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 CHAPTER ONE

# Biblical Theology of the Psalms Today

*A Personal Perspective*

BY BRUCE K. WALTKE

*T*he Consultation's steering committee has asked me to focus on the biblical theology of the Psalms, specifically consisting of three parts: "my story" with the Psalms, what I have especially learned about the Psalms, and my reflections on the future of Psalms studies. This paper has essentially these three parts, though the first receives the lion's share, and the last two are treated much more briefly.

## MY STORY WITH THE PSALMS

### *The First Step: Teaching Exegesis*

My story with the Psalms can be analyzed in nine metaphorical steps. I took my first step in 1963 when, upon my return from Harvard University to Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS), I began to teach second-year Hebrew students the science and art of exegesis. As is well known, exegesis consists of multiple spiral-like processes, beginning with the parts of a text entailed in the grammatico-historical method and ending with a reflection on the text's whole message, refined with each rereading of the text.

In short, a text's message depends on the parts (e.g., historical context, philology, figures of speech, prosody) and the message provides the literary context in which to interpret the parts. To develop exegetical skill the student must repeat that spiral exercise several times. Problematically, the extended nature of most of the Old Testament literature does not allow a second-year student, who has limited reading skills, to see the parts of a text in light of the whole. The psalms, however, are short, restricted texts, allowing the student to rework the text in light of the whole, and so they are ideal specimens for teaching the principles of exegesis.

### *The Second Step: A Plenary Lectureship*

I took my second step in 1967. Knowing of my exegetical work in second-year Hebrew, the seminary administration asked me to teach the book of Psalms to the entire DTS family. Dallas Seminary annually devoted four plenary two-week sessions for the exposition of important biblical books. They did this so that students would “catch” the art of expository preaching. Usually DTS asked a well-known, popular Bible expositor to teach a book, but in the spring of 1967 the administration made an exception and asked me to give the plenary lectureship on the book of Psalms. In preparation for the lectureship I researched the relatively recent history of Psalms studies. From that research I analyzed the commentaries on the Psalms into five approaches:

1. *The traditional-historical approach*, which accepted the veracity of the superscription and is best represented by Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890).<sup>1</sup>
2. *The literary-analytical approach*, which dated the Psalms to the second-temple period and is well represented in the *International Critical Commentary* by C. A. Briggs (1841–1913).<sup>2</sup>
3. *The form-critical approach*, which, having rejected the credibility of the superscripts, sought to reconstruct a psalm’s *Sitz im Leben* by its genres (*Gattungen*), and is best represented by Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), the originator of this approach.<sup>3</sup>
4. *The cult-functional approach*, which, while employing form-criticism, sought to interpret the Psalms in light of the first-temple cultus, and is represented most notably by its founder, Sigmund Mowinckel (1884–1965).<sup>4</sup>
5. *The eschatological-Messianic approach*, which interpreted the Psalms in light of Christ’s first and second advents, and is best represented by Christ and his apostles.

As for the historical approach, philology, ancient translations, and ancient Near Eastern hymns support the notion that the superscripts are historically reliable. As for the form-critical approach, I nearly fell off my chair when, in connection with my researching for another project, I read 1 Chronicles

1. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., trans. Francis Bolton (1881; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

2. Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906–1907).

3. Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, comp. Joachim Begrich, trans. James D. Nogalski. Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (1933; repr., Macon, GA: Mercer Univ., 1998).

4. Sigmund O. P. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, 6 vols. (Kristiana [Oslo]: Jacob Dybwad, 1921–1924); idem, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 2 vols., trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

16:4. There the chronicler distinguishes what I had already judged as legitimate forms three of the five forms of psalms that had been identified by Gunkel: petition/lament, confession of answered petition, and praise of God as Creator of the cosmos and Redeemer of Israel. Of the many commentators since Gunkel using the form-critical approach, I found Claus Westermann's *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* most helpful.<sup>5</sup> As for the cult-functional approach, the references within the Psalter to sacred personnel—especially the king—sacred sites, sacred seasons, and sacred institutions validated Mowinckel's correction of Gunkel's approach, albeit not his theory of an Enthronement Festival as part of Israel's cultus. As for the eschatological-messianic approach, the New Testament use of the Psalms validates this approach.

### ***The Third and Fourth Steps in My Interpretation***

In 1980 I advanced two steps in my interpretation of the Psalter. The third step came about through Brevard Childs' canonical approach, as argued in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*.<sup>6</sup> My understanding of this approach was enriched in my writing the article on the canonical process approach for the Feinberg Festschrift (1980).<sup>7</sup> In this article I argued that as the canon developed, the incipient Messianic Psalms were reinterpreted more precisely with reference of the Messiah.

James Kugel's work *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*<sup>8</sup> pushed me to my fourth step. Unfortunately I read Kugel's landmark work while on an airplane, traveling to deliver a lecture on Hebrew poetry. When I stepped off the plane, I realized that my prepared lecture, which was founded on Lowth's analysis of Hebrew poetry, was wrongheaded and passé. When I later stepped behind the lectern, I jettisoned my prepared notes and précised Kugel's work.

### ***The Fifth Step: Reading Alter's Biblical Poetry***

The fifth step occurred as a result of reading *The Art of Biblical Poetry* by Robert Alter.<sup>9</sup> His study prompted me to add the rhetorical approach to my exegetical toolbox, which now included a whole new vocabulary, including "inclusio," "janus," and "chiasm."

### ***The Sixth Step: Understanding Anthologies like Psalms, Proverbs***

The sixth involved two doctoral dissertations: the Yale doctoral dissertation by the late Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*,<sup>10</sup> and

5. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

6. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

7. Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. J. S. and P. D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 3–18.

8. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

9. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

10. Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

the University of St. Michael's College doctoral dissertation by Raymond Van Leeuwen, *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25–27*.<sup>11</sup> These two dissertations convinced me that anthologies, such as the book of Psalms and the book of Proverbs, are intentionally arranged to give semantic depth to the individual psalm or proverb. According to this thesis, editors collected and consciously arranged songs or wisdom sayings to give them semantic depth. The notes by the late John Stek in the NIV Study Bible are at the cutting edge of this approach to the book of Psalms.

Wilson argued, convincingly to me, that the editors of the Psalter succeeded in achieving a sequential “theological intentionality” in the Psalter’s current shape.<sup>12</sup> According to this thesis, there is a historical movement reflected in the arrangement of the Psalter. For example, Books IV and V are a response to Psalm 89, a psalm that complains that the Davidic covenant failed, redirecting among things Israel’s reliance on an earthly monarchy to the appreciation of *I AM*’s eternal kingship, the message, for example, for Psalm 90.

### ***The Seventh Step: Comparative Studies at Westminster***

The seventh step was taken in connection with teaching a doctoral-level course on the Psalms at Westminster Theological Seminary (1989). My own comparative studies of the Psalms with ancient Near Eastern hymns convinced me that Thirtle (1904) rightly divided the so-called superscripts into both superscripts and subscripts.<sup>13</sup> Thirtle based his argument on Habakkuk 3, a psalm in isolation. Here the editorial superscript at the beginning of Habakkuk 3, “a psalm of Habakkuk,” pertains to genre and authorship, and the subscript at the end of chapter 3, “for the director of music,” pertains to musical directions. I observed the same division of superscripts and of subscripts in ancient Near Eastern texts from Mesopotamia to Egypt. In the book of Psalms, however, there are no subscripts. Rather the editorial musical notations, “for the director of music,” often with other musical notations, always precede the editorial notations about genre and authorship.

This internal evidence from the Psalter, the external evidence of Habakkuk 3, and the extrabiblical data from the ancient Near East persuaded me that there was a massive, early textual error of the book of Psalms, namely, that in fifty-five psalms having the notice “to the musical director,” the prose subscript of a preceding psalm became confounded with prose superscript of the following psalm. In an article entitled, “Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both” (1991),<sup>14</sup>

11. Raymond Van Leeuwen, *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25–27*, SBLDS 96 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

12. See also Norbert Lofink and Erich Zenger, trans. Everett R. Kalin, *The God of Israel and of the Nations: Studies of the Book of Isaiah and the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989).

13. For a discussion of various interpretive options for the prepositional phrase *le-david*, see Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), 179–82.

14. Bruce K. Waltke, “Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 583–96.

I argued the case that the superscripts pertained to a psalm's composition and its subscript to its performance. An anonymous external referee of that critical journal scrawled on the article, "Excellent," and no scholar since then, to my knowledge, has refuted it. Disappointingly, however, scholars since 1991 have mostly ignored it. Perhaps this is so both because of my reputation as an evangelical conservative who tends to accept the biblical claims of its own authorship until proven otherwise, and the article's strong inference that the superscripts are an integral part of a psalm and historically creditable.

### ***The Eighth Step: Teaching Hermeneutics***

I took my eighth step forward when in 1991, upon my return from Westminster Theological Seminary to Regent College, the college assigned me to teach hermeneutics, the only required course in the college. Until then I had not forged a reasonable link between spiritual discernment and scientific exegesis, though I knew experientially that both were necessary. I vividly recall, upon my return from Harvard to the Dallas classroom, a student asking me their linkage, and my inability to give a cogent answer. About thirty years later the Regent course on hermeneutics compelled me to forge a reasonable link between the role of the Holy Spirit's illumination and of the scientific method.

I found the linkage through reflecting upon Paul's succinct statement regarding the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture: "all Scripture is inspired of God" (2 Tim. 3:16, author translation). Let me explain the linkage that works for me.

Every object has a logic to its composition, and so to understand an object one must first discern that logic. For example, to study the stars, one must first perceive their distance from earth and in that realization craft a telescope to see them better. By contrast, to understand a microorganism, one must first perceive its smallness to realize the necessity of crafting a microscope to study the organism. Likewise to understand the Bible we must first understand its logic to craft a reasonable method for its study.

The subject, predicate, and modifier phrase of 2 Tim. 3:16, "all Scripture is inspired of God," provides an insight into the Bible's logic: (1) "of God," a genitive of authorship, identifies God as a text's Author; (2) "inspired" implies a human author; and (3) "all Scripture" denotes a text. Each of these three demands that the exegete craft the proper instrument (i.e., method) for understanding a biblical text, albeit they must be used together because the three components are combined in a unified text. The first two factors pertain to personal authors and so demand a spiritual commitment on the part of the interpreter, and the third demands approaching the text with the detached objectivity of a scientist. To understand the divine Author the interpreter needs the spiritual illumination of the Holy Spirit, an illumination contingent on the spiritual virtues of faith, hope, and love.

J. A. Ernesti, the product of the so-called scientific Enlightenment, pitted the scientific method against this spiritual method. He denied the proposition “that the Scriptures cannot be properly explained without prayer, and a pious simplicity of mind.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana*<sup>16</sup> demarcates clearly that the principles of theological inquiry and the claims for truth are distinctive, when they are “Christian.” Augustine contrasts Christian scholarship with classical scholarship in important ways, even when classical procedures for rhetoric are still imitated, and then modified. This quote by Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 320–367/8) illustrates vividly how the early fathers understood the necessity of a devotional approach to the Psalter, as indeed all Scripture: “God can only be known by devotion,” he wrote. Elsewhere Hilary says that God requires “warmth of faith.” According to this church father, the knowledge of *I AM* begins with the receptivity of the eternally precedent Being, God. Thus, “only in receiving can we know.”<sup>17</sup>

As for the human author, the author’s personal dimension demands an appropriate psychology for understanding him. Superior intellectual talent and superb education, though not to be despised, cannot render one fit to interpret the Scripture. To understand an author, a reader must encounter the author with sympathy, not merely empathy.

As for the text, the interpreter must exercise the grammatico-grammatical method of interpretation. That scientific method demands various kinds of criticisms: historical criticism (in the derived [i.e., bastardized] sense of understanding a text’s historical context), literary criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, and so forth. These tools were unknown throughout most of the church’s history, but Providence has given them to the contemporary exegete, and he or she has a responsibility to honor that Providence and not to ignore the tools God has given us.

Taking these three factors into consideration enabled me to see the connection between spiritual illumination and scientific exegesis and to modify intellectually my mostly lip service to spiritual interpretation in contrast to my *de facto* commitment to scientific exegesis.

### ***The Ninth Step: Writing a Psalms Commentary***

After taking these eight steps I now felt ready to take my ninth step and actually *write* commentary on the Psalms. The material appears in *The Psalms as Christian Worship* and in *Psalms as Christian Lament* by James M. Houston and Bruce K. Waltke.<sup>18</sup> Professor Houston is the founder of Regent College

15. J. A. Ernesti, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, trans. Charles H. Terrot (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1832), 1:5.

16. Available in Latin with English translation; Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

17. *Ibid.*, 1:18, 18; 11:44, 495; 2:35, 63.

18. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, with Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); *idem*, *Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

and formerly an Oxford lecturer on the history of geography and a recognized specialist in the history of ideas. I originally intended to write a commentary on selected psalms, but Professor Houston persuaded me that I should include for each one a history of the psalm's interpretation. I recognized the legitimacy of his concern and also my limitations in that connection. So I suggested we co-author the work with my hearing the voice of the psalmist and his hearing the voice of the church in response.

Our interaction profited me immensely. For the first time I listened to the voice of the church from apostles to the present and that voice enabled me to hear more clearly the prophetic voice of the psalmist in his hope for Messiah. Now I met firsthand such great churchmen as Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, the remarkable Herbert of Horsham (1120–1194), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

These pre-Reformation commentators, who center on Christ with piety and passion, are in fact more biblical than academics who dispassionately and scientifically explain the text both without considering its canonical context and without passion and devotion to Christ. The Christ-centered piety and devotion of these commentators before the recovery of the plain sense by the Reformers should be treasured, not trashed. Although some of their interpretations appear to moderns as ridiculous and silly, for the most part they stayed within the parameters of orthodoxy—that is to say, within the parameters of the apostolic traditions as they found later expression in the creeds of the early church, especially the Nicene Creed.

Professor Houston identified four significant “hinge periods of history” that have opened up new vistas of interpretation. Not counting the pre- and post-Nicene periods, they are (1) the Augustinian allegorical debate at the end of the fourth century and the medieval period under the influence of Augustine; (2) Christian Hebraism and scholasticism in the High Middle Ages; (3) the Reformation and John Calvin's “plain meaning”; and (4) biblical criticism, within which context most of us have been educated, remaining ignorant of our great heritage from the apostolic era until the so-called Enlightenment.

Professor Houston writes that higher biblical criticism “has turned the Bible into ‘an object of study’ rather than remaining as ‘the two-edged sword’ that the apostles used pastorally.”<sup>19</sup> Psalms were and are of key importance in the daily life of the Christian and in Christian community worship. Both were the basic features of early Christianity, since it was believed by the early Christians that Jesus Christ himself lived within the Psalms. The early fathers of the church, in contrast to much modern scholarship, rightly believed in the maxim that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” The incident of the risen Christ asserting to the two disciples on the Emmaus way the hermeneutical principle

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19. Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 13.



that all the Scriptures, including the Psalms, speak of Christ set a basis for the early church thinkers to interpret the Bible as *the* book about Christ (Luke 24:13–49).

In the writing of *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, I came to realize the confessional reductionism in much contemporary biblical scholarship, which overlooks two thousand years of Christian devotion and orthodoxy (or “right worship”) in the use of the book of Psalms. It ignores the historical continuity of tradition in the communion of saints. With the loss of this tradition the Psalms tend to lose their spirituality, and the whole heritage of devotion becomes ignored for both Jews and Christians. As the Jewish scholar James L. Kugel, Harvard professor of Hebrew, has observed, “It would not be unfair to say that research into the Psalms in this century has had a largely negative effect on the Psalter’s reputation as the natural focus of Israelite spirituality, and much that was heretofore prized in this domain has undergone a somewhat reluctant re-evaluation.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than being inspired by the spirituality of the Psalter, critical “moderns” de-spiritualize the Psalms. Scholarly questions about authorship, psalm classifications, pagan origins of Canaanite and Ugaritic sources, cultic or noncultic sources of worship, the changing roles of the Psalms, all tend to detract, as Kugel argues, to de-spiritualize them for their use today.

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

My reflections on hearing the voice of the catholic church in response to hearing the voice of the psalmist segues me into biblical theology. This is so because, as I argued in *An Old Testament Theology*, biblical theology first reflects upon the doctrines or theology of discrete blocks of writing, such as the theology of Moses, as found in the book of the law—not to be equated with the Deuteronomist—and then traces the history of those doctrines throughout the canon of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> The process of abstracting the theology of discrete blocks of writing ultimately raises the question of whether there is one abstraction that synthesizes the entire Bible.

As is well known, scholars differ in their unifying abstractions. In *An Old Testament Theology*, I argue that Walter Eichrodt rightly underscored as Scripture’s central doctrine the irruption or in-breaking of the kingdom of God but that Eichrodt wrongly developed that doctrine by systematically analyzing the covenant.<sup>22</sup> He analyzed the concept of covenant, but not of kingdom.<sup>23</sup> If the Bible is about God’s in-breaking of his kingdom, that is to say, of his will

20. James L. Kugel, “Topics in the History of the Spirituality of the Psalms”, in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 113.

21. See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 49ff.

22. *Ibid.*, 144ff.

23. See now the brilliant work of Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical Theology of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

being done on earth as it is in heaven, then the Psalms are the faithful voice of the people of God in response to his saving history. In the Psalms we hear the voice of the faithful petitioning God to irrupt into the world with his just rule; and of praising him for his faithfulness to his creation of the world that sustains them and for his faithfulness to them in their salvation history. More specifically, we hear the voice of Israel in corporate solidarity—that is to say, in a covenant relationship—with their king who expresses their common voice of praise and petition. As such the historical king and Israel are a type of Christ and his church.

## FUTURE ISSUES

I will restrict my reflections here to the period of the second temple. Future study should include more research and reflection on the editing and interpretation of the Psalter during the second-temple period. Erika Moore's "Survey of Second Temple Period Interpretation of the Psalms" has laid a firm foundation for those reflections.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, more reflection on the influence of Second Temple Judaism is needed. To give you a taste of Moore's reflections that provide such a foundation, I cite:

Various socio-liturgical settings for how the Psalms were used in this period can be identified. For example, there were various guilds of Levitical temple singers (i.e., Asaphites, Korahites) who used the Psalter in their liturgical practices in the temple service, for both festal days and daily sacrifices (1 Chronicles 16; Sirach, 50:16–17; 1 Maccabees, 4:54). These Levitical singers served, among other roles, a prophetic function . . . either offering salvation or threatening punishment. In the temple they dialogued with "I AM" on behalf of the community.<sup>25</sup>

Research in this period would also include reflecting upon the composition and shape of the Psalter in Second Temple Judaism. For example, more work is needed to test Wilson's thesis that Books IV and V function in part as a response to Psalm 89.

Also more reflection is needed on the messianic and eschatological use of the Psalms in the second-temple period. Moore, citing Sue Gillingham, states that "the Psalms began to be explicitly cited as prophetic texts late in the Hellenistic period."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, according to Gillingham, "of the 116 most obvious references to the psalms in the NT, at least 75 of these understood the

24. See Erika Moore, "Survey of Second Temple Period Interpretation of the Psalms," in Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 19–36.

25. *Ibid.*, 26.

26. *Ibid.*, 25, no. 23, cited from Sue Gillingham, "From Liturgy to Prophecy: The Use of Psalmody in Second Temple Judaism," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 488.

psalms in a future-oriented way; and when the psalms are quoted they are frequently referred to as ‘Prophecies.’”<sup>27</sup> Moore further notes that Harry B. Nasuti “points out that in Childs’ discussion regarding the eschatological orientation of the Psalter, Childs does not deal with the question as to whether this orientation stems from a prophetic impulse already present in the original intent of the psalm (following Becker) or from a decisive reinterpretation during Second Temple Judaism (following Begrich).”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, more research is needed to understand the Elohist Psalter, which features the number 42, the number that elsewhere is associated with premature death by divine judgment.<sup>29</sup> This earlier edition contains forty-two psalms, beginning with Psalm 42.

## CONCLUSION

I draw my paper to conclusion, expressing the hope that my narrative may put this Psalms Consultation in a historical perspective, give it a focus, and open the way to future research.

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27. *Ibid.*, 28, n. 40, cited from Gillingham, “From Liturgy to Prophecy,” 471.

28. *Ibid.*, 28, n. 39.

29. Cf. Judg. 12:6; 2 Kings 2:24; 10:14; Rev. 13:5. See L. Joffe, “Elohistic Psalter: What, How and Why?” *SJOT* 15 (2001): 142–69.