

The Book of Psalms: A Survey of Modern Approaches

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Abstract

This paper surveys the methodological variety currently applied to the book of Psalms, available to students of biblical studies. From the more general verse-by-verse approaches of the commentaries, the critical methods applied to the Psalter kept the pace of research development. During the last two centuries several modern methods could be traced and generously illustrated with scholastic activity in six main fields of criticism: rhetorical, comparative, literary, form, redaction, and dogmatic. This selection of names and works in relation to a particular method is meant to orientate the student in the area of Psalm's criticism and assist in the difficult task of identifying a method with its forefathers and main supporters.

The Book of Psalms was approached differently in its long interpretation history. From the interpretation given by the Rabbis and mere quotation of the Psalms in the New Testament, until the end of this century passed over two thousand years. Probably the most important work to be consulted on the matter is the two-volume one written by Thorne Wittstruck, entitled *The Book of Psalms: An Annotated Bibliography*.<sup>1</sup> It lacks the earlier material before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For that reason the work is highly modern but regards only the Western trend of Christian theology, Europe, Northern America and South Africa, as a mere reflection of the current leading school of biblical theology, represented by Catholics and Protestants. We will be dealing extensively with this work and refer many times to it.

Discussing the whole issue of history of Psaltic studies, James Luther Mays understood it as a struggle to answer the question *What is a Psalm?* He condensed the history of critical studies on the Psalter into three eras: a pre-form criticism era, the form-criticism era, actually controlling the century, and a post-form criticism era still following. From this perspective the personality of Herman Gunkel is prominent and definitory for the understanding of critical studies *per se*. If the primary era has to respond to this question, then the answer would be "a document for Israel history." The second one says with precision "a specific genre," but the third one does not hurry to offer a clear single answer, preferring a broader perception of the "rich and multilevel nature of a psalm."<sup>2</sup> We will find this period division time and again but in our travel over the centuries, trying to discern the most popular methods being in scholarly use, we frequently imply the question to which J.L. Mays circumscribed the resumé of research's history on Psalms.

Commentaries

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<sup>1</sup> During the editing process of this work, published by Garland in 1994, the author confessed he reduced the manuscript from 3000 pages down to 1000, in order to fulfill the requirements imposed by the publisher. In the process, commentaries from the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries and articles written before 1940 were deleted as well as many of the summaries that proved to be tautological instead of explanatory. For this reason, at times, our conclusions are not based on exhaustive data but on the great majority of documents listed and adnotated in this work, and in other articles written on the topic, we will refer to due course.

<sup>2</sup> Past, Present, and Prospect in Psalm Study, *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present and Future. Essays in Honor of Gene M Tucker*, ed. James Luther Mays, David L. Petersen, Kent Harold Richards, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 147-156.

From the very beginning Psalms were considered by theologians a fertile field for devotional commentaries. Starting with Origen's commentary, appeared at the beginning of the third century, during the two millennia of Christianity many writers added their own contribution as a proof of spiritual and theological maturity.<sup>3</sup> First commentaries had more an expositive character being mere ecclesiastical addresses or sermons, as their names betray: *expositio*, *explanatio*, or *ennarratio*. The closer we get to our modern times the less exhaustive are the commentaries, in that that they do not attempt to discuss the whole Psalter, but rather specific types of psalms, a clear influence from the form criticism studies. This is the case with many commentaries published particularly in the 80's and 90's.<sup>4</sup>

Luis Alonso Schokel approached only 30 Psalms, the ones of whose merits are considered spiritually to be the highest.<sup>5</sup> Westermann's selection is in accordance with his form criticism theory took over from Gunkel, and exposed to the public in his essay *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*.<sup>6</sup> Besides them, there are other complete commentaries as well. Dahood's commentary and his method is discussed below. To this we may attach Stuehlmueller with his two-volume commentary *The Psalms*,<sup>7</sup> and Leopold Sabourin, presenting the value of the psalms on a form criticism scale.<sup>8</sup> Another recent notable attempt to accompany each psalm with a scholarly comment belongs to Word Biblical Commentary Series, who gathered P.C. Craigie, M.E. Tate, and L.C. Allen to write a complete overview of the *Psalter*. Even their methods are not identical with one another, they offer the necessary material a student or a scholar will need for a refined study.<sup>9</sup>

### Rhetorical studies

One of the oldest subjects that preoccupied the highly educated minds of the biblicists is the presence of the figures of speech in the Sacred Book. Started in 1750's general poetical studies were abandoned for a while and rediscovered several times across the two following centuries. The seminal paper of Richard Lowth, originally written in Latin (1753) was translated into English (1787) and have known two other imprints later on (1829, 1971). The development of research contributed to the appearance in the last decade of the most reliable and complex Hebrew stylistics

<sup>3</sup> Probably Origen's work, *Exegetica in Psalmos* (Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 12: 1053-1686, vol. 17: 105-150, Paris: J.P. Migne, 1857) was the first one, but then there were many other Christian theologians who wrote partial or complete commentaries on Psalms, approaching them differently, as Alonso Schokel noticed in one article, i.e. historically, prophetically, typologically, allegorically (Interpretacion de los Salmos hasta Casiodoro: Sintesis histórica, *Estudios Biblica* 47/1989).

<sup>4</sup> J. Kenneth Kuntz, Engaging the Psalms: Gains and Trends in Recent Research, *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*, 2 (1994), Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 86-89.

<sup>5</sup> *Treinta Salmos: Poestay oración* (Estudios de Antiguo Testamento, 2, Madrid: Ediciones Cristianidad, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Atlanta: John Knox, 1981. See also *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Old Testament Message, 21-22 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> *Le livre de psaumes: Traduit et interprété*, Recherches, NS 18, Montreal: Bellarmin; Paris: Cerf, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, 19, Waco, TX: Word Books; M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, WBC, 20, Waco, TX: Word Books; L.C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC, 21, Waco, TX: Word Books.

textbooks. We have to mention here the name of Robert Alter,<sup>10</sup> G.E. Watson,<sup>11</sup> Luis Alonso Schokel,<sup>12</sup> Adele Berlin,<sup>13</sup> D.L. Petersen<sup>14</sup> and K.H. Richards and S.E. Gillingham,<sup>15</sup> who inferred that the problematic of the Hebrew poetry belongs to the larger domain of world literature.

Biblical Poetry raised an increasing interest among the scholars. Modern literary criticism of late 19<sup>th</sup> century sharpened its methodology after decades of stylistic development due to the high contribution the romanticists proved to be for their generation and the ones still to come. Studies of meter and rhythm applied on the biblical poetry, specifically in Psalms, were not rare at all, and since Julius Ley's study,<sup>16</sup> many promoted them as the most legitimate scientific enterprise someone can develop on Israel's poetic books. It is sufficient to mention here names as Gustav Bickell, Hubert Grimme, David Heinrich Muller, Robert Stiebb, Sigmund Mowinkel, Arvid D. Bruno and more recently Stanislav Segert, Douglas K. Stuart, P. van der Lugt and Michael P. O'Connor. Even so, there is not a perfect agreement regarding the opportunity of such studies on the Psalms because modern European terminology and concepts are applied to Ancient Near Eastern pieces of literature, without having the needed proofs for accepting such an input.<sup>17</sup> This is why each time a study like this starts, it is always necessary to present first the proofs that could make the argument absolute and only then develop the thesis.

H. Fisch, a literary critic, focussed on the sacred nature of the Psalter, emphasizing the importance of the relation between God and humanity that it describes, rather than the possible literary structure it took from relative literatures of Near East. It took a lay scholar not a theologian, to remind us that this Scripture is God's, and careless usage of it dishonours both us and our God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, New York: Basic Books, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to Its Techniques*, JSOT Suppl. 26, 1984 (reprinted several times since), and *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse*, JSOT Supp 170, Sheffield: University, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, Subsidia Biblica 11, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> *Biblical Poetry through Medieval Jewish Eyes*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> *Interpreting Biblical Poetry*, Fortress, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> We imply here *Die metrischen Formen der hebraischen Poesie. Des Vers- und Strophenbaues in der hebräischen Poesie. Nebst Analyse einer Auswahl von Psalmen und anderen strophischen Dichtungen der verschiedenen Vers- und Strophenarten mit vorangehendem Abriss der Metrik der hebraischen Poesie*, appeared in 1875 at Halle (Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses). It was followed by others such as *Leitfaden der Metrik der hebraischen Poesie nebst dem ersten Such der Psalmen. Nach rhythmischer Vers- und Strophenabteilung mit metrischer Analyse* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1887), and "Origenes Über hebraische Metrik", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1892).

<sup>17</sup> There is an outgoing interest in preserving the meter told to be specific to laments, which is the *qinah*. The first study seems to belong to K. Budde: *Das hebräische Klagelied*, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 2 (1882): 1-52, the next one coming after a century: Randall W. Garr, *The Qinah: A Study of Poetic Meter, Syntax and Style*, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983): 54-75. Evidently there were other authors who wrote about it but we implied here very specific studies and essays on the matter.

<sup>18</sup> *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

## Comparative studies

New horizons have tended to open along with the archaeological discoveries at Ras Shamra, the extinct Canaanite civilization at Ugarit, because it permitted to compare biblical texts with their contemporary Canaanite literature. During the process, scholars discovered a tremendous similitude not only at the level of structuring the documents but even at the level of wording and inner intertextual connections. The Ugarit discoveries were fundamental for W. F. Albright who considered them as opening a new era in the exegetical research. Consecutively he spoke about two distinct periods in Psalm's exegesis: the "pre-Ugaritic" period, and the "Ugaritic" period.<sup>19</sup>

At that time, Ovid R. Sellers foresaw the future of the exegetical studies in Psalms as a mere comparative study between Hebrew and Ugaritic Poetry, which were not to be overemphasized.<sup>20</sup> During its short existence, the Canaanite-Hebrew comparative studies met the interest of many scholars. Among the most important researchers we need to mention here John Gray,<sup>21</sup> Loren R. Fisher,<sup>22</sup> Marvin H. Pope,<sup>23</sup> or Patrick D. Miller Jr.<sup>24</sup>

By far, the most prolific author of Hebrew-Ugarit comparative studies applied to the Psalms was Mitchell Dahood, who proved the value of this comparative method in his three volume commentary on the Psalms.<sup>25</sup> His tremendous work was indexed by Ernest E. Martinez and published in two consecutive volumes, one dedicated to the research on Ugarit, the other one to the research on Ebla.<sup>26</sup> Besides him there were few who dared to pass into this highly specialized field, as Oswald Loretz did for example.<sup>27</sup> All the

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<sup>19</sup> *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, Baltimore, 1942, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> *The Status and Prospects of Research Concerning the Psalms, The Study of the Bible Today and Tomorrow*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947, pp. 131ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Canaanite Mythology and Hebrew Tradition*, Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions, 1954; *The Legacy of Canaan. The Ras Shamra Texts and their relevance to the Old Testament*, *Vetus Testamentum* Suppl. 5, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957; 2 ed. 1965; *Sacral Kingship in Ugarit*, *Ugaritica* 6 (1969).

<sup>22</sup> *The Claremont Ras Shamra Tablets*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971; *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*, 2 vols. *Analecta Orientalia* 49-50, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1972, reprinted in 1975.

<sup>23</sup> *El in the Ugarit Texts*, *Vetus Testamentum* Suppl. 2, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955; co-author with W. Rollig on writing *Die Mythologie der Ugariter und Phönizier*, *Wörterbuch der Mythologie I, Die Alten Kulturvölker*, ed. H.W. Haussig, Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1965.

<sup>24</sup> *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 5, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1973; *Vocative-Lamed in the Psalter: A reconsideration*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 11 (1979).

<sup>25</sup> His three volumes commentary on the Psalms appeared during the second half of the 60's, at Doubleday, New York, in the prestigious series entitled *The Anchor Bible*: 1965 - vol. 1 *Psalms 1*; 1968- vol.2: *Psalms 51-100*; 1970- vol.3: *Psalms 101-150*.

<sup>26</sup> *Hebrew-Ugaritic Index to the Writings of Mitchell J Dahood: A Bibliography with Indices of Scriptural Passages, Hebrew and Ugaritic Words, and Grammatical Observations*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967; *Hebrew-Ugaritic Index to the Writings of Mitchell J Dahood: A Bibliography with Indices of Scriptural Passages, Hebrew, Ugaritic, and Eblaite Words, and Grammatical Observations, Critical Reviews, Doctoral Dissertations and Related Writings*, *Subsidia Biblica* 4, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981.

<sup>27</sup> *Psalmstudien I*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 3(1971); *Die Ugaritistik in der Psalmeninterpretation*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 4 (1972); *Psalmstudien II* *Ugarit-Forschungen* 5 (1973); *Psalmstudien III*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 6 (1974); *Psalmstudien IV. Stichometrische und textologische Probleme in den Thronbesteigungs-Psalmen*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 6 (1974); *Die Umpunktierung von m'd zu ma'ed in den Psalmen*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 6 (1974); *Ugaritische und hebraische Lexikographie*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 12 (1980); *Die Ugaritistik in der Psalminterpretation (II)*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 17 (1986); *Die*

bibliography available on Ugarit is now presented to the reader grace to Manfred Dietrich, the leading editor of a larger group of editors, who prepared an exhaustive guide in 5 volumes. The study is divided into two periods of time, of which the first one is most extensively covered (there are four volumes on the period 1928-1966). The last volume is dedicated to a period of 5 years only, 1967-1971. All five volumes appeared the same year, 1973.<sup>28</sup> Since then there is no other attempt registered, at least to start such a major enterprise, excepting the studies gathered in one volume and published in 1994 by Yitzak Avishur.<sup>29</sup>

Few other scholars have tried the Mesopotamian,<sup>30</sup> Egyptian,<sup>31</sup> or Hittite parallelism,<sup>32</sup> but either one of those fields implies a very good knowledge of some other dead languages besides Hebrew, a goal not easy to reach.

### Literary criticism

Even though literary criticism is the oldest critical method used to be applied, on the Biblical text, regarding the Psalter, history proves that this method was not cited until late in our century, excepting the interest for the figures of style which proves to be much earlier in use. Matters like the date, author, title or doxologies are quite late and there are few scholars that commented on them because of their variety and lack of clues for establishing with certainty these items. Their role in the Jewish society was a bit more interesting, being given two main options: the Psalter as a cultic song-book, or the Psalter as a lyric registration of Israel history. Here the studies are interfering with those of form criticism because it is considered to be a close relationship between the form a piece of literature has and its *Sitz im Leben*, or the original context that has produced and shaped it.

From here derived another issue that have met a large audience, that of the redaction process at the end of which the Psalter reached the present canonical form. Studied on books, according to the Hebrew Psalter division or according to the author, identified in the title or presumed from the inner structure or word preferences, Psalms knew many scholars ready to engage in that kind of research. Among the most important ones we quote here Jesus Enciso Viana, David M. Howard, Jr., Walter Brueggemann and, of course, Gerald Henry Wilson.<sup>33</sup>

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*Königpsalmen. Die altorientisch-kanaanaische Königstradition in jüdischer Sicht, teil 1.: Psalm 20, 21, 72, 101, 144*, Akademische Bibliothek: Ugaritisch-Biblische Literatur 6, Altenberge and Soest: CIS Verlag, 1988; *Ugarit-Texte und Thronbesteigungpsalmen. Die Metamorphose des Regenspenders Baal-Jahwe (Ps. 24:7-10; 29; 47; 93; 95-100; sowie Ps. 77:17-20; 114)*, Akademische Bibliothek: Ugaritisch-Biblische Literatur 7, Altenberge and Soest: CIS Verlag, 1988; *Zur Zitat Vernetzung zwischen Ugarit-Texten und Psalmen*, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 26 (1994).

<sup>28</sup> *Ugaritische Bibliographie 1928-1966*, 4 vols. *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 20/1-4, Neukirchen Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973; *Ugaritische Bibliographie 1967-1971: Titel, Nachtrage, Register*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 20/5, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973.

<sup>29</sup> *Studies in Hebrew and Ugaritic Psalms*, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> S. H. Hooke, Raffaele Giorgio Castellino, Erich Ebeling, Henri Frankfort, Adam Falkenstein and many others.

<sup>31</sup> Hermann Gunkel, J. Zandee, Othmar Keel and few others.

<sup>32</sup> H. G. Guterbock, P.H.J. Houwink, René Lebrun, and James C. Moyer.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson is the leading scholar at the moment in matters concerning the editorial activity applied to the Psalter. Here we are citing a few of his important articles and works: *The Qumran Psalms Manuscripts and*

Literary criticism developed from what was at the beginning rather a textual, and then source, criticism, toward the more pragmatic wing of the linguistic research, structuralism for example. This is why structuralism emerged in the 80's and was applied to the Psalms. Among all, Pierre Auffret proved to challenge the most because in 15 years he published structural studies on 74 psalms. Besides many articles published in different European leading theological journals, he gathered studies on Psalms and published them in books.<sup>34</sup> His main presupposition is that the meaning of a specific Psalm is hidden in the structure its author gave it. It seems that the pioneer of this method was Eberhard Baumann, who promoted it in two consecutive articles published in the post-World War II Germany.<sup>35</sup>

### Form criticism

The classical studies, i.e. the historical exegesis, found its highest expression in the critical work inspired by Hermann Gunkel,<sup>36</sup> and continued by J. Lindblom, Sigmund Mowinckel, Claus Westermann,<sup>37</sup> Roland E. Murphy, and many others. The main interest Gunkel had was related to the cultic usage and the *Sitz im Leben* a specific psalm may have had. Sigmund Mowinckel has disagreed with W. F. Albright on the point of overstressing the importance of Ugaritic discoveries, which is quite normal for an archaeologist, considering that we can rather talk about a new era of the form critical

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the Consecutive Arrangement of Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 45 (1983); Evidence of Editorial Divisions in the Hebrew Psalter, *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984); *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 76, Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985; The Use of the 'Untitled' Psalms in the Hebrew Psalter, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 (1985); 'The Shape of the Book of Psalms, *Interpretation* 46 (1992).

<sup>34</sup> *Le sagesse a bâti sa maison. Etudes de structures littéraires dans l'Ancien Testament et spécialement dans les psaumes*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 49, Fribourg Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1982; *Quatrepsaumes et un cinquième: étude structurelle des psaumes 7 à 10 et 35*, Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1992; *Voyez de vos yeux: Etude structurelle de vingt psaumes dont le psaume 119*. Supplement to *Vetus Testamentum* 48, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993; *Merveilles a nos yeux. Etude structurelle de vingt psaumes dont ce de 1 Ch 16,8-36*, BZAW 235, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Struktur-Untersuchungen im Psalter, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 61 (1945-1948) and Struktur-Untersuchungen im Psalter II, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 62 (1949-1950).

<sup>36</sup> The interest for such criticism was raised probably through K. Budde, of whose essay on the psalms of lamentation appeared in 1882, twenty two years before Gunkel's first work (K. Budde, *Das hebraische Klagelied*, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 2). Afterwards Gunkel developed the method in such a way that for decades form criticism became the method in critical work on the Psalms. His tremendous work includes *Ausgewählte Psalmen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1904 (the 4<sup>th</sup> ed. published only 13 years later), *Reden und Aufsätze von Hermann Gunkel*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913; *Die Königspsalmen*, *Preussische Jahrbücher* 158 (1914), *Formen der Hymnen*, *Theologische Rundschau*, 20 (1917); *Danklieder im Psalter*, *Zeitschrift für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft* 34 (1919), *Die alttestamentliche Literaturgeschichte und die Ansetzung der Psalmen*, *Theologische Blätter*, 7 (1928); *Was bleibt vom Alten Testament?*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1916.

<sup>37</sup> No other scholar can be compared with Westermann since Hermann Gunkel. He is the leading author in Psalms' form criticism at the moment, and he oriented the search around two main categories, praise and lament, and around two main personalities, the individual and the community (*Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen*, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1953). The work knew five German editions and two English ones; cf. *Lob und Klage in den Psalmen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977, trans. into English and published by John Knox Press in 1981 under the title *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*).

method which, beside the classic view on the gattung, adds a new interest on the comparative studies of Israel's psalmography in relation to other religions of the Near East.<sup>38</sup> Far from being objective, Mowinckel's major preoccupation is that that form criticism does not fall in desuetude. The same main interest remained valid for the next two decades. This is what D.J.A. Clines proved too in his two essays published in three years time, the first of which was dedicated to the cultic origin of the Psalms, and the second one to the study of Psalms' literary genres.<sup>39</sup>

Among the most recent representatives of the form-criticism school, J.K. Kuntz, E.S. Gerstenberger, Miller, Aejmelaeus, Bellinger, Cartledge, Broyles, Eaton, Croft, Steingrimsson, Jeremias, and Brueggemann.<sup>40</sup> The main category frequently present at these biblical critics is the lament. Anyway, different things mattered most for each of them: Miller considered the importance of psalms' superscriptions for finding the appropriate situation where such a plea may find its right place, Aejmelaeus targeted prayer as the center of a lament, Bellinger focussed on the certainty of cries' hearing, Cartledge reminded the importance of the final vow, Broyles discussed the three stages of a complaint, Eaton and Croft spoke about the identity of the "I", Steingrimsson and Jeremias had in attention mostly the entrance liturgical psalms and enthronement psalms respectively have, and eventually Brueggemann ended up caring more about Israel's hymns.

#### Redaction criticism

Opposing the form criticism stream comes the suggestions of Eric Zenger who, after showing the innaccuracy and inconsistency of the method, suggests continuing the exegetical studies by finding answers to three main questions based on the new set of presuppositions, e.g. individual psalms are individual works of art, and are part of a canon. He demolishes the form criticism main presuppositions of psalms as cult originated works of art and post-exilic redaction. According to him the new questions to be answered are: (1) What connections are there between adjacent psalms? (2) Are there recognizable groups of Psalms within which a specific Psalm would play a specific role? (3) How important is the given position of the specific Psalm in the context of the Psalter and for its interpretation?<sup>41</sup> This way he urged toward a redaction criticism from a more canonical approach.

The new canonical presuppositions were noticed by J. Kenneth Kuntz too, who mentioned names such as Childs, Sanders, or Mays, as builders of this new concept of approaching the Bible through exegetical exercise. Kuntz's anticipation for Psalms research regards three domains: form criticism categories which will continue to be refined, rhetorical studies adding "helpful insights into the figurative capacity of the language of the Psalms," and textual and comparative studies. The corner-stone for the

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<sup>38</sup> Psalm Criticism between 1900 and 1935 (Ugarit and Psalm Exegesis), *Vetus Testamentum*, V (1955), Leiden: E.J. Brill. His masterful study on Psalms, *The Psalms in Israel Worship*, appearing for the first time in German in 1922 and translated into English in 1962, was reissued recently, proving the interest the academic world still has in it (The Biblical Seminar, 14, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> *Tyndale Bulletin*, 18 (1967), pp. 103-126, and 20 (1969), pp. 105ff

<sup>40</sup> Wittstruck, op. cit., pp. 89-93.

<sup>41</sup> New Approaches to the Study of the Psalms, *Proceedings of the Irish Association*, 17 (1994), Dublin: The Irish Biblical Association, pp. 37-54.

new era ahead represents a new theology of the Psalms seriously studied from all these points of view, and with a higher perception of the book as a canonical unity.<sup>42</sup> From now all that matters are the inner connections between Psalms, those elements that prove to keep together close psalms or remote psalms, psalms from different books or authorship.

It is notorious the division into Ascent psalms, Hallel psalms, Asaph's Psalms, David's psalms, Kore's sons psalms, and there are many studies dedicated to these segments of the Psalter. But one of the first connections noticed regards the beginning and the end of the Psalter, i.e. the first two and the last two psalms.<sup>43</sup> There are few other pairs that are considered to belong together, such as psalms 9 and 10,<sup>44</sup> psalms 105 and 106, or psalms 111 and 112.<sup>45</sup> The relationship could go further on identifying connections among larger groups of psalms, such as 24-26, where Theodore Lescow noticed a ring structure.<sup>46</sup>

On this matter, there were many arguments raised by the influential work of G. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*,<sup>47</sup> that searched for answers in the papers redacted under the editorship of J.C. McCann, Jr. The contributors to *The Shape and Shaping of Psalter*<sup>48</sup> proved to value the *Psalter* as a complete book. Here, Walter Brueggemann considered the overall structure of the *Psalter* the perspective of the importance the historical process behind the *Psalter*'s development has for understanding of its present shape. He asserts that Psalms' structure as a book and the historical process that shaped it are two intermingled concepts and have to be affirmed together. The *Psalter* has an introduction (Ps. 1), a conclusion (Ps. 150), and a pivotal point (Pss. 72 and 73).<sup>49</sup> Discussing the psalms 90-94, 95-100, and 101-106, David M. Howard, Jr., maintains the pivotal position of Psalm 94, and highlights their interrelations through evidence of internal coherence.<sup>50</sup> Far from being solved, the matter will continue to arouse the scholars' interest for some time.

### A Dogmatic Approach

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<sup>42</sup> Wittstruck, op.cit., pp. 93-97.

<sup>43</sup> André Wénin, Le Psaume 1 et l'encadrement du livre des louanges, *Ouvrir les écritures ...*. For G. Wilson, the last six psalms of the Canon (Pss. 145-150) represent the conclusion of the book as a whole. Others saw a close relationship between the individual virtue of Psalm 1 and the royal ruling in Psalm 2 (E. Lipinski, Macarismes et Psaumes de Congratulation, *Revue Biblique* 75/1968; W.H. Brownlee, Psalms 1-2 as a Coronation Liturgy, *Biblica*, 52/1971).

<sup>44</sup> Notker Füglistner, 'Die Hoffnung der Armen ist nicht für immer verloren'. Psalm 9/10 und die sozio-religiöse Situation der nachexilischen Gemeinde, *Lohfink Festschrift ...*.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Zimmerli is discussing about the last two pairs as twin psalms. In each of the pairs, there is a contrast noticed, between the godly and the godless, or between the faithful ones and the faithless (*Zwillingspsalmen, Forschung zur Bibel. Wort, Lied, und Gottesspruch. Beiträge zu Psalmen und Propheten. Festschrift für Joseph Ziegler*, ed. Rudolf Schnackenburg and Josef Schreiner, 2 vols., Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1972).

<sup>46</sup> Textübergreifende Exegese. Zur Lesung von Ps. 24-26 auf redaktioneller Sinnenebene, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995).

<sup>47</sup> SBLDS, 76; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985.

<sup>48</sup> JSOT Supl., 159; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993.

<sup>49</sup> Response to James L. Mays, 'The Question of the Context'. Well-known critics of this approach are R. D. Anderson and E. S. Gerstenberger. W. S. Prinsloo gave an answer to their comments in the article written in Afrikaans: Die Psalmen as samehangende boek, *NGTT* 36 (1995).

<sup>50</sup> A Contextual Reading of Psalms 90-94.

Getting close to the categories through which dogmatic theology proposed to analyse the Bible, there is plenty of evidence regarding the concerns of the biblical scholars toward a more systematic approach. There is no doubt that the preferred categories are Christology, royalty, Messiahship, and eschatology. The Christological interpretation of the Psalms is as old as the Church itself, because there is evidence of such theological exercises even in the book of *Acts*, where the apostles are preaching from Psalms, as means to illustrate the Messiahship of Jesus.<sup>51</sup>

Anyhow, the earliest evidence of a critical commentary having as subject the Messiahship in the Psalms is reported in 1877, when William Alexander published his lectures.<sup>52</sup> Thirteen years later, Franz Delitzsch is taking over producing a book on the Messiahship in the OT.<sup>53</sup> The interest remained vivid over the decades, as the gallery of the following scholars indicate: Hugo Gressman, Aubrey R. Johnson, John Gray, Edward Lipinski, Sigmund Mowinckel, to mention just some.

Issues that raised new interest or tended to solve old mysteries, especially the ones imposed by form critics, are noticed as perennial topics. We mean here the individual in the Psalms, the 'I' that appears quite frequent, the poor, the evil-doers, and the enemies.

### Conclusions

At the end of this diachronical study, one can recall the question posed at the beginning of this study: "What is a psalm?" Are we able now, after hundreds of years of critical studies to give a straightforward answer? James L. Mays would dare say "No!" The changes in direction due to the growing recognition that psalms are more than simple results of a specific historical, sociological or even liturgical event, resulted in setting four presuppositions extremely important for a contemporary research in the book of Psalms. (1) Each psalm is a an individual literary composition (literary approach). (2) Each psalm is the product of Israel's religious tradition (form and tradition approaches). (3) Each psalm is part of a larger book (canonical approach and contextuality). (4) The *Psalter* is part of a larger book, the Scripture (canonical approach, intertextuality).

Does this mean that one is very much delayed in finding the real message of the Psalms? We may assume that a text is ambiguous, but we cannot infer that ambiguity is the rule in Scripture, but rather the exception. As any othe text, biblical texts are meant to communicate. One should strive to understand them and make public the things that are clear. Since the Psalter is so much present in Christianity, the reader has to confront another problem, that of subjectivity. Arguably, a good literary method will provide the means towards achieving the desired objectivity.

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<sup>51</sup> On the day of Pentecost, Peter is preaching from Psalms 16 and 110, following the model His Lord Himself established before He died, as He cited from the Psalms even on the cross. Patristic commentaries on the Psalms are not few and this method became traditional in the Eastern Church.

<sup>52</sup> *The Witness of the Psalms to Christ and Christianity*, Eight Bampton Lectures (1876), London: John Murray, 1877.

<sup>53</sup> Referring here to the first Messianic text in the Bible, Genesis 3.15, he coined the term *protoevangelium* (*Mesianische Weissagungen in geschichtlicher Folge*, 1890, reprinted in 1992 at Brunnen Verlag (Giessen and Basel).