

## A Form-Critical Classification of the Psalms According to Hermann Gunkel<sup>†</sup>

*“Genre research in Psalms is nonnegotiable, not something one can execute or ignore according to preference. Rather it is the foundational work with which there can be no certainty in the remainder. It is the firm ground from which everything else must ascend.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Hermann Gunkel’s pioneering form-critical work on the psalms sought to provide a new and meaningful context in which to interpret individual psalms – not by looking at their literary context within the Psalter (which he didn’t see as significant), but by bringing together psalms of the same genre (*Gattung*) from throughout the Psalter.

According to Gunkel, for psalms to be considered as part of the same genre (*Gattung*) three conditions had to be met:<sup>2</sup>

- 1) the psalms had to have a similar setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*), basis in worship, a common cultic setting, or at least originally derive from one;
- 2) they had to be characterized by common thoughts, feelings, and moods; and
- 3) they required a shared diction, style, and structure – a language related to form (*Formensprache*). The latter feature provides the signals of the particular genre.

Working with these criteria, Gunkel isolated a number of different genres or types of psalms. In his earlier work<sup>3</sup> he highlighted four primary types of psalms (hymns, community laments, individual thanksgiving psalms, and individual laments), with various subcategories, as well as several mixed forms. In his later work,<sup>4</sup> completed by Joachim Begrich, he identified six major types (hymns, enthronement psalms, communal complaints, royal psalms, individual complaints, and individual thanksgiving psalms) and a number of smaller genres and mixed types. I have tended to follow the later classification, with modifications as noted. Also note that some psalms are found in more than one category. This is especially the case with sub-genres since Gunkel wasn’t consistent in how he dealt with them.

### I. Hymns

#### A. Hymns in General

Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 65; 67; 68; 96; 98; 100; 103; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 139; 145-150.

#### *Form*

- 1) Introduction: A call to praise, sing, and rejoice to Yahweh in some form.
- 2) Body: The reasons why Yahweh should be praised (often introduced by כִּי, *kî*, "for").
  - a) His qualities and attributes.
  - b) His regular or repeated actions, including his works in creation and conservation of cosmos and his works in history, especially for Israel.
- 3) Conclusion: renewed summons to praise.

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<sup>†</sup> Prepared by Tyler F. Williams (10/2006). Sources: Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Fortress Press, 1967; translation of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [2nd ed; J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1930]; and Hermann Gunkel (completed by Joachim Begrich), *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Mercer University Press, 1998; translation of *Einleitung in die Psalmen: die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985, 1933]).

<sup>1</sup> Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*, p. 16; Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*.

<sup>4</sup> Gunkel and Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms*.

### ***Sitz im Leben***

Hymns were sung as part of worship on diverse occasions, including sacred festivals as well at other times, perhaps by a choir or an individual singer.

### **B. Songs of Zion**

Psalms 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122.

These psalms tend to lack a proper introduction. They praise Yahweh by praising Jerusalem, addressing the holy place, and calling down blessings upon it. They were sung at particular occasions that celebrated Jerusalem's majesty and future eschatological significance.

### **C. Psalms of Yahweh's Enthronement<sup>5</sup>**

Psalms 47; 93; 96:10-13; 97; 99.

#### ***Form***

- 1) Often begin with the words יהוה מלך, "Yahweh has become king."
- 2) Contain many calls to rejoice.
- 3) Have brief references to Yahweh's deeds, depicted as just now taking place.
- 4) Give descriptions of what his reign will mean to Israel and the world.
- 5) Present the idea that a new world kingdom is coming.

#### ***Sitz im Leben***

These psalms were used as part of Israel's worship, likely including an enthronement festival in which Yahweh is glorified as king. These psalms were given a prophetic, eschatological, reinterpretation in their final stages.

## **II. Lament/Complaint Psalms**

### **A. Communal Complaint Psalms**

Psalms 44; (58); (60); 74; 79; 80; 83; (106); (125).

#### ***Form***

- 1) Calling upon Yahweh by name (usually in the vocative)
- 2) Lamenting complaints over the misfortune; almost always political in nature.
- 3) Supplications and petitions to Yahweh to transform the misfortunes.
- 4) Thoughts aimed to excite confidence in the suppliant or to move Yahweh to action, such as his honour or the sake of his name.
- 5) Often end with a certainty of hearing.

#### ***Sitz im Leben***

The setting of these psalms are days of national fasting and/or complaint festivals brought on by various national calamities, such as war, exile, pestilence, drought, famine, and plagues.

### **B. Individual Complaint Psalms**

#### ***1) Individual Laments in General***

Psalms 3; 5; 6; 7; 13; 17; 22; 25; 26; 27:7-14; 28; 31; 35; 38; 39; 42-43; 54-57; 59; 61; 63; 64; 69; 70; 71; 86; 88; 102; 109; 120; 130; 140; 141; 142; 143.

#### ***Form***

Laments will typically include the following element, though not necessarily in the same order:

- 1) Summons to Yahweh.
- 2) Complaint/Lament proper, often preceded by a description of the prayer.
- 3) Considerations inducing Yahweh to intervene, whether by challenging Yahweh's honour, exciting his

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<sup>5</sup> Note: While these psalms are given a separate chapter in Gunkel and Begrich, Gunkel clearly saw them as a subcategory of the Hymn, so I have included them here as such.

- anger by citing the enemies' words, or by the nature of the complaint itself.
- 4) Petition/Entreaty. This is the most significant part of the complaint psalm. May be of a general nature or may be quite specific (confessional petitions, petitions of innocence, etc.).
  - 5) Conviction of being heard (present only in some Psalms) and/or a vow.

### ***Sitz im Leben***

The setting in life is difficult to determine due to the formulaic character of the language in laments. Originally derives from the worship service and then later were used as spiritual songs of the individual. These psalms were occasioned by apparently life-threatening situations rather than everyday life; such situations may include illness, misfortune, persecution from enemies – though one needs to be careful about taking the images too literally.

### **2) *Psalms Protesting Innocence***

Psalms 5; 7; 17; 26. These psalms have an accentuated assurance of innocence, and even in some cases a qualified self-curse.

### **3) *Psalms of Confession***

Psalms 51; 130 (Psalms expressing national penitence include Psalms 78; 81; 106; cf. also Ezra 9:9-15; Neh 9:9-38; Dan 9:4-19). These psalms are characterized by a painful awareness of having sinned against Yahweh and deserving punishment. In this light they ask forgiveness and appeal for God's grace.

### **4) *Psalms of Cursing and Vengeance***

Psalm 109, among others. These psalms strive for retaliation against enemies.

### **5) *Psalms of Trust***

Psalms 4; 11; 16; 23; 27:1-6; 62; 131 (Psalm 125 is a national song of trust).

- 1) These psalms reformulate the lament psalms and shift their focus to an expression of trust and confidence, so much so that often the complaint, petition, and certainty of hearing are displaced.
- 2) They often speak of Yahweh in the third person.

## **III. Royal Psalms**

Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 101; 110; 132; 144:1-11; cf. 89:47-52.

### ***Form***

Formally Royal psalms are of different types, though in all cases they are "concerned entirely with kings." Some of their distinguishing elements include:

- 1) Praises of the king.
- 2) Affirmations of Yahweh's favour to the king.
- 3) Prayers for the king (or his own prayer) and royal oracles.
- 4) Portrayals of the king's righteousness and piety.

### ***Sitz im Leben***

These psalms were performed at some sort of court festivity, where they were performed in the presence of the king and his dignitaries. Specific occasions may be enthronement/accession festivals and anniversaries, victory over an enemy, healing from an illness, among others.

## **IV. Thanksgiving Psalms**

### **A. Thanksgivings of the Individual**

Psalms 18; 30; 32; 34; 40:2-12; 41; 66:1-7; 92; (100); (107); 116; 118; 138.

### ***Form***

- 1) An expanded Introduction, declaring the intention to thank God.
- 2) Narration of the trouble, usually to the guests of the celebration. The psalmist usually recounts:
  - a) his trouble (thus they are akin to Laments)
  - b) his calling upon God
  - c) his deliverance
- 3) Acknowledgement/proclamation of Yahweh's deliverance; usually directed towards others.
- 4) In many cases, the psalm ends with an Announcement of the thank-offering.

### ***Sitz im Leben***

Since the word usually translated “thanksgiving” is the same word used for “thank offering” (תודה; *todah*; e.g., Ps 50:14, 23; Jonah 2:9), it is clear that these psalms were intended to be used in a cultic setting. It is thought that the individual, in the presence of the worshiping congregation (e.g., 22:22; 26:12), would testify personally to God’s saving deeds, accompanied with a ritual act and meal. Eventually, these psalms freed themselves from the actual sacrifice.

### **B. Thanksgivings of the Community<sup>6</sup>**

Psalms 66:8-12; 67; 124; 129. These psalms are parallel in form to the individual thanksgiving psalms. The life setting for these psalms was likely a cultic celebration at the temple in remembrance of God’s help and intervention.

## **V. Wisdom Psalms**

Psalms 1; 37; 49; 73; 91; 112; 127; 128; 133. While there are wisdom elements found in psalms of a variety of genres, there are psalms which exhibit a concentration of wisdom themes to be considered a distinct type. As such, these psalms do not exhibit a single formal pattern, but share a number of characteristics, including:

- 1) Psalmist speaks of his words as wisdom, instruction, etc.
- 2) He describes the “fear of Yahweh.”
- 3) He addresses his hearers as “sons.”
- 4) He warns, teaches, and uses figures, question and answer techniques, beatitudes, descriptions of Yahweh’s ways.

## **VI. Smaller Genres and Mixed Types**

### **A. Pilgrimage Psalms**

Only one complete example remains, Psalm 122. These psalms were used at the beginning of a pilgrimage as well as once the pilgrim had reached his or her destination.

### **B. Psalms Using Ancient Stories (Legends) of Israel**

Psalms 78; 105; 106. These psalms are subsumed under other literary types (e.g., Ps 105 is a hymn), but may be grouped together because they share a number of common characteristics:

- 1) The Narration of Yahweh’s deeds and/or the sins of Israel (of *Heilsgeschichte*)
- 2) The Exhortation (as in Deuteronomy)

### **C. Psalm Liturgies**

Psalms 15; 20; 24; 14/53; 66; 81; 82; 85; 95; 107; 115; 118; 121; 126; 132; 134. These psalms are characterized by their antiphonal structure, particularly suited for corporate worship.

### **D. Miscellaneous**

Psalms 36; 50; 52; 75; 82; 108.

### **E. Mixed Psalms**

Psalms 9-10; 12; 77; 90; 94; 119; 123; 137.

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<sup>6</sup> Note: Gunkel and Begrich list these under the category of “smaller genres”; I will include them here since they are related to the individual thanksgiving psalms.