
PSALMS

A GUIDE TO STUDYING THE PSALTER

SECOND EDITION

W. H. Bellinger Jr.

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Preface to the Second Edition

I am pleased to offer the second edition of this guide in the hope that it will provide benefits to readers of the Psalms, especially to students who are beginning their journey with the Psalms. This edition is an update and gives special attention to three matters: (1) the changed context of form-critical work on the Psalms in the twenty-first century, (2) recent work on the interpretive significance of the book of Psalms as a whole, and (3) the place of readers in interpreting Psalms.

I am keenly aware of the contributions of many to this volume. Thanks go to Baker Academic and especially Jim Kinney for their significant efforts. I must once again thank Baylor University, its president, provost, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and my colleagues in the department of religion for crafting a context supportive of continuing biblical scholarship. John Anderson, Trevor Cochell, Christine Jones, Lindsey Trozzo, and especially Roy Garton deserve great thanks. My wife, Libby, continues to support my scholarly vocation. I trust that this edition will help students to read and study the life-giving Psalms.

Preface to the First Edition

Most of my professional life has focused on the book of Psalms. These poems center on worship and provide an especially fruitful source of insight concerning the relationship of theology and worship. My own pilgrimage keeps returning to just these concerns; many other readers of the Bible give testimony to similar experiences. Out of that background, I have written this book.

While ministers and other members of the worshiping community may find the volume useful, its primary intended audience is students. The aids at the end of the book should help that audience. I hope the work will be not a book about the Psalms, but a guide to reading and hearing the Psalms. The volume is well suited for reading in conjunction with the Psalms.

Producing a book leaves one indebted to many people. I wish to thank Baylor University, its president, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and my colleagues in the department of religion for providing a setting in which to study and write. The work for this volume has been supported significantly by the Baylor University Research Committee and by the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies. Many individuals have helped: Mikeal Parsons, Tony Moyers, Jan Granowski, Jann Clanton, Ronald Clements, and Sandra Ratley. I am also grateful to Patrick Alexander and Hendrickson

Publishers. My wife, Libby, and children, Jill and Chip, have given me support.

I dedicate the volume to my wife, Elizabeth Smith Bellinger, faithful lover, companion, and friend. She makes possible every aspect of my life, and she has, no doubt, lived with the Psalms longer than she ever thought possible. I am grateful.

Abbreviations

ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
FOTL	The Forms of Old Testament Literature
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
LHB/OTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WW	<i>Word and World</i>

1

Getting Started

The book of Psalms is the most read, the most used, of all the Old Testament books. In the Psalms, ancient worshipers address God; for centuries people of faith have learned how to pray from these texts. The Psalms express every emotion—from joy to despair, from hate to love. Thus pilgrims of faith find themselves in the Psalms, and they find themselves praying. “Prayer Book of the Bible” is a fitting title for the book. Martin Luther wrote,

This explains, moreover, why the Psalter is the favorite book of all the saints, and why each one of them, whatever his circumstances may be, finds in it psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake.¹

Many readers will fondly remember verse 1 of the Twenty-third Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Or Psalm 100:

1. For the German original, see Martin Luther, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel: Hausgegeben von Heinrick Bornkamm* (1550; repr., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 68; English translation quoted in A. Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 20.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing. (vv. 1–2)

Or Psalm 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” People of faith throughout the generations, then, identify with the book of Psalms.

The Psalms have also significantly influenced history and theology. These texts relate to vital parts of the history of ancient Israel and thus found a place in the life of the early church (Mark 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The book also forms a kind of summary of Old Testament theology, reflecting representative themes in the story of God and ancient Israel.² In addition, the Psalms have influenced the worship of the church; they address the encounter between God and congregation as well as the significance of the worship event for the life of faith.

The Psalms have greatly affected the community of faith.³ That reality alone moves us to study these texts to discover their historical impact and their relevance for contemporary life. We will begin with three introductory matters—setting, shape, and poetry—that will prepare us to develop and apply a method of psalm study.

The Setting of the Psalter

Crucial to our study of the Psalms is a framework, and the setting in which Old Testament psalms occur can supply it. The narrative portions of the Old Testament contain psalms; such songs relate to specific experiences in the life of ancient Israel. Exodus 15:1–18 illustrates this perspective. God has just delivered the people from oppression in Egypt, specifically from the armed forces of the Pharaoh at the sea. The people celebrate this deliverance with a hymn of praise:

2. See G. W. Anderson, “Israel’s Creed: Sung Not Signed,” *SJT* 16 (1963): 277–85.

3. Concentration camp victims who found hope and strength in the Psalms provide recent history’s best-known illustration. See, for example, B. W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 2–3.

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
 horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
 The LORD is my strength and my might,
 and he has become my salvation;
 this is my God, and I will praise him,
 my father's God, and I will exalt him.
 The LORD is a warrior;
 the LORD is his name. (vv. 1–3)

The psalm conveys the people's faith and helps them define and understand their encounter with God at this high point in their history. Other psalms embedded in the narrative parts of the Old Testament can also function as songs of faith:

1. Judges 5:1–31 celebrates God's victory for ancient Israel over the Canaanites. The song serves as a reminder of the God who delivers.
2. First Samuel 2:1–10 offers thanksgiving on the part of Hannah, who has just received the gift of a son. The song encourages future Israelite generations to have faith in the God who "raises up the poor from the dust" (v. 8).
3. Jonah 2:2–9 expresses thanksgiving for Jonah's deliverance from drowning, a deliverance wrought by way of the great fish. The psalm teaches that "deliverance belongs to the LORD!" (v. 9) and that God is attentive to the cries of those in need.
4. Jeremiah 20:7–18 contains two of the prophet's prayers of lament. Jeremiah cries out in the midst of difficulty in his prophetic task. These prayers portray the painful side of the honest dialogue of faith and provide justification for the community's inclusion of the difficulties of life in its relationship with God. Jeremiah's laments also confronted ancient Israel with its refusal to repent in the face of God's word.

The Old Testament includes additional psalms, but these examples show that psalms function as pilgrimage songs, expressing and defining faith for the people of God.

The book of Psalms reflects the practice of the people journeying, going on a pilgrimage to worship in Jerusalem. We will see that

there is a collection of psalms for the ascent to the temple. As people journeyed to Jerusalem for major festivals, they sang psalms on the way. Note Psalm 122:1:

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

We might also think of pilgrimage in a broader sense, as a metaphor for the life of faith. Believers, ancient and modern, journey through life. Psalms provided ancient Israel with expressions of faith to sing on the journey of life. Psalms kept the people going and expressed and defined their faith; such songs helped the people understand and enact their belief.

The Old Testament contributes this basic framework for reading psalms as songs of faith, but we also need to remember that the Old Testament has a broader setting—the ancient Near Eastern world. Writing psalms was an ancient practice. Archaeologists have discovered Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian texts similar in language, poetic form, vocabulary, and thought to the psalms of the Old Testament. Hear a section from a hymn to the Assyrian Moon-God:

O Lord, decider of the destinies of heaven and earth,
whose word no one alters,
Who controls water and fire, leader of living creatures,
what god is like thee?
In heaven who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted.
On earth who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted.⁴

Compare Psalm 89:5–14:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.
For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,

4. F. J. Stephens, trans., “Hymn to the Moon-God,” *ANET*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 386.

a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
 great and awesome above all that are around him?
 O LORD God of hosts,
 who is mighty as you, O LORD?
 Your faithfulness surrounds you.
 You rule the raging of the sea;
 when its waves rise, you still them.
 You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
 you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
 The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;
 the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.
 The north and south—you created them;
 Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.
 You have a mighty arm;
 strong is your hand, high your right hand.
 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
 steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Listen to part of a prayer of lamentation to Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven:

How long, O my Lady, shall my adversaries be looking upon
 me,
 In lying and untruth shall they plan evil against me,
 Shall my pursuers and those who exult over me rage against
 me?
 How long, O my Lady, shall the crippled and weak seek me
 out?
 One has made for me long sackcloth; thus I have appeared
 before thee. . . .
 Let my prayers and my supplications come to thee.
 Let thy great mercy be upon me.
 Let those who see me in the street magnify thy name.⁵

Compare Psalm 13:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?

5. Stephens, "Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar," *ANET*, 384–85.

How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Old Testament psalms also differ from other psalms in the ancient Near East. The immediate distinctiveness of Hebrew psalms is their vision of faith in the one God, Yahweh (the LORD). The book of Psalms is a central expression of ancient Israel’s distinctive faith and as such encourages the community of faith to remain loyal to the one God, Yahweh. Psalm 29 demonstrates this perspective. A number of scholars have argued that Psalm 29 betrays Canaanite influence. Some have suggested that this psalm is actually a Canaanite hymn that ancient Israel adapted to its faith; if that is true the psalm may even polemicize against the idols by saying that *Yahweh*, not the Canaanite nature deities, is to be praised as the Lord of nature.⁶ To be sure, Psalm 29 is similar to other ancient Near Eastern texts, but it uniquely affirms ancient Israel’s faith in the one God, Yahweh:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. (v. 10)

Psalms, in short, come from a sociohistorical setting in the ancient Near East and reflect Israel’s encounter with God in that setting. Theology and culture interact in the Psalms as God uses the ancient Near Eastern setting as the medium and place of revelation. This reality implies that in ancient Israel the Psalms articulated faith and encouraged the people to hold fast during their pilgrimage of faith.

6. For bibliography on the Canaanite background of Psalm 29, see P. C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 68–71, 107–8.

The Psalms call for belief in Yahweh rather than in the Canaanite deities. Caution is essential for studying the ancient Near Eastern setting of the Old Testament and the Psalms, because we often are forced to depend on hypotheses. Nonetheless, an awareness of this background can help in reading the Psalter.

Up to this point, the Old Testament setting of psalms and the ancient Near Eastern setting of the Old Testament have suggested a starting point for reading psalms—understanding them as pilgrimage songs of faith. The songs help articulate, encourage, and define belief in Yahweh; they help ancient Israel comprehend its distinctive faith. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Psalms forms the standard collection of these texts. Therefore, we next need to inquire about the particular shape of that book.

The Shape of the Psalter

The organization of the book of Psalms is our next matter for consideration. We will look at the title, structure, superscriptions, and collections of the book of Psalms.

Title

The word *psalm* is a transliteration of the Greek word referring to a song performed to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. “Psalter” is another title for the book; this title comes from the Latin word indicating the stringed instrument used to accompany the songs. The original title of the book, however, is “Book of Praises” (in Hebrew סֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים, *sēfer tēhillîm*), a singularly appropriate title.

Structure

The Psalter consists of five divisions, or “books,” analogous to the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses. As there are five books of Moses, the Torah or Law, so there are five “books” of Psalms, perhaps in poetic response to the Torah.

Table 1
Five Books of Psalms

Book I	Pss. 1–41
Book II	Pss. 42–72
Book III	Pss. 73–89
Book IV	Pss. 90–106
Book V	Pss. 107–50

Each book ends with a benediction giving praise and thanksgiving to God, especially for the psalms just completed.

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Amen and Amen. (Ps. 41:13)

See also Psalms 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48; 150. Psalm 150 functions as a brief, powerful benediction for the fifth book of psalms and for the entire Psalter. The first Psalm forms the introduction to the Psalter, calling upon individuals to choose between two lifestyles—the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked. Psalm 2 is probably a second part of the introduction, because it concerns the same decision for nations. Psalm 149 speaks of the relation between Yahweh and the nations, as does Psalm 2; perhaps Psalm 149 is also part of the book’s conclusion. The Psalter, then, traverses the path from obedience in righteous living to the uninhibited praise of Yahweh (Pss. 149; 150), the response to the joy found in the lifestyle of righteousness.

Superscriptions

Of the 150 psalms, 116 have superscriptions, brief descriptions written just above the text. Most scholars agree that superscriptions are not original to the text but were added in the process of compiling the Psalter. Reasons for this judgment include the following: (1) the lack of agreement between the superscriptions in the Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac versions of the Old Testament; (2) analogy to other biblical texts, especially Chronicles;⁷ and (3) difficulties in correlating content

7. Chronicles, from the postexilic era, does not fully reflect the practice of attaching superscriptions to psalms; the later Dead Sea Scrolls do, however. The practice thus

in a given superscription⁸ with that in the body of the corresponding psalm. Nonetheless, the superscriptions are a part of the book of Psalms and may hint about how ancient Israel interpreted these texts. The superscriptions vary but often contain three elements:

1. *Collection markers.* Many of the superscriptions contain a phrase such as “A Psalm of David,” “A Psalm of Asaph,” or “A Psalm of the Korahites,” indicating the liturgical collection from which the psalm came. The compilers of the Psalter have used several collections. The next section discusses these.
2. *Technical terms related to use in worship.* Psalm 59 is a Mik-tam (golden poem) of David, and its superscription includes instructions to the choirmaster. The phrase “Do Not Destroy” apparently refers to the tune used to accompany the psalm. Some of these Hebrew terms are obscure, but they do appear to relate to the use of the psalm in worship.
3. *Historical notes.* Several psalm superscriptions include a setting for the psalm. The superscription of Psalm 59 says, “Of David. A Miktam, when Saul ordered his house to be watched in order to kill him.” These historical notes help the reader envision the psalm’s impact in a particular setting in a representative person’s life. These historical notes provide clues to the way the compilers of the Psalter understood certain psalms to function in life.

Psalm 57’s superscription has all three elements: “To the leader: Do Not Destroy [technical terms for use in worship]. Of David. A Miktam [liturgical collection], when he fled from Saul, in the cave [historical note].”

probably derives from a time after the writing of Chronicles and before the production of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

8. See, for example, B. S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *JSS* 16 (1971): 137–50; idem, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 520–22; M. D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 456–59; W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 528–30.

Collections

The Psalter contains several collections of psalms. Much interest has centered on the psalms of David. Some suggest that the occurrence of the phrase *a psalm of David* in the superscription indicates Davidic authorship,⁹ but the reference in the Hebrew is less than clear. The Hebrew word contains the name *David* (דָּוִד, *dāwīd*) plus the preposition *lamed* (לְ, *lě*), which has a broad range of meanings: to, for, in relation to, in behalf of, belonging to. The superscriptions thus offer little basis for a decision about authorship. Other evidence suggests that the phrase indicates the liturgical collection or hymnbook from which the psalm came.

Table 2
Collections in the Psalter

Davidic collections	Pss. 3–41; 51–72; 138–45
Korahite collections	Pss. 42–49; 84–85; 87–88
Elohistic Collection	Pss. 42–83
Asaphite Collection	Pss. 73–83
Psalms on the kingship of God	Pss. 93–100
A collection of psalms of praise	Pss. 103–7
Songs of Ascents (<i>perhaps on ascent, pilgrimage, to the temple for worship</i>)	Pss. 120–34
Hallelujah psalms (<i>beginning/ending with hallelujah [Praise the LORD]</i>)	Pss. 111–18; 146–50

Other superscriptions refer to collections; this view accords well with the description of Asaph and the Sons of Korah in 1 and 2 Chronicles. “Of [belonging to] David” therefore most likely refers to the psalm’s original collection. As well, the general nature of psalm language supports this view; the Psalms reflect representative life experiences rather than specific events in the life of one person. At the same time,

9. See, for example, E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. J. Thomson and P. Fairbank, 4th ed., 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867–69); F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. D. Eaton, 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908); A. F. Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902).

the tradition relating David to the Psalms is strong and unmistakable in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 16; 2 Sam. 1; 22; 23; 1 Chron. 16; 25; Amos 6). Perhaps we should say that David was the patron or the primary sponsor of psalmody in ancient Israel. David gave important initial impetus to the writing of psalms and to their use in worship in Jerusalem. He may well have written psalms, but the Psalter provides little evidence on the question of authorship. It is clear, however, that David was the primary patron for psalm-writing in ancient Israel, just as King James I was for the King James Version of the Bible. A number of psalms come from the Davidic, royal collections, those collections given the royal stamp of approval for use in worship in Jerusalem.

Some Davidic psalms have become part of another collection: the Elohist Psalter (Pss. 42–83). This grouping of psalms gets its name from the dominant use of the name *Elohim* (God), as opposed to the special Hebrew name *Yahweh* (Lord), when referring to God. Additional evidence for the view that Psalms 42–83 formed an established collection comes to the fore when we realize that some psalms occur twice—once as a part of the Elohist Psalter and another time elsewhere in the book of Psalms. For example, compare Psalm 14:2, 4 with Psalm 53:2, 4:

The *LORD* looks down from heaven on humankind. . . .
 Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
 who eat up my people as they eat bread,
 and do not call upon the *LORD*? (Ps. 14:2, 4, emphasis mine)

God looks down from heaven on humankind. . . .
 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,
 who eat up my people as they eat bread,
 and do not call upon *God*? (Ps. 53:2, 4, emphasis mine)

Psalm 40:13–17, when compared with Psalm 70, exhibits the same convention. In addition, the psalms of the Elohist Psalter contain the phrase *God your God* (Pss. 45:7; 50:7), which is usually “LORD your God.” For some reason, the compilers of this collection preferred the term *Elohim* for God. No one is sure why they preferred this title, but their work does show that Psalms 42–83 comprised an identifiable collection of psalms at some time.

We do not have a complete picture of the way these collections came together, but their overlap shows the process involved in the final compilation of the Psalter. We will return to this issue in the next chapter, but some preliminary comments may help. The core of the Psalter is the Davidic collections (Pss. 3–41; 51–72; 138–45), texts that are most often cries for help in the midst of crisis and that come from an individual rather than from the whole community. The psalms of the Korahites (Pss. 42–49; 84–85; 87–88) and the psalms of Asaph (Pss. 73–83) include more community psalms. With the psalms on the kingship of God (Pss. 93–100), the book begins to move toward the praise of God, a movement that continues in Books IV and V (see table 1, “Five Books of Psalms”). In sum, the Psalter is shaped in a purposeful way; that shape has come to us by way of a lengthy process.

This section has provided some basic information on the shape of the Psalter—its title, structure, superscriptions, and collections. Awareness of these matters can help us understand the Psalms.

The Poetry of the Psalter

Another significant matter to consider in preparation for reading the Psalms is the poetic quality of these texts. Hebrew poetry differs from English poetry. In English, traditional poetry is characterized by rhyme and rhythm:

Jack and Jill
went up the hill.

Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon.¹⁰

In Hebrew, the sense of thought determines the poetic form. Characteristic of this form is the matching of lines as parallel parts of a verse. The second line of a verse may echo or second the first. The first line makes an assertion and the second says, “Yes, and even more so

10. Walter de la More, “Silver,” in *The Complete Poems of Walter de la More* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 181.

this.” The resulting parallelism is often memorable and comes across in English translations. Parallelism takes a variety of forms:

1. *Synonymous parallelism*. The second line enhances the thought of the first by way of a closely related statement:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? (Ps. 8:4)

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Ps. 19:1)

2. *Antithetic parallelism*. The second line may complete a thought by presenting a contrast to the first line:

For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
(Ps. 37:9)

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps. 1:6)

3. *Stair-step parallelism*. The second line may continue the thought of the first and take it a step further:

For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)

Students of Hebrew poetry have noticed other types of parallelism, but the above examples suffice to show that parallel lines in Hebrew poetry express nuance and completion of thought rather than entirely distinct ideas. These examples also indicate that the thought—not the sound—of the text determines its form, a form often including parallelism at various levels. Sometimes parallel lines and verses group together to form “stanzas” (Ps. 119) or liturgies (Ps. 95). A psalm may reflect various parts of a worship event. The sense of the psalm, though, still determines the form.

Hebrew poetry also has meter or rhythm. Many scholars have attempted to recover the basic meter, but a clear picture has not yet emerged. Some observers have argued that parallelism itself is the meter of Hebrew poetry, but there do appear to be limits to the length of a line of Hebrew poetry. Meter has not been shown to be uniform in a psalm, however, and our knowledge of the phenomenon is still limited. Thus, we need to be cautious in our discussions of meter in Hebrew poetry.¹¹ In any case, English translations of the Psalms seldom reflect Hebrew metrical structure. Other poetic devices such as repetition, alliteration, and assonance occur; but a poetic rhythm tied to the content or message appears to be the primary characteristic of Hebrew poetry. Awareness of this characteristic and its parallelism should aid in understanding the Psalms.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has provided background for our study of the book of Psalms. Psalms are pilgrimage songs of faith and poetic compositions. The Psalter forms the primary Old Testament collection of psalms and has developed through a lengthy process. Having reviewed the basic introductory matters of the setting, shape, and poetry of the Psalter, we can now move to the exciting task of developing the best method of reading and interpreting the Psalms.

11. See the discussion and bibliography in P. D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 16–17, 29–47; other significant works include R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); A. Berlin and L. Knorina, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). The reader should be aware that a number of interpreters now find the forms of parallelism described in this section to be outdated. The categories are, however, still helpful to students. Chapter 3 will explore this issue further.

2

Lessons from the Past

When we study the Bible, and especially the Psalms, we participate in a long-standing tradition. Many have taken up this worthy task, and we can learn much from those who have gone before us. For that reason, we begin our look at interpreting the Psalms by exploring the history of psalm study. This history provides significant insight into how we can better understand the Psalms.

Early Psalm Study

Personal/Historical Method

Much of the work on the Psalms before the twentieth century employed what might be called the personal/historical method of psalm study. If a psalm related to an individual, the central issue was authorship: Who wrote the psalm and in what circumstance? In the effort to answer such questions, interpreters searched for clues in psalms and their superscriptions. For example, Psalm 6 appears to be the prayer of someone suffering from an illness. Several commentators imagined a relationship between this text and Job's experience of illness and thus interpreted the prayer in light of Job's condition.

Interpreters understood other psalms as prayers David spoke during particular circumstances in his life. Central was the quest for the “personal” setting out of which the psalm arose. That setting from the psalm writer’s life established the framework for interpreting the text.

Other psalms did not relate to an individual but to historical events. The interpreter searched for the date and historical background of the psalm and interpreted the text in light of that background. For example, Psalms 46 and 48 describe Jerusalem under attack. Several commentators found a relationship between these texts and Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701 BCE and thus interpreted these psalms in light of that event. Historical background and date were the keys to interpretation. The personal/historical method, then, related psalms to personal background in an individual’s life or to historical background in an event in order to fully understand these texts.¹

The primary difficulty with this approach arises from the language of the Psalms themselves. Note the examples given above. Psalm 6 could be the prayer of any person who is sick. Nothing in the psalm necessitates connecting it with Job and his illness. The general language of the text makes such an identification impossible. In like manner, Psalms 46 and 48 could refer to any attack upon Jerusalem. The identification of the historical event behind the text is in no way clear. The general language of the Psalms eventually spelled the death of the personal/historical approach in psalm scholarship.

Dating the Psalms

Early study of the Psalms concentrated on personal/historical background and on detailed study of the Hebrew text. The dawning of the Enlightenment movement in the eighteenth century, however, began to question traditional views of religion and history, placing greater emphasis instead on science and reason. As the conclusions

1. For examples, see E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 4th ed., trans. J. Thomson and P. Fairbank, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867–69); F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. D. Eaton, 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908); M. Bittenwieser, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated with a New Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

concerning historical background changed, many scholars began to date the Psalms late in the history of ancient Israel's religion (after 587 BCE). There were several reasons for this position:

1. The language of the Psalms is quite eloquent, and a number of scholars held the view that such eloquence reflected late developments in the history of language. Some of the more sophisticated poetic forms in the Psalms were also judged to be late.
2. The religion of the Psalms showed an interest in priestly and liturgical issues. Again, many scholars understood the priestly aspects of ancient Israel's religion to indicate a decline in faith (a stale ritualism) and to be a late development after the high point of the preexilic prophets.
3. Commentators understood the superscriptions of the Psalms as later attempts to give the impression that these texts came from an earlier time.
4. Scholars understood any mention of royalty in the Psalter to relate to Maccabean princes in the second century BCE.
5. Interpreters related the conflicts between enemies in the Psalms to struggles between different religious parties in Second Temple Judaism.

The late dating of the Psalms reflects assumptions about the history of language as well as the history and religion of ancient Israel that are seldom espoused today. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the start of a trend to date the Psalms in the time before the Babylonian exile (beginning in 587 BCE), a trend that dominated until recently.²

Hermann Gunkel

Early psalm study narrowly focused on the personal/historical approach. The twentieth century, however, witnessed a new beginning

2. For an account of this story, see R. E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 76–98.

in psalm scholarship with the work of Hermann Gunkel.³ Gunkel regarded prior work on the Psalms as arbitrary, sentimental, and too narrowly focused. He sought a more objective, clear, and logical method. He also began to explore more fully the connection between the Psalms and worship; the assumptions of many previous scholars had kept them from seeing this crucial relationship.

In terms of method, Gunkel began by comparing the psalms and classifying them according to type. He perceived various types of psalms; these types had a fairly consistent form and content. Psalms of similar type or kind reflected a similar setting in ancient Israel's life. Gunkel's basis for classification included the structure of the psalm, its vocabulary, and its religious tone. He listed together all hymns of praise, all petitions, and all wisdom psalms. This procedure enabled one to study all the hymns together and in comparison with other kinds of psalms. One could also study a particular hymn in light of the whole category. Such a process would construct a broader base for study. Gunkel's type-analytical method introduced a new departure in psalm interpretation; his work became foundational for contemporary psalm scholarship.

Gunkel discovered several major and minor psalm types. The major types occur more frequently in the Psalter. Gunkel's classification also affords a good introduction to the Psalter's content. Consider a description, including examples, of his categories:

1. *Hymns*. The hymns offer adoration and praise to God. Psalm 8 offers praise to the Creator; Psalm 19 praises the Creator and Law-giver. Under this major category, Gunkel listed three subtypes and their distinguishing characteristics:

Songs of Zion. These hymns praise God as the one who is present with the community of faith in Zion (Jerusalem). Psalms 46 and 48 show God protecting the city of Zion and its people.

3. See, for example, H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner, Facet Books, Biblical Series 19 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. J. D. Nogalski, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).