

Types of Psalms:

Hermann Gunkel and the Form Criticism of the Psalms

Hermann Gunkel began the Form Critical classification of the Psalms, establishing different forms, categories, types or genre (*Gattungen*) and their setting in life (*Sitz im*

Leben). This work was continued by Sigmund Mowinckel. Gunkel's ideas developed over the years. In his introduction to the Psalms (published after he died) the basic forms of psalm he recognised were —

- hymns of praise Pss. **8**, 19, 29, 33, 65, 68, 96, 98, 100, 103-105, 111, 113-115, 117, 135, 136, 145-150
- songs of Zion Pss. **46**, 48, 76, 87
- enthronement psalms Pss. 47, 93, 97, 99 (94, 96)

- community laments Pss. 54, 74, 79, 80, 83, (58, 106, 125)
- royal psalms Pss. 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132
 - founding of dynasty and temple Pss. 132
 - king's enthronement Pss. **2**, 101, **110**
 - royal anniversary Ps. 21, 72
 - royal wedding Ps. 45
 - departure for battle Ps. 20 (144:1-11)
 - victorious return from battle Ps. 18

- laments of the individual Pss. 3, 5-8, 13, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42-43, **51**, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69-71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140-143

- individual thanksgiving songs Pss. (18), **30**, 32, 34, 41, 66, 92, 116, 118,

Gunkel also recognised a number of minor forms —

- pronouncements of blessings or curses
- pilgrimage songs
- victory songs
- national songs of thanksgiving
- sacred legends (90)
- torah psalms (119)
- wisdom psalms (1)
- elements of prophecy

Mowinckel drew on Canaanite psalms to explore the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalms. He developed the idea of a Canaanite "New Year" festival at which the king was enthroned, or his enthronement celebrated as the representative of God which he believed to be one of the main worship-settings of Israelite psalms. This is still controversial in that it represents the cyclical overthrow and re-enthronement of Yahweh who seen as a parallel of the god Baal in Canaanite myths. Ancient Near Eastern parallels with the psalms has led to a number of studies exploring the symbolism and mythology of the psalms and the possibility that Israel drew on the worship of other cults and cultures. Dahood drew on Ugaritic (Canaanite) texts to both to interpret some of the psalms more obscure words and the psalms themselves in the their near-eastern cultural context.

Westermann drew on his experience of detention in a Nazi concentration camp to push the form-critical description of praise and lament as "deep expressions" of actual praise and lament, rather than merely "representations" of them.

Types of Psalms – Some Technical Terms (most of which are obscure ...)

Mizmor — psalm

Shir — song

Shiggaion — ?

Miktam — ?

Maskil — ?

Selah — 71 times (and 3 times in Habakkuk 3) "pause" or signal for a change of accompaniment or singers?

Higgaion — "meditation" (?) or signal to use soft music to allow reflection?

- *To the choirmaster* — occurs in 55 psalms
- *According to the Sheminith* — Pss 6 and 12, (paralleled in 1 Chron. 15:21 with *According to the Alamoth*, referring to the way harps and lyres were played)
- *According to the Gittith* — Pss. 8, 81, 84 — referring to a musical instrument or a particular ceremony ... ?
- *According to Muth-labben* — connected with a son's death — was this a tune or an incident?
- *According to the hind of the dawn* — Ps. 22 — the name of a tune, or a suggestions to use the psalm at dawn, or drawing attention to the final verses of the psalm ... ?
- *According to lilies* — Pss. 45, 69; Ps 80 adds "a testimony"; Ps. 60 also adds "a testimony" but has the singular of lilies ...
- *According to Mahalath* — Pss. 53, 88 — another tune, or perhaps indicating a psalm to use when afflicted ...

- *According to the dove on far-off terebinths* — Ps. 56 — the previous psalm refers to a dove seen far-off, so may be it was a postscript to Ps. 55 rather than an introduction to Ps. 56 ... ?
- *According to do not destroy* — Pss. 57, 58, 59, 75 — the name of a tune or popular song (cf. Isa. 65:8) ... ?
- *A song of ascents* — Pss. 120-134 — perhaps a song to use on pilgrimage ascending Mount Zion into the temple ...