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Pajunen, Mika Sakari

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Differentiation of Form, Theme, and Changing Functions in Psalms and Prayers

Mika S. Pajunen

University of Helsinki

University researcher, Docent in Old Testament Studies

Faculty of Theology

P.O. Box 4 (Vuorikatu 3)

00014 University of Helsinki

Finland

mika.s.pajunen@helsinki.fi

ABSTRACT

Form criticism has long been an indispensable part of psalm studies, and some of its main results are still widely accepted. Nevertheless, certain formal categories distinguished by some, such as the existence of genres of royal or wisdom psalms, have been firmly denied by others. Moreover, psalm and prayer material from the late Second Temple period has nearly from the beginning of form-critical studies been acknowledged to resist formal classification into firm categories. With only a small portion of the available material falling neatly into recognized categories, the limits of the current form-critical approach are obvious. This paper considers whether a differentiation between formal and thematic elements and their further distinction from issues related to the changing functions of

psalmody could pave the way for methodologically more nuanced models that would be able to cope more flexibly and reliably with the diversity of the material and the changing social settings behind them.

KEYWORDS: psalms, Second Temple Judaism, form criticism, functions of psalms

1. Introduction

In the course of the past decade, a large portion of my research has focused on the functions of psalms and prayers in the late Second Temple period and different issues related to this larger question. I have done both minute studies on specific texts,[1] and broader synchronic studies, such as the one at the beginning of this journal issue.[2] But I have also initiated meetings and discussions on these issues with other scholars, some of the results of which have been published in the recent volume *Functions of Psalms and Prayers in the Late Second Temple Period*,[3] and now in this thematic journal issue on the same topic. All these studies, mine and others, have not only demonstrated the wide variety of questions explored in psalm studies today, but also highlighted problematic areas in need of fresh attention. In this final essay of the current issue I wish to briefly tackle a particular methodological problem that relates to the central form-critical method used in psalm studies for almost a hundred years now.

Form criticism has long been an indispensable part of psalm studies, and some of its main results are still widely accepted. Its vital role in psalm studies and continued success have been recently predicted, for instance, by Rolf Jacobson in an article on the future of psalm studies and by William Brown in the introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Psalms*.[4] At the same time criticism of the method and its known pitfalls has been steadily increasing, especially from social memory theorists, and many scholars have turned their backs on the method and turned to other sets of questions in their study of psalmody.[5] Unfortunately, however, we cannot just do away with the historical questions form criticism has sought to answer because without a proper appreciation of the diverse functions psalms and prayers had at different times and in diverse social contexts, theories on their ritual use or on their impact on identity are built on partly faulty premises. Furthermore, without

[1] E.g., Pajunen: 2012a, 2014, and 2017.
[2] Pajunen: 2013, 2015, and the first article in this journal issue.
[3] Pajunen and Penner (eds.): 2017.
[4] Brown: 2014, 1–26. Jacobson: 2014, 231–246.
[5] See, for example, Arnold: 2006. Jokiranta: 2007 and 2017. Holst's article in this journal issue.

knowledge of the ways different psalm and prayer collections were used in the late Second Temple period, their reasons for being in the current canons cannot be understood properly. They are not in the canons because of their possible role at some distant time in the past but because of the role they had in the contemporary society when matters of canonicity were discussed and decided. Such issues as these are all related to questions about the historical use of psalms and prayers in Second Temple Judaism, and this is why the need to revise some of the axioms of the form-critical method cannot be left unanswered. I will first present here the three most problematic areas in the current method and its application that in my view need to be resolved if the method's usefulness is to be upheld. After that I will outline some possible ways forward from this methodological deadlock that could possibly pave the way for methodologically more nuanced models that would be able to cope more flexibly and reliably with the diversity of the material and the changing social settings behind them.

2. Significant Pitfalls of Form Criticism

As is well known, the study of early Jewish poetic literature and its use in early Judaism has been dominated for nearly a hundred years by the form-critical method. The use of the method was initiated by Hermann Gunkel's groundbreaking work *Die Psalmen* in 1926,[6] and further developed by major studies done particularly before the 1980s by scholars such as Sigmund Mowinckel and Claus Westermann.[7] The original aim of these scholars was to form-critically place the songs and prayers now in the Masoretic Book of Psalms into their supposed original setting in the cult of ancient Israel. The possible original *Sitz im Leben* of these poems was considered by these early form critics to be reachable by analyzing the formal elements in the poems, and categorizing them accordingly, for example, as individual laments, hymns, or songs of praise and thanksgiving. The research conducted by early form critics was largely based on a consensus that the Book of Psalms was the hymn book of Second Temple Judaism from which songs and prayers could be drawn for various liturgical purposes. This methodological axiom was at least partly based on the use of psalms in the contemporary religious communities projected back to the ancient Jewish society. This premise was then also used for investigating other Jewish poetic collections, like Lamentations and Song of Songs, that were accordingly placed into supposed cultic settings as well. And even today form criticism continues to be the foremost method used in studying the historical setting of early Jewish poetic

[6] Gunkel: 1926 and 1933.
[7] Mowinckel: 1962. Westermann: 1965 and 1981.

literature, and some of its results concerning individual formal categories, like the existence of individual laments, are still largely accepted by scholars.[8] To be sure the present studies are much more nuanced and aware of more material and problems than the pioneers of the method were,[9] but some problematic areas continue to plague this field of study.

Already Gunkel acknowledged that the method did not work with all the psalms he studied, and since then skepticism concerning the capability of the current methodology to deal with the historical settings of poetic literature has increasingly begun to permeate the field of biblical studies. Indeed, the established form-critical method is ill-equipped to deal with the complexity of the available evidence, and there are at least three perceivable reasons for this.

The first, widely acknowledged, deficiency in the method is that it has only been able to be used to categorize and situate but a fraction of the available sources. This was already evident when only the 150 songs and prayers in the MT Book of Psalms were investigated, but it was made even more apparent by the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Even when only a small portion of the psalm and prayer manuscripts among these finds had been published some thirty years ago, it was clear to scholars like Eileen Schuller that the previously suggested form-critical categories did not work at all with the newly discovered psalms and prayers,[10] and this is currently a consensus view. The relatively recent completion of the publication of the Qumran material, together with renewed interest in other available Jewish psalm and prayer material roughly from the same time period, for example, in the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, has raised the number of available psalms and prayers from this period from the first-studied 150 to circa 500. This large corpus makes a more comprehensive analysis of this material and its use at different times and in different social contexts not just a desideratum but a necessity for developing more nuanced ways to factor all this evidence into theoretical models. Moreover, the Qumran manuscripts are a thousand years older than the factual manuscript evidence previously available, thus providing essential firsthand information on poems, their material formats,[11] and their functions in a specific social context.

A second shortcoming in form-critical studies relates to the formulation of the method, which has led to a frequent tendency among scholars to mix formal elements in psalms and prayers with thematic ones when applying it. For instance, for many form critics the mention of a king in a

[8] E.g., Brown (ed.): 2014. Gerstenberger: 2014, 338–349.
[9] See, for instance, Holt: 2017 and her article in this journal issue.
[10] E.g., Schuller: 2003, 173–190.
[11] See, for instance, Flint: 1997. Jain: 2014. Davis: 2017, 155–184.

poem has suggested a historical setting directly related to royalty and a subsequent dating of the poem to the monarchical period before 586 BCE. Today it is more and more recognized that the literary setting chosen for a poem cannot be as straightforwardly equated with a historical setting as was done before.[12] The mention of a king does not automatically mean that the historical setting necessarily was a kingdom. The ancient writers were fully capable of placing their works into historical settings preceding their own, thus providing their works with added ancient authority. Furthermore, the mention of a king is not a formal element related to the function of a poem like praising or petitioning is. It is rather a thematic element that can be found inside a poem that is formally, for instance, a praise or a lament, and thus should be perceived as a different level of categorization. A similar situation concerns the debated existence of a formal category of cultic wisdom songs.[13] This category, when considered as one, is based most of all on shared language reminiscent of wisdom works, but this is typically a matter of literary style or world view of the authors, not of formally distinct elements. Further examples of such thematically grounded categories are historical psalms and Zion psalms.[14] This is not to say that the themes cannot be important as well. On the contrary, the themes most easily reflect changing interests in the use of poetry and central ideological shifts in societies. Major new themes in the mid-Second Temple period poetry are, for instance, the history of the Jewish people, Jerusalem as a central city, and the Torah as a basis for common ethics,[15] whereas later texts reflect the ideologies of different Jewish groups.[16] Thus, both formal and thematic elements need to be analyzed but at the same time firmly distinguished from each other; for example, Psalm 104 is formally a *barkhi nafshi*-type hymn, the theme of which is God the creator and sustainer of all life;[17] it is not simply a creator psalm.

A third, and in my view the most important, reason for the problems in the application of the form-critical method is that changes in the functions of poems necessitated by the altering needs of the Jewish user communities have not been factored into the methodology even though there is clear evidence for such changes in the sources and this has been one major thrust in the critique of social

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[12] See, for instance, Berlin: 2017, 341–355.
[13] For this category, see Kuntz: 1974, 186 –222. Terrien: 1993, 51–72. For criticism, see, for example, Crenshaw: 2000, 9–17. Pajunen: 2013: 334–335.
[14] For recent studies on the use of historical recollection in psalms, see, e.g., Gärtner: 2012. Klein: 2014. For a discussion of a category of Zion psalms, see, e.g., Körting: 2006.
[15] See further Brettler: 2017, 279–304.
[16] Some more group-specific ideologies can be found in late editorial layers of the MT Psalter; see Marttila: 2006. A more readily observable change in this discourse can be seen in psalms written after the Maccabean revolt. Psalms written after this period, such as the *Hodayot* or the Psalms of Solomon, were used for building and maintaining group identity rather than an identity as a people, as shown, for example, in the analysis concerning the possible effects of the *Hodayot* on members of the Qumran movement by Newsom (2004).
[17] Pajunen: 2012a.

memory theorists. Form criticism has been used as a synchronic way of categorizing collections of songs and prayers that axiomatically had one specific setting, typically in the cult. However, it should be irrefutable with the current evidence that the functions of Jewish poetic literature extended outside liturgical use during the early Hellenistic period if not earlier,[18] and moreover that the functions of individual poems changed over time and according to the (different, even contemporary) settings they were used in. Evidence for such changes is preserved in narrative sources, in the reasons for quoting psalms and prayers, in their thematic characteristics, and in manuscript evidence. Therefore, the form-critical categories presuming a single established setting are practically useless in defining the intended settings of many of the poems written from new perspectives or for factoring diachronic changes into their use. An illustrative example of this is Psalm 18. It is form-critically classifiable as a praise psalm of an individual. This would point to a liturgical function in prior form-critical models. Yet the psalm's superscript, probably added later in the Hellenistic period, ascribes it to a specific historical occasion in the life of King David when he had vanquished all his enemies, and the song has been incorporated precisely into this literary setting in the books of Samuel (2 Sam 22). Thus, the song is displayed as being sung by David on a particular occasion, and it is treated as a historical source for this situation, for example, in Qumran manuscript *4QNon-Canonical Psalms B*. Finally, in the *Hodayot* Psalm 18 is used as a prophecy pertaining to the leader of the movement. Thus, this psalm had many different functions that are dependent on the time period and the individual or group using it. Psalm 18 is not an exception in this respect but rather the norm. Yet such plurality of use is not accounted for in the current methodology. A related problem is that even when a formal category can be distinguished, the perceived usage cannot be straightforwardly extended to all representatives of that genre. The use of the genres also changed. It can, for example, be questioned whether Psalm 18 ever had a liturgical use, even if we can be fairly certain that Jewish liturgy contained an abundance of praise.

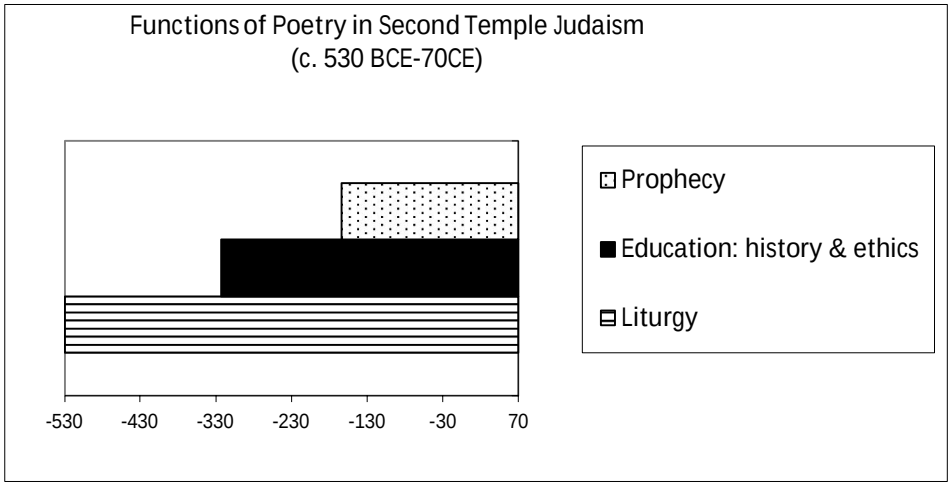
3. Differentiation of Form, Theme, and Changing Functions

Future studies need to take all of this complexity into account and build their theories concerning historical settings not only on an analysis of formal and thematic elements but also on both broader and more minute evidence available on the actual use of psalms and prayers in different Jewish

[18] For recent contributions to this question, see, for example, my first article in this issue and the articles in Pajunen and Penner (eds.): 2017

communities. My view on the larger historical developments behind these changes is, in short, that psalms and prayers continued to have (changing) liturgical functions throughout the Second Temple era. However, they also began to be used as education on history and ethics from the early Hellenistic period onward, which was possibly stimulated by the influence of the dominant Greek culture,[19] the interaction between poetic and narrative material, and the use of poetic language in contemporary wisdom works. This led to the use of poetic literature in building and maintaining a Jewish identity. Finally, psalms and prayers were regarded and written as prophecies after the Maccabean revolt, probably due to the poetic form of earlier prophetic oracles in prophetic books and the disillusionment of the elite on the gained self-government, which led to a fragmentation of Jewish society and a growing orientation towards an eschatological (better) future. All three of these overall functions, liturgical, educational, and prophetic, continued to be employed in Jewish poetry either separately or in combinations at least until the end of the Second Temple period in 70 CE.

Figure 1: Overall hypothesis on the development of poetic functions



It is well documented in the sources that the functions of Jewish poetry did indeed change over time. The poems gathered novel functions pertinent to the developing worldview and practices of the user communities but some practices apparently also became obsolete over time and this literature needed completely new uses to remain meaningful and to continue to be transmitted to future generations. In terms of liturgical functions, several new forms of songs and prayers that evidently became more important in the course of the Second Temple period have already been discovered by scholars. Penitential prayer can be distinguished as one such form and incantations and apotropaic prayers used

[19] For a study dealing with the didactic use of hymns in different cultures of the Ancient Mediterranean cultural sphere, see Gordley: 2011.

against demons as another. Both forms were established because of developing societal needs. Indeed, poetry as an expression of the basic beliefs of a community was a flexible mirror of any changes in the outlook of the worshiping community.[20] Penitential prayer grew in the Persian period out of a sense of a continuing exile of the Jewish people that was hoped to be reversible by penitence over sins committed by their forefathers that were perceived as the cause for the current exilic state of the people.[21] Incantations and apotropaic prayers in turn became needed when the general worldview developed to include a more pronounced presence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits (angels and demons).[22] These examples demonstrate how important changes in liturgy are for understanding the evolving identity and ideology of people and the consequent need to include such changes in theoretical formulations. But at the same time other forms of poetry seemingly lost their place in liturgical practices. I have already argued in several articles that the late Second Temple liturgy was characterized by an all-encompassing emphasis on praise of God and his name, which resulted in the nearly complete disappearance of lament elements.[23] Hence, the formal group of earlier lament psalms seems to have been almost completely recontextualized as prophetic oracles and as perceived records of individual petitions made to God by important forefathers, and in that way this portion of cultural heritage continued to have an important function in the society, although not in its traditional role. As a related further cautionary note concerning the dating of poems, later authors evidently retained the ability to imitate an earlier poetic form, but in such cases the poems would not have been composed for the earlier but the later settings these poems were used in. For instance, two separate penitential prayers of Manasseh have been discovered, neither of which had a liturgical function but were, according to references in sources, rather used for education concerning Manasseh's sins and subsequent repentance that served as penitential models to be emulated by the audiences.[24]

But during the early Hellenistic period psalms and prayers were, perhaps for the first time, written down in a more consistent manner and changed from mainly oral performance to literature where the substance of the poem and its literary form became more important than the repetitive refrains typical of some of the earlier cultic poetry. For instance, acrostic psalms that begin each poetic line, or a cluster of lines, with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet are first and

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[20] Cf. Magonet: 2014, 162.
[21] E.g., Werline: 1998.
[22] For the formal categories of apotropaic prayer, see Eshel: 2003, 69–88. For the development of these formal categories as a response to societal changes during the late Second Temple period, see Pajunen: forthcoming.
[23] Pajunen: 2015 and the first article in this issue.
[24] See further, Newman: 2007, 105–125. Pajunen: 2012b, 158–161. Note also the analysis of Ben Sira's use of earlier poetic forms by Marttila: 2017, 356–383.

foremost artistic literature, regardless of whether they were also used in liturgies. Similarly, the use of classic repetitive synonymous parallelism begins to dwindle and poetry becomes more progressive with clear admonitory and didactic aims. The transformation from only oral performance to literature and the subsequent entrance into the stream of scribal transmission and interpretation of literary traditions was a fundamental change that predicated the further diversifying role of poetic texts in Jewish society. This movement of poems into the sphere of literature resulted in their study as historical records valuable for establishing a common past and as ethical instructions regarding societal norms and values. The dimension of societal ethical instruction in psalms is rather well acknowledged, especially after Gerald Wilson's study where he argued that the current shaping of the MT Psalter shows that the probable intention of the final editors was to compile a collection primarily meant for study use as instruction, as stated, for instance, in Psalm 1.[25] But poems were also seen as vehicles of history testifying about particular prayers offered by David or some other prominent figures in a specific context, hence providing information about that context and the character traits of the protagonist.[26] Such a perspective does not reveal anything about the original historical context and usage of a poem, yet the historicizing superscripts added later to many songs and prayers testify to the importance of this function of poetic literature from the Hellenistic period onwards. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the MT Psalter as a whole is intentionally divided in accordance with the history of Israel, dealing with the reign of David, the later kings, exile, and the post-exilic community in turn.[27] The acceptance of such a view would mean that these poems were seen as reflecting certain historical situations by the compilers of this particular collection. More evidence for the educational use of psalms and prayers is provided, for instance, by wisdom works, superscripts in the Greek Psalter, the songs of the Qumran movement, and the Psalms of Solomon. But the New Testament also shows evidence for such use of psalms. Marika Pulkkinen's recent articles on Paul's use of psalms indicate that Paul does not primarily use psalms as liturgical sources or as prophetic literature. Paul rather uses clusters of references to psalms when dealing with theological/ethical matters, such as sin in Romans 3, or as providing historical information on a par with the Pentateuchal narratives as in 1 Corinthians 10.[28] This demonstrates that for Paul psalms were still a natural part of such discourses on ethics and history, not just liturgical works or prophetic oracles.

[25] Wilson: 1985.
[26] Cf. Johnson: 2009.
[27] See, for example, Kratz: 1996, 1–34.
[28] Pulkkinen: 2017, 384–409, and her article in this journal issue.

The prophetic function of poems, aside from earlier prophetic oracles in prophetic books, probably emerged in the wake of the Maccabean revolt (c. 167–160 BCE) or at least the first available evidence for this is found in works dateable slightly after this time. The revolt brought about the first Jewish state in Palestine after the Babylonian exile. But rather than unite the people it led to the gradual fragmentation of the Jewish literary elite into small rival groups vying for control of the land and the people. These different groups interpreted their common cultural legacy in very different ways. Psalm literature also underwent a transformation caused by these events. Many of the old psalms and prayers were not meaningful in their traditional functions in the new societal situation, and different groups used them in various ways. A new way that became very prominent in the centuries around the turn of the era was to see them as prophecies handed down from past authoritative figures that would show the audiences a better future than their situation in the contemporary society. Each group could then interpret these prophecies from their own perspective as God's promises to their group and usually excluding the others (e.g., Qumran *pesher* commentaries, *Psalms of Solomon*, and the New Testament gospels). This reinterpretation of the earlier poetic material as prophecies pertaining to the settings of particular groups then paved the way for the composition of new poems as prophetic utterances or containing prophetic sections predicting the future (cf. *4QNon-Canonical Psalms B*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Hodayot*, and the *Barkhi Nafshi* hymns). Even though the prophetic use of poetic literature in some Jewish communities has been generally recognized by scholars,[29] it has often been treated as a peculiarity of several sects when in fact it seems to have been common to all Jewish groups that are represented by preserved literary evidence.

Thus, by the late Second Temple period, psalms and prayers were not only used in liturgies but also in education and were interpreted as prophecies concerning the coming days. Moreover, to complicate matters further, individual poems from this later period may employ both liturgical formulations and historical reflection, and the songs of the Qumran movement, such as the *Hodayot*, frequently contain not only praise formulas and wisdom instruction but also prophetic utterances concerning the future. This presents a challenge for their categorization and if these diverse functions of poetic literature are not properly accounted for by the methodology it does not reflect the actual historical milieu of the poems it aims to clarify. As is readily perceivable from this hypothesis concerning the historical development of poetic functions and the preceding discussion on the

[29] E.g., Moyise and Menken (eds.): 2004. Brooke: 2005, 134–157. Evans: 2005, 551–578. Høgenhaven: 2017, 231–251. Willgren's article in this journal issue.

problems of form criticism, there is rarely a possibility of pinpointing a single specific function of a poem in a particular setting. This means that a properly functioning methodology should be built on a sliding scale based on a poem's form, thematic content, and evidence of use because these indicate the range of different possibilities that could have been realized in the course of the Second Temple period.

4. Conclusions

I would therefore suggest that a differentiation between formal and thematic elements in poems and their further distinction from issues related to the diachronic changes in usage is needed to more accurately analyze the functions of psalms and prayers and their use in different social settings. This type of categorization could pave the way for methodologically more nuanced models that would be able to cope more flexibly and reliably with the diversity of the material and the changing social settings behind them. Such a clarification of nomenclature and classification, together with an analysis of available material indicators of usage in manuscripts, will also be beneficial for investigations dealing with the different reasons for and practical ways of collecting psalms into collections of different size and scope. This kind of categorization would better reflect the situation in Second Temple Judaism by providing a spectrum of different possibilities that may have been actualized in the course of the period rather than trying to pinpoint a single *Sitz im Leben* for each poem, which has been shown to be a scholarly mirage of the situation.

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