

Memory as Moral Formation: Intergenerational Storytelling in Psalm 78:1-8 as a Paradigm for Faithful Discipleship

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 78:1–8 presents memory not merely as the preservation of Israel's past but as a formative theological practice through which covenant identity, moral character, and faithful discipleship are transmitted across generations. This article investigates how intergenerational storytelling functions as a divinely ordained pedagogical strategy that transforms communal memory into ethical responsibility. Employing a historical-literary and theological exegetical approach, the study analyzes the structure, vocabulary, and theological motifs of Psalm 78:1–8, paying particular attention to the relationship between remembering God's mighty acts, covenant fidelity, and the formation of successive generations. Drawing on theories of collective memory and moral formation, the article argues that biblical remembrance is an active and communal process that shapes identity rather than a passive recollection of historical events. The psalm portrays storytelling as a covenantal practice that cultivates trust in God, obedience to divine instruction, and resilience against the recurring pattern of forgetfulness and rebellion. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the intergenerational transmission of faith serves as a paradigm for contemporary Christian discipleship, where narrative participation fosters theological imagination and moral formation within families and faith communities. By integrating biblical exegesis with theological reflection, this article contributes to Old Testament scholarship and practical theology by proposing that covenant memory remains an indispensable foundation for sustaining faithful discipleship across generations in an increasingly fragmented and memory-deficient cultural context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transmission of faith from one generation to the next has become an increasingly urgent concern within contemporary Christianity. Rapid cultural transformation, digital individualism, and the fragmentation of communal life have weakened the continuity of religious memory that historically sustained Christian identity. While churches continue to invest in educational programs, discipleship is frequently reduced to the transfer of doctrinal information or individual spiritual formation, with insufficient attention given to the formative power of communal memory. Consequently, younger generations often inherit fragmented theological knowledge detached from the historical narrative of God's redemptive acts. This challenge raises an important theological question: how does Scripture envision the transmission of faith in ways that shape both belief and moral character across generations? Psalm 78:1–8 provides a compelling biblical response by presenting remembrance not as a nostalgic recollection of the past but as a covenantal practice through which God's mighty deeds are continually proclaimed, interpreted, and embodied within the community of faith (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014; Goldingay, 2008).

Within the Psalter, Psalm 78 occupies a distinctive position as a historical wisdom psalm that integrates instruction, covenant theology, and communal memory. Rather than offering a simple historical recital, the psalm reinterprets Israel's past to expose the recurring pattern of divine faithfulness and human rebellion, thereby transforming history into theological pedagogy. The opening verses (vv. 1–8) function as the hermeneutical gateway to the entire psalm, introducing the pedagogical imperative that each generation must transmit God's "glorious deeds" and covenantal instruction to the next. This intergenerational movement reflects the covenantal mandate already articulated in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and reinforced throughout Israel's liturgical tradition, where remembering becomes an indispensable act of covenant fidelity rather than mere historical preservation (Mays, 1994; Miller, 1994). Accordingly, memory in Psalm 78 is neither private nor accidental; it is intentionally cultivated through storytelling so that succeeding generations may "set their hope in God" and remain faithful to His commandments (Ps. 78:7).

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized memory as a central theological category in biblical studies. Influenced by the interdisciplinary work of cultural and collective memory, scholars argue that memory constructs communal identity by selectively interpreting the past in light of present and future covenantal commitments (Assmann, 2011; Carr, 2011). Biblical remembrance (*zākar*) therefore functions as an active theological practice through which God's saving acts become continually present within the believing community. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature on Psalm 78 has concentrated on its historical reconstruction, literary composition, Asaphic tradition, or Deuteronomistic theology, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the relationship between intergenerational storytelling and moral formation. Likewise, studies of Christian discipleship frequently emphasize spiritual disciplines, ecclesial practices, or educational models without adequately engaging the formative role of biblical memory as the foundation of covenant identity and ethical transformation (Smith, 2009; Volf, 2006). This lacuna suggests the need for a more integrative reading that connects Old Testament theology, collective memory, and contemporary discipleship.

This article argues that Psalm 78:1–8 presents intergenerational storytelling as a covenantal practice of moral formation in which communal memory shapes identity, ethical responsibility, and faithful discipleship. The psalm portrays storytelling not simply as the communication of historical information but as a theological act that invites every generation to participate anew in God's covenant story. Remembering God's mighty deeds cultivates trust, obedience, and covenant loyalty, whereas forgetting inevitably leads to spiritual rebellion and moral disintegration. In this sense, memory functions performatively: it forms a people whose lives embody the narrative they continually remember and proclaim. Such a perspective expands the theological significance of Psalm 78 beyond its ancient Israelite context, offering a robust framework for understanding discipleship as the ongoing formation of communities whose identity is grounded in the faithful remembrance of God's redemptive work.

Methodologically, this study employs a historical-literary and theological exegetical approach to Psalm 78:1–8 while engaging insights from collective memory theory and moral formation. The analysis begins with an examination of the literary structure, key lexical features, and theological motifs of the psalm's opening section before exploring how remembrance functions as a formative covenantal practice. The discussion then considers the implications of intergenerational storytelling for contemporary Christian discipleship within families, churches, and broader faith communities. By integrating biblical exegesis with theological reflection and interdisciplinary perspectives on memory, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations in Old Testament theology and practical theology, demonstrating that covenant memory remains an indispensable paradigm for nurturing faithful discipleship across generations in an age increasingly characterized by historical amnesia and fragmented religious identity.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative biblical-theological research design using a historical-literary exegetical approach to examine Psalm 78:1–8 within its canonical, literary, and theological contexts. The analysis begins with a close reading of the Hebrew text, paying particular attention to its lexical features, poetic structure, rhetorical devices, and key theological motifs, including remembrance (*zākar*), covenant instruction, and intergenerational transmission. Historical and canonical perspectives are integrated to situate the psalm within Israel's wisdom tradition, covenant theology, and the broader narrative of the Psalter, while relevant intertextual connections—especially with Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Exodus 12–13, and Joshua 4—are examined to illuminate the biblical theology of remembrance. To extend the theological significance of the text, the study also adopts an interdisciplinary dialogue with collective memory theory and moral formation, drawing particularly on the works of Jan Assmann (2011), David M. Carr (2011), and James K. A. Smith (2009). Rather than treating these theories as interpretive authorities over the biblical text, they function as complementary analytical lenses for understanding how communal memory shapes identity, moral imagination, and covenantal faithfulness. The findings are synthesized through theological reflection to demonstrate how Psalm 78:1–8 presents intergenerational storytelling as a formative practice that transforms communal remembrance into faithful discipleship, thereby offering a constructive paradigm for contemporary Christian communities.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Psalm 78:1–8: Remembering God's Mighty Acts as Covenant Pedagogy

Psalm 78 opens with a solemn pedagogical summons that immediately establishes its instructional purpose: "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching" (v. 1). The vocabulary of *tôrâ* ("instruction") and the imperative "incline your ears" echoes wisdom literature while simultaneously recalling covenantal exhortations in Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:9; 6:4–9). The psalmist therefore assumes the role of a covenant teacher who interprets Israel's history as divine instruction rather than merely recounting historical events. The reference to "dark sayings of old" (*hîdôt min-qedem*) in verse 2 does not imply esoteric knowledge but theological wisdom embedded within Israel's historical experience. History becomes revelation because God's acts disclose His covenant character and His expectations for His people. Consequently, the opening verses frame memory as an interpretive activity in which the past acquires normative significance for present covenant obedience (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014; Goldingay, 2008).

The central concern of verses 3–6 is the deliberate transmission of covenant memory across successive generations. The repeated references to "our ancestors," "their children," and "the generation to come" reveal a carefully structured chain of intergenerational responsibility. Faith is not portrayed as an individual achievement but as a communal inheritance sustained through intentional narration. This pedagogical pattern closely parallels Deuteronomy 6:6–9, where parents are commanded to teach God's commandments diligently to their children in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. Psalm 78

extends this Deuteronomic vision by emphasizing not only legal instruction but also the narration of God's "glorious deeds" (*tehillôt YHWH*), thereby integrating doctrine, worship, and historical remembrance into a unified process of covenant formation (Miller, 1994; Childs, 1979).

The pedagogical goal of this transmission is explicitly stated in verses 7–8. The purpose of remembering is "that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." Three theological outcomes emerge from this sequence: hope, remembrance, and obedience. Hope is grounded not in human capability but in God's historical faithfulness; remembrance safeguards that hope by continually recalling God's saving acts; obedience represents the ethical embodiment of remembered grace. Conversely, forgetfulness leads to covenant infidelity, as illustrated throughout the remainder of Psalm 78. Memory therefore functions not merely as cognitive retention but as the theological foundation of covenant ethics. The psalm constructs a direct relationship between remembering and moral fidelity, suggesting that spiritual failure originates not primarily in ignorance but in the abandonment of covenant memory (Mays, 1994).

From a canonical perspective, Psalm 78 demonstrates that biblical pedagogy is fundamentally narrative rather than merely propositional. Israel's identity is preserved through participation in God's story, not through abstract theological concepts alone. The historical narratives of divine deliverance, provision, judgment, and mercy become the curriculum through which each generation learns who God is and how covenant life should be lived. Thus, the psalm establishes storytelling as a sacred practice that continually renews covenant identity. Remembering God's mighty acts is therefore not an antiquarian exercise but a liturgical and pedagogical act through which the covenant community is continually reconstituted before God.

Collective Memory and Moral Formation in Psalm 78

Psalm 78 illustrates that memory in the biblical tradition is fundamentally communal rather than individual. The repeated use of plural pronouns throughout the opening verses emphasizes that Israel remembers as a covenant people whose identity is collectively shaped by God's historical acts. This understanding resonates with contemporary theories of collective memory, which argue that communities preserve their identity by selectively remembering events that define their shared existence (Assmann, 2011). Biblical remembrance, however, differs from purely sociological conceptions because its primary reference is God's covenantal activity rather than human achievement. Israel remembers not to celebrate its own history but to confess God's enduring faithfulness across generations.

The theological concept of remembrance (*zākar*) throughout the Old Testament extends far beyond mental recollection. Remembering is a performative act that renews covenant relationships and shapes present obedience. Israel's festivals, liturgies, and historical narratives continually reactualize God's saving deeds so that every generation becomes a participant in the covenant story rather than a distant observer. This dynamic understanding of memory transforms history into a living theological reality. Psalm 78 therefore portrays storytelling as an act of covenant participation in which listeners are invited to interpret their own lives within the continuing narrative of God's faithfulness. Memory functions sacramentally in the sense that the past becomes existentially present through faithful proclamation and communal reception.

This covenantal understanding of memory is intrinsically connected to moral formation. Moral character emerges not simply through the acquisition of ethical principles but through sustained participation in narratives that shape imagination, identity, and desire. James K. A. Smith (2009) argues that human beings are fundamentally shaped by what they love rather than merely by what they know. Psalm 78 anticipates this insight by locating ethical transformation within the repeated remembrance of God's mighty acts. As successive generations hear and internalize these narratives, they develop dispositions of trust, gratitude, humility, and covenant loyalty. Moral formation therefore occurs through narrative immersion rather than abstract moral instruction alone.

Conversely, Psalm 78 presents forgetfulness as the root of moral and spiritual collapse. The repeated cycles of rebellion described throughout the psalm are consistently preceded by Israel's failure to remember God's works. Forgetfulness is portrayed as theological amnesia that distorts identity, weakens hope, and erodes covenant fidelity. In this respect, remembrance functions as a moral safeguard against idolatry and covenant unfaithfulness. The psalm thus offers a profound theological anthropology in which memory becomes the indispensable medium through which God's people continually rediscover both their identity and their vocation. Moral formation is sustained not by the accumulation of information but by the continual rehearsal of God's redemptive story within the covenant community.

Intergenerational Storytelling as a Paradigm for Faithful Discipleship

The intergenerational vision of Psalm 78 provides a robust paradigm for understanding Christian discipleship as the transmission of covenant identity through shared narrative. The repeated emphasis on teaching "the generation to come" indicates that discipleship is not confined to formal instruction but encompasses the intentional cultivation of a community in which God's faithfulness is continually remembered and embodied. This perspective challenges contemporary models of discipleship that often prioritize individual spiritual development while neglecting the communal and historical dimensions of faith. Within Psalm 78, discipleship is fundamentally relational, narrative, and intergenerational because it is rooted in the ongoing proclamation of God's mighty acts.

This narrative model of discipleship also redefines the role of families and faith communities. Parents, elders, and religious leaders function not merely as instructors but as custodians of covenant memory entrusted with preserving God's story for future generations. Their responsibility extends beyond communicating theological propositions to embodying lives that visibly reflect God's faithfulness. Such an understanding echoes the broader biblical vision in which testimony and example mutually reinforce one another (Deut. 6:6–9; Joel 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:5). Consequently, discipleship becomes a communal vocation in which every generation participates simultaneously as recipients and transmitters of God's redemptive narrative.

The contemporary relevance of Psalm 78 is particularly evident within societies increasingly characterized by historical discontinuity, digital fragmentation, and declining religious literacy. In many ecclesial contexts, biblical knowledge has become detached from communal practices of remembrance, resulting in discipleship models that emphasize information without adequately cultivating identity and moral imagination. Psalm 78 offers an alternative vision by locating spiritual formation within the continual retelling of God's covenant story through worship, family life, preaching, catechesis, and communal practices of remembrance. Such practices enable believers to interpret their personal experiences within the larger narrative of God's redemptive purposes, thereby fostering resilience, hope, and covenant fidelity amid rapidly changing cultural contexts.

Ultimately, Psalm 78:1–8 demonstrates that faithful discipleship is sustained not merely by preserving doctrinal orthodoxy but by cultivating communities whose identity is continually shaped through remembering God's mighty acts. Intergenerational storytelling transforms historical memory into a living theological practice that forms hope, obedience, and covenant faithfulness across successive generations. As contemporary churches confront the challenges of secularization, generational discontinuity, and cultural amnesia, the psalm offers a compelling theological paradigm in which communal remembrance functions as the enduring foundation of discipleship. The future of Christian faith, therefore, depends not only on the effective communication of biblical knowledge but also on the faithful preservation and embodiment of the covenant story that continually forms God's people into a community of remembrance and obedient hope.

4. CONCLUSION

Psalm 78:1–8 demonstrates that memory is not merely a recollection of Israel's historical experience but a covenantal practice through which faith, identity, and moral character are intentionally formed across generations. Through a historical-literary and theological reading, this study has shown that the psalm frames intergenerational storytelling as God's ordained pedagogical means for preserving covenant fidelity. Remembering God's mighty acts is presented as an active, communal, and formative practice that nurtures hope, obedience, and trust while guarding the covenant community against the destructive consequences of forgetfulness and rebellion. Consequently, the transmission of faith in Psalm 78 extends beyond the communication of religious information to the formation of a people whose identity is continually shaped by participation in God's redemptive narrative. This finding highlights the inseparable relationship between collective memory, moral formation, and covenant discipleship within the theological vision of the Psalter.

The study further argues that the theological paradigm of Psalm 78 remains profoundly relevant for contemporary Christian discipleship. In an era marked by cultural fragmentation, declining historical consciousness, and increasing individualism, the recovery of intergenerational storytelling offers a constructive framework for renewing faith communities. Families, churches, and Christian educational institutions are called not only to teach biblical doctrines but also to cultivate practices of communal remembrance through worship, testimony, catechesis, and shared participation in the biblical story. Such practices enable successive generations to interpret their lives within God's continuing redemptive work and to embody covenant faithfulness in changing cultural contexts. Future research may extend this discussion by exploring the role of covenant memory in other biblical traditions or by examining empirically how intergenerational narrative practices contribute to moral formation and discipleship within diverse ecclesial settings. In this way, Psalm 78:1–8 continues to offer a robust biblical paradigm in which faithful remembrance serves as the enduring foundation for sustaining Christian discipleship across generations.

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