Why Did God Include the "Historical" Psalms?

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Those who do not learn from past history will surely repeat it in the future. Learning lessons from the past is a wise lesson for life. This wisdom comes from God. The genre that consumes much of the Old Testament is narrative (Torah, the Former Prophets, etc.). One could accurately deduce that God desires that His people not only learn *about* the past but also learn *from* the past. The Book of Psalms contains a number of what scholars have called, "historical psalms." These consist of Psalms 78, 105-107, 114, and 135-136. Some of these are lengthy and provide detailed accounts of Israel's history and God's powerful workings within her history. So why do some of the Psalms (=poetic genre) pick up on ancient history and incorporate it into the hymns?

In this article, I will provide five reasons why God included the *historical* psalms in the Psalter.

I. TO REMEMBER HISTORY — *Information*
The Psalms include accounts of Israel's past so that God's people will remember history. This is, perhaps, the most obvious reason of all. The retelling of past events reminds the reader of the events that have happened previously. It informs the audience of the real, verifiable, historical events that once took place. Thus, the psalms at times reference Israel's history so that God's people will remember their history. The many events, the miraculous deliverances, the innumerable invasions, the God-given prophets, the idolatrous leaders together comprise one of the reasons the psalms speak of Israel's history. Thus, the retelling of events provides reliable information.

II. TO PREVENT DISOBEDIENCE — *Caution*
The retelling of history goes beyond just the stating of past events. The historical psalms contain more than jumped gathering of facts lumped together. Another reason the psalms contain much about Israel's history is to prevent disobedience. Israel failed — *often*. She frequently disobeyed Yahweh and heinously committed spiritual adultery. The Old Testament narrative includes accounts of complaints, disbelief, idolatry, sexual immorality, drunkenness, irreverence to the LORD, false worship, pride and arrogance, foolishness, and lying — to name just a few. Thus, when the psalms speak of Israel's history, one such reason is to teach God's people to beware and exercise caution so as to not repeat the failures and sins of Israel in the past. Thus, learning from past history can prevent one from presently falling into disobedience.

III. TO URGE OBEDIENCE — *Instruction*
If the present reader reads of Israel's past history and is taught what *not* to do, another reason the retelling of Israel's history is so crucial is that it provides what *to* do, namely, follow divine instruction and diligently obey the Lord. Where Israel failed, God's people must learn so as to not fall into the same trap. Where God's people of old succeeded in following Him obediently, proclaiming Him worshipfully, and living for His renown consistently, God's people today should receive the plea to passionately and persistently obey God. To do otherwise would result in his own spiritual detriment and eternal peril. The recasting of Israel's history in the Psalter

powerfully instructs the people of God in the present day to obey the Lord where Godly ones of old have trod. Following the ancient paths is not old or outdated; it is wise and profitable.

IV. TO INSTRUCT CHILDREN — *Dissemination*
To speak of one's past can powerfully preach to a person. To declare the events and deeds of old instruct people to learn from the past, imitate the pious, and flee from impurities. Many of the historical psalms remember Israel's past in order to teach the present or future generations ('a generation yet to be born') about the works and Word of the LORD. This goes beyond the mere informational passing on of data. This has a compulsory and persuasive element to it. The retelling of past history to present and future generations is to *compel* them to put their confidence in God, not in themselves, not in idols, not in pleasures, nor in power. So much of Israel's history had served to visibly show Israel various ways that God had worked in her midst (e.g., the Feasts of Passover, Tabernacles, Day of Atonement). God had clearly commanded families to take divine truth and diligently teach it to the children. Often in the Old Testament, when a child asks a father about a particular memorial, stone, feast, or location, the parents must be ready to explain the significance of the past event *and* provide the relevant application to them so as to live appropriately in response. Thus, the relaying of the past should prompt the parents to present Israel's history to the next generation so as to instruct them walk in the ways of God and warn them to flee from the ways of sin.

V. TO WORSHIP GOD — *Adoration*
Remembering the past should cause a believer's heart to erupt in worship! The same God of old remains exactly the same God today because He is immutable. The God of creation is the same God of the Patriarchs. The God who loved Jacob is the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt by parting the Red Sea miraculously. The God who split the Red Sea preserved an entire nation of people for 40 years in the hot, dry, troublesome wilderness. This same God who led His people dwelt among them in the Tabernacle and remained faithful even when they sinned — incessantly. God does not change. His years shall never come to an end. He is faithful and cannot lie. What He did in the past should produce adoration in the worshiper's heart! Thus, when the psalmists remember the past works and ways of God (from creation, to Egypt, to the Exodus, to the Wilderness, to the Conquest, etc.), the proper response should be the oft-quoted refrain: *His love endures forever*!

> For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
> — *Romans 15:4*