

THE PSALMS AS HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Through the years the Psalms have inspired numerous studies embracing religion, theology, literary characteristics and the relation of Psalmody to the cult. However one area of Psalter studies has been neglected—the presentation of history in the Psalms. Again, numerous studies have been made of the various historiographies in the Old Testament, embracing the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Priestly Code, the Deuteronomist, the Chronicler, the Apocalypticist, the Prophetic School, but the historiography of the Psalms has been neglected. On occasion commentators have appeared to be on the brink of an essay into the subject, but the matter is strangely dropped, and not even the outline of an excursus emerges.¹

A factor which has perhaps unintentionally militated against such a study in the Psalter derives from the major thrust in Psalm-studies in this century. Charles August Briggs' monumental study² placed great emphasis upon the literary phenomena of the Psalms to the neglect of other factors. Hermann Gunkel, the father of modern Psalm-studies, emphasized *Gattungen* and tended to underscore the literary groupings of the Psalms.³ The next student to approach the Psalms was Sigmund Mowinckel.⁴ He examined the cultic origins of the Psalms and related them to Temple practice. Function rather than content was emphasized. An attempt to check this trend came from the facile pens of Norman H. Snaith and W. O. E. Oesterley. These long-time students of the Psalms incisively pointed out that in the attempt to compare Hebrew political and liturgical practices with those of other cultures of the Ancient Near East too much emphasis had been placed on supposed similarities rather than on differences, and the former are frequently found lacking in the biblical account.⁵ For in-

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¹E. g., A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: University Press, 1901); Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (5th ed.; trans. Herbert Hartwell; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms: Translated and Interpreted in the Light of Hebrew Life and Worship* (New York and Nashvile: Abingdon, 1949).

²Charles Augustus Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (2 vols.; ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1906-1907).

³Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen uebersetzt und erklart* (Goettinger HKAT; Goettingen, 1926).

⁴Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien* (6 vols; Kristiana, 1921-1924) and *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols.; New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

⁵Norman H. Snaith, *Studies in the Psalter* (London: Epworth, 1934); W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Psalms: Translated with Text—Critical and Exegetical Notes* (2 vols.; London: SPCK, 1939) and *A Fresh Approach to the Psalms* (International Library of Christian Knowledge; New York: Scribner's, 1937).

stance, both point out that while there are enthronement ceremonies in the Ancient Near East, there is no specific reference to such a festival in the Bible. However, most students of the Psalms continue to be persuaded by the contributions which flow from the studies of Gunkel and Mowinckel.⁶

Since 1930, with the discovery of the Canaanite library at Ugarit, increasing emphasis has been placed on the relationship between Israelite psalmody and that of the Canaanites. This trend has been supported by the contributions of such scholars as John Hastings Patton⁷ and, in more recent years by Mitchell Dahood.⁸ In the meantime, the discovery and publication of psalms at Qumran—particularly the materials at Cave 11—focus on the phenomenon that psalms were still being written up to the beginning of the Christian era. Thus, as this superficial resumé reveals, the study of the Psalms has shifted from emphasis to emphasis in this century in such a dramatic fashion that one may hazard the assertion that no part of the Old Testament has undergone such a bombardment of scholarly analysis and reinterpretation as has the Psalter. The results are such that they overpower the cautious student and challenge the more adventuresome.

Israel's existence and history did not take place within a political vacuum. She seldom attained the heights of a great power; most of her existence was passed within the shadows of the great empires that surrounded her. Her location as a "bridge" between the transient empires of the Tigris-Euphrates valley to the east and the more stable Egypt to the southwest could only place her in a position where she would be the recipient of cultural diffusion. Even the little states—Phoenicia, Philistia, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Arabia, Syria—affected her, as did the residue of the Canaanites. The amazing thing is that she had anything that was peculiar to her.

Even Psalmody was not a literary genre peculiar to the Hebrews.⁹ Examples abound throughout the Ancient Near East of hymns of praise to national gods. There is considerable evidence, for example, that a Hymn to Aton was borrowed by the Hebrews and reworked to become Psalm 104.¹⁰ Again, however, it is not so much the similarities as it is the differences that distinguished Hebrew psalmody from that of

⁶For a splendid essay on these interpretations, see A. R. Johnson, "The Psalms," *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (ed. H. H. Rowley; London: Oxford University Press, 1951) 162-209.

⁷John Hastings Patton, *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1944).

⁸Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I-III* (AB, 16, 17, 17A; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1966-1970).

⁹See James B. Pritchard, ed., *ANET and ANEP, passim*; George T. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (Green Book Fund, 17; 3rd ed.; Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1920).

¹⁰Leslie, *Psalms* 144-147; Weiser, *Psalms* 666-671. For a contrasting view see Arnold Black Rhodes, *Psalms* (Layman's Bible Commentary, 9; Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1959) 143.

neighboring peoples, and this is especially true in the presentation of history vis-à-vis the psalm. For while the psalms of Babylon, Egypt, Akkad or Phoenicia frequently deal with creation or myths, Hebrew psalms add a new dimension: they treat their God as active in history, as the Lord of history. Other gods are not so depicted. In the psalmody of the Ancient Near East, as Elmer A. Leslie has so interestingly pointed out, "we meet, as in the Psalms, the language of the individual and social worship, the mood of devotion to deity, the desire for fellowship and right relations with the deity, the ceremonies and rituals of the public cult, and lyrical and religious utterance from the heart of pious individuals,"¹¹ but we are not introduced to a god working in history. However, the Hebrew hymns, as Wm. R. Taylor has so keenly commented, "different from those of other ancient peoples, appeal to history as an evidence of the greatness of their God."¹²

If a Hymn writer wished to celebrate the glorious doings of God how could he do so better than by recalling the mighty acts by which Israel had been freed from Egypt and brought at last into the land of promise. The composer of a Lament, whose aim was to induce God to intervene on behalf of His people, could find in these same mighty acts a compelling reason why God should save Israel in the present. A Wisdom Psalmist, undertaking to exhort and warn his contemporaries, might well draw from ancient stories the admonition that Israel today should not repeat the rebellion of the fathers who were overthrown in the wilderness.¹³

It was not just that God acted in history; it was rather that from these acts Israel is distinctive—she has a faith, laws, a land, a royal line. She is the people of Yahweh. The call of the Patriarchs, the migration to Canaan, the sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus experience, the Wilderness wanderings, the Settlement, the emergence of the Throne—in all these God's hand is evident, and God has "come in history into relation with His own people."¹⁴ No Assyrian ever felt that way about his god; but as Johannes Hempel has observed, "History as the realm of Yahweh's power is a theme which is specifically Israelite. Yahweh is primarily the god of history, of the other nations connected with Israel

¹¹Elmer Archibald Leslie, "Psalms, Book of," *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* 2:923. For a similar view see Charles Gordon Cumming, *The Assyrian and Hebrew Hymns of Praise* (Columbia University Oriental Series, 12; New York: Columbia University, 1934) 155-156.

¹²William R. Taylor, "Exegesis of Psalms 1-71, 93, 95-96, 100, 120-138, 140-150," *Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1952-1957) 4:696. See a similar claim by W. Stewart McCullough, "Exegesis of Psalms 72-92, 94, 97-99, 101-119, 139," *ibid.*, 4:603.

¹³Fleming James, *Thirty Psalmists. A Study in Personalities of the Psalter as Seen Against the Background of Gunkel's Type-study of the Psalms* (New York: Putnam's, 1938) 225.

¹⁴Adam C. Welch, *The Psalter: In Life, Worship and History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926) 49.

(e.g., Amos 9:7) and of the world.”¹⁵ And so closely related to God is Israel through his acts and through the formalizing of history through the covenant experience that in times of adversity God is reminded of his mighty works on behalf of his people in the past and is thus urgently entreated to come to their aid again (Ps. 44).

The nature of the history portrayed in the Psalms—as well as that throughout the Old Testament—is not history as we normally think of it, i.e., the written record of man’s past; it is *Heilsgeschichte*—holy history, salvation history, the story of redemption. Arthur Weiser has correctly observed that “the difference between the psalms and their hymnic parallels in the religions of the neighbouring countries becomes even more striking when we consider the *Heilsgeschichte* which forms the subject matter of the psalms.”¹⁶ When one reads the so-called “historical psalms”¹⁷ he becomes aware of a grand recital of past events whereby Israel’s covenant God, Yahweh, and Israel have become comrades in their living together.¹⁸

However it is not the close relationship of Yahweh to His people that alone makes the Psalter’s historiography unique; it is the manner in which the mighty acts of God are viewed from the perspective of the existential present. The sins of Israel are reviewed, confessed, bemoaned (see esp. Ps. 106:6-7, 13-14, 19-22, 24-25, 28-29, 32-39, 43, 47).¹⁹ Here is an interpretation which far transcends even the historiography of the Ancient Near East wherein kings and Pharaohs boasted in their virtues and military prowess. Israel’s understanding of history stands unique among the national traditions of mankind. Fleming James has raised some honest questions at this point: “What other people have seen their whole past as a chain of sins? Among the nations of the present does any stand as penitent before God? Nay, do the *religious people* in any nation regard its past and its present with repentance?”²⁰ Thus was the prophetic voice heard in the Psalms.

The events of the past in ancient days were handed down orally and epigraphically.

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our fathers have told us,
what deeds thou didst perform in their days,
in the days of old, (Ps. 44:1)

¹⁵Johannes Hempel, “Psalms, Book of,” *IntDB L-Q*: 948.

¹⁶Weiser, *Psalms* 59.

¹⁷Normally these as Pss. 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136. In this study other Psalms have been examined: 44, 46, 68, 74, 79, 80, 81, 83, 87, 89, 111, 114, 137 and 149.

¹⁸Leslie, *Psalms* 160; Gunkel, *Einleitung in den Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1933) 78.

¹⁹The English order of the Psalms and versification are followed in this article, and all quotations are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

²⁰James, *Thirty Psalmists* 234.

and

I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us, (Ps. 78:2,3)

are passages indicative that history was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Such a method of transmission by no means invalidates the content, for as the late Wm. F. Albright called to our attention, "Writing was used in antiquity largely as an aid or guide to memory, not as a substitute for it."²¹ Even before the traditions of the Pentateuch became literature, there was oral transmission.

It is not an easy matter to ascertain precisely which literary sources the psalmists used. If each Psalm could be dated specifically, even this would not necessarily be an accurate aid. Furthermore, the psalmists did not write objective history, and there is much evidence to suggest that they adapted some traditions to their immediate purpose.²² But much of the theology behind the sources was utilized, as a closer examination of the Deuteronomist on the psalter will reveal.

The sin-begets-punishment, righteousness-begets prosperity ethic of the Deuteronomist is discernable in Ps. 44:

Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbors;
the derision and scorn of those about us.
Thou hast made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.
* * * *

All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten thee,
or been false to thy covenant. (Ps. 44:13-15, 17)

The protests of the psalmist can be understood only against the Deuteronomist background, for he believed that God blesses in proportion to obedience and punishes in proportion to disobedience.²³ If Ps. 44:13-17 is the negative approach to Deuteronomist theology, certainly Ps. 94:14-15 is the positive affirmation:

For the Lord will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;
for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.

²¹William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (2nd ed.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957) 64.

²²This is particularly true of Ps. 78. Many of these details differ from the Exodus account; cf. McCullough, *IntB* 4:415.

²³Rhodes, *Psalms* 77-78.

Ps. 106:40-43 is permeated with Deuteronomistic religious historiography. Here Israel's history is understood by Leslie as "being indissolubly linked with issues of morality and religion."²⁴

Literary dependence on the Pentateuchal sources is evident throughout the historical Psalms. A few examples will suffice. Ps. 106:19 refers to Horeb. Throughout Deuteronomy, except 32:2, this is always the name given to Sinai, and its use in Ps. 106 appears to point to the narrative in Deut. 9:8-12. Ps. 135:14 is a direct quotation from Deut. 32:36. In Ps. 44:20 is found an explicit reference to the P document of Gen. 6:12-13. When God saw the awful corruption to which creation had slipped he went into action, destroying the corrupt generation utterly, but saving the righteous Noah and his sons. Now the psalmist urges God to look again and become just as concerned over the present corruption that is oppressing his creatures.²⁵ Weiser pointed out that the variations from the Pentateuchal traditions in Ps. 106 with Exodus (Ps. 106:7—Ex. 14:10-12 (J and E); Ps. 106:9—Ex. 14:15-18 (E and P); Ps. 106:12—Ex. 14:31 (E)) "show that there can be no question of a direct literary dependence by the psalm on the Pentateuch. . . ."²⁶ Such a literary dependence would also assist in establishing the date of the psalm as late Exilic or post-Exilic.

Precise dating of the individual psalm could contribute toward an understanding of its historiographical contributions, but such preciseness does not seem possible at the present.²⁷ In some instances the psalmist has simply drawn upon the vast literature and lore of his people to write history (e.g., Pss. 78, 105, 106, 135, 136); in other instances he is almost a "primary source" inasmuch as he stands at the brink—if not the center—of the activity which he is describing (e.g., Pss. 44, 46, 74, 137).

Because the Psalms are poetry, they tend to carry archaic terms with them. There is also the tendency to idealize, to generalize, to exaggerate. Hence the dating of a psalm is at best a risky business. Internal evidence is all that can be employed for each particular psalm, "from what may be more or less clearly read out of it, due regard being given to what is otherwise known to us about the spiritual and religious history and state of Israel at different times," as Mowinckel has cautioned.²⁸ Thus Elmer Leslie has set forth the axiom that it is not

²⁴Leslie, *Psalms* 169. Certainly Ps. 78 breathes Deuteronomisms.

²⁵Ibid. 237.

²⁶Weiser, *Psalms* 681.

²⁷For the proposed dates of the Psalms used as the basis for this study, see the Appendix.

²⁸Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship* 2:153.

the date of the psalm which is important, but its function: what was it intended to do?²⁹ There are trends even in the dating of psalms. Charles Augustus Briggs, for instance, writing near the beginning of the present century, tended to date psalms late; Ivan Engnell, writing in 1941, found only one psalm (Ps. 137) that he could classify as post-Exilic,³⁰ and Robert H. Pfeiffer, in his monumental *Introduction*, found only two—Pss. 24:7-10 and 45.³¹ Artur Weiser represents a current trend to date the psalms early on the grounds that if they had been composed in the post-Exilic era there would have been more allusions to the post-Exilic ritual laws; but such allusions are not to be found.³² And because of Israel's varied history, it is not even possible that all the national disasters alluded to in the Psalms refer to the collapse of Judah.³³

We conclude this study, which is at best only an introduction to the larger area of the historiography of the Psalter, by making an affirmation and at the same time posing a problem. The affirmation is that the Psalms do indeed discuss history and they are singular among the literature of the Ancient Near East in so doing. Thus the general topic of the historiography of the Psalter is one that invites perusal. The problem consists in dating the individual psalm. History generally treats with the past, occasionally, with the present, never with the future. So long as it is difficult to date the individual psalm with preciseness, we shall never really know whether there are psalms that are actually speaking to the existential moment. Through their literary dependence on earlier sources and by means of utilizing the broad events of Israel's past, we can readily ascertain how they reworked and used epigraphical and traditional materials. But we can never be really certain whether they relate a contemporary event.

²⁹Leslie, "Psalms," 2:924; Elmer A. Leslie, "Studia Biblica IX: The Book of Psalms," *Int* 4 (1950) 70-71.

³⁰Ivan Engnell, *Studies in the Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Almqvist, 1943) 176.

³¹Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1941) 629.

³²Weiser, *Psalms* 91. For instance, in regard to Ps. 119 he noted, "... the kind of piety, based on the law, such as is presented in the psalm does not yet exhibit the degeneration and hardening into a legalistic form of religion to which it succumbed in late Judaism and which provoked Jesus' rebuke," 740. Otherwise he does not date it.

³³*Ibid.*, 91-92.

APPENDIX

The Dates of the Psalms

PSALM	BUTTENWIESER	DAHOD	DAVISON/DAVIES	KIRKPATRICK
44	312 B. C.		Hezekiah	
46	Artaxerxes III		Hezekiah	
68	Deborah	Solomon		
74	344 B.C.	Exilic	Maccabean	
78	Hezekiah	922-721 B.C.		Pre-exilic
79	334 B.C.		Maccabean	
80	Exilic	Pre-721 B.C.	Pre-722 B.C.	
81	Joshua			
83		Pre-exilic		
87		7-6 century	Persian/Syrian	Post-exilic
89	Exilic			Exilic
94	344 B.C.			
105			Nehemiah	Post-exilic
106	Pre-exilic	Exilic		Post-exilic
111				Post-exilic
114	Pre-exilic	8th cent. B.C.		Post-exilic
135				
136	Pre-exilic			
137	Exilic		Syrian	Post-exilic
149			Maccabean	Maccabean

MOWINCKEL	RHODES	TAYLOR/ MC CULLOUGH	WEISER
Exilic	Early post-exil.	Persian	
Israel			Post-exilic
Persian	587 B.C.	• 587 B.C. 8th cent. B.C.	5-2 cent. B.C. Davidic
Exilic	587 B.C.	Exilic	
Ca. 721 B.C.		8th cent. B.C.	Hoshea
Pre-721 B.C.			Pre-721 9-7 cent. B.C.
	Post-516		
Monarchy	Jehoiachin	Jehoiachin/ Zedekiah	Monarchy
	Exilic		
			Pre-721 B.C.
			Pre-exilic
			Post-exilic
Post-exilic	Exilic	Exilic	Post-exilic
	Post-exilic		Pre-exilic

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