

Form Criticism of the Psalms

by Will Groben

Gunkle and Mowinckel focused on the liturgical value and place in Israel's worship of the Psalms. They used form criticism to identify different types of Psalms, specifically three main types of laments, thanksgiving, and praise, which are consistent with the description of types in 1 Chronicles 16.4. Form critics have identified patterns for each of these types.

Laments were psalms causing God to remember the needs of his people, with the hopeful result of deliverance. They have a general structure as follows:

1. opening address or cry for help
2. description of the distress
3. statement of trust in Yahweh [except Psalm 88]
4. prayer for deliverance
5. vow of praise to Yahweh when delivered [sometimes omitted or alluded to indirectly]

Psalms of Thanksgiving were in response to answered prayer. They have a general structure as follows:

1. declaration of intent to praise
2. summary of the distress and Yahweh's deliverance
3. renewed vow of praise
4. descriptive praise / instruction

Praise Psalms glorified attributes of Yahweh or his general acts of goodness and deliverance. They have a general structure as follows:

1. exhortation for people to praise Yahweh
2. reasons for praise
3. renewed call to praise

While the insight into structural form of the psalms and their liturgical use in Israel's worship has been beneficial for exegesis, these methods have proven vulnerable to potential abuse as some scholars [including Mowinckel himself] have speculated about the settings for each type of psalm, imagining liturgical contexts for which there is no biblical basis. This has led them to a speculative interpretation which sometimes was heretical, inconsistent with the overall biblical account, and distorted from the true meaning of the psalm.

So while there is value in seeing the Psalms in their original context of national worship and in recognizing and understanding the various forms, we must be careful to allow our exegesis to fuel our conclusions, not our speculations to fuel our exegesis.