

TITLE:

How useful is the form-critical categorisation of the psalms into ‘types’ as an aid to understanding their message?

- 1**      *Introduction*
- 2**      *Definition of ‘useful’*
- 3**      *The basic genres*
- 4**      *More controversial types*
- 5**      *Sitz im leben*
- 6**      *Applications*

## 1 Introduction

The classification of the Psalms according to their content is by no means new. Even some of the titles within the text describe categories such as *mizmor*, *sir*, *shiggaion*, *miktam*, *maskil*, *prayer* and *praise*<sup>1</sup>, but these are mostly hard to define and may often refer to musical style rather than verbal content. So they are of limited help, especially as many Psalms lack such titles.

Even in Christian history, the attempt to classify is not recent. Matthew Henry<sup>2</sup> refers to Psalms of *penitence*, *instruction*, prayer, lamentation, meditation, thanksgiving, praise, and prophecy. And Martin Luther<sup>3</sup> recognises *didactic*, *prophetic*, *eucharistic* (ie thanksgiving) and *catechetical* types. But serious attempts to classify the whole psalter began with de Wette in the nineteenth century<sup>4</sup>, and only bore real fruit through the influential form-critical approach of H Gunkel in the twentieth, on which most other classification into *genres* and types is based.

## 2 Definition of 'useful'

To earlier scholars, the principal purpose of classification was devotional:

If we make David's psalms familiar to us, whatever errand we have at the throne of grace, we may find there apt words wherewith to clothe it, sound speech which cannot be condemned.<sup>5</sup>

This has not always been the case with more recent scholarship. For example, of Gunkel it is said:

Gunkel was interested in writing a history of Israel's literature.<sup>6</sup> Indeed it is hard to find any higher motive throughout his book, and such an abstracted view has coloured much subsequent work. 'Useful' to the Christian, though, must surely relate back to Paul's principle of study, that 'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'<sup>7</sup>. In other words, 'understanding' should bring us closer to God, and this should change our lives.

But the first stage in this process must always be to comprehend the original context, so that Gunkel was right to insist that:

Every ancient literary type originally has its setting in the communal life of Israel in a very specific place ... One who wants to understand the type must in each case define the whole situation and ask, Who is speaking? Who are the hearers? What is the mood of the situation? What is the effect desired?<sup>8</sup>

When we see how God moved Israel to worship, our own worship will be deepened.

## 3 The basic genres

Unfortunately, scholars classify the psalms in different ways, partly because of their own theological agenda, and partly because no literature sticks rigidly to academic structures. However nearly all agree on three categories which constitute a majority of the Psalms. These are *laments*, *thanksgiving*, and *praise*. Claus Westermann's insights into these are particularly helpful.

He sees praise as central to Israel's psalmody. His most basic category is the psalm of individual thanksgiving, or *declarative praise*. This is built upon a one-sentence exclamation of deliverance, similar to those found in all societies: 'Praise Yahweh, for he has delivered me' (eg Pss. 26.12, 30.1).

Such sentences could stand alone, but in the Psalms are developed for a specific cultic use, which is why they have the strictest structure of all genres. For the private answer to prayer leads to a vow to *confess* (*yadah*) his deliverance in the assembly. Hence the Psalms consist of an introductory *proclamation* and *summary of deliverance*, a *testimony* of the need and the deliverance, a *restatement of the vow of praise*, and *descriptive praise* (see below). So despite the personal nature of these poems, their *sitz im leben* is shown to be a public declaration, for God's glory: 'The psalmist does not intend to relate what happened to him, but what God has done for him'<sup>9</sup>.

The connection of this with *laments* becomes obvious from seeing that they also often contain a 'Praise Yahweh, for he has ...' sentence (eg Ps. 28.6), and

usually a vow of praise (eg Ps. 26.12). We can see them as the heartfelt cry for deliverance of the needy, whether from sickness, enemies or sin, but always connected either actually or potentially with praise amongst God's people. The lament finds its fulfilment in the Psalm of declarative praise. As Westermann points out:

... in the Psalms of the OT there is no, or almost no, such thing as "mere" lament and petition ... The cry to God ... is always underway from supplication to praise.<sup>10</sup>

Just as thanksgiving and lament are firmly based on experience of God, so is the third category, the *hymns* or Psalms of *descriptive praise*. Westermann makes clear that these are really the end-point of the previous two. Just as in laments, the vow of praise often ends with a sentence of declarative praise, so the declarative Psalms in turn end with a single sentence of descriptive praise. 'This sentence, "the miracle of exaltation", is the basic theme of the descriptive Psalm of praise'<sup>11</sup>. One central description of God is the key to these Psalms (eg Pss. 38.6, 93.5).

And yet these descriptions are never abstract. Though they cover all the superlatives of God's nature in our systematic theologies, they never speak of his attributes in isolation. On the contrary,

... in Israel this recapitulating praise which brings together descriptions never lost its connection with the unique, concrete intervention which was experienced in the history of the people or of the individual.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Westermann's work in defining these three *genres* also reveals the links between them, finally resolving their different settings into a unity of praise to the God who intervenes, the God of Sinai: *Yahweh*, 'I am really there'<sup>13</sup>. He summarises this in terms of *hesed*, grace (or covenant lovingkindness<sup>14</sup>). *hesed* does not describe God's attributes apart from a pre-existing relationship with him. 'It never becomes God's duty, but it also never was and never is merely arbitrary'<sup>15</sup>.

#### **4 More controversial types**

One disadvantageous outcome of the desire to classify is the mutilation of exceptions to make them fit the procrustean bed of the scheme. For example, the seven *penitential psalms* and the *psalms of confidence* (eg Ps.23) are usually seen as sub-types of lament. This would be legitimate at a purely literary level, but in practice seems to make them black sheep as far as *sitz im leben* is concerned. Since the lament is the cultic norm, the argument goes, there is no point in seeking a specific cultic use for these exceptions. In fact, their 'impure' form is regarded as evidence of late date. This is arguable.

More serious is the attempted reconstruction of the cult from the supposed existence of a Psalm type. A particularly well-documented example of this is the *Royal Psalm*. The only unifying feature in these Psalms is the mention of the king; their literary *genres* vary greatly. In that these Psalms contain clear references to coronation and anointing, it is quite possible that they were used in some way in the enthronement of the Davidic king, or perhaps even some annual royal festival<sup>16</sup>.

But Mowinckel, in particular, has gone beyond this hypothesis, taking hints from the historical books, and interpolating the practice of other contemporary cultures. He not only reconstructs the king's coronation ritual in detail, but asserts an annual festival, at the New Year, at which not only the king, but Yahweh, was re-enthroned through a dramatic portrayal of Yahweh's mythical victory over the forces of chaos at creation. Where the Psalms do not fit this reconstruction, we learn that

old cult-lyrical and hymnic fragments have been brought together in a new form, making it possible to sing these old sacral cultic texts in a new form.<sup>17</sup>

The circularity of this process is shown by Kraus (though he later falls into the same trap):

In the Psalter there is no ritual transmitted anywhere ... The principles of ancient Near Eastern ritual were adduced for the purpose of 'filling out' and 'completing' the fragmentary OT worship tradition. Surreptitiously, what was 'filled in' and 'completed' then became the governing principle of interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

That this is so is confirmed inadvertently by Seybold, who says that they are only a 'type' insofar as they relate to the so-called 'Ritual of the king' and the royal cult at the state sanctuary<sup>19</sup>. In this case then, the 'type' can blind us to other interpretations, and in particular to conscious, prophetic, messianic application. Such interpretation is scornfully excluded by Mowinckel, *re* Ps. 110:

Further discussion of the often recurring messianic interpretation of this or that psalm is from the point of view of scientific research unnecessary.<sup>20</sup>

This is a specific rejection of Christ's own interpretation<sup>21</sup>.

Nevertheless, some of Mowinckel's work on this category provides an insight into the relationship between the 'individual' and 'community' Psalms. By pointing out how the king not only *represented* Israel before God, but in some sense *embodied* the nation, he explains why certain Psalms can move between 'we' and 'I' at random, and how 'individual' Psalms may be used by the community:

According to this view of the king and his relation to the deity and to the people, and of his position in the divine services, there is no sharp distinction between public and private psalms ... The *royal psalms* in this extended sense are thus really *congregational psalms*.<sup>22</sup>

This has real significance in the Christian age, Jesus having identified so fully with our state, so that we are called his body. Far more than David, he is the true mediator between us and God: as we pray the Psalms, so does Jesus.

##### **5 *Sitz im leben***

Some of the dangers of reconstructing the cultic setting of the psalms through their *genre* have been mentioned. In particular, the circularity of dividing Psalms into *genres* to find their setting, and then excluding them from the setting if they do not fit the *genre*, has been pointed out. Mowinckel again falls into this trap when discussing the *Wisdom Psalms*, which he classes as late and non-cultic because they derive elements from several genres<sup>23</sup>. These Wisdom Psalms are neatly defined as 'didactic in tone and relatively amorphous in shape'<sup>24</sup>. They are best identified by their subject matter:

All the forms operate on the same assumption, namely that the world is ordered, that conformity or nonconformity to this order has consequences, that the main issues of order concern social conduct.<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion, Mowinckel casts light not only on the *sitz im leben* of the Wisdom Psalms, but also on the composition of the other types. By pointing to the likelihood of the foundation of a school of 'temple scribes' by Solomon, he draws attention to the hereditary families of singers, prophets, and judges (*eg* 1 Chr. 25) who staffed the temple. We know that the musicians led the singing (*eg* 2 Chr. 5.13), and therefore probably composed many of the Psalms. But these categories cannot have been completely distinct, being all levites, and it is not hard to imagine the composition of prophetic psalms by prophets, wisdom and law (*torah*) psalms by scribes, and so on. Even those not actually used in the cult would still fit within the ministry of the Temple. But there is no reason why these 'types' based on different ministries should not have coexisted from the beginning, rather than being purely the product of evolution down the centuries as Mowinckel believes.

Any conclusions drawn from this picture have to be tentative. We know little of the actual life of the first temple, although perhaps less use is made of the better known example of the second temple than might be. It is perhaps more satisfying to reconstruct the complexities of a hypothetical festival than admit relative ignorance on what *is* known. But the picture of the temple

guilds at least gives a tentative starting point for understanding Israelite worship through the varieties of Psalms they (presumably) wrote.

How did these fit with the individual experience of worshippers? Firstly, one must remember that Levites were individuals too. Just as most hymns now sung by 'the laity' were composed from the experience of ministers, so the temple singers' eloquent poetry could express both the individual and corporate worship of Israel.

Secondly, speculation aside, we know some of the contexts in which worship was offered. For instance Leviticus teaches about fellowship offerings made as thank-offerings, in fulfilment of vows, and as freewill offerings<sup>26</sup>. Such offerings are frequently referred to in the Psalms, and yet relatively little work seems to have been done in suggesting their relationship with the *genres* of Psalms. Mowinckel briefly mentions such a link between temple-composer and ordinary sacrificing worshipper:

We may suppose, therefore, that it had become accepted among the pious that the person who had been saved had better himself compose the thanksgiving psalm to be recited at the sacrificial feast \_ if he was able to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Why, then should not such Psalms be incorporated into the daily use of the temple? A better understanding of the relationship between specific sacrifices (whose purpose is well known from the Pentateuch) and the types of Psalm used with them, would give us a more integrated insight into the objective and subjective aspects of Israelite worship. The main barrier to this seems to be the unwillingness of many scholars to accept the antiquity of the sacrificial system in Leviticus \_ again in spite of New Testament testimony.

## **6 Applications**

This survey has only briefly sketched the form-critical *genres*, leaving a number of types unmentioned. It has attempted to look more at the conclusions to be drawn from the methodologies applied by workers in the field. Where this work is done from the clear basis of a faith commitment, it is more likely to yield *theologically* useful results. This is in keeping with the emphasis in the Psalms themselves on *hesed*, covenant lovingkindness, which can only be recognised in them by those who have experienced it for themselves:

All 'dogmatics' of the church [can] be only development of the confession of Jesus as the Christ ... Theology, that is, speaking about God, statements about God, can exist only when surrounded by praise of God. Strictly speaking, God can never become an object.<sup>28</sup>

With this proviso, such categorization can be of major benefit in understanding the contexts in which particular psalms are best used, and the movement of worship within them. The resulting enrichment of the worship of the individual and, more especially the worshipping community, is immeasurable.

Secondly, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Davidic king and the assembly of Israel, and thence between Christ and his Church, is an insight not to be gained outside the Psalms, which represent the heart of Christ as the Gospels represent his acts.

Thirdly, the close identity, especially in the wisdom psalms, between worship and practice should reawaken a sense of obedience as the necessary consequence of praise, which is very much lacking today. §§§

(2480

words)

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- 1 Kidner, 1995, p.37f.
- 2 Henry, 1973, pp.577-623.
- 3 Luther, 1857, p.13.
- 4 Day, 1996, p.11.
- 5 Henry, *op. cit.*, p.577.
- 6 J Muilenberg in Introduction to Gunkel, 1969, p.iv.
- 7 2 Timothy 3.16-17.
- 8 H Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1913, p.33, quoted in Kraus, 1988, p.44.
- 9 Westermann, 1981, p.109.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp.74-5.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.118.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 T Vriezen, quoted in B Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM 1974), p.69.
- 14 T Longman III, 1996, p.58. This is the pivotal theme of his book.
- 15 Westermann, *op. cit.*, p.121.
- 16 The drawing together of the Scriptural strands of evidence in fact makes such a festival, at the feast of tabernacles, quite plausible. It would make sense of the later Jewish expectation that Messiah would come at this feast (*cf* Matthew 17.1-13).
- 17 Seybold, 1990, p.102.
- 18 Kraus, 1988, p.60.
- 19 Seybold, *op. cit.*, p.115.
- 20 Mowinckel, 1962, vol 1, p.48 footnote.
- 21 Luke 20.41-44.
- 22 Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, p.76.
- 23 Mowinckel, 1962, vol 2, p.111.
- 24 Breuggemann 1984, p.42.
- 25 *ibid.*, p.43.
- 26 Leviticus 7.11ff.
- 27 Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, vol 2, p.110.
- 28 Westermann, *op. cit.*, p.135.

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