

## Lecture 3

### Form Critical Approach

#### I. Survey of Academic Approaches

##### A. Traditional: from Apostles to 1875

##### B. Literary Analytical: 1875-1920

###### 1. Men:

**J. Wellhausen** (1844-1918, Goettingen), **C. A. Briggs** (1841-1913, American Presbyterian scholar and later priest in the Protestant Episcopal Church),<sup>1</sup> **T. K. Cheyne** (1841-1915, an English divine),<sup>2</sup> and **B. Duhm** (1847-1928, Goettingen),<sup>3</sup>

###### 2. Method

- a. Denies superscripts are original and credible
- b. Reconstructs historical horizon by philological (late Hebrew) and theological (evolution of religion, late piety) typologies.
- c. By “scientific typologies” dated to Second Temple.

###### 3. Critical appraisal

- a. Ugaritic text showed language was early.<sup>4</sup>
- b. Comparative religions evidence refuted simplistic evolution of religion
- c. In spite of “hang over” with form critical, not of exegetical value.

<sup>1</sup> C. A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC, 2 vols. Repr. Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1986-87)

<sup>2</sup> T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of Psalms: translated from a revised text with notes and introduction* (London : Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904).

<sup>3</sup> B. Duhm, *Die Psalmen uebersetzt* (Freoburg i.B.: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1899).

<sup>4</sup> M. Dahood, *Psalms: introduction, translation, and notes*, vol. 1 (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966)

## C. Form Critical: 1900-Present

### 1. Men:

- a. Throughout the church's history some commentators recognized that psalms fell into various types, such as penitential psalms, and that they met differing emotional needs of the Church.
- b. Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932, Halle), the great champion of form-criticism, scientifically refined form criticism, first in an essay on selected psalms in 1904 and then in his commentary of 1926, which ignored psalm inscriptions and so evaded the question of their historicity.<sup>5</sup>

### 2. Method

- a. *Sitz im Leben* ("Setting in Life") where forms circulated: temple (priests), city-gate (sage), home, etc.
- b. *Gattungen* (Genre > species/ form): categorize psalms by their common treasure of words, moods, ideas, motifs and other literary criteria. This approach gains support from analogies with ancient Near Eastern hymns that belong to similar categories as those of the Psalter.
- c. Conclusion: five principal types of Psalms
  - 1.) *Individual laments*
  - 2.) *communal laments (ca. 50 psalms)*
  - 3.) *Thanksgiving [of individual or community]*  
N.B. Refined by Westermann to public confession/praise
  - 4.) *Hymns of praise (Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 65; 67; 68; 96; 98; 100; 103; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 139; 145-150.,*
  - 5.) *Royal psalms (Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 101; 110; 132; 144:1-11; cf. 89:47-52)*

<sup>5</sup> H. Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*. Completed by Joachim Begrich (Macon: GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

*Plus several minor types, such as songs of Zion (Psalms 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122), songs of trust and wisdom psalms (1; 37; 49; 73; 91; 112; 127; 128; 133).*

### **3. Critical Appraisal**

#### *a. Of Sitzen im Leben:*

- 1.) Disregards evidence for traditional approach. Identification of “enemy” hotly debated.
- 2.) Gunkel concluded individual psalm reached final form in Second Temple Period, but see objections to “literary analytical”
- 3.) Assumes long oral tradition without empirical validation
- 4.) .Too speculative as shown by no consensus among practitioners.

#### *b. Of Gattungen:*

- 1.) Chronicler (1 Chr 16:4) recognizes three types

*a.) Petition (lhzkr, NIV/NRSV, not TNIV, see Ps. 70: s/s)*

*b.) Public Praise (tdh - with “confess”)*

*c.) Praise (hll)*

N.B. Distinction between individual and community false; resolved by royal interpretation (see “liturgical approach”).

- 2.) These types confirmed empirically
- 3.) Distinction between individual and community flawed; fails to recognize extensive royal interpretation.

- 4.) Royal:

*a.) Not a form but a topic. Based merely on mention of “king.”*

*b.) Book of Psalms demands extensive royal interpretation. Why are these psalms so scattered throughout the Book of Psalms (see “liturgical approach.”)*

- 5.) Minor types

- a.) Cf. Psalm 137:1: “sing us one of the songs of Zion”
- b.) Wisdom psalms have formal characteristics

6.) Has hermeneutic/exegetical/literary values:

Among other merits, the recognition of a psalm’s form is important for philology and literary analysis. For example, words mean different things in different genres (cf. the meaning of “ball” on the sport page versus the social page). Moreover, a recognition of forms guides one’s reading strategy. The reader expects to read the Book of Revelation symbolically but a Pauline letter more woodenly. Also significantly, as it helps to interpret a sonnet by recognizing its distinctive form, the recognizing a poet’s motifs assists an exegete in his or her interpretation of a poem. Variations from a typical form can also be significant.

7.) Brings praise to scholar and exegete, not to God! Without carefully use of spiritual disciplines, may be destructive to spiritual/devotional life.

### III. Petition Psalms

#### A. Motifs:

1. Address to God
2. Lament/Complaint: God absent; enemy too strong; psalmist at point of death.
3. Confidence: God’s attributes; Psalmist’s election; Past saving acts
4. Petition: “deliver”: *ysh*‘: military (rescue) and legal (right)
5. Praise: Vow or open (no consensus as to reason for certainty).

## **B. Species:**

- 1. Protest of Innocence (Ps. 26, 44)**
- 2. Penitential (Ps. 51)<sup>3</sup>**
- 3. “Imprecatory” Psalms: “deliver” psalmist and “punish enemies (35 psalms).**

## **C. Imprecatory:**

- 1. Psalm 137 a text book example.**
- 2. Problem: contrary to New Testament teachings to love and forgive enemies.**
- 3. Solutions:**
  - a. “Mean spirited” (Kittle). Lewis speaks of them as “devilish: “terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms.”<sup>6</sup> Contradicts orthodoxy (“right worship”)*
  - b. Human spirit, not Holy Spirit. In fact, however, upon reflection they teach sound doctrine (2 Tim 3:16) and are most holy for the following reasons:*
  - c. Profitable for doctrine*
    - 1) By innocent saints who have suffered gross injustices. Few commentators have experienced the agony of utterly unprovoked, naked aggression and gross exploitation.
    - 2) Righteous and just: they ask for strict retribution (cf. Lev. 24:17-22). Here Lewis is helpful, for he notes such expressions are lacking in pagan literature because Israel had a firmer grasp on right and wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the absence of anger, especially that sort of anger which we call indignation, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom . . . If the Jews [sic!] cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Reflections*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because they are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. The thought of the 'righteous Lord'--who surely must hate such doings as much as they do, who surely therefore must (but how terribly He delays!) 'judge' or avenge, is always there, if only in the background.<sup>8</sup>

- 3.) Express total trust in God's justice. The New Testament upholds the justice of God and the legitimacy to pray for justice (Luke 18:6-8; cf. Matth. 7:23 with Psalm 6:8; Matth. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:6-9). In that connection, the pious trust God, not themselves, to avenge the gross injustices against them. "The wicked, by contrast, avenge themselves" (cf. Psalm 8:2; Rom 12:17-21).<sup>9</sup>
- 4.) To be avenged, not for revenge. The psalmist is seeking to be avenged, not seeking for revenge. "There have been few men," says Kidner, "more capable of generosity under personal attack than David, as he proved by his attitudes toward Saul and Absalom, to say nothing of Shemei."<sup>10</sup>
- 5.) Ethical, asking God to distinguish between right and wrong (cf. Ps. 7:8-9; cf. 2 Tim. 4:14-18).
- 6.) Theocratic looking for establishment of kingdom of righteousness by the Moral Administrator of Universe (cf. Psalms 72, 82). The earthly king asks no more of the Heavenly King than the latter asked of him (cf. Dt. 13:5; 17:7,12; 19:13, 19; 21:9, 22; 22:22, 24).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup> The biblical concept of "vengeance" (*NQM*) entails faith. B.W. Anderson oversimplifies the meaning of word to mean "to save." Better, it means that the LORD secures his sovereignty and keeps his community whole by delivering his wronged subjects and punishing their guilty slayers. Viewed from the perspective of the sovereign acting on behalf of his besieged community, a translation such as "deliver" or "rescue" is called for, but where the perspective is between the ruler and the enemy, as in Mi. 5:14, a translation such as "defeat" or "punishment" is appropriate. Only the sovereign himself has the legitimate right to use force to protect his imperium; the exercise of force by an individual is actually a hostile act. Mendenhall notes: "With reference to the early usages of *NQM*, one must conclude that the normative value system of the early biblical society would never tolerate an individual's resorting to force in order to obtain redress for a wrong suffered. . . . Yahweh was the sovereign to whom alone belonged the monopoly of force. Self-help of individuals or even of society without authorization of Yahweh was an attack upon God himself" (Mendenhall. *The Tenth Generation*, 95).

<sup>10</sup> D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 26.

- 7.) Theocentric, aiming to see God praised for manifesting his righteousness and justice in the eyes of all (cf. Ps 35:27-28; 58:10-11).
- 8.) Evangelistic, aiming for conversion of earth by letting all men see that the Lord is Most High over all the earth (83:17, 18).
- 9.) Covenantal, a wrong against a saint is seen as a wrong against God (Ps 69:7-9, 22-28; 139:19-22).<sup>11</sup>
- 10.) Oriental, full of figures, especially hyperbole (cf. Jer. 20:14-18).<sup>12</sup>
- 11.) Political.<sup>13</sup> If we may presume the enemy heard the prayer, he would be publicly exposed as one who opposes the kingdom of God. Moreover, the righteous identify with the psalmist and rally around him (Ps 142:7; cf. the complaint of Psalm 38:11). Indeed, the enemy and potential evildoer may be instructed and converted through prayer (cf. Ps. 51:13; 94:8-11).

*d. Not for Christian prayer*

- 1.) Church is establishing a spiritual, not carnal/political, kingdom.
- 2.) Church looks for ultimate justice in the eschaton, not in the present (Rev 20:11-15; cf. Isa 61:1-2 with Matth. 13:30; 25:46; Luke 4:18-20; John 15:15; 2 Cor. 6:2; 2 Thess. 1:5-9).
- 3.) Sin and sinner are now more distinctly differentiated (cf. Eph 6:11-18), allowing the saint both to hate sin and to love the sinner.
- 4.) The saint's struggle is against spiritual powers of darkness where he conquers by turning the other cheek and by praying for the forgiveness of enemies (Matt 5:39-42, 43-48; 6:14; Luke 6:28, 35; Acts 7:60).

<sup>11</sup> Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *Princeton Theological Review* 1.4 (1903) 537-553.

<sup>12</sup> G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 182. See hyperbole in Lk 17:2. Kirkpatrick, pp. xcii-xciii.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, "'Enemies' and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms," in *The Bible and the Politic of Exegesis*, edited by David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim press, 1991).

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