

2) A SHORT HISTORY OF EXEGESIS ON THE PSALMS

Exegesis of the Psalms in the early centuries of Christianity was dominated by the allegorical method. Philo of Alexandria (25 B.C.) was the famous Jewish writer in the diaspora who had made use of the platonic method of the Stoics to develop his own allegorical method for interpreting scripture. The Stoics had used the platonic method primarily to offer reasonable explanations of the popular myths. They attempted to distil from the myth its very soul. A presupposition for the Stoics was that the actual content of the text is something other than what the text superficially seems to be saying. Interpretation is necessary to bring out the true meaning of the text. It is not difficult to see immediately platonic influence in the nature of the relationship between reality and appearance. In Plato's famous analogy of the cave with the shadows, the shadows reflect only the appearance of the real object. The mind has the task to go from the appearance to the reality behind the shadow. This task was readily applicable to a literary text. The surface meaning of the text is like the shadows. The task of the mind is to reach back to the inner or deeper significance of the text itself.

Philo developed this method in his commentaries on OT texts in order to make available in a reasonable way the writings of the Jewish people to the Greek world. A position that Philo seems to have fostered and promoted was that Moses taught nothing different from the Greek philosophers. The Torah corresponds to the natural law, it is eminently reasonable.

An example of Philo's allegorical method can be gleaned from his commentary on Genesis. The method of correspondences was often employed for moral teaching. The images of Adam and Eve and the beasts symbolize other realities: reason, the senses and emotions. The use of allegorical method was quite often deliberate and conscious throughout his works and especially when scriptural quotations were used. Three books were dedicated to allegorical interpretation itself (*Legum Allegoriae I-III*).

But the likeness of the sun he only indicates by symbols. And it is easy otherwise by means of argument to perceive this, since God is the first light, "For the Lord is my light and my Saviour," (Ps 26:1) is the language of the Psalms; and not only the light, but he is also the archetypal pattern of every other light, or rather he is more ancient and more sublime than even the archetypal model, though he is spoken of as the model; for the real model was his own most perfect word, the light, and he himself is like to no created thing (Legum Allegoriae I.74-75).

Even Paul in his letters employed such an allegorical method that had been developed by the Stoics. For instance in commenting on Deut. 25:4 "You shall not muzzle the ox that grinds the grain." Paul writes in 1Cor 9:9-10, "This is not uttered for the sake of the animals who are to receive nourishment but for us. Support the person in the community who serves the Gospel." Similarly in Gal 4:21-31 Paul employs an allegorical method when commenting on the images of Hagar and Sarah and their two sons by saying that the story should be interpreted allegorically in that one character represents freedom and the other slavery.

The great exponent of this particular method in Christian circles was Origen who worked from Alexandria and from Caesarea. In this method, a prime goal was to locate correspondences of the various images and situations presented in the psalms to the realities of Christian faith. This method allowed for a context of great piety and spiritual insights that fostered individual and communal prayer.

Many of the early exegetes were influenced by the writings of Origen even if and when they preferred a more literal interpretation of the psalms.

Take, for instance, St. Augustine who is known for his literal preference in interpreting scripture. In his commentary on the psalms which appears to be a series of homilies, Augustine makes the following remarks on the opening psalm of the psalter:

1. *"Blessed is the man that hath not gone away in the counsel of the ungodly" (ver. 1). This is to be understood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord Man. "Blessed is the man that hath not gone away in the counsel of the ungodly," as "the man of earth did," who consented to his wife deceived by the serpent, to the transgressing the commandment of God. "Nor stood in the way of sinners." For He came indeed in the way of sinners, by being born as sinners are; but He "stood" not therein, for that the enticements of the world held Him not. And hath not sat in the seat of pestilence." He willed not an earthly kingdom, with pride, which is well taken for "the seat of pestilence;" for that there is hardly any one who is free from the love of rule, and craves not human glory. For a "pestilence" is disease widely spread, and involving all or nearly all. Yet "the seat of pestilence" may be more appropriately understood of hurtful doctrine; "whose word spreadeth as a canker." The order too of the words must be considered: "went away, stood, sat." For he "went away," when he drew back from God. He "stood," when he took pleasure in sin. He "sat," when, confirmed in his pride, he could not go back, unless set free by Him, who neither "hath gone away in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of pestilence.*

2. *"But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law will he meditate by day and by night (ver. 2). The law is not made for a righteous man," 4 says the Apostle. But it is one thing to be in the law, another under the law. Whoso is in the law, acteth according to the law; whoso is under the law, is acted upon according to the law: the one therefore is free, the other a slave. Again, the law, which is written and imposed upon the servant, is one thing; the law, which is mentally discerned by him who needeth not its "letter," is another thing. "He will meditate by day and by night," is to be understood either as without ceasing; or "by day" in joy, "by night" in tribulations. For it is said, "Abraham saw my day, and was glad:" and of tribulation it is said, "my reins also have instructed me, even unto the night." (LF 24§).*

As exemplified in this text from Augustine, in this allegorical approach the task at hand is to search for various correspondences to the images used in the text. Often other scriptural passages are used from both Old and New Testaments to make the correspondences, or elements of Christian faith are suggested to be the topic discussed in an anticipated form. This form of exegesis dominated through the centuries and left behind a rich tradition of allegorical interpretation, full of insights into the spiritual life and into prayer.

The allegorical method underwent a series of refinements through the ensuing centuries. At the outset the free-wheeling spirit of allegory was dampened with a more literal approach in interpreting the scriptural passages. Antioch favoured such a limitation on interpreting Scripture.

Even within the rabbinic schools a similar tendency existed in these two approaches to scripture. At first in the Talmud the rabbis make free use of the allegorical method in order to explain and exhort the laws in the *haggadah* and the *halakhah*. By the 8th century there was a reaction to such free use of interpretation and a method arose that concentrated on the text. Philology became an important feature of this method of whom Rashi in Spain was the major proponent. Again in the 12th century allegory- experienced a revival in the Kabbala movement whose gnostic mysticism stressed allegory. In the Zohar, the various levels of interpretation are presented. It is not known for sure who the author of the Zohar was. For a long time it was considered that R. Simeon ben Yohai (R. Simeon) was the author, but this work of the Kabbalah was more than likely composed in the second half of the thirteenth century by Moshe ben Sem Tob de Leon in Spain.

The division of Jewish history into periods:

Moses: written Torah -
oral Torah -

Tannaim 1st century BCE -- early 3rd century CE

Rabbinic period begins with Hillel and Shammai at the time of Christ (or according to Abraham Ibn Daud 1160 from BCE 300). These first teachers are called Tannaim (Aramaic *tanna* from Hebrew *shanah*, 'to repeat, to learn'). Abraham Ibn Daud is responsible for dividing the Tannaim into five generations, the Amoraim into seven generations.

Amoraim (Hebrew, *amar*, 'to say, to comment) are the commentators of Tannaitic teachings up to 500 CE.

Saboraim (Hebrew, *sabar*, 'to think': the editors of the Babylonian Talmud) moved from 6th CE into the period of the

Geonim (Hebrew, *ga'on*, 'eminent': the title of the heads of the Babylonian academies), until the eleventh century.

Mishna (also from Hebrew *shanah* to repeat, in its technical sense means to study). It comprises the three branches of rabbinic tradition, the midrashim, the halakhot and the haggadot. It is organized into six sections (*sedarim* or *arakhim*, the abbreviation for the Talmud as Shas stands for *shishah sedarim*, the six orders).

- 1) Zeraim = seeds 11 tractates;
- 2) Mo'ed = festival days 12 tractates;
- 3) Nashim = women 7 tractates;
- 4) Neziqin = damages 10 tractates;
- 5) Qodashim = holy things 11 tractates;
- 6) Toharot = purities 12 tractates.

The **Tosefta** (Aramaic, supplement) consists of *halakhic* additions to the Mishna. The Talmud which is the commentary on the Mishnah is ambiguous on the authority of the Tosefta. Sometimes the Amoraim seem to refer to it. At other times they seem to be unaware of it.

Gemara (Aramaic, to complete, to learn) refers to the oral teachings regarding the Mishna and is understood to be in continuity with the oral Torah. With the Mishnah this commentary constitutes the Talmud.

The **Talmud** (Hebrew, *lamad* to learn or *limmad* to teach). The Palestinian Talmud (PT) is the commentary on the Mishna by the Palestinian Amoraim (but only for the first four orders, only 39 of the 63 Mishnaic tractates). Sometimes additional material to the Mishnah is commented on. The Babylonian Talmud (BT) is the Babylonian commentary on the Mishnah (only 36 1/2 tractates of the 63 are commented upon here, practically none for Zeraim except for *Berakhot* = blessings).

ZOHAR

- Peshat - literal
- Remez (to hint) - philosophical
- Derash - moral
- Sod - mystical

Such a perspective is quite similar to Christian methodologies as that of Hugh of St. Victor.

literal-historical
allegorical
tropological
anagogical

The literal sense of scripture attempts to teach attitudes. The allegorical sense defines what Christians believe. The tropological sense exhorts how one must act. And finally the anagogical sense presents the aspirations and hopes of Christians.

At the turn of the last century arose the historical critical method, which based itself on many of the values of the romantic period and on many of the procedures of scientific research. It focused on the historical development of scripture. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) continued the work of J.G. Eichorn in making the historical-critical method more precise. Most of his work concentrated on establishing the redaction of the Pentateuch. However, he then did apply his method to a short study of the psalms. His main guiding principle was that the psalms reflect the time of their composition. In itself this was a very undifferentiated principle and it led to the conclusion that practically all the psalms are post-exilic, mostly from the Maccabean period.

There was considerable reaction to this new method. Some scholars such as Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890) opposed this new system, but in the course of his studies he came to accept many of its conclusions. He accepted the Deutero-Isaiah authorship as well as the later dating of the priestly writings.

Buttenwieser (1862-1939) accepted the method of Wellhausen but changed some of the conclusions with respect to the psalter. Buttenwieser observed that the psalter had to be prior to the Maccabean period because at that time Aramaic had become the popular language of Palestine. He concluded that 4/5 of the psalter stemmed from the Persian period, that of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Scientific scholarship reached an impasse in its concentration of determining the date of authorship. The problem seemed to be how to continue with the newly developed tools of exegesis, but to bring out of the texts their powerfully aesthetic and spiritual qualities.

In this regard Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) made a break-through by developing a method that would encompass a wider set of literary, spiritual and theological categories. Gunkel felt that the unique religious experiences that are the basis for the written units of scripture can best be apprehended through their literary expressions. A particular experience that calls forth a composition conditions the literary form that gives shape to the particular composition.

Three basic elements can be discerned in a literary composition: content, form and experience. All of these inter-react in the formulation of a given text. Gunkel then proceeded to analyze the psalms in light of their literary form, discerning the underlying experiences, and probable settings. Using cultic aspects as a basis, he classified the psalms according to their general subject matter: lament, praise and thanksgiving.

Then after studying the common characteristics of the psalms of a given category, he arrived at a series of conventional literary forms into which much of the religious poetry of the bible can be fitted. Since the forms gave evidence of a long period of development, Gunkel concluded that many psalms originated at an early date, even though they did not reach their final form until shortly before the Exile.

The method of Gunkel was not without its difficulties, and it did lead to conclusions that have been seriously challenged. To begin with, Gunkel presumed to be able to reach the unique, unrepeatable experience of the original poet through the analysis of literary forms that are essentially repetitive, cyclical and typical. Gunkel attempted to resolve this difficulty by distinguishing between literary styles of the ancients and the moderns. If the moderns express their experiences in more free and immediate styles, the ancients remained tied in their expressions to the literary conventions of their epoch. Gunkel defined a literary genre by its particular theme, by its peculiar structure and by its stylistic characteristics. To this he added a study of an extra-textual reference to a typical social context - the *sitz im leben*. Precisely because the task at hand was to uncover the repeatable, cyclical and typical literary form in its social context, the uniqueness and peculiarity of each psalm tied to the uniqueness of human experience was not readily attainable. But Gunkel's approach opened the doors to two areas of research: literary genres and the cultic bases of the psalms.

Sigmund Mowinckel (1884-1965) advanced the Scandinavian school which has become known also as the Myth and Ritual School. The *sitz im leben* for the vast majority of the psalms was the national temple of Solomon. He argued that the psalms reflect a cultic setting of a New Year Festival similar to the Akitu festival of Babylon. Each year the king of Babylon celebrated an enthronement of the god Marduk in the person of the king. 'Marduk is King' in the Babylonian psalms became 'The LORD is King' in the Hebrew psalms. He conceived the authors of the psalms as the temple singers who composed the songs for various cultic situations and for particular individuals, notably the king. The title of the majority of psalms **ledawid**, was considered not as a proper name, but rather as a title of the king, much like Caesar was a title originating from the proper name Julius Caesar.

Mowinckel finally advanced the concept of the democratization of the psalms which refers to the tendency that psalms which originally were composed for priests, prophets and kings were then prayed by the average Israelite. The criticism of Mowinckel's position centers around the exaggerated emphasis of the New Year Festival as a key to the interpretation of the psalms. Really there are only a handful of psalms that adequately fall under the purview of such a hypothesis.

Other possible contexts were proposed as key cultural settings from which to explain the majority of the psalms. Artur Weiser (1893) from Tubingen proposed the annual feast of covenant renewal: The theophany was a category of crucial importance in such a presentation of the psalms. The starting point was the theophany of Exodus. The LORD is enthroned in this festival. Phrases such as 'glory to his name, glory to his face', originating from the theophany of The LORD to Moses in Exodus characterize the covenant ritual.

The hymns describing the theophany, which are incorporated in psalms of diverse types, have retained the archaic and mythological colors of the first theophany at Sinai, and are to be understood as reflection of the cultic theophany of The LORD which took place above the cherubim of the sacred Ark, representing the cloud which was the chariot of the Deity. (The Psalms, pp. 38-39)

Hans-Joachim Kraus (1918) proposes a Royal Zion Festival as a further key for interpreting the psalms. The basis for this cultic setting would be 2 Sam 6 and 1K 8 in which the choice is commemorated of the Davidic Dynasty and the city of Jerusalem as the Lord's dwelling. The procession with the Ark as in 2 Sam 6 would have been a principle ritual in the Festival, but in distinction from Mowinckel there was not an enthronement of The LORD. The related psalms that do speak of enthronement would have originated according to Kraus during the exile under the deuteronomistic and Second Isaiah theologies in which The LORD is seen as the one who leads his people to Jerusalem where he is enthroned.

The strength of these analyses of cultic settings is that they provide a context for interpreting some of the psalms. Unfortunately, the methods for discovering the social context of the psalms tend to be alarmingly accumulative, and this leads to a categorizing of psalms according to a cultic setting on very meagre evidence. The propositions of cultural settings and the cultic rituals that were a basis for the singing and reciting of psalms can only go so far in-providing a backdrop with which to understand and to study the psalms. The interest in the cultic background of the psalms did have an important influence on psalm studies and that is the return to the theological and spiritual impact that the psalms obviously contain.

The categorization of psalms into literary types and genres continued to be clarified, simplified, or in some cases even obscured by various scholars. The categories that Gunkel had provided for the psalms continued to be used, and for the most part, even today when an introduction to the psalms is given these categories are used. Gunkel's categories are the following:

- 1) Hymns, which are psalms of praise
- 2) Laments of the People, which presume a communal context for their setting
- 3) Laments of the Individual, which by far make up the major part of the psalter
- 4) Songs of Thanksgiving
- 5) Spiritual poems, which Gunkel referred to as the real treasure of the psalter

Although this classification meets the requirements for organizing the vast majority of the psalms, Westermann (1909) felt that such a classification as that of Gunkel did not correspond to the inner dynamic of prayer that gave shape and form to the psalms. For instance he observed that Gunkel's category of hymns was determined by form whereas the prayers of thanksgiving were determined by their content. The important distinction in the psalms of praise for Westermann is not between form and content, but rather in the different manners of praising God and praying to God. There exists in the psalms that praise God a clear distinction in the motives for praise. On the one hand, God is praised in all his glory and wonder, as creator and Lord of history, and on the other hand, God is praised for specific acts of salvation. The former tends to be descriptive and imperative, the latter tends to be declarative and narrative.

Furthermore, Westermann continued the distinction that Gunkel had made between individual and communal petition right into the psalms of praise. His classification then builds on Gunkel's classification:

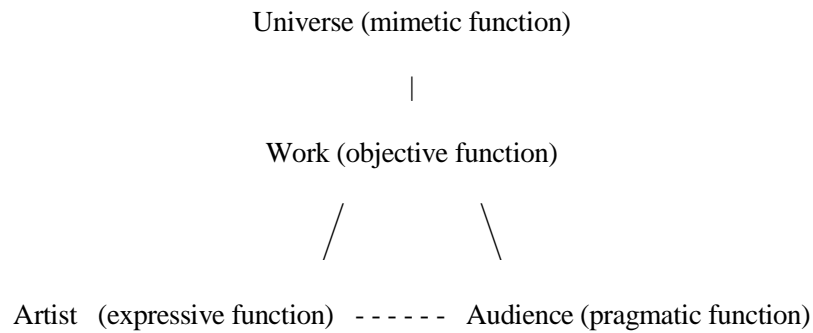
- 1) Lament of the People
- 2) Lament of the Individual
- 3) Declarative Praise of the People
- 4) Declarative Praise of the Individual
- 5) Descriptive Psalms of Praise
- 6) Eschatological Song of Praise

For the most part, Westermann's classification has not been popularly received. The classification which at first had been efficiently simplified into psalms of praise and psalms of lament as the two basic modes of prayer in the psalter became subdivided into types that are less readily recognizable.

However, Westermann's classification explains the inner dynamic of prayer in the psalter in a way that provides valuable insights into prayer and the various forms that a particular prayer takes. Many scholars have felt in the last ten years that we have reached a plateau in psalm classification, and that the various classifications have exhausted the insights and fruits that can be gained by form-criticism applied to the

psalms. We can always of course be open to surprises. On occasion, we can notice how the essential structures and relations that underlie Westermann's categories are reconceived to express contemporary understanding. W. Brueggemann has employed the psychological categories of orientation, disorientation and new orientation with great success in exploring the manner in which the psalms engage a hermeneutic for transforming our world. Many other terms that we ordinarily employ to name the processes of growth that have been an outgrowth from psychology are helpful to appreciate the dynamics of lament, praise and thanksgiving (integration, disintegration, reintegration; notice even William Blake's categories of innocence, experience, organized innocence).

Structuralism (and its cousin Semiotics) is a method for analyzing literary works either in narrative form or in poetic form. It is characterized by uncovering structural relationships in the dynamics of action (narrative form), or in the dynamics of speech (dialogical form). These structures then are applied to literary works for the sake of understanding and uncovering their inner and outer constructions. This method has been generously applied to various biblical works (e.g. the Joseph story, Luke-Acts and the Psalms). The hermeneutical basis for a work of art is often expressed through the establishment of relationships of the work to its various points of contact.



(M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

Employing the categories presented by R. Jakobson, J.-N. Aletti and Trublet have proposed a classification of psalms based on the categories of linguistic discourse:



Accordingly, the psalms of lament can be classified by the four functions of speech: the expressive function, the conative function, the phatic function and the referential function. The psalms of praise however are categorized by the quality of action of the psalm's speaker.

Factitive praise -- calls others to praise God because of the blessings the speaker has received.

Performative praise -- reveals the speaker caught up in the dynamic of praising God for all the marvelous blessings of God in the world.

Mixed praise -- combines the first two forms of praise and is the most frequently found type in the psalter.

Community performative praise -- is like the second form in that the speaker is caught up in the dynamic of praising God, but this form of praise is realized only in the context of the community, usually under the form of a ritual action.

Finally there is -- *inverted factitive praise* -- in which the speaker calls others to praise God, but not for the blessings the speaker has received but for the marvelous blessings that everyone or others have received.

examples:

- 1) Bless the Lord all you peoples, for the Lord has done marvelous things to me.
(Exodus events) time: past
- 2) I will bless the lord at all times, for he has done great things.
(Creation) time: present
- 3) The Lord has done great things, his glory is forever in his city, His love is established forever.
(Enthronement) time: future
- 4) In recognition, I offer you a sacrifice of praise, I do what I promised. To the Lord is salvation.
time: present

- 5) Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, he has not refused his blessings and faithfulness from my lord.
time: past

The often tortuous terminology of structural analysis is the first hurdle to overcome in order to appreciate the insights that this method of reading may provide. A criticism often leveled at structuralistic methods is that at the end of the research, one has gone through circles and circles of relationships without having penetrated in a particularly significant manner the meaning of the text. However, such a criticism can be leveled at any methodology that ultimately stops short of presenting the theological meaning and relevance of a religious text.

Research on the psalms has been dominated by the form-critical method that has concentrated as we have seen on the *sitz-im-leben*, the social, religious contexts that gave rise to literary forms, and on the classification of the forms. The method for classifying the psalms included the use of many poetic devices such as parallelism, repetitions etc., but one major poetic device has been conspicuously missing in the form-critical method - the study of symbolic language which is so crucial to the poetic language of the psalms.

There have been recent studies that concentrate on uncovering the symbolic imagery used in the psalter. Such books as Beauchamp's, *Psaume nuit et jour* and Monloubou's, *L'imaginaire des Psalmistes*, explore the world of symbolism in the psalter. Othmar Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, provides iconographic background of images from reliefs arising from Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt. Moreover there have been recent attempts to include the results of form-criticism while at the same time expanding the work of the commentaries towards literary criticism and a methodical treatment of the psalm as a symbol or metaphor whose uniqueness and meaning is best uncovered and grasped by a thorough understanding of the psalm's unity.

In this regard, Louis Jacquet's three volume work on the psalms is one of the most complete commentaries on the psalms. The outline of the method applied to each psalm underscores the breadth of the method. Each psalm begins with a translation, a textual criticism, a presentation of the psalm's context, exegetical notes in which both structures and imagery are explored, a Christian perspective, liturgical use and finally a short prayer composed by Jacquet in the spirit and tone of the psalm. Unfortunately, Jacquet took considerable liberty in reorganizing verses of certain difficult psalms that few exegetes have found convincing. This is one flaw in an otherwise excellent treasury of information on any psalm.

The exegetical section in Jacquet's work is quite extensive and provides many helpful insights. Where it is lacking in a rigorous methodology for analyzing the unity of the psalm, Alonso Schökel offers in his original work on the psalms, *Treinta Salmos: Poesia y Oracion*. In his introduction, Alonso Schökel summarizes the main contribution of Gunkel's form-criticism while showing its inadequacies of understanding and appreciating the meaning of the psalm. A psalm's meaning goes beyond the form it has taken, it goes beyond cultural or religious settings that gave rise to the psalm. A psalm's meaning is grasped in its particular and unique literary unity. "I intend to come to an understanding of the poetic work in its unity, uniqueness and validity as a fusion of content and form, as an expression in poetic words of a human experience. In the form the meaning is realized, by studying the form I will try to penetrate and delve into the meaning." (p. 20) The strongest aspects of Alonso's method, and perhaps the most fruitful results of insights revolve around his analysis of imagery within the context of the psalm's

organization. By exploring the meaning of the psalms through form and symbolism, he makes the psalms come alive. They speak a meaning and a sense for contemporary contexts.

Walter Brueggemann has written extensively on the Psalms, applying contemporary social contexts to the structures of prayer put forward by Gunkel and Westermann. The Psalms of Lament and Praise are translated as Psalms of *orientation, disorientation and new orientation*. The significance of the types of Praise can be seen as a check against and a critique of ideological hegemony. His reflections on the Psalms and contemporary situations and challenges point to a spirituality of the Psalms that is both critical and constructive.

