment brought against

⁴⁸ On the plague account in Ps 78, cf. A.C.C. Lee, “The Context and Function of the Plagues Tradition in Psalm 78,” *JSOT* 48 (1990), 83–89. See further E.S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 95.

⁴⁹ Cf. Campbell, *Psalm 78*, 64–72, who denies, with good reason, the correlation between Ps 78 and Exod 16. The relationship between Ps 78 and Exod 15 still remains unclear. Gärtner (*Geschichtspsalmen*, 64, 85–89) presupposes the dependence of Ps 78 on Exod 15 since both texts contain semantic links. However, she does not provide any arguments for an assumed dependence. Campbell (*Psalm 78*, 64) and Füglistner (*Psalm LXXXVIII*, 284) also refer to semantic links but without the assumption of literary dependence. R.J. Clifford (“In Zion and David a New Beginning: An Interpretation of Psalm 78,” in B. Halpern and J.D. Levenson [eds.], *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points of Biblical Faith. Studies in Honour of F.M. Cross* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981], 121–41 [134–36]) limits the parallels to Ps 78:44–55.

⁵⁰ Hartenstein, *Bedeutung*, 335.

the wicked, he warns the community not to give up their belief in God and to continue to proclaim his acts, so as to ensure that the divine anger will flare against the wicked and no longer against the community. In Ps 78 the psalmist does not point to the fall of the northern Israel, nor to the devastation of Jerusalem in Babylonian times. “Geschichte soll mit Geschichte gedeutet werden. Die Vergegenwärtigung der Frühgeschichte (vgl. מני־קדם “aus der Frühzeit,” v. 2) dient der Bewältigung der jüngeren Vergangenheit und Gegenwart und bekommt damit eine prophetische Dimension.”⁵¹ While history is not necessarily a riddle, it did become one when Judah forgot the divine acts of salvation and behaved in the same way as the Israelites. The history of Israel thus becomes a prototypical event; in much the same way as northern Israel sinned, Judah did so, too. Moreover, such misconduct is being repeated by the wicked in the author’s present context. The psalmist wants to inspire his community to reflect on God’s history with his people in order to understand the need to join with him in proclaiming God’s former acts, and to trust in a renewal of divine salvation.⁵² “So, wie Gott damals gehandelt hat, kann er jederzeit wieder handeln: עשה פלא ‘Wunder wirkend’ (Ex 15,11, vgl. Ps 78,12).”⁵³ In the days of the psalmist, however, he can only hope that God will act like this again.

7. CONCLUSION

Greenough’s intuition that “form follows function,” and Gunkel’s insight that the function of a text can be explored by describing its form, are still valid. Analyzing the metrical structures and the genres of Ps 78 as expressions of its form, this article describes the function of Ps 78 for its original readership. The psalm is composed of traditional poetic passages and reflecting sequences in which the psalmist calls upon the community to observe the divine orders since the believers are suffering. He wants his audience to understand that the only way to live in God’s grace is to remember his former miracles. To remember the former miracles involves having faith that God will resume his former ways of acting once again.

The formation of Ps 78 is explained as a process of citing traditional texts and highlighting them by adding reflective passages. The reflection on God’s former acts is formulated in the tri-cola passages. These passages include several keywords, by which Ps 78 is linked to other Psalms of Asaph, especially to Ps 77, 79 and 80. The three tri-cola verses based on former bi-cola (vv. 19, 20a, 71) also serve to relate the depicted occurrences to the Psalms of

⁵¹ Weber, *Mitte*, 316. Further cf. A. Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (ATD, 14–15; Berlin: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 353.

⁵² Cf. Gerstenberger (*Psalms* 2, 93) who insists, “It does not want simply to teach history, but to exemplify present faith in the light of a few historical situations.”

⁵³ Spieckermann, *Heilsgegenwart*, 141–42.

Asaph. This means that Ps 78 was formulated from the beginning within the Psalms of Asaph.

In this context, it is clear that the psalmist highlights various historical situations. While Ps 78 ends with the fall of northern Israel and the election of Judah, Jerusalem, and the Davidic kingdom, the composition of Ps 77–80 originated in the late exilic or early post-exilic period when the temple in Jerusalem was still in ruins. However, the recourse to a later stage of the formation of biblical texts ultimately suggests that the psalm may have been composed at a later stage. The destruction of the temple and the lament of the people had already become a literary motif used to describe deplorable conditions. The framing of the Psalms of Asaph thus provides insight into the current situation of the author and his community. The temple is defiled and destroyed by the wicked and the psalmist is suffering as a result of these circumstances. He calls on his community to preserve and pass on the memory of God's former acts in order to preserve their faith and to continue hoping for a renewal of divine salvation. So the form "riddle" performs a twofold function: a literary function, posing the question of why Judah and Jerusalem could fall even though God had elected its people, city and kingdom, and also a social function, warning the community not to give up the memory of God's former acts, and calling upon it to preserve the hope of renewed salvation. In the current situation, the psalmist encourages his audience to consider what they can do to receive God's salvation again, to remember the miracles God once did and to demonstrate their faith in a renewal.