



Current Issues in Psalms Studies

PATRICK D. MILLER, JR.

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

The scholarly investigation of the Psalms is now as always a matter of lively discussion on a variety of issues. In these pages no effort is made to cover that discussion exhaustively. The focus is on those issues that seem to this writer to be at the forefront and of potential importance for persons whose primary task is the interpretation of the Psalms in the context of the community of faith.

I. THE FUNCTION OF THE PSALMS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Form critical study has dominated, if not controlled, the way in which the Psalms have been handled during this century—a fact which is as evident in popular treatments of the Psalms and commentaries as it is in the scholarly literature. Attention to the type and character of the Psalms with an effort to understand how they functioned in the life and worship of individual and community can offer either direct clues or heuristic suggestions for their continuing role in personal piety and public worship. However, the very character of the Psalms as relatively brief individual units, for the most part now loosed from any context but the literary one, means that many questions about type, and especially about the setting in life of the various types, are uncertain of answer or open to various answers.

The basic schema set forth by Gunkel and Begrich in their *Einleitung in die Psalmen*¹ remains the foundation on which others continue to build. The most important comprehensive treatment since that time is found in the work of Claus Westermann.² He has made a very strong case for seeing praise and lament as the two poles of human address to God and by far the dominant categories of the Psalms. With regard to the first pole, praise, the primary issue raised by Westermann and debated by others is whether or not there is any separate category of thanksgiving to God that can be distinguished from praise of God—either in Hebrew thought generally or in the types of psalms—as Gunkel so indicated in separating the song of thanksgiving from the hymn of praise. Westermann argues that both categories in the Psalter are distinct from expressions of thanks in the human sphere, in that they are totally directed

¹Herman Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1933).

²Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

toward God in exaltation by persons who in spontaneous joy think not of themselves but only of God.

In this writer's judgment, Westermann's description to some extent caricatures

thanksgiving in the process of virtually eliminating it from the Psalter and Hebrew thought. Expressions of blessing toward human beings and toward God, as well as the more explicit declarations of praise, express gratitude as well as exalting God and bearing testimony to the Lord's grace and power. Westermann is correct, however, in identifying *praise* as the primary category, and in fact he essentially preserves Gunkel's distinction in differentiating *ʾhillāh* (Gunkel = hymn; Westermann = descriptive praise) and *tôdāh* (Gunkel = song of thanksgiving; Westermann = declarative praise). The latter category does explicitly represent psalms that praise God by making joyful response to God's deliverance of persons from distress, in distinction from those that praise God more generally for majesty and creative power. The discussion is not unimportant for thinking theologically about the nature of praise and its relationship to thanksgiving and confession or proclamation, all of which are terms that have to do with what goes on in the *tôdāh*.³

The lament or complaint psalms in the Psalter and elsewhere in the Old Testament have been the subject of even more attention than the psalms of praise. Various proposals have been put forth to try to explain the situation and purpose of the laments of individuals. These represent efforts to understand who the *speaker* in the individual laments (the "I") is, who the *enemies* are, and what is the human need. Related to such questions is the matter of the cultic character of these psalms. References in various psalms to the sanctuary, sacrifice, help in the morning, and purification suggest a cultic connection. But is that universally the case, and does the ritual activity that may be associated with the laments take place in public cult or worship, or does it happen privately, perhaps in the context of the family? Some interpreters have noted and emphasized those places in the psalms that seem to identify the speaker as someone who has been accused of something. Noting places in the Old Testament where legal cases could be handled at the sanctuary (e.g., Exod 22:8-9; Deut 17:8-13; 19:16ff.; 21:1-9; 1 Kings 8:31-32), H. Schmidt suggested that a number of individual laments arise out of the language and activity of a sacral judicial procedure. One who claimed to be falsely accused prayed to God against his or her enemies (accusers) and received from the priests the verdict of God, which if favorable then elicited a further prayer of thanksgiving. (Examples: Pss 3, 4, 5, 7, 17, 26, 27, 54, 55, 69, etc.)⁴ Walter Beyerlin more recently has proposed a modification of this view, seeing in a number of psalms (3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 17, 23, 26, 27, 57, and 63) a plea for divine judgment that is not understood as threatening or tied to a regularized sacral procedure in which the accused is brought to the priests for judgment, but is a protection; and the sanctuary provided asylum.⁵ More sweepingly L. Delekat has proposed that these psalms along with many others are prayers of persons who, seeking asylum in the sanctuary, wrote a short

³On the praise of God in the Psalms see the January, 1985 issue of *Interpretation*.

⁴Hans Schmidt, *Das Gebet des Angeklagten im Alten Testament* (BZAW, 49; Giessen, 1928).

⁵Walter Beyerlin, *Die Rettung der Bedrängten in den Feindpsalmen der Einzelnen auf institutionelle Zusammenhänge untersucht* (FRLANT, 99; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1970).

prayer for help on the temple wall, probably in the evening upon arrival. After the certainty of a hearing had been received, a short note to that effect was added. In time, according to Delekat, the prayers became longer and more artful. They could be engraved on a stele and perhaps by one who had not composed the prayer.⁶

Neither Schmidt nor Beyerlin would ascribe all of the laments to an occasion of judicial procedure or protection from false accusers in the sanctuary. They both have acknowledged that a number of the laments seem to cry out not for divine justice, but for deliverance from sickness and misery (e.g., Pss 6, 13, 22, 28, 38, and 102). This view, accentuated earlier by Mowinckel and affirmed by Gunkel as probably the origin of some of the psalms before they were loosed from any cultic setting, has more recently been elaborated by Klaus Seybold, who summarizes as follows:

According to these texts, the psalm of the individual sick person was variously anchored in the lament phase and was a prayer for preservation and healing. In keeping with this context, it was often simultaneously a confession of guilt and a request for mercy, spoken within the private sickroom, probably with the aid of a priest. It was very likely not performed by the sick person himself during a pilgrimage to a holy place, since anyone seriously sick was generally not up to the rigors of such a trip. Or the psalm belonged in the thanksgiving phase as a laudatory prayer and personal (sacrificial) contribution within the framework of a community meal, celebrated at the sanctuary after successful recovery and as part of the reconciliation and rehabilitation of the recovered person. This could happen...“twice, three times” during the course of life. The actual, individual, and liturgically formed psalms of sickness originated in this way.⁷

The most impressive proposal in recent years for understanding the form and function of the individual laments is that of Erhard Gerstenberger. His analysis is shaped by three contributing factors that have not played so large a role in other interpretations: (a) sociological analysis of the relation of the individual to the group and the function of the group in society, as well as of the relation between word and act in ritual matters; (b) the everyday scheme of prayer as uncovered in the *narrative* texts of the Old Testament; and (c) Mesopotamian ritual texts.⁸ The result of his investigation is to place the individual laments outside the official cult and the Temple. These laments belong rather to healing ceremonies within the circle of the family. A person who may be threatened by any of a wide range of troubles goes to a ritual expert (trained in the ritual but not a priest) within the family or clan, participates in a healing rite involving both words and actions, and gets rid of the threat or trouble. The final goal and consequence of such activity is the rehabilitation of the individual as a

⁶L. Delekat, *Asylie und Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

⁷Klaus Seybold and Ulrich B. Mueller, *Sickness and Healing* (Biblical Encounter Series; Abingdon: Nashville, 1981) 44. Seybold's more elaborated development of this view appears in *Das Gebet des Kranken im Alten Testament* (BWANT, 19; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1973).

⁸Erhard Gerstenberger, *Der bittende Mensch* (WMANT, 51; Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1980).

member of the primary social sphere (clan or family) and thus the restoration of clan harmony.

If all this sounds more like family or group therapy than prayer and worship in the church, that is neither surprising nor accidental. In his concluding remarks, Gerstenberger, noting the increasing isolation of individuals in a modern technological society, compares the rehabilitation

of the sufferer in the Old Testament with contemporary group therapy movements that seek to reintegrate a distressed person into the primary group in a process of words and actions under a group leader who is an expert in the process or “ritual.”⁹ In this same connection Gerstenberger sees in Old Testament scholarship’s inability to think about these matters except in terms of individual prayer and piety or the official and corporate worship of the people a reflection of the Protestant tendency to understand prayer as either an individual matter or a part of public worship. The lament psalms are an indication of the fact that individuals live their lives “above all in the small world of the primary group” (translation mine) rather than in the larger—albeit secondary when viewed sociologically—sphere of community or people. It is in the small group that meaning is found and religion experienced.¹⁰

Gerstenberger’s analysis, which has impressed many, will continue to be tested and modified. His work is at least a challenge to others to assess theologically the sociological reality of the significance for human existence of small groups (e.g., families, circles of friends, groups with common interests or needs) as the context for meaningful existence. Both with regard to Gerstenberger’s work on the lament psalms as well as the contemporary experience of church and synagogue, the relation of these smaller groups to the larger spheres (e.g., church, community, nation) that give identity and evoke loyalty remains to be developed.¹¹

It would not do to characterize major approaches to the understanding of the laments without recognizing that the view of Birkeland,¹² the later Mo-

⁹Ibid., 1.67-69.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹A similar point of view has been set forth in two works by Westermann’s student, Ranier Albertz: *Weltschöpfung und Menschenschöpfung* (CTMA 3; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1974) and *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (CTMA 9; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1978). In distinction from the laments of the people, which are rooted in the history of salvation and thus associated with the official theology of the nation, the individual laments are rooted in the history of the individual and that person’s relationship with God. They belong therefore to the personal religion that has its locus in the sphere of the small group and the family. The lament is an appeal to one’s personal God to be present and protect and is intended to rehabilitate and restore the person to the small group. In a long conclusion to the second work Albertz suggests some implications of this perspective for the focus of ministry, seeing it involved more in the family and its life and worship, helping to give family members a better understanding of themselves and their situation as well as to actualize and strengthen in each new phase or turning-point in life their personal relationship of trust in God (*Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 208). In his treatment of the biblical material Albertz gives some attention to the integration of the personal religion of the individual in the small group into the official religion and worship of the larger community.

¹²H. Birkeland, *The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms* (Oslo: J. Dybwad, 1955).

winckel,¹³ and others that the “I” of the laments is the king acting in behalf of or as representative of the people in crying out for help against national enemies has been taken up afresh and impressively by J. H. Eaton, who sees some fifty-odd psalms of the individual as being in fact royal psalms.¹⁴ Such a construal of the texts is plausible and undergirded by the centrality of the king in ancient Israel and possibly in the official cult, as well as by the ascription of so many psalms to David. The connection of the psalms to the Messiah and the christological use of them by the early church would be even more direct should such an interpretation be on the right track.

The search for a readily identifiable situation as the context for understanding the laments may, however, be illusory or unnecessary. The language of these psalms with its stereotypical,

generalizing, and figurative style is so open-ended that later readers on the one hand are stopped from peering behind them to one or more clearly definable set of circumstances or setting in life, and on the other hand are intentionally set free to adapt them to varying circumstances and settings. Indeed one can relate some of the laments to persons and events in the Old Testament even though the psalms did not *originally* belong to such persons' experience in the sense of being composed by them or for them.¹⁵ Gunkel, Westermann, and others have helped us see the distinction between original purpose and later use even when we may not be absolutely certain about either one.¹⁶ Indeed in the work of Westermann the laments are not at all seen in the context of cultic and ritual activity but as one of the primary modes of prayer (the other being praise) that characterize human address to God.¹⁷

Theological concerns come very much to the fore in Westermann's analysis of the laments when compared with other treatments. Two issues that have theological implications stand out in the current discussion. One of these is what seems to be the simple question of how to label the genre under discussion. Should these psalms be called *laments* or *complaints* (*Klage/Anklage*), as is the standard approach, or should one designate them *petitions* or *supplications* (*Bitte*)? Westermann is a good example of the former, Gerstenberger of the latter, though each uses the other terminology also. While this may seem to be simply another case of form critics unable to agree on standard terminology, it is really more than that. Does such prayer function primarily to lay out complaint against God and others, articulating the human need, and giving form to the anguish

¹³Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), chapters III, VII, and VIII.

¹⁴John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT, 32; London: SCM, 1976).

¹⁵Cf. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Trouble and Woe: Interpreting the Biblical Laments," *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 32-45.

¹⁶With regard to the prevalence of interpretations that focus upon sickness and false accusation as the primary conditions of the laments, Joachim Becker's summary words are appropriate: "It is no accident that sickness and accusation dominate in the prayer speech of the individual lament songs. These have to do with the two fundamental human needs. Sickness is the threatening of physical existence by lessening life. The sick person in the Old Testament believes himself or herself to be near the entrance to the realm of the dead. Accusation is the threatening of moral existence in the community and no less dangerous." J. Becker, *Wege der Psalmenexegese* (SBS, 78; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975), 33; translation mine.

¹⁷Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 15-35.

and despair of one in trouble?¹⁸ Or do these prayers place before God specific petitions for help in the hope and expectation that God will intervene in the situation to deliver one from trouble? Clearly both dimensions are present in the lament psalms, but the accent one places (or discerns) may affect one's theology. The emphasis may tend to create an understanding of prayer as an expression of human distress and a struggle with God that is in itself healing and restorative and a notion of God as present and involved in suffering more than delivering persons out of it. Or one's sense of these prayers as petitions for help may focus one's theology on prayer as effective in bringing about the power of God who is able to deliver and does so. It is of course possible also that the theology of prayer held by the interpreter of these Psalms may shape the way the genres are understood. If the "passion" of Jesus, i.e., God's incarnational com-passion with a suffering humanity (see below), and God's resurrection of the crucified Jesus are any clue, we

would seem to be compelled to try to hold complaint and petition together.¹⁹

A second theological issue that may be identified in the ongoing study of the lament psalms is the question of how they identify the fundamental human need. Traditionally these psalms have been seen as reflecting the human condition of sinfulness before God, a condition that is directly attested in the so-called penitential psalms (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143) and inferred from the association between sickness and sin and judgment that may be discerned in various Old Testament contexts. In contemporary interpretation of the psalms that view is being regarded as much too simple if not misleading. Most of the psalms either do not identify the plight of the lamenter with sin or at least are ambiguous on that score. Westermann again is the one who has addressed some of the theological implications of this fact by suggesting that Pauline theology has shifted the lament of the suffering one to the confession of the sinner. As he suggests, this shift has had large ramifications for Christian understanding of the work of Christ. The focus has been upon the forgiveness of sins rather than ending human suffering, even though the Gospels offer the Old Testament lament, especially Psalm 22, as a reference for understanding the Passion of Jesus, i.e., his identification with the suffering of those who cry out in the laments.

More recently Samuel Balentine has demonstrated that while the motif of the hiding of the face of God and related themes such as God's rejecting, forgetting, and being silent, and the like, are frequently understood as manifestations of divine judgment for sin when appearing in prophetic texts, that is not the case in the Psalms. There such expressions reflect more a sense of doubt, despair, and alienation from God, a condition that is frequently quite inexplicable, as is evidenced by the occasional protestations of innocence, protestations that are hardly very congruent with a Pauline anthropology.²⁰ Most Christian readers

¹⁸Cf. Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (OTM; Oxford: Oxford, 1983).

¹⁹Both the modern consciousness vis-à-vis the intervention of God in the nexus of events and the loosening of the lament psalms from a possibly highly specific cultic event to a more spiritual setting in the ongoing experience of worship and piety have probably contributed to an emphasis upon the complaint character of these psalms more than the petition for help.

²⁰See note 8.

have as much difficulty with these claims of innocence as they do with the imprecations against enemies—in both cases because they cut against the grain of what is heard from the New Testament. It might seem that the communal laments of the people (Pss 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, and 89) would be primarily cries for forgiveness of sin rather than pleas for help, but that assumption also may be a reflection of a prophetic-Christian reading of the texts. In a dissertation in progress,²¹ Murray Haar demonstrates that these psalms subordinate the issue of sin to the claim on the covenantal relationship with God, which means that God's fate is bound up with that of Israel and the enemies of Israel are the enemies of God. Confession of sin is not a prominent feature of the communal laments.

Before leaving the issue of the form and function of the Psalms, one should note the stimulating hermeneutical efforts in this area by Walter Brueggemann. In a study published a decade ago he laid out the lament-deliverance relationship as a basic structure of Israel's faith that is prominent not only in the Psalms but runs throughout the Old Testament.²² Subsequently

Brueggemann placed the lament psalms over against the analysis by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross of the death-grief process that she discovered in her work with terminally ill patients. Brueggemann thus highlighted the significance of form and structure for persons handling loss, grief, and death, while underscoring some of the distinctiveness of the process in the community that is formed by faith.²³ The most extensive general treatment of the form and function of the Psalms by Brueggemann is a very heuristic proposal, growing out of the work of Paul Ricoeur, that the Psalms speak to or from situations of *orientation* (especially hymns), *disorientation* or *dislocation* (laments), and *reorientation* (especially songs of thanksgiving or declarative praise).²⁴ In all of this Brueggemann draws together psychological, philosophical, and hermeneutical strands in ways that suggest points of reference for a contemporary reading of the Psalms.

II. RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALMS

While the term “re-interpretation” is not fully adequate, it does point to an aspect of Psalms study that focuses more on the final form of a psalm than on its original genre and character. A number of psalms are in some fashion composite or the result of earlier psalms or parts of psalms being re-interpreted in a new time. The result is often very different from the original form and function, but the dynamic present in the Psalms’ capacity to speak in and for different situations is well illustrated in the very growth of the Psalter itself. Many psalms are seen as the result of the scribal activity in Exilic and post-Exilic times, impacted more by concerns of wisdom and torah and the search for true piety than by the influence of the cult. Some of these psalms have been described as “antholo-

²¹At Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.

²²“From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life,” *Interpretation* 28 (1974) 3-19.

²³“TheFormfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977) 263-75.

²⁴“Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function,” *JSOT* 17 (June, 1980) 3-32. See now W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

gies” (e.g., Pss 25, 33, 34, 103, 111, 112, 119, and 145)²⁵ because they are created by drawing upon pieces, expressions, verses, and language of other psalms—as well as other Old Testament traditions—which were not only composed earlier but possibly for quite specific cultic occasions. Here expressions for “seeking the Lord,” “fearing God,” God as “refuge” as well as references to “the afflicted,” “the poor” and the like, which may have identified activities of persons in poverty or oppressed by others, have been spiritualized to describe the state of the pious Israelite before God.²⁶

Such literary creations expressive of a torah piety are clearly present in the Psalter. Indeed one can identify obvious use of certain psalms in the composition of other psalms, e.g. in the relationships between Psalms 18 and 144 or Psalms 115 and 135 (the latter drawing on a number of psalm texts as well as other Old Testament material), the identity of Psalm 70 with Psalm 40:14-18, and the composition of Psalm 108 out of Psalms 57:8-12 and 60:7-14 as well as I Chronicles 16 out of Psalms 105:1-15, 96:1-13, and 106:1, 47-48. The issue that remains the subject of debate, however, is how far one can go in assigning psalms to this process of composition growing out of the concerns identified above. The language is so stereotyped that one may claim an early lament as a later spiritualized creation when that may not be the case at

all. Nevertheless, enough clear examples exist that one may see the foundations laid for an ongoing process of re-interpreting the Psalms.

Another aspect of this new (or re-) interpretation that went on in the formation of the Psalter is the transformation of individual psalms possibly from the pre-Exilic era into psalms of the community in the Exilic and post-Exilic periods. The “I” of these individual psalms became Israel when the psalms were edited and rewritten at a later period. That process was not merely a mechanical, non-substantive one. On the contrary the psalms were given a new meaning in a new time. Joachim Becker, a primary advocate of such an understanding of the Psalms, sees a significant number of them as examples of reworking to give a new interpretation in a new time (Pss 9-10, 22, 40, 45, 54, 56, 59, 66, 68, 69, 85, 93, 102, 107, 108, and 118).²⁷ For Becker the most noticeable form of the new interpretation is the transformation of original cultic songs of lament or thanksgiving into eschatological songs reflecting the Exilic or post-Exilic situation of Israel in conflict with its neighbors.²⁸ He sees four central ideas in the eschatological salvation word of these psalms: Yahweh, whose power is revealed in creation and deliverance from exile, enters into rule and appears on Zion; deliverance from exile, return, and renewal as a people occupy a central place; the nations recognize the saving act of Yahweh, assemble to worship on

²⁵Becker, *Wege*, 75.

²⁶See the summary discussion of Becker, *Wege*, Ch. IX and the works by Deissler, Gelin and Robert referred to there.

²⁷In addition to his *Wege der Psalmenexegese*, one should consult his more extended study, *Israel deutet seine Psalmen: Urform und Neuinterpretation in den Psalmen* (SBS 18; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975).

²⁸Cf. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 517-18.

Zion, and are punished and destroyed; Israel’s posterity shall possess the land and inherit the blessing.²⁹

A further mode of new interpretation that has been recognized for a long time but is also the subject of current interest is the *historicizing* of psalms, a feature primarily of titles added to psalms, associating them primarily with David and his life and experiences.³⁰ Such ascriptions served not only to identify a presumed author but to provide some hermeneutical clue to understanding the psalms thus titled.³¹ Such historicizing, however, was not confined to the process of adding titles, according to Becker. For example, an individual song of thanksgiving in Psalm 18:2-31 became a royal song of David with the addition of vv. 32-51 and the title. The whole was then placed into the David story (II Sam 22). One can cite other examples of psalms that have been historicized by being ascribed to figures in the biblical story, e.g. I Samuel 2:1-10 (Hannah), Isaiah 38:10-20 (Hezekiah), and Jonah 2:3-10 (Jonah).³²

III. THE PSALTER AS A COLLECTION

The interest in the way in which various Psalms may have been edited and given a new interpretation in the Exilic and post-Exilic age has contributed to a growing appreciation of the Psalter as a collection or book of psalms. Both the process of formation and the significance of the final shape of the Psalter have been matters of debate or discussion. Investigations of smaller collections and interrelationships among the Psalms have suggested a more conscious composition of the whole than has been sometimes recognized. Klaus Seybold has done a very

careful study of the psalms of ascents (Pss 120-134) to show that they are interrelated not only by a common title “Song of Ascents” but by linguistic expressions, content, theology, and redactional activity. He sees them arising out of a lay context but collected together as a kind of handbook of songs and prayers for the pilgrim to Zion. They reflect a communal orientation that affirms the close relation to God and rejoices in Zion as God’s chosen abode.³³ Pierre Auffret has tried to demonstrate the interrelationships of Psalms 120-134 by analysis of literary structure and has also suggested that Psalms 135-138 are a consciously

²⁹Becker, *Wege*, 93ff.

³⁰Cf. Becker, *Wege*, Ch.XIII; Childs, *Introduction*, 520-22.

³¹Childs sees this interpretative move as follows: “...the incidents chosen as evoking the Psalms were not royal occasions or representative of the kingly office. Rather David is pictured simply as a man, indeed chosen by God for the sake of all Israel, but who displays all the strengths and weaknesses of all human beings. He emerges as a person who experiences the full range of human emotions, from fear and despair to courage and love, from complaint and plea to praise and thanksgiving.... The effect of this new context has wide hermeneutical implications. The psalms are transmitted as the sacred psalms of David, but they testify to all the common troubles and joys of ordinary human life in which all persons participate.” *Introduction*, 521. Cf. M. Fishbane, “Torah and Tradition,” in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 287; and P. D. Miller, “Trouble and Woe.”

³²Becker, *Israel*, 33.

³³K. Seybold, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen* (Biblich-Theologische Studien, 3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978).

constructed group that have clear relation to Psalms 120-134 and more daringly that Psalms 15-24 are a group arranged chiasmatically around Psalm 19 as a center.³⁴

Westermann has identified several features of the present shape of the Psalter, including the fact that to some extent the Psalms are grouped according to distinctions that have been recognized form-critically.³⁵ There are groupings of psalms that are primarily individual (e.g., the David psalms) and some that are largely psalms of the community (in the Korah and Asaph psalms as well as the Songs of Ascents). The lament psalms occur more in the first half of the Psalter and hymns of praise more in the latter—a literary movement from dominant strains of lament to dominant shouts of praise that reflects a basic theological structure as well as the movement encountered in individual laments. Westermann has also suggested that the original Psalter may have been Psalms 1-119, to which the Songs of Ascents and others were added.³⁶ Whether or not that can be proven, it is clear from the beginning and ending of the Psalter that some guides have been given for understanding the whole. Psalms 1 and 2 form an introduction which suggests first that one finds here a true torah piety that will show the way for those who love the Lord and the law, and secondly that these psalms also show the way of God’s rule over the larger human communities. The conclusion to the Psalms, i.e., Psalm 150, and the title of the Psalter (*šhillim* = hymns) give the Psalter to the community as a book of praise to God.

The appearance of a number of Psalms manuscripts at Qumran, including the large Psalms scroll from Cave 11 with a decidedly different order and arrangement of the Psalms that are on it, has raised the issue of whether or not there may have been another “authoritative” or “canonical” Psalter than the one that presently exists in the Hebrew Bible—one that could have been a genuine rival or alternative to the form preserved in the Masoretic Text.³⁷ While the matter is hardly settled, the evidence tends toward the conclusion that the Qumran manuscripts

are dependent on the received canonical Psalter of the Hebrew Bible. The Cave 11 Psalms scroll containing only the latter third of the Psalter is where the most variation occurs, both in reordering and in the inclusion of non-canonical psalms. But over two-thirds of the Psalms manuscripts or fragments show only canonical materials extant and in the expected sequence.³⁸ The grouping of Psalms 105, 95, and 106 in I Chronicles 16 shows us both that Book IV of the Psalter already existed as a unit (because the conclusion to that Book which follows the end of Ps 106 is included in I Chron 16:36), and that psalms from the canonical text could be regrouped for liturgical purposes. It may be that the unusual contents and ordering of the Cave 11 scroll reflect liturgical concerns as well as the desire to create “a library edition of the putative works of

³⁴P. Auffret, *La sagesse a bâti sa maison: études de structures littéraires dans l’Ancien Testament et spécialement dans les Psaumes* (OBO 49; Fribourg, Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1982) 407-549.

³⁵C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 250-58.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷J. A. Sanders, “Cave 11 Surprises and the Question of Canon,” *McCormick Quarterly* 21 (1968) 1-15. Cf. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1967) 14.

³⁸P. W. Skehan, “Qumran and Old Testament Criticism,” *Qumran: Sa Piété, sa théologie et son milieu*, ed. M. Delcor (BETL 46; Leuven: University Press, 1978) 167.

David.”³⁹ Patrick Skehan was probably correct in his judgment that we cannot learn anything from the Qumran texts about “the formative period of the building up of the standard collection of 150 Psalms.”⁴⁰

IV. LITERARY STUDY OF THE PSALTER

Finally, attention should be called to the fact that the growing interest in the literary study of the Bible has had its impact also on the study of the Psalms, and in two ways. One of these is the renewed and intense interest in trying to define the nature and character of Hebrew poetry, with particular attention to the poetic line and its function in building larger blocks. The question whether or not meter exists in Hebrew poetry, or can be described if it does exist, remains much debated.⁴¹ The phenomenon of parallelism has been the subject of major treatments in recent years. Stephen Geller has proposed a system for analysis of aspects of parallelism that sets up some basic categories and applies the concept of grammatical paradigm to produce a reconstructed sentence out of poetic couplets.⁴² In a somewhat different direction, James Kugel claims that parallelism is not a poetic device that breaks down into many types but is essentially a way of heightening, reinforcing, or—to use his term—“seconding” a point or statement made in the first colon of a poetic line.⁴³ The most complex recent proposal about the nature of Hebrew poetry is that of Michael O’Connor, who combines analysis of lines on a syntactical basis with the examination of various tropes or figures as the way to approach small numbers of lines, i.e., bicola and tricola.⁴⁴ These studies raise the question whether parallelism in Hebrew poetry is one thing (Kugel) or many (Geller and O’Connor). They effectively rule out the usual handbook approach that suggests all lines can be seen in terms of three types of parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic). While this writer has found Kugel’s approach particularly helpful in analyzing poetry, it is also the case that both Geller and O’Connor provide categories that, when applied to lines of poetry, give us handles for grasping both logical and aesthetic dimensions of Hebrew poetry.

Beyond the focus of parallelism and the nature of Hebrew poetry, which of course encompasses much more than simply the Psalms, literary study of the Psalter has sought to apply stylistic and rhetorical analysis. Here issues of formation and function are less to the fore, and the particular mode of expression of each psalm takes precedence over its place as a typical example of a genre. The concern is for the medium as well as the message, and the claim is that form and content cannot be separated. One is led to appreciate any psalm as a unique literary expression that unfolds its word in various traditional poetic devices and features. Interpreters who have moved in this direction have given particular at-

³⁹Ibid., 169.

⁴⁰Ibid., 164.

⁴¹See, for example, James Barr's review of Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, December 25, 1981, 1506.

⁴²S. A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (HSM 20; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

⁴³J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 1981).

⁴⁴M. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

tention to formal features of structure and the figures of speech that create that structure, such as repetition, chiasmus, inclusion, alliteration and word play, ambiguity, and the like.⁴⁵

Such stylistic analysis belongs to the study and indeed the understanding of any poetic text. It is consistent with larger trends in contemporary biblical study toward a primary focus on the final form of a text. It remains to be seen how well those whose sensitivity is to formal and poetic features will be able to place their work in the service of hermeneutics. To date stylistic analysis often stands by itself without engaging other issues of interpretation.⁴⁶ But it is also the case that interpreters of the Psalms whose attention is particularly given over to form critical exegesis or to theological, liturgical, and pastoral dimensions of interpretation, have tended on the whole to ignore stylistic aspects as features of the text's expression. No modern commentary in English reflects any serious concentration on matters of style.⁴⁷ The full hearing of the Psalms will be greatly enhanced when the familiar tendency to abstract content from form or to empty form of its content is overcome. To know the Psalms are poetic is not to forget that they are Scripture. To read and hear them as Scripture requires that one receive them also as poetry. From either direction, *understanding* is all.

⁴⁵Some representative examples of rhetorical or stylistic analysis of the Psalms are N. H. Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen—Stilistischen Verfahren und Aufbau* (BZAW 117; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1972); M. Weiss, "Wege der Neuen Dichtungswissenschaft in ihrer Anwendung auf die Psalmenforschung," *Biblica* 42 (1961) 255-302; L. Alonso-Schokel, *Treinta Salmos: Poesia y Oracion* (Estudios de Antiguo Testamento 2; Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1981); J. Trublet and J.-N. Aletti, *Approche poétique et théologique des psaumes* (Paris: Cerf; 1983); and P. Auffret, *La sagesse*.

⁴⁶Some of the works cited above are refreshing exceptions in this regard.

⁴⁷It is worth noting that the great form critic Hermann Gunkel gave major attention to the aesthetic features of the Psalms in his commentary on them.