HOW USEFUL IS THE FORM-CRITICAL CATEGORISATION OF THE PSALMS INTO 'TYPES' AS AN AID TO UNDERSTANDING THEIR MESSAGE?

INTRODUCTION

The book of Psalms derives its name from the ancient Greek translation, *psalmoi*, which designates instrumental music and, by extension, the words that accompany the music. In Hebrew, it is known as 'the book of praises.' Discussing the form-critical categorisation of the psalms into 'types' within the scope of the analysis given by **Hermman Dunkel** (the founding father), evidently illustrate how it could aid the understanding of the message in the psalms. In this account therefore, I would discuss this analysis and while doing that, I would try to indicate how it is able to provide new possibilities for understanding the message in the Psalms, and how it can extend the reader's competence in knowing what kinds of meanings to look for. I would also try to explain the modification made by some other scholars and what seem to me as the possible limitation in some of the various categories.

FORM-CRITICAL CATEGORISATION OF PSALMS

Until the early decades of the century, the standard scholarly approach to Psalms and other books was historical criticism, which 'sought to understand the books of the Bible by a critical analysis of their composition, their authorship, date, provenance, purpose, and sources.' For the psalms, this method had proved

highly inadequate due to lack of specific data to help with dates and historical settings of the various poems. Even where a possible background is given in the titles of psalms (e.g., 7; 18; 30; 34; 51-52; 54; 56-57; 59-60; 63), neither the reliability of the tradition that produced the titles nor the psalm's use in the worship of Israel is certain.

Since the Psalter is not a manual providing directions for those leading worship but a collection of hymns, prayers, and poems for the people, the settings for these psalms in worship and other occasions must be inferred from the psalms themselves. Herrmann Gunkel (1862-1932) more than anyone else worked this out. This approach is called 'form criticism'. With form criticism things are rather different. From the beginning this was understood not only as affording insight into the biblical text by isolating pre-literary stages in its growth, but also as a tool in reconstructing the social life and institutions (both sacred and secular) of ancient Israel.

Gunkel shifted the emphasis in Psalm studies from an attempt to pinpoint the historical setting of a given psalm's composition to an endeavour to trace the psalm's use in public worship or private devotion. Concentration on authorship gave way to investigation of the religious setting in which the psalm may have arisen and of its oral transmission in living worship. Subsequent scholars have

modified his conclusions, but his classification of the psalms into five main categories remains basic.

According to Gunkel, **hymns or song of praise** suggest congregational worship utilising vocal and instrumental music and marked by exuberance and creativity (the 'new song'; psalm 33:1-3). The hymns begins on a joyful note in which the psalmist summons self (Psalm 103-104) or a community (Ps. 117) to praise the Lord. By this, form-critical categorisation of psalms into 'types' enhances the use of psalms for meaningful worship and better understanding of their message.

According to Gunkel, **individual thanksgiving psalms** are not so common as the individual laments. In them, the psalmist thanks God for deliverance from personal distress. They include such psalms as Psalms 30; 32; 34; 41, 116; and 138. Again there is no absolute regularity in structure, but they may include an introduction, in which the psalmist declares his intention to thank God, a narrative section, in which the previous distress is described as well as the prayer for deliverance and its fulfilment, and finally a conclusion.

The **'Pilgrimage Psalms'** (120-34) seem to have been used as a collection especially designed for those 'going up' to Jerusalem for one of the regularly occurring festivals (Deut. 16:16-17). They fit a broad pattern of anticipating the

journey (122:1), setting out (121), joyful arrival (133), and concluding evening worship (134).

Some psalms were categorised for **liturgy** uses. The words of such psalms were accompanying with actions. Psalm 66 functioned in connection with the making of an offering (66: 13-15). Psalms 48 and probably 132 were associated with processions; the latter would fit a re-enactment of David's bringing the ark into the city (2 Samuel 6). Psalms 24:, 9 and 118:19-20 suggests a procession passing through the temple gates, with participants carrying branches (118:27). 26:6 and perhaps 51:7 suggest ceremonial washings.

Communal laments are psalms in that the nation laments some public disaster that has come upon it, for example the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Psalms 74; 79) or some other disaster (e.g. 60; 80; 126). After an opening invocation of God, there is no fixed order in what follows, though the main part of the psalm tends to consist of a complaint directed at God and pleas to him for deliverance. With this in mind, we can easily understand the message in those particular psalms.

More psalms fall into the category of **Individual lament** than any other category. The components of the individual lament are virtually identical to those of the communal form, though the appeal to God's past salvation of the nation

and the double wish are no longer standard elements. An address to God and cry for help; an affirmation of trust; a series of petitions; a vow of praise; an assurance of being heard. Some examples are Psalms 3; 5; 7; 17; 25; 27; 56; 69 and 88. As an appendix to the individual laments, Gunkel included the **psalms of confidence** (e.g. Psalms 11; 16; 23). These are psalms in which the psalmist expresses his confidence that God delivers him from evils and enemies, the kind of thing complained about in the individual lament psalms.

Royal Psalms are other group of psalms as categorised by Dunkel. Though not designating strictly a literary type, this term is often used for a group of psalms that centre on Israel's king. They illustrate the role of the pre-exilic king in Israel's worship and the expectations and obligations, which the covenant laid upon the sons of David. These deals with the king's coronation (Psalms 2; 110), marriage (Psalm 45) and battles (Psalms 18; 20; 144).

On a general note, form-critical categorisation of the psalms into 'types' enables psalms to be used as scripture. The first picture that appears in psalm 1 is that of a tree, planted by a river, flourishing, yielding fruit (1:3). Used as a comparison, this is an image of a human life that is deeply rooted and marked by productivity, prosperity, and beauty. This psalm thus suggests that the way to the kind of life symbolised by the tree involve delighting in and meditation upon the word of God.

One other convincing argument in favour of Form Criticism Approach was its power to explain features in the Psalms that had been puzzling on the older hypothesis. Readers of the Psalms soon notice that in a good many of these texts there are quite abrupt transitions from petitions for divine aid to expressions of confidence that the prayer has been heard, or even to thanksgiving for benefits received. For example, the change of tone at verse 22 in Psalm 22, or at verse 4 in Psalm 54.

It is note worthy that, some portions of the psalms are cast in the language appropriate to lay worshippers, others to priest, others to – perhaps – 'cultic prophets'; and to read them with understanding we must see that, so far from being inventories of private religious emotions, they are conventionalised liturgical formulas, expressing more or less 'official' religious attitudes and viewpoints and designed for use in the performance of the official cult.

Furthermore, there is often a curious shift in the imagined speaker in many Psalms, where some verses seem to be spoken by the psalmist himself, others by God, and yet others by some dimly outlined third party. For instance, Psalm 55:22, where a mysterious voice comforts the main speaker in his anguish; or Psalm 91:14-16, where God himself seems to enter to endorse the reassuring remarks of the psalmist, who in any case is not praying but offering advice to

some unspecified listener. All these extends the readers competence in knowing what kind of meaning to look for.

MODIFICATION AND LIMITATION

As mentioned above, since the pioneering works of Gunkel, certain refinement in literary classification have been proposed. **Sigmund Mowinckel** went beyond Gunkel's analysis in his emphasis on the liturgical background of the Psalter. One effect of Mowinckel's work has been a much earlier dating for many Psalms previously thought post-exile or even Maccabean (i.e. second century B.C.), and it is now academically 'respectable' to suggest a date in the age of Solomon or even of David for some of the Psalms, especially those such as the 'Psalms of Zion' (46, 48, etc.) which seem to reflect ideas about the Temple and its site that must have been important from its very first construction.

Claus Westermann proposed to incorporate the traditional thanksgiving psalm into the class of hymns. He regarded such psalms as declarative songs of praise (e.g. Ps. 30), as opposed to descriptive songs of praise (e. g. Ps. 136). Indeed, he regarded the hymn (praise) and lament as the dominant categories of the psalter, and he presented the psalms as a movement from lament to praise.

Walter Brueggeman has added another dimension to the interpretation of the psalter. While recognising the traditional literary types established by Gunkel, he

placed a new grid on the classification, based upon the categories of the philosopher **Paul Ricoeur**. He distinguished between psalms of orientation (all is right with the world; hymns such as Ps. 8; 33; 104), or disorientation (laments such as Ps. 13; 74; 88), and of new orientation (e.g. Ps. 23; 30; 66). These three categories are not univocal, since traces of movement from one stage to another can be found in many psalms. Neither is his approach merely psychological, it helps the reader to see things that may not be seen otherwise, by underscoring the dimension of personal experience.

The classification of **Royal psalms** derives from content, not from literary factors. Indeed, many settings and moods are reflected in them: a royal coronation or anniversary (Ps. 2; 72; perhaps 110); a royal thanksgiving (Ps. 18; 144); prayers before and after (Ps. 20; 21) military operations; a royal wedding (Ps. 45), a 'mirror of princes' (Ps. 101). In the course of time such psalms would have become 'democratised.' Although originally featuring the monarch as the main figure, they came to be applied to and used by the average person (e.g. Ps. 28; 61; 63).

In a broad sense, most of the psalms can be considered **liturgical**, but certain poems capture the spirit of a liturgy more obviously, particularly those in which oracles, questions, and word by word response are featured. A liturgical format (question and answer) is conspicuous in the gate or entrance liturgies of Psalms 12

and 23 (Isaiah. 33:14-16; Mic. 6:8). Prophetic oracles appear in Psalms 50; 75; 85. Psalm 136 is virtually a litany, with the repetition of the enduring 'steadfast love' in each verse.   Apart, it should be remembered that 'the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung, not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons'.

Concerning the **Wisdom psalms** for example, not all would agree that this classification is proper, and there is a wide variation in determining which of the psalms might come under this rubric. The criteria for the classification remain somewhat vague: typical wisdom language (such as 'teach' and 'fear of the Lord'); acrostic patterns (e.g. Ps. 34; 37); the contrast between the just and the wicked (Ps. 1); the problem of retribution (Ps. 37; 73); a meditative style (Ps, 90). If the literary genre remains difficult to pin down, perhaps it is better to speak of wisdom influence on such psalms as 1; 32; 34; 37; 49; 73.

On the whole, I found that form criticism is very much a matter of genre-recognition, not just in the sense that it involves a deliberate attempt to describe and define the various genres into which the category 'psalm' may be subdivided, but in a much more far-reaching sense.

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