

Psalms: Form Critical Approaches and Hymn Motifs in Psalms

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke introduces the form-critical approach to the Psalms, contrasting it with traditional and 19th-century literary-analytical theories. He evaluates Hermann Gunkel's foundational concepts of Sitz im Leben (setting in life) and Gattung (genre) alongside findings from 1 Chronicles 16 and Ugaritic parallels. The lecture gives detailed attention to hymns and praise psalms, identifying their core structural motifs—the call to praise, cause for praise, and renewed call to praise—using Psalm 117 and Psalm 33 as primary examples. Finally, Waltke draws upon C.S. Lewis to offer a theological rationale for the divine imperative to praise God as the proper and complete response to ultimate reality.

Outline

I. Introduction and Course Context

- A. Purpose of the Course
 - 1. Focus on authentic interpretation appropriate to the biblical text.
 - 2. Prioritizing exegetical methodology to understand the mind of the psalmists.
- B. Review of Prior Methodological Approaches
 - 1. Historical Approach: View of Psalms as a royal hymnbook centered on the King as representative of God's people.
 - 2. Literary Approach: Focus on Hebrew poetry and parallelism (relationships and distinctions between poetic lines).
- C. Overview of the Form-Critical Approach
 - 1. Classification of Psalms into distinct genres/forms (minimum of five basic types).
 - 2. Focus on Hymns/Praise Psalms as rich repositories of communal theology and revelation.

II. Background to Form Criticism: Survey of Academic Approaches

- A. Traditional Approach
 - 1. Reliance on psalm superscripts/titles dating psalms to David and early Israel.
 - 2. Emphasis on the central role of the King (a focus highlighted by Waltke).
- B. Literary-Analytical / Documentary Approach (19th Century)

1. Philosophical presupposition: Reason elevated over revelation and skepticism regarding divine intervention.
 2. Development of the Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP theory) by Julius Wellhausen.
 - a. J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly) document theories.
 - b. Dating of D to Josiah's reform (620 BC) and P to the Exile, flipping traditional chronology.
 3. Skepticism toward Mosaic and Davidic authorship across academic seminaries.
- C. Waltke's Critique and Response to Source Criticism
1. Addressing Exodus 6 and the 'Recognition Formula' (experiencing Yahweh's power in action vs. mere nominal awareness).
 2. Distinguishing the Mosaic composition of the core 'Book of the Law' from exilic editing of Deuteronomy.
 3. Influence of academic liberalism on theological education (Briggs, Cheyne, Duhm).

III. The Form-Critical Method of Hermann Gunkel

- A. Hermann Gunkel's Innovations (c. 1900–1933)
1. Shift from literary source-splicing to identifying pre-literary oral traditions and genres.
 2. Core Analytical Principles:
 - a. Sitz im Leben: Setting in life (societal and liturgical contexts where psalms originated).
 - b. Gattung: Genre/form defined by shared vocabulary, mood, motifs, and literary structures.
 3. Utilization of Ancient Near Eastern comparative literature (Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian hymns).
- B. Evaluation and Critique of Gunkel's Method
1. Weaknesses: Erroneous late dating (Second Temple period) based on flawed theories of linguistic and religious evolution.
 2. Impact of Ugaritic Discoveries (Ras Shamra, 1929): Proved archaic Hebrew poetic forms date to 1400–1200 BC.
 3. Strengths: Identification of five principal psalm categories (Hymns/Royal, Individual Laments, Communal Laments, Songs of Trust, Thanksgiving).
 4. Confirmation in 1 Chronicles 16:4: Levites appointed to invoke/petition (lamnatzeah), give thanks (hodot), and praise (haleel).

IV. Analysis of Hymns and Praise Psalms

- A. Two Principal Categories of Praise Psalms (Westermann)
1. Hymns: Descriptive praise celebrating God generally for creation and salvation history.
 2. Songs of Grateful Praise (Thanksgiving): Declarative praise testifying to specific answers to prayer.
- B. Structural Motifs of the Hymn
1. Call to Praise (Introduction): Imperative command calling the congregation to worship.
 2. Cause for Praise (Body): Theological basis detailing who God is and what He has done.

3. Renewed Call to Praise (Conclusion): Reiterated call summarizing worship.
4. Textual Examples:
 - a. Psalm 117: Shortest psalm clearly displaying all three structural motifs.
 - b. Psalm 33: Full-orbed praise psalm demonstrating creation, providence, justice, and trust.

V. Examination of the Call to Praise and Theological Rationale

- A. Analysis of the Imperative Mood in Calls to Praise
 1. Linguistic forms: 2nd person imperatives, 3rd person jussives ('may they'), and 1st person cohortatives ('let us').
 2. Tone and atmosphere: Command characterized by fervor and enthusiasm rather than tepid formality.
- B. C.S. Lewis on the Divine Imperative to Praise
 1. Addressing the objection of divine narcissism or self-centeredness.
 2. Lewis's defense: Praise is the natural and necessary completion of enjoying anything truly admirable (e.g., fine art or nature).
 3. Failing to praise reflects spiritual dullness and loss of participation in ultimate reality.
- C. Universal Context of Praise
 1. Worship commanded in all life circumstances, including times of difficulty and trial (e.g., Psalm 95 and Psalm 22).
 2. Praise as an essential, non-negotiable spiritual obligation for the believer.