

QUESTION

IN WHAT WAYS DO RECENT INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE PROCESS OF THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS, AND ITS FINAL FORM, HELP US TO UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALMS?

INTRODUCTION

The two parts to this question on the book of Psalms are historical question (i.e. the process of formation) and the literary question (i.e. its final form). Though, they are distinct questions but they are closely related. In this account therefore, I would refer to the titles of the Psalms, the structure of the five books of Psalms, and the patterns which scholars have noted in the move from the earlier to the later Psalms. Having done that, I would move on to discuss its final form and then explain how this has helped us in understanding the significance of the Psalms.

THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

No fewer than 73 psalms are attributed to David. Other authors named in the titles are Asaph (50; 73-83), the sons of Korah (42-49, 84-85, 87-88), Solomon (72; 127), and Heman (88), Ethan (89), both Ezrahites, and Moses (90), who have one psalm each attributed to them. Some bear descriptive titles such as “A Psalm of Ascents” (120-134) and “Psalm for the Thank Offering” (100).

Ancient Jewish and Christian ecclesiastical traditions both held David to be the author of the book (and final editor of those psalms ascribed by the text to others), but modern biblical scholars agree that the book was compiled from older independent collections. Nonetheless, Davidic authorship of many of the psalms has often been denied, principally on the ground that David the psalmist of popular belief bears no resemblance to David the warrior of the books of Samuel and Kings.

The Psalter as we have it consists of five books 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150. This division goes back to the LXX version, which was begun as early as the 3rd century BC. Every section is easily recognisable because a doxology closes each book. These doxologies are short except the one that ends Book V; there, an entire psalm is given over to the closing doxology. The five divisions of the Psalter are as follows: Book I, Ps. 1-41; Book II, Ps. 42-72; Book III, Ps. 73-89; Book IV, Ps. 90-106; Book V, Ps. 107-150. The division probably follows the pattern of the Pentateuch. Indeed, the number of psalm (150) follows closely the number of sections into which the Pentateuch is divided for reading in the synagogue (153).

Apart, various features suggest that there were separate collections of psalms in use before the final compilation. For example, certain psalms, in whole or in part (notably Ps. 14 and 53; Ps. 40:13-17 and Ps. 70; Ps. 57:7-11 plus 60:6-13 to make Ps. 108), occur in more than one part of the Psalter. Further, a large group (42-83) speaks predominantly of 'God' rather than 'the Lord', whereas other blocks (1-41; 84-89;

90-150) have the opposite preference, even in psalms attributed to some of the authors of the former group (42-83).

The modern scholarship is skeptical about two aspects of the traditional titles: authorship (hence dating) and setting. There is no hard evidence for Davidic authorship of any of the psalms. *David's reputation as a musician (1 Samuel 16:23; Amos 6:5) makes it reasonable to associate him with the psalms, but it is not possible to prove authorship. As regards the setting in a very generic way: a lament of an individual or community, a song of praise in the Temple, and so on. In other words, literary classification has replaced the historicising tendency that the titles display.

THE FINAL FORM OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

A landmark in the modern study of the Psalter was the work of H. Gunkel in the early decades of this century. To him it was all-important to start by distinguishing the different classes of psalms by attending to (a) the worship-situations from which they had sprung ('some definite divine service', rather than some event in the history of the nation or the

writer); (b) the thoughts and moods which different psalms were found to have in common; and (c) the recurrent features of style, form and imagery which served these various ends.

Gunkel analysis of literary categories remains the backbone of contemporary approaches to the Psalms, though more emphasis is now given to their individuality. The life situations in which hymns were used and within which they developed must have been numerous: victory after battle, thanks for harvest, relief from drought and plague, commemoration of the Exodus, and the seasonal feasts.

He found the following main types: Hymns of Praise, Personal Thanksgiving, Communal Laments, and Personal Laments. In addition there were smaller categories such as Entrance Liturgies, Blessings and Cursings, Wisdom Psalms, Royal Psalms; and there were also mixed types. His classification has been widely adopted and approved by many Scholars and his insistence on the importance of such an approach they seldom questioned.

These other Psalms arose out of particular occasions. The Royal Psalms were composed for use in connection with events in the life of a king. Several psalms were produced to suit liturgical needs, providing the script for a procession around the city or for the offering of sacrifices (Psalm 66). More than two dozen 'Wisdom Psalms' offer short observations growing out of life's experiences (Psalm 127, 128) or longer reflections on the great problems of life (37, 73) or they may commend Torah (instruction) and its study (1; 19; 119). The alphabetical acrostic psalms were built on the pattern of the Hebrew alphabet, probably both to facilitate memorisation and also for the sheer delight of producing such a work.

Mowinckel in his own investigation, distinguishes two main types of Hymns: the more general category, which deals with the works of God as a whole, and the more special type which depicts a particular work of salvation. (Ps. 136 for the former and the latter Ps. 114, 46 & 48). He paid a special attention to this type. In his view the main characteristic of

these Psalms is that ‘they salute Yahweh as the king, who has just ascended his royal throne to wield his royal power’. He also included in this group Ps. 95 and 100, and linked with them a second, closely associated group of songs consisting of Ps. 8, 15, 24, 29, 33, 46, 48, 50, 66a, 75, 76, 81, 82, 84, 87, 114, 118, 132, and 149.

Mowinckel proceeded to reconstruct the Enthronement Festival of Yahweh, on the basis of the so-called Enthronement Psalms, Near Eastern analogies, and various hints found in post-biblical Hebrew literature; he regarded this Festival as ‘another aspect of the harvest and new year festival itself. The principal motives associated with this cultic occasion were the kingship of Yahweh, the defeat of the primeval enemies, the creation of the world, and the judgement of the nations. This investigation of course points to the main significance of the concerned Psalms.

It is important to stress that any classification of psalms according to their categories, or *Gattungen*, is not an exact science, and it is bound to involve a subjective judgement.

In the OT there are comparatively few examples of pure psalm-types, and the *Sitz im Leben* of most Psalms is far from certain. We must also reckon with the possibility that in the course of the history of the Psalter some psalm-types may have disintegrated, or that some Psalms lost their original cultic setting as in the case of the Royal Psalms. This may well have affected the form and contents of the Psalms concerned. On the other hand, irrespective of the weakness and difficulties of this method of interpretation, this seems to be right approach to the Psalter and it brings out clearly the significance of Psalms.

HOW THE RECENT INVESTIGATION HAS HELPED US TO UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALMS.

In both Jewish and Christian tradition, the psalter is one of the most treasured books. It is aptly considered a school of prayer, not simply because it contains prayers that can be appropriated for personal use but because it also teaches one to pray. The familiarity and the frankness of the lament, the enthusiasm of the hymn, the confessional character of the thanksgiving – all these characteristics speaks to the

human heart before God. It is note worthy that our understanding of this significance of psalms is a direct result of the recent investigations.

Apart, the book of Psalms is unique in the Bible because it is a collection of literature of prayer, praise, and meditation.

The recent investigation has made it clear to us that, as the Bible's narrative materials relates what God has done and the prophetic literature reports what God has said, the Psalms present the response of the people to the acts and words of God. This of course is one of the significance of the psalms. For example, psalm 8 celebrates God's work as Creator, addressing God with general words of praise. Psalm 30 expresses praise and thanks to God.

Furthermore, the recent investigation illustrates the theology and worship of the Israelites across the six centuries in which they were composed and collected. No other book in the Bible has this kind of origin and orientation. One learns what kind of God Israel worshiped and both the history and the mystery of the covenanted relationship. At the same

time, one learns much about the warmth and dynamism of Israel's faith.

Further more, in Gunkel's definition of the Psalms which he categorised as *Hymns or Praise*, the same which Westermann preferred to speak about as *Descriptive Praises*. Their investigation made it clear to us that the significance or let's say, 'the principal aim' of this psalm-type is to declare Yahweh's greatness, which he has manifested both in nature and in the history of Israel. They are the response of the worshipper or the cultic community to the works of God, or to his saving intervention. This cultic answer takes the form of praise for what God had done. Thus the main theme is his praise. We also note that, the term 'Songs of Zion' is derived from 137:3, where the captors of the Jewish people asked them to sing 'the songs of Zion', which probably were a group of songs composed for the glorification of Jerusalem, and ultimately for the praise of Yahweh – for the glory of Zion is Yahweh.

In sum, the psalms arose out of the midst of Israel's life in the presence of God, responding to good times and bad, providing words for the celebrations of the communities and problems of life.