

# HOW DOES FOOD SHAPE HISTORY?

## Images of Food in the Historical Review of Ps 78<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Reconstructing Israel's history several psalms include the remembrance of food as a key element. With numerous references to the Pentateuch these psalms pick up well known food-based stories and engage these traditions in their discourses on history. In these retrospects food is more than just a prerequisite of life. Because it is prepared and consumed every day, it is an essential element of social behaviour. Food and its consumption thus reflect social conditions, and it can be used as a statement of identity. Based on its importance, food also plays an essential role in the construction of a human-divine relationship. Looking back in history, the availability or lack of food are presented as a part of God's well-planned actions; similarly, the people's handling of food and their behaviour at meals is considered as a display of their attitude towards God. In this article, I will show on the example of Ps 78 how a critical retrospective view presents food related episodes.

**Abstract:** In den Geschichtsrückblicken des Psalters spielen Erinnerungen an Nahrung eine wichtige Rolle. Insbesondere Erzählungen des Pentateuchs, in denen die Versorgung des Volkes im Mittelpunkt steht, werden wiederholt aufgegriffen und im Rückblick (kritisch) reflektiert. Dabei ist Nahrung nicht nur eine Notwendigkeit, sondern bildet ein wesentliches Element des menschlichen Zusammenlebens. Ihre Beschaffung, Zubereitung und ihr Verzehr spiegelt soziale Gefüge, verweist auf Identitätskonstruktionen und wird ebenso als Ausdruck menschlich-göttlicher Interaktion gedeutet. So wird insbesondere die Verfügbarkeit von Nahrung als göttliche Zu- bzw. Abwendung interpretiert, und umgekehrt kann auch der menschliche Umgang mit Nahrung als Ausdruck ihrer Gottesbeziehung gesehen werden. Am Beispiel von Ps 78 zeigt dieser Beitrag, wie ein kritischer Geschichtsrückblick mithilfe von Erinnerungen an Nahrung gestaltet werden kann.

**Keywords:** Psalm 78, History, Food.

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## Images of Food in the Psalms: A Short Introduction

Remembering Israel's past, the psalms reconstruct and evaluate central aspects of the previous relation between God and the people in order to explain the present situation and to shape a future relationship. The selection of relevant episodes includes unique and extraordinary events, but everyday procedures also come into view, so e.g. the preparation and consumption of food. The joint experience of hunger or satiation and its interpretation are essential for a community. The dependence on a constant food supply makes the availability of food a fundamental element in the description of living conditions. However, food is more than just a prerequisite of life. Because it is prepared and consumed every day, it is a key process of everyday life, and it also is an essential element of social behaviour. The selection and preparation of food and the way meals are consumed are determined by the social environment. Furthermore, shared meals play an important role as they provide an opportunity to foster good relations with people and to express one's affiliation.<sup>2</sup> Based on the importance of food for human life, it also plays an essential role in the construction of a human-divine relationship. To eat and drink, to be satisfied or to go hungry thus also are key metaphors for the description of relations between God and people, whereby most occurrences of food in the psalms confirm and strengthen the trust in God, pointing out that God is both able and willing to care for his people.<sup>3</sup> The image of God caring for his people can be further specified with reference to human behaviour. In this case, the accent lies on the idea of rewarding the righteous and those who fear God,<sup>4</sup> or the opposite, namely punishing the wicked.<sup>5</sup>

In accordance with the importance of food and its consumption, some psalms reflect on the people's past by remembering and retelling food-related stories. In these texts, the memory of selected food-based episodes becomes a paradigmatic

<sup>2</sup> As references to eating and drinking are also closely connected to social activities, they are shaping a community and establishing a sense of belonging to God's people. Conversely, accepting an invitation from the wrong people, e.g. the wicked, connects the psalmist with their sphere (e.g. Ps 73:10; 141:4).

<sup>3</sup> Hymns, in particular, express a basic trust in God's support, emphasising that God, as creator, provides food for all his creatures (e.g. Ps 103:5; 104:28; 145:16; 146:7). Cf. Judith Gärtner, *Die Geschichtpsalmen. Eine Studie zu den Psalmen 78, 105, 106, 135 und 136 als hermeneutische Schlüsseltexte im Psalter* (FAT 84), Tübingen 2012, 370.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. Ps 22:27; 37:18.19.25; 85:9.12; 111:5.

<sup>5</sup> This line of thought especially unfolds in the memories of the plagues of Egypt (cf. Ps 105:33–35), where God's interruption of the food supply plays an important role (cf. Exod 7–11). Another, though quite different image, is the harmful food someone is forced to consume, like the evildoers in Ps 75:9, who must drink God's cup of wrath (cf. Ps 11:6; Isa 51:17.22; Jer 25:15; 49:12; 51:7; Hab 2:15–16; Ezek 23:31–33; Zech 12:2). See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20), Waco 1990, 259–260.

part of Israel's history.<sup>6</sup> The most prominent episodes, the giving of water and food (manna and quails) in the wilderness (cf. Ps 78:15–32; 105:40–41; 106:32; 107:5–36; 114:8), evoke the origin of YHWH's own people. Within the memory of this special time of Israel's origins as a people, stories about food serve to reflect the relationship between God and his people. The readers can participate in the paradigmatic stories. Nevertheless, they are aware that these are experiences of a distant past. In this way, present and past interlock.<sup>7</sup> Although the psalms pick up well-known food narrations, they do not simply retell the stories but transform them. History is remembered in a way that enables the readers to see its relevance for their own present and their identity, as an individual and as a community.<sup>8</sup>

How images of food, social expectations on meals and the retelling of well-known stories of divine food supply are combined to a critical review of the people's past will be shown on the example of Ps 78:15–33.

### **Food Images: A Critical Review of the Past in Ps 78**

Ps 78 presents a retrospect of Israel's history as a wisdom teaching, an instruction and also a warning for the following generations. The prelude (vv. 1–11) points out this basic concern and explicitly connects the memory of God's deeds with the request to observe the divine commandments.<sup>9</sup> What the ancestors failed to do, their children should accomplish.<sup>10</sup>

The main part of the psalm presents Israel's history from the time in the wilderness to the era of King David in two compilations (vv. 12–39 and vv. 40–72). Food-related stories are part of the first presentation (vv. 15–33). The first cycle of events starts with memories of the exodus and Israel's time in the wilderness. The dividing of the red sea (v. 13; cf. Exod 14:16.21; 15:8), the guidance by the cloud and the fiery light as well as the dividing of the rock and the supply of water in the wilderness are told as God's wondrous deeds the people experienced (vv. 12–16). This exemplary list bears witness to the continuity of divine support, and, furthermore, these wonders confirm God's dominion over nature. In con-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Harry P. Nasuti, *Historical Narrative and Identity in the Psalms*, HBT 23 (2001) 132–153: 135.

<sup>7</sup> Gärtner, *Geschichtspsalmen* (Fn. 3) 23.

<sup>8</sup> Gärtner, *Geschichtspsalmen* (Fn. 3) 26.

<sup>9</sup> In this way, history and Torah are closely interwoven. Cf. Markus Witte, *From Exodus to David – History and Historiography in Psalm 78*, in: Núria Calduch-Benages/Jan Liesen (ed.), *History and Identity. How Israel's Later Authors Viewed its Earlier History* (DCL.Y 2006), Berlin et al. 2006, 21–42: 26.

<sup>10</sup> Nasuti, *Historical Narrative* (Fn. 6) 150.

trast to the corresponding stories in the books of Exodus and Numbers, no humanitarian crisis is outlined and, furthermore, only God takes actions. In this way, the accent is clearly on God's impressive deeds.

*Longing for Food: High Expectations and Severe Doubts*

Once the divine actions have been highlighted, the rebellion of the people comes into view (vv. 17–19).

- (17) And they continued to sin against him,  
rebellious against the Most High in the dry land.  
(18) They tested God in their heart  
by demanding food for their appetite (נפש)<sup>11</sup>  
(19) They spoke against God, saying,  
is God able to set a table in the wilderness?

An anticipating summary (v. 17) is followed by a more detailed description, adding a devastating interpretation of the people's behaviour (vv. 18–19). The psalmist presents the people's cry for food as a rebellion (מרה Hi.) against God (v. 17); as a testing (נסה Pi.) of God (v. 18);<sup>12</sup> and as a speaking against God (v. 19). Compared to the narratives in Exodus and Numbers, which emphasise the grumbling and murmuring of the people (cf. Exod 16:7–9.12; Num 14:27; 17:20.25), the unwillingness and rebellion of the people is intensified in this psalm. While vv. 17–18 evaluate the lacking trust in God and his support, v. 19 and 20 address the people's doubts. The first question in v. 19 “*Is God able to spread a table in the wilderness?*” uses the same image as Ps 23:5 but doubts if God is able to prepare a festive table in a seemingly hopeless situation. This image does not focus on any specific food, but rather envisions a banquet (cf. Ezek 23:41; Prov 9:2), an image quite different from the situation of the wilderness. The discrepancy between the situation and the people's expectation already

<sup>11</sup> נפש is used here in the sense of “wish, desire, appetite”, as in Deut 23:25 (cf. also Deut 21:14; Jer 34:16, Ps 35:25, 105:22). While this wish is not yet offensive, the continuation of the story transforms the people's behaviour into a sinful one. This context often influences the interpretation of v. 18. So, Tate, e.g., states that “the food referred to in v. 18 was not so much to sustain life as to satisfy undisciplined appetites”. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Fn. 5) 282. Several commentaries translate נפש as “greed”. See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (BKAT 15,1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1961, 536; Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen II. Psalm 61–150* (ATD 15), Göttingen 1950, 350; Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Die Psalmen neu übersetzt und erklärt*, Berlin 1905, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Exod 17:2.7; Num 14:22; Deut 6:16; 33:8; Isa 7:12; Ps 78:18.41; 106:14. Following this line of thought, several interpretations emphasise the aspect of rebellion and, subsequently read the images of the abundant divine gifts already as part of God's wrath. Cf. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Fn. 5) 290–291; Erhard E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2 and Lamentations* (FOTL 15), Grand Rapids 2001, 95–96; Anna Klein, *Geschichte und Gebet. Die Rezeption der biblischen Geschichte in den Psalmen des Alten Testaments* (FAT 94), Tübingen 2014, 91.

points out that they hope for more than a fulfilment of their basic needs. They rather long for a festive meal in abundance and joy, comparable to the experience YHWH, as a royal host, provides at the temple.<sup>13</sup> Besides a generous supply of food, this hope includes a sense of security and confidence in the divine king. The next verse (v. 20) unfolds this line of thought in more detail:

(20) Behold, he struck the rock and water gushed out  
and streams flowed<sup>14</sup>.  
Will he also be able to give bread  
or will he provide meat for his people?

Although the people acknowledged God's ability to provide water, they still doubt if he will also supply them with bread and meat (cf. Num 11:4–6). With this verse, the logic of the murmuring episodes of Exodus and Numbers is summarised: the people lack trust in God's ability or willingness to support them. They receive the marvellous gifts, but they do not conclude from experience that they can rely on God. The divine reaction is presented first as an insight into God's emotion (vv. 21–22).

(21) Therefore, when YHWH heard, he grew angry;  
and a fire was kindled against Jacob;  
and also anger rose against Israel,  
(22) because they did not rely on God  
and did not trust his saving.

Subsequently, God's actions are described. However, God did not act according to his anger, he rather provided food in abundance (vv. 23–29).<sup>15</sup>

(23) And he commanded the clouds above  
and opened the doors of heaven,  
(24) and he rained down on them manna to eat  
and he gave them the grain of heaven.<sup>16</sup>  
(25) Everyone ate bread of the strong<sup>17</sup>;  
he sent them provision to saturation.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gärtner, *Geschichtspsalmen* (Fn. 3) 67.

<sup>14</sup> Kraus notes that the deep waters (תְּהוֹמוֹת) emphasise the abundance God gives to his people. See Kraus, *Psalmen* (Fn. 11) 544.

<sup>15</sup> The interpretation of this seemingly discrepancy is not straightforward. It may point to God's patience and loyalty, so Delitzsch, or, as Tanner points out, the divine gift is part of God's lesson and another invitation to finally trust in God. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblischer Kommentar über die Psalmen*, (BC 4,1) Leipzig 41883, 562; Beth Tanner, *Psalm 78: A Teachable History*, in: Nancy Declaissé-Walford; Rolf A. Jacobson, Beth Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids 2014, 617–626: 624.

<sup>16</sup> Like in Exod 16:4 God lets bread rain down from heaven.

<sup>17</sup> LXX reads "bread of angels" (cf. Ps 103:20, here the angels are called "the mighty ones").

Explaining the manna vv. 24-25 call it *לֶחֶם אֲבִירִים* (bread of strength/of the Strong),<sup>18</sup> thus highlighting that it is a special and valuable food, typical for a feast, and something only God can provide. He thus spreads a festive table in the wilderness. Pointing out that God sent food to satiety (*לִשְׂבֹעַ*) further highlights the generous divine care (cf. Exod 16:8; Lev 25:19; 26:5) and also YHWH's unparalleled possibilities for action.<sup>19</sup>

*Food in Abundance: An (un)Conditional Divine Gift?*

Compared to the story in Exod 16, Ps 78 does not mention the aspect of God testing if Israel is abiding his Torah. In the Exodus story, the specific way the Israelites are to collect this bread plays a significant role, even shaping their community. Because it is impossible to store manna, it has to be collected daily and, furthermore, the portions of manna the people are able to gather fit their individual needs. Greedy behaviour or the attempt to build up stocks are impossible. Thus they have to gather their food day by day. This unique way of obtaining food is presented as divine instruction, which is enforced by the specific characteristics of the manna. Fulfilling basic needs thus requires the people to follow divine regulations. By doing so day after day, the people experience divine care and support and they are expected to learn to trust their deity. In addition, the alteration of work and rest, keeping the Sabbath, establishes their identity as community, and becomes an essential part of their life before and with God.<sup>20</sup> Exod 16:32 even continues the learning process into the future: as one measure of this bread is to be kept as a reminder for future generations. The manna commemorates the people's experience of divine support but also their learning how to respond to this care. The manna thus becomes a symbol for their being shaped into God's people.<sup>21</sup>

In Ps 78, however, this process is not described in detail, but only referred to. The focus clearly lies on the result: God sent the food and everybody was satisfied. Whether or not the people did understand the relation between the food

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ps 105:40; Neh 9:15.

<sup>19</sup> Dietler explains that public "distribution and consumption of a basic need derives added symbolic salience from its demonstration of confidence and managerial skill in the realm of production." (Michael Dietler, *Feasting and Fasting*, in: Timothy Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, Oxford 2011, 179–194: 181.) In the underlying leadership competition between YHWH and the Pharaoh in Exodus, the distribution of manna is meant to demonstrate YHWH's superior power.

<sup>20</sup> Dohmen points out that the manna helps the people to discover the Sabbath. Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18* (HThKAT), Freiburg i. B. et al. 2015, 393.

<sup>21</sup> This process of learning is also described in Deut 8:3.

supply and God's commandments is not mentioned. It is a connection the wise readers may recognise.

*Divine Food Supply: Exceeding All Expectations*

Closely connected to the memory of the manna is the coming of the quails.<sup>22</sup> Again, God is presented as creator, who holds power over the cosmos and nature: first, he opened the doors of heaven<sup>23</sup> for the grain and now he also summons the winds (vv. 25–26) in order to provide meat (cf. Num 11:31).

- (25) Everyone ate bread of the strong;  
he sent them provision to saturation.  
(26) He led out the east wind in the heavens,  
and by his power he drove the south wind.

Similar to the manna, God's provision of food is depicted as an enormous quantity, the winged birds are like the sand of the sea (vv. 27–28).<sup>24</sup>

- (27) And he rained meat on them like dust,  
winged birds like (the) sand of the seas;<sup>25</sup>  
(28) And he let them fall in the midst of his camp,  
all around his dwellings.

This image does not refer to a supply of basic needs, but to food in abundance and a rich meal for everybody. Especially meat was a rare treat for the majority of the people, “and meat consumption therefore serves as a powerful symbol. This special value for meat occurred in part because meat was often reserved for royal and divine ‘consumption’ in the ancient Near East.”<sup>26</sup> With the gift of the quails, God's power and his hospitality are equally emphasised, as he turns the wilderness into a dining table. The people are treated like royal guests at a king's banquet. The generous food supply alludes to two divine images, namely God as creator and God as king.<sup>27</sup> In the wilderness, God invites Israel to his royal table and offers them an abundance of food in a situation in which only God as creator

<sup>22</sup> The stories in Exod 16 and Num 11 also focus on the desire of meat. While in Exod 16 the people's desire for meat is fulfilled, but not condemned, in Num 11 the people are punished for their desire.

<sup>23</sup> For the motif of God opening the windows of heaven cf. Gen 7:11; Mal 3:10.

<sup>24</sup> Together with the metaphor of the “raining of meat” this simile emphasises that the quantity of the divine gift cannot be measured.

<sup>25</sup> The only other occurrence of a statement mentioning that food is “like the sand of the sea” is Gen 41:49, Joseph gathering grain.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel. Deuteronomy's Identity Politics in their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (BZAW 424), Berlin et al. 2011, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Nathan MacDonald, *The Eyes of All Look to You: The Generosity of the Divine King*, in: *ibid.*, Luzia Sutter Rehmann/Kathy Ehrensperger (eds.), *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature* (LNTS 449), London et al. 2013, 1–14: 12.

is able to do so. Furthermore, the divine table exceeds the gifts of all kings, who usually do not prepare a feast for the entire population, and thus underlines and confirms the divine king's power and prestige.<sup>28</sup> In this way, God not only proves himself king, he is able to compete and surpass the Pharaoh and the "meat pots" of Egypt.

### *Missing the Banquet for the Food*

A summarising statement brings the people's immediate need to an end and stresses once again that God is the one who gave them all they craved (v. 29). Thus, v. 29 points to a conclusion, yet, vv. 30–31 continue the image, pointing out that the Israelites did not desist from their desire.

- (29) And they ate and were well filled,  
and their desire (תַּאֲוָה) he brought to them.  
(30) They had not yet departed from their desire,  
their food (still) in their mouths.

The word תַּאֲוָה used here for desire, usually refers to physical needs, e.g. hunger and thirst.<sup>29</sup> Such a natural need is not considered sinful, "unless it becomes the sole criterion and goal of human life (e.g. Num 11:4; 11:34)."<sup>30</sup> When v. 30 emphasises the persistent desire, such a shift of significance is suggested and desire becomes greed.<sup>31</sup> In this way v. 30 continues the people's sinful behaviour, emphasising that they are only interested in their own needs.<sup>32</sup>

In the way the stories of the supply of manna and quails are retold, the people's attitude manifests itself in their eating. As they only focus on their own needs, God's abundant care and his role as a host does not come into view from

<sup>28</sup> Cf. MacDonald, *The Eyes of All Look to You* (Fn. 27) 7–8.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Samo Skralovnik, *The Dynamism of Desire. The Root ḥmd in Relation to the Root 'wh*, VT 66 (2016) 1–12: 4. (doi 10.1163/15685330-12341268)

<sup>30</sup> Skralovnik, *The Dynamism of Desire* (Fn. 29) 4. Hossfeld also notes that v. 29 uses "being satisfied" in a neutral way, a negative connotation is only added in v. 30. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld/Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51–100* (HThKAT), Freiburg i. B. et al. 2000, 435–436.

<sup>31</sup> Ps 106 even increases this characterisation. When vv. 14–15 refer to the giving of food in the wilderness, this description does not present a developing situation that goes awry, but concentrates only on the people's desire (תַּאֲוָה) and their testing (נִסָּה) of God. Although the events referred to are recognisable, the food itself fades into the background, emphasising only the people's behaviour. Thus, the situation is reduced to the people's craving and their doubts whether God will help them. Cf. Gärtner, *Geschichtspsalmen* (Fn. 3) 207.

<sup>32</sup> The story in Num 11 condemns the people's desire for meat because they do not trust in YHWH's provision but long for their life in Egypt (Num 11:4.18). In Exod 16:3, however, the desire is not evaluated, it just is a strong physical need. Cf. Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel* (Fn. 26) 76–77.

their perspective.<sup>33</sup> A royal meal, however, is more than merely consuming food, it also provides a sense of belonging and it establishes social interactions.<sup>34</sup> “Commensal hospitality may be viewed as a specialised form of gift exchange that establishes the same relations of reciprocal obligation between host and guest as between donor and receiver in the exchange of other more durable types of objects.”<sup>35</sup> However, in the way Ps 78 presents the events, the people do not recognise the divine host and their eating is not portrayed as a joyful feast before God (cf. e.g. Deut 12:7–8; 27:7; 14:26; 1 Chr 29:22). This misbehaviour is not presented as a one-time event, but as a general problem of the people in the wilderness. Hence the situation shifts and v. 31 continues the motif of God’s wrath (vv. 21–22).

(31) And the anger of God rose against them,  
and he killed the fattest of them  
and laid low the young men of Israel.

(32) Despite all this, they continued sinning;  
and they did not trust in his wonders.

(33) And he made their days vanish in vanity,  
and their years in (sudden) terror.<sup>36</sup>

Manna and meat are no longer an additional wondrous gift from God, but turn into a punishment for Israel’s mistrust, their selfish desire and their neglect of God. The description of the divine reaction continues the food image, and points out that the divine wrath, as a logical consequence, affected the “fattest” (משמן), that is those who benefited most from the food. Just as the people’s behaviour does not meet God’s expectations, the divine reaction does no longer match the image of a benevolent king. The lack of response presented in the people’s behaviour is mirrored by God’s reaction, he also acts against all expectations.

<sup>33</sup> In this presentation of the people’s desire one possible aspect is missing. Skralovnik points out that the “verb form of the lexical root ’wh indicates an existential need, which forces a human being into a ‘dialogue’ with various objects (for preservation), fellow human beings (for reproduction) and, in the prophetic literature, even with God. Verb forms of the lexical root ’wh do not merely mark the basic aspirations for self-preservation but also an equivalent aspiration for God (Isa 26:9; Jer 17:16; Amos 5:18).” Skralovnik, *The Dynamism of Desire* (Fn. 29) 7.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jean Bottéro, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World. Cooking in Mesopotamia*, trans. Teresa L. Fagan, Chicago 2004, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Dietler, *Feasting and Fasting* (Fn. 19) 183.

<sup>36</sup> בָּהֵלָה and הִבֵּל form a word play; both words indicate changeability and transience and thus point to an unexpected end of life. Cf. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Fn. 5) 282. Hossfeld notes, that the description in v. 33 is the exact opposite of the idea of a good life (cf. Job 21:13, 36:11). Hossfeld, *Psalmen* (Fn. 30) 436.

### *Images of Food Mirroring the People's Relationship with God*

The memory of food-related episodes in Ps 78 problematizes the people's relationship with God and shows how the fundamental trust in God's care is challenged. The people's doubts are routed in their inability to trust in God. They only believe what they see and have already experienced, but they are not able or not willing to deduce a basic trust from these experiences. Hence, the people do not reach a wise understanding of the relations between their own situation and God's possibilities and intentions. The deep trust and confidence the hymns are speaking of is clearly lacking in this retrospect.<sup>37</sup>

The problem presented thus shows a discrepancy between the people's expectations, their reactions and conclusions. On the one hand, the people do not only crave basic supplies but a feast, including meat. They have great expectations, yet on the other hand, they doubt if God is able to provide a royal meal in the wilderness. In addition, they seem not able to recognise and to appreciate what they get.<sup>38</sup> The abundance of food and especially meat provided by God resembles a royal meal and recalls the host's beneficent power. Furthermore, such a meal also points to the importance that the guests are happy to remain loyal subjects to the king's advantageous rule.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the people are not shown to participate in the banquet in an appropriate manner. The discrepancy between the portrayal of the people and God's acting defines the readers' critical distance. While the people seem to be entrenched in their behaviour patterns, the retrospect presented to the readers highlights this discrepancy and encourages the readers to join the critical reflection. The readers are pointed to the inappropriate behaviour and they may even add a sapiential reticence about abundance.<sup>40</sup>

### **Summary**

The way in which the psalms retell stories about food invites the readers to see the past through the lens of a well-known, daily workflow. On the one hand, the presentation of events focusing on food provides a link to the experience of the

<sup>37</sup> A quite similar dilemma is also expressed in Ps 81:11, yet it is presented from God's perspective. Here God is longing to satisfy Israel with the best food, if only they would turn towards him.

<sup>38</sup> The "distribution of meat played a central role in the giving of royal gifts and royal prestige." Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel* (Fn. 26) 98.

<sup>39</sup> Bottéro, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* (Fn. 34) 104–105.

<sup>40</sup> The question of dealing with abundance is also part of sapiential discussions. Sir 31:12–32:13, e.g., warns against greed and asks for moderation in the face of abundance at banquets. Cf. Ursula Rapp, *You Are How You Eat: How Eating and Drinking Behavior Identifies the Wise According to Jesus Ben Sirach*, in: Nathan MacDonald/Luzia Sutter Rehmann/Kathy Ehrensperger (eds.), *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature* (LNTS 449), London et al. 2013, 42–61: 53.

readers. They are able to establish a connection and to re-imagine the past.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the psalms reflect and interpret the past through the lens of food. As each psalm offers its own assessment, the characteristic of the events' presentation in Ps 78 becomes even more obvious, when it is compared with the retrospective view on the same events in other psalms. Ps 105 and 107 retell the stories of YHWH provisioning his people with manna and quails as a positive memory (cf. also Neh 9:20) emphasising the divine rescue, while the people's reactions do not come into view. In Ps 105:40, the people's request is instantly met by a supply of quails and bread from heaven, whereby the hostile environment becomes a place of abundance due to divine presence. Like in the temple, the people may experience God's love and care in the wilderness.<sup>42</sup> Ps 107:4–9 presents Israel's rescue with more emphasis on the threatening conditions, pointing out that despite the hostile environment, God is able to save his people. In contrast to such positive retrospective views, Ps 78 presents its critical review of the past shifting the focus to the people's social interactions in the contexts of meals and their response to God's generous attention. Ps 106 also joins the critical perspective but the short reference to the people's longing in the wilderness reduces this episode to the people's greed and God's punitive reaction (vv. 14–15), whereas images of a joyful feast are missing. Thus, unlike Ps 78, Ps 106 does not evoke the image of a missed opportunity or a rejected offer. Comparing these contrasting retellings of the same stories, Ps 78 takes a position in the middle as it highlights God's generous care and the people's rebellious delusion. Although the retrospective clearly states the people's failure, it does not negate the chances. In this way, the readers are not encouraged to learn something about their people's history, but to learn from these examples.

Looking back through the lens of Ps 78, it becomes evident that food-related events express the fundamental relationship between the people and YHWH. Looking forward, every meal may thus become an opportunity to remember and practice a relationship with God, which Ps 40:9 summarises in yet another food-related image: *ותורתך בתוך מעי* (*your Torah is in the middle of my belly*).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Nasuti, Historical Narrative (Fn. 6) 153.

<sup>42</sup> Gärtner, Geschichtspsalmen (Fn. 3) 177.