

THE PSALMS AND MODERN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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THE BOOK OF PSALMS, probably the most familiar part of the Old Testament, has always had a privileged place in Jewish and Christian prayer and devotion. The psalms were part of the piety and worship of Jesus (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26); and the frequent quotations in the New Testament of the psalms are exceeded only by the New Testament's use of Isaiah.

In this survey I will examine the different approaches developed and refined in the twentieth century for the study of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the psalms.¹ The two main concerns of contemporary scholarship on the psalms will provide the outline and structure of this article: the psalms as liturgy (i.e., as liturgical prayer) and the psalms as literature (i.e., the psalms as a collection of sacred writings). The psalms began their life as part of the worship of Israel, a role which they continue to play in the worship of many Christian churches; as a book, they became part of Holy Scripture, and so took on a new function – to instruct.

The Psalms as prayer: form criticism

The twentieth century has seen great progress in the understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures through the investigative method termed 'form criticism'. This method categorizes biblical literature by form, i.e., by literary type or genre; it associates the determined genre with an institutional setting in ancient Israel that produced and preserved it (what form critics call its 'setting in life'); and it investigates the literature's origins, before it was fixed in writing, in orally composed and transmitted material. It was Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) who applied the method to biblical literature in two groundbreaking works: his commentary on Genesis (1901) and his posthumously published introduction to the Psalms (1933).² These monumental contributions set the direction for studies of the Hebrew Scriptures in the twentieth century.

Even a cursory look at the psalms makes it clear that the prayers and poems collected in the Book of Psalms reflect various moods and

moments in the life of faith. By the application of the form-critical method to the Psalms, Gunkel was able to systematize these diverse compositions into their several types. The categories he employed for this systematization begin with the two dominant forms of address to God in the Psalter, petition and praise, or what Gunkel called lament psalms and hymns. These poems of plea and praise form the two poles of the Psalter.

The lament. The lament psalm is petitionary prayer, a call to God to relieve the psalmist's experience of misery and distress. The one uttering the lament appeals to God out of the experience of suffering, whether mortal illness, or oppression by enemies, or unjust accusations in a legal proceeding. The appeal for divine intervention and aid is made on the basis of God's character and reputation as a saving God, or on the basis of the psalmist's innocence of any sin deserving such misery and distress.

Many of the lament psalms conclude with an apparently abrupt, unexpected change of tone or mood; the psalmist's cry of distress changes to cries of rejoicing and thanksgiving, to praise of God, who has heard the psalmist's plea and is already acting to answer the psalmist's need (Pss 3:8; 6:8-10; 22:22-31 etc.). While there are a number of explanations for this sudden change from lament to praise, one that has been favoured by many students of the Psalms is the suggestion that the lament psalms are not private prayers addressed to God, but public prayers in the cult. That is, these psalms are part of Temple ritual, in which the lamenter makes his plea to God dwelling in the Temple. The plea is answered by a cultic official, speaking for God, who by a divine oracle assures the one suffering that God has heard the lament and will act on the petitioner's behalf. An instance of such a divine oracle is found in Psalm 12:5; after an appeal for divine help against enemies who lie and speak with double heart (perhaps testifying against the psalmist in a legal proceeding?), the psalmist hears from the cultic prophet or priest an oracle of assurance that God will act: "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up," says the Lord; "I will place them in the safety for which they long". In other words, the lament psalms are cultic dialogues between a suffering petitioner and a cultic official able to speak for God. The setting for this ritual is most probably the Temple.³

This explanation, while the most likely, is not without difficulties. It is puzzling that the divine oracle assuring the petitioner of the coming of help from God is missing in most lament psalms. The structure of the lament psalm seems to go from plea to praise, without the intervening word from God. That is, the oracle of assurance in Psalm 12:5 is

the exception rather than the usual form. One explanation that deserves consideration is that the stereotypical form of the lament ('one size fits all') makes it repeatedly usable by different people with different experiences of suffering; the same lament, because of its general and non-specific character, is suitable to more than one sort of distress or cry of pain for divine help. Perhaps the priest or prophet who pronounced the oracle promising divine assistance tailored or pastorally fitted his words to the particular distress of the person uttering the (non-specific) lament. The freedom of the cultic official to use different and appropriate responses to the many kinds of distress that would be brought to the Temple in a lament may explain their absence from many lament psalms.

The discussion to this point has focused on the large number of lament psalms of the individual. The Psalter also contains examples of national or communal laments (e.g. Ps 44), where the psalm voices the distress of the whole community, or of a group within the larger community. However, the distinction between the individual and communal prayers is somewhat fluid, since the 'I' who utters the prayer may be speaking purely personally or as the representative of the community. Psalm 77, for example, though cast in the first person singular ('I cry aloud to God'), makes the Exodus, the great event of *national* liberation, the basis for trust in the coming of divine aid.

The hymn. The other pole of Hebrew prayer, the hymn of praise, has a two-part structure. It begins with a call to praise, addressed to oneself (Ps 103:1: 'Bless the Lord, my soul'), to Israel (Ps 118:20), or to a group within Israel (the righteous in Ps 33:1; God-fearers in Pss 115:11; 118:4), to the Gentiles (Pss 100:1; 117:1), or to the other gods, subordinate to the God of Israel (Ps 29:1). Following this invitatory is the body of the hymn, beginning with 'for' or 'because' and proposing reasons for the praise of God: God's act of creation and his providential sustaining of what has been created (Pss 8; 104); his salvific deeds in history for the sake of Israel, whom God released from imprisonment and oppression in Egypt.

These two poles or types of Hebrew prayer are rooted in the conviction that the God of Israel is a saviour, who is both the source of the help prayed for, and the object of praise for help granted. These two basic types can be further subdivided into such subcategories as the psalm of trust (Ps 23), which may be derived from the expressions of trust so often found in the lament psalms. Similarly the thanksgiving psalm may have its origin in the words of praise and thanksgiving that conclude a number of the lament psalms, offered in anticipation of the

divine aid prayed for. Hymns of praise can be distinguished by the object of the praise: praise can be directed to God as divine king (Pss 93, 95—99), to Zion where he is enthroned (Pss 46, 48), and to his human representative, the Davidic king (Pss 2, 72).

After the classification of the psalms by type, the other major issue of form-critical investigation of the psalms is the search for its 'setting in life', i.e., the institution(s) in Israel that produced and preserved the psalms. A leading candidate would certainly be the cult, Israel's worship of God in local shrines (1 Sam 1:1—2:11), and in the Jerusalem Temple, as well as in its predecessors (Exod 25—27, 35—39) and its successors (Haggai; Ezra 1—6). In regard to the setting in life of the psalms, Gunkel surprisingly did not follow where his own logic was leading; he claimed not that the psalms were taken from Israel's cultic prayer, but that they were private expressions of piety modelled on cultic prayers. It was his student and successor, Sigmund Mowinckel, who demonstrated that the psalms were indeed part of Israel's Temple cult, where they functioned to express the pleas and praises of Israel and where they served as verbal complements to ritual acts, chiefly sacrifice (1 Kg 8; Pss 54:8; 116:17). In addition to accompanying ritual acts, psalms of praise could also be presented as offerings in and of themselves, as a substitute for cultic sacrifice (Pss 19:14; 40:7; 141:2).

When the Temple lay in ruins after its sixth-century destruction by the Babylonians and sacrifice was no longer possible, such verbal acts of worship as the psalms took the place of the interrupted Temple cult. This is the situation envisaged by Psalm 51: the Temple having been destroyed (v 18), Israel's worship is now limited to verbal praise (v 17); and the inner dispositions of the worshipper, dispositions formerly externalized and symbolized in the cult offerings and rituals, are now a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart (v 19).⁴

The gains of the form-critical study of the psalms are many and obvious. The classification and comparison of psalms of similar type, and the location of the psalms in the worship of Israel are clearly advances in our understanding and appreciation of the psalms. Nevertheless, the application of form criticism to the psalms had other, unintended, consequences. Form criticism led to an atomizing of the Psalter into its individual components (the only context of which was other psalms of the same type); and concern with the original cultic setting in life brought with it a lack of attention to how the psalms are now presented to us, as parts of the collection that makes up the Psalter. It is to the recovery of a sense of the Book of Psalms as the

interpretative context for the individual psalms – their ‘setting in literature’ – that we now turn.

The Psalms as literature: word of God and divine instruction

When one turns from the types of the psalms identified by form-critical analysis to their collection in the Psalter, one cannot but be struck by the apparent absence of order or plan in their arrangement. There are occasionally groupings of psalms by topic or theme, for example, several psalms that are concerned with the access of the pious Israelite to the Temple (Pss 15—17), or with the kingship of God (Pss 93, 95—99), or the psalms grouped as ‘Psalms of Ascents’ (Pss 120—134). But these prove to be the exceptions to the apparently random character and disorder of the prayers collected in the Psalter.

Despite the almost total lack of explicit statements of organizational intent in the Book of Psalms, some patterns and tendencies can be discerned. As mentioned above, a striking characteristic of the psalms of lament is the movement from deepest distress brought before God in petition to exultant praise for the anticipated divine intervention and relief. This movement from complaint to praise in the microcosm of the individual lament psalm is replicated in the macrocosm of the Psalter, where the psalms of lament tend to be clustered in the first half of the Psalter and the hymns of praise in the second half. The dominant type in the first major section of the Book of Psalms (Pss 1—41) is the individual lament; and the Book concludes with a series of hymns of praise (Pss 146—150). It is probably this movement from individual lament to communal praise that has given the Book of Psalms its Hebrew title, *Tehillim* (‘Praises’).⁵

A second clue within the Psalter to its arrangement is the presence of several doxologies, statements of praise found at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89 and 106. The first of these doxologies (Ps 41:13) is typical: ‘Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen’. These doxologies are ordinarily taken to be additions or supplements to the several psalms in which they occur; their purpose is to divide the Psalter into five smaller collections, five ‘books’: Pss 1—41, 42—72, 73—89, 90—106, and 107—150. This division of the Psalter into five books may be an intentional echo of the Pentateuch, the five-book Torah of Moses.

Another signal of partition in the Psalter is found at the end of Psalm 72; appended to the doxology (vv 18–19) that concludes the second ‘book’ of the Psalter is the statement in v 20: ‘The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended’. Since a number of psalms following Psalm 72

are attributed to David, Psalm 72:20 may be an indication that Psalms 1—72 were a proto-Psalter that predated the present Book of Psalms.

Claus Westermann. Another scholar positing an earlier form of the Psalter is Claus Westermann.⁶ He begins by noting the presence of a collection of psalms within the Book of Psalms, Psalms 120—134. These psalms are linked by a common heading, ‘a song of ascents’, and are taken to be a fairly late addition to the Psalter. The isolation of this collection leaves Psalms 1—119 as a proto-Psalter. The psalms that frame this collection, Psalms 1 and 119, are both wisdom psalms, psalms that see God’s *torah*, his divine instruction, as the source of wisdom. Westermann notes how this use of wisdom psalms to frame an earlier form of the Psalter effects a change in the function of the psalms. Psalms 1—119 no longer have a primarily cultic function; they have become divine instruction: ‘The Psalms have now become the word of God which is read, studied, and meditated upon’.⁷

Gerald H. Wilson. Westermann’s observation on the new function of the psalms, their transformation from cult songs to be performed to divine instruction to be studied, has been taken up and developed by Gerald H. Wilson in his 1981 doctoral dissertation.⁸ Of the many contributions of this important book, I want to focus on two that are important for understanding the purposes in the arrangement of the Psalter: the prefacing of the Book of Psalms with Psalm 1, and the positioning of royal psalms (psalms dealing with the origin and career of the Davidic monarchy) at the ‘seams’ of the five ‘books’ that make up the Psalter.⁹

While Wilson agrees with the form critics that the psalms originated in Temple prayer, his interest lies in the new context provided by the collection of Psalms in the Psalter. This new context, in Wilson’s view, intentionally obscured the original use and performance of the psalms in the Temple cult. In this new context, the psalms became texts to be read and meditated upon by the devout.

This fundamental shift in usage, from understanding the psalms as prayers for public cultic performance to receiving the psalms as Scripture for private and individual reflection, is effected by the collection of the psalms into a book of Scripture and by prefacing the collection with Psalm 1. The first psalm, with neither superscription nor attribution to an author, is an appropriate introduction to the psalms that follow. Timeless and didactic, Psalm 1 alters our manner of reading the Psalter. The psalms are no longer simply prayers, our words to God; they have become the word of God to us, worthy of reverent study and attention. This is underlined by the delight the devout reader

takes in 'the law of the Lord' (Ps 1:2). The Hebrew word *torah*, rendered in the NRSV as 'law', is more accurately translated here as 'instruction'. The Psalter, with its five 'books' of instruction, has become a Davidic mini-*Torah*, corresponding to the Mosaic *Torah* in the five books of the Pentateuch.

Psalm 2 also has a prefatory function. Perhaps originally a coronation ode, its new function at the beginning of the Book of Psalms is to introduce a major theme of the Psalter, the kingship of God and the Davidic monarch as God's adopted son (Ps 2:7). The tone of Psalm 2 is optimistic: it describes the defeat of the enemies of 'the Lord and his anointed' (the king) by the newly chosen ruler. This optimistic tone continues in Psalm 72, the final poem in the second 'book' of the Psalter (Pss 42—72), dealing as it does with God's continuing support of the Davidic dynasty, experienced in the divinely approved succession of a royal son to his father's position and role. Appropriately, the heading of Psalm 72 attributes it to Solomon, David's son and the progenitor of the dynasty to follow. Turning to Psalm 89, the final psalm of the third book of the Psalter, one is struck by the loss of the optimistic tone and the darker picture that this psalm presents. Although it begins with the divine promise of an enduring Davidic dynasty, Psalm 89 becomes in vv 39—51 a lament; the Davidic covenant, inaugurated in Psalm 2 and extended to David's descendants in Psalm 72, has failed. 'You have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced your covenant with your servant . . .' (Ps 89:39—40). With the collapse of the kingship, with the foundering of institutions thought to be blessed by God and permanent, where now are security and meaning to be found?

The psalms that follow in the fourth book of the Psalter provide an answer to this anguished question of the sixth-century exiles. Psalm 90 begins with the conviction that YHWH is 'our dwelling place in all generations . . . from everlasting to everlasting you are God'. This conviction is underlined by the heading of the psalm, 'a prayer of Moses, the man of God'. This superscription directs the eyes of the Judahite exiles, who have been taken from the land, who are without Temple or king, to the era of Moses, before land, Temple and king — to an era without those institutions when nevertheless Israel was God's people, his beloved, liberated from oppression and on the way to a new future. And Psalms 93 and 95—99 remind the exiled community that their security, wrongly placed in human kingship, is founded only on the kingship of YHWH (proclaimed by Moses in Exod 15:18), truly eternal, a stay and support for a dispirited people.

Wilson's views, to be sure, enrich our understanding of the Book of Psalms as part of Scripture, as God's word to us, a source of divine instruction; but this enriching need not obliterate the use of the psalms in liturgy and prayer, that is, as our words to God. The new function of the Psalter that Wilson has rediscovered is an added benefit, not a replacement.

Walter Brueggemann. A final contemporary approach that deserves comment is that of Walter Brueggemann.¹⁰ Agreeing with Wilson's emphasis on the prefacing function of Psalm 1, Brueggemann sees Psalms 1 and 150 as framing the Psalter between a call to obedience to God's word in Psalm 1, and a summons to praise in Psalm 150. The movement of the Psalter is thus from duty to delight. The path through the Psalter from obedience to praise moves through challenge, doubt and pain; and so Brueggemann examines three of the intervening psalms on the way through the Psalter: Psalm 25, a psalm of lament that begins in trust and ends in petition; Psalm 103, a hymn celebrating God's steadfast love in the troubling context of human guilt and finitude; and Psalm 73, the first psalm of the fourth book of the Psalter, a psalm at the canonical and theological centre of the Psalter. Psalm 73 opens with an affirmation of God's goodness to Israel, to the obedient observers of the law (73:1). Counter to this confident affirmation is the picture of the wicked, living at ease, apparently facing no retribution for the sinful conduct of their lives (vv 4–9). The bitterness of the psalmist at the injustice of the world finally gives way to an experience of communion with God in his sanctuary (vv 23–26). Thus the course of the Psalter between obedience and praise moves through lament (Ps 25) to communion (Ps 73) and thanksgiving (Ps 103).

There are other scholars who are following the lead of Wilson in seeing the Book of Psalms as a planned and coherent collection, and as the interpretative context for understanding the individual psalms; some of these are beginning to examine the theology and piety that emerge from smaller collections within the Psalter (e.g. Pss 15–24; Pss 25–34).¹¹ While constraints of space preclude discussing them here, it is my hope that enough has been said to invite those who use the psalms for prayer and reflection to share the rich feast laid out by modern scholarship: 'You prepare a table before me . . . my cup overflows' (Ps 23:5).

NOTES

¹ For two other recent surveys, see E. Zenger, 'New approaches to the study of the Psalms', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* no 17 (1994), pp 37–54; J. L. Mays, 'Past, present, and prospect in psalm study', *Old Testament interpretation: past, present, and future* (Nashville, 1995), pp 147–156.

² H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1966). For a short presentation in English, see H. Gunkel, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia, 1966).

³ J. L. Kugel, 'Topics in the history of the spirituality of the Psalms' in A. Green (ed), *Jewish spirituality: from the Bible to the Middle Ages* (London, 1986), pp 113–144.

⁴ See also Psalm 69:30–36, where a psalm ('my song' in v 30) will please God when other offerings are no longer possible, since the Jerusalem Temple lay in ruins (v 35). That prayer is a replacement for sacrifice in Psalms 51 and 69 can be seen in the hope expressed in both psalms that the Temple will be rebuilt and the sacrificial cult reinaugurated.

⁵ On the hymns of praise that conclude the Psalter, see J. S. Kselman, 'Psalm 146 in its context', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* vol 50, no 4 (October, 1988), pp 587–599. It must be emphasized that the grouping of laments at the beginning of the Psalter and of hymns at the end is a tendency, not a rigid plan: e.g., Psalms 8 and 19 are hymns found in the first half of the Psalter, while Psalms 140–143 are laments found near its end.

⁶ C. Westermann, 'The formation of the Psalter', *Praise and lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, 1984), pp 250–258.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 253.

⁸ Gerald H. Wilson, *The editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, 1985).

⁹ On the reign of God as the organizing theme of the Book of Psalms, see J. L. Mays, *The Lord reigns: a theological handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville, 1994), pp 12–22.

¹⁰ W. Brueggemann, 'Bounded by obedience and praise', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no 50 (June, 1991), pp 63–92.

¹¹ See, e.g., Patrick D. Miller, 'The beginning of the Psalter' in J. C. McCann (ed), *The shape and shaping of the Psalter* (Sheffield, 1993), pp 83–92; and 'Kingship, Torah obedience, and prayer: the theology of Psalms 15–24' in K. Seybold and E. Zenger (eds), *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung* (Freiburg, 1994), pp 127–142.