

‘A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS?’
THE RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF FOOD LANGUAGE
IN PSALM 78¹

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Across time and cultures, the daily need to eat and drink has ordered and consumed human life. It is not surprising that this preoccupation with food is also reflected in the biblical text. While scholars have shown a far-reaching and protracted interest in food and meals in the New Testament, little attention has been directed to this topic in the Hebrew Bible (HB). Food texts in the Psalter remain largely untouched.

Psalm 78’s historical recital provides an excellent text for exploring the rhetorical function of food language through its combination of depictions of food events (i.e., the wilderness food account and Egyptian plagues) and the use of descriptive language drawn from the arenas of food production, distribution, and consumption. This thesis argues that the psalmist’s use of food language in the recital of Israel’s past is a rhetorically driven means to instil confident trust in the possibility of YHWH’s renewed intervention in the present. Food language provides a rhetorically powerful medium to facilitate this goal through its multidimensionality and literary flexibility.

In order to situate this rhetorical study of Psalm 78, Chapter Two surveys the historical trends in scholarship on Psalm 78 over the past 150 years. While literary and rhetorical features in the psalm have been noted by early commentators and explored in some recent studies, no substantial work has been done on the persuasive force of the language of the psalmist’s recital. One of the often-neglected sections of the psalm is the wilderness frame (vv. 13-53). This thesis provides a much-

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needed examination of two key events depicted within this frame: the wilderness food events (vv. 15-31) and the Egyptian plagues (vv. 44-51).

Chapter Three explores the multi-dimensionality of food language and considers its rhetorical potential. This chapter introduces five central dimensions of food—its physical, sensory, social, locational, and patterned dimensions—and then illustrates these dimensions with examples from historical narratives and individual psalms. The chapter closes with a discussion of the rhetorical potential of food language, asking the question ‘Why might the biblical authors be drawn to use the language of food?’

Chapter Four considers the psalmist’s depiction of the wilderness food events (vv. 15-31). After surveying parallel accounts of these events across the HB, this chapter argues that Psalm 78’s portrayal of these food events (water from a rock/manna/quail) provides a picture of YHWH’s gracious care for Israel’s needs, even in the midst of their doubt and rebellion. Here, the psalmist uniquely emphasises the abundance of the food provision as well as YHWH’s active involvement and sovereign power over the created order. No human agents appear in the account; instead, the natural world serves as an obedient participant in this provision. In this recital of YHWH’s wilderness wonders, the psalmist exploits the rhetorical force of food language in order to capture the attention and instil hope in the audience.

Chapter Five considers the psalmist’s depiction of the Egyptian plagues (vv. 44-51). After surveying parallel accounts of this event across the HB, this chapter argues that the psalmist’s selection and arrangement the Egyptian plagues mirror the earlier presentation of the wilderness food events. Psalm 78’s plague account begins with the destruction of Egypt’s water supplies (v. 44; cf. YHWH’s provision of wilderness water, vv. 15-16), then agriculture (vv. 46-47; cf. YHWH’s provision of grain/bread in the wilderness, vv. 23-25), then livestock/meat sources (v. 48; cf. YHWH’s provision of meat/winged birds in the wilderness, vv. 26-28). By presenting the destruction of Egypt’s food supplies as an antithesis of YHWH’s provision of food in the wilderness, the psalmist magnifies the significance of Israel’s wilderness rebellion even as it highlights YHWH’s sovereign control over food.

Chapter Six expands the study of Psalm 78 to consider the composition as a whole as well as its contexts within the Psalter. The chapter begins with a summary of Psalm 78's rhetorical uses of food language in the wilderness frame (vv. 13-53) and then extends the study into the land-based section of the psalm (vv. 54-72). One finds that the psalmist employs all five dimensions of food language across the psalm. This chapter then considers Psalm 78 in the context of the two collections in the Psalter with which it is most closely identified: the 'historical psalms' (Pss 105, 106, 135, 136) and the Asaph Collection (Pss 50, 73-83). When Psalm 78 is viewed in the midst of the historical psalms, one finds a variety of similar rhetorical strategies employing food across these psalms. Seen against the backdrop of the historical psalms, Psalm 78 shows a heightened concern for recalling the wilderness food events, especially God's extravagant provision in an unlikely setting. When viewed within the Asaph Collection, Psalm 78 stands in the company of a variety of psalms that employ the language of food production and food consumption for rhetorical effect (i.e., Pss 50, 74, 75, 79, 80, 81). When considered in light of the Asaph Collection, Psalm 78 shows a unique concern for celebrating divine provision and divine engagement in Israel's past while invoking confident trust in the present.

This thesis advances two key areas of scholarly discussion: the study of Psalm 78 and the study of food in the Hebrew Bible. To this point in time, there has been no decisive attempt to explain the non-chronological ordering of events in Psalm 78, in particular the inclusion of the Egyptian plagues at the close of the wilderness frame (vv. 13-53). This thesis argues that this positioning of the plagues is rhetorically motivated. By beginning with the wilderness food account, the psalmist starts the psalm with a celebration of God's act of gracious care for Israel. By closing the wilderness frame with God's systematic dismantling of food supplies in Egypt, the psalmist invites the audience to evaluate Israel's wilderness rebellion, now in light of YHWH's sovereign power over food in Egypt. By placing the Egyptian plagues after the wilderness food events, the composer invites the audience to critique Israel's dissatisfaction not only at the end of the food account, but again at the end of the plagues, offering a compounded rhetorical punch.

In addition, I offer a proposal to explain the ordering of events within the psalmist's depictions of the wilderness food account and the

Egyptian plagues. The Psalmist's distinctive placement of the water from a rock event before the manna and quail events parallels the water-to-blood event at the start of the plagues. In addition, I have shown that the arrangement and selection of the specific Egyptian plagues mirrors the arrangement of the wilderness food events.

Regarding the study of food in the Hebrew Bible, this thesis advances the field through the establishment of categories for considering the multidimensionality of food as a foundational aspect of its rhetorical power. In particular, it offers a clear articulation of the multi-dimensional nature of food and its compounded rhetorical effect in Psalm 78. In addition, this thesis is the first sustained study of the rhetorical potential of food language within major collections in the Psalter (history psalms and Asaph Collection).

The title of this thesis draws from the question posed by Israel: 'Can God set a table in the wilderness?' (v. 19b). This rhetorical question is unique to Psalm 78 and with this query the psalmist captures the heart of Israel's concerns in the wilderness as well as their fears after exile. The psalmist, however, begins the recital with an invitation to a posture not of fear, but one marked by a confident trust in God (v. 7a). When viewed against the backdrop of exile, Psalm 78's portrayal of YHWH's provision in spite of Israel's past rebellion offers the audience the hope that YHWH will remember their current plight and act again with compassion. In order to achieve this intention, the psalmist whets the appetite of his audience by telling his tale through the language of food.