

# **Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Form Critical Approach, Hymn Motifs, Session 6, 6-min. Video Overview**

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Alright, welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're jumping into something really cool. A scholarly tool that's going to totally change the way you read one of the most famous books of poetry ever written.

You know, for centuries, people have gone to the Psalms for everything. Comfort, inspiration, you name it. But let's be honest, it can be a bit much.

You've got these incredible songs of joy right next to cries of pure anguish, and then these deep thoughts on history and creation. It's a lot to take in. So the big question is, are we really getting it? How do we get back inside the heads of the original poets and understand what they were really trying to say? That's the puzzle we're going to try and solve today.

Okay, first things first. We have to admit there's a problem. To really get the Psalms, you can't just read them at face value.

We need a method, some kind of reliable guide. Especially when the old signposts, like who wrote what, are suddenly being questioned. And you know, a really powerful tool for this came from a place you might not expect.

It popped up during this period of intense academic skepticism about the Bible back in the 19th century. So you had scholars who started to question all the traditional ideas about authorship. They wanted new ways to figure out where these ancient texts came from.

This whole new way of thinking, you know, prioritizing reason and a kind of scientific analysis over just accepting tradition. Well, it famously led to something called the documentary hypothesis for the first five books of the Bible. Right.

So guys like Julius Wellhausen came along and basically said, hey, these books weren't written by one person like Moses. They argued that they were actually woven together from at least four different sources. And each source had its own style, its own vocabulary, its own point of view.

I mean, you can imagine this completely shook things up. And this is the key point. Out of this environment of, well, skepticism, a totally new approach started to take root.

It's called form criticism. The idea was simple, really. If we can't be sure who wrote it, maybe we can figure out what kind of thing it is and why it was written in the first place.

OK, so this is where our main character, a scholar named Hermann Gunkel, enters the picture. He's the one who really pioneered this new method. He basically shifted the whole conversation away from who wrote this to what kind of psalm this is. Gunkel had this really smart two-part method.

First, he'd ask about its Sitz in Leben. That's German for setting in life. In other words, what was the original situation? Was this thing sung at a king's coronation, a funeral, maybe a big harvest festival? Then, second, he'd figure out its Gattung, or its genre.

He'd look for patterns and the mood, the words they used, the overall structure, and group them together. So he went through the entire book of Psalms, all 150 of them. And after applying this brand new lens, he came to a pretty amazing conclusion.

You could basically sort all of them almost scientifically into five main categories. And this right here was a total game changer. Seriously.

All of a sudden, scholars had a new way to understand each psalm based on what it was and what it did- its form and function- instead of getting stuck in endless debates about who may or may not have written it. OK, so that's the theory. But how does this actually work in practice? Let's take a look.

We'll grab one of the most common types, the hymn of praise, and see how Gunkel's tool just brilliantly reveals its hidden structure. It turns out that these hymns of praise almost always follow a super simple, kind of elegant three-part pattern. First, there's a call to praise, like an opening invitation to worship.

Then you get the main part, the why, the cause for praise. And finally, it wraps up with another call to praise, often echoing the very beginning. And you know what? You can see this pattern perfectly in the shortest psalm in the entire book, Psalm 117.

It's got all three parts right there in just a couple of lines: the call, the cause, and the conclusion. It's like a perfect tiny little hymn. OK, but this whole analysis, especially that call to praise part, it actually brings up a really deep, kind of tricky question.

And it's one that even bothered the famous writer C.S. Lewis. Yeah, Lewis really struggled with this. I mean, think about it.

Why would an all-powerful God command people to praise him? Doesn't that sound a little narcissistic? He felt like it came across as insecure, you know, like a demand for flattery, which seemed beneath a truly great being. But then he had this breakthrough. He started thinking about art and about nature.

And he realized something. We praise things that are admirable not for the thing's sake, but for our own sake. Praise isn't about flattering some cosmic ego.

It's just the right, the appropriate, the natural response when you come face to face with something truly great. To not praise it would mean you're just not getting it. So Lewis concluded that the command to praise isn't for God's benefit at all.

It's actually an invitation for us, an invitation to wake up, to join in with reality, to experience real joy. In the end, it's for us. So here's the takeaway.

The next time you open up the Psalms, you have this new tool in your back pocket. You can ask yourself, okay, what am I actually reading here? Is this a lament, a Thanksgiving song, a royal Psalm, or a hymn of praise? Understanding its form, its Gattung, and its original setting

in life, well, that just unlocks a whole new layer of meaning. It's not just words on a page anymore.

It becomes a living, breathing piece of literature with a real purpose.