

An INTRODUCTION to the Book of Psalms (part IV)

II. HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON PSALMS

A. The Traditional Historical Method

1. The method: To relate the Psalms to an historical incident in the life of the Psalmist. E.g. Psalms 3, 51, etc.
2. Evaluation:
 - a) If the historical incident is given in the heading or superscription of the Psalm, the approach is invaluable.
 - b) If the historical incident must be reconstructed without the basis from God's authoritative Word, the approach is unconvincing.

Bullock says, "The Psalms embody historical elements of the Israelite people, the result being that the true meaning of a psalm cannot be fully grasped apart from those historical elements. In the myriad of instances where the historical data are illusive and the interpreter is left to conjecture, the situation as it appears in the psalm must still be assessed." (Bullock, 123)

The comment is that if the Holy Spirit had wanted us to apply this method on all 150 psalms, then why are there many psalms without the historical background and we have to conjecture the historical incidents? This method can be applied when historical information is provided.

B. The Literary, Analytical Historical Method

1. The method: It is divided into two parts: to completely disregard the headings; and to determine by literary and theological analysis that the Psalms are post-exilic.
2. Evaluation:
 - a) This method is totally not historical at all even if the title claims itself to be so.
 - b) The proponents of this view called the Book of Psalms, the Hymn Book of the Second Temple. Therefore the Psalter was written only during this period, between 400-100 B.C. after the Second Temple was built after the exile.
 - c) We do not accept this method because the superscriptions are included in the earliest manuscripts. and are therefore accepted as part of inspired Scripture. To reject them makes this method

without merit at all. Basically, this method rejects Mosaic and Davidic authorship! This method is unbiblical and must be rejected in its entirety.

C. The Form-Critical Approach

1. The method: It is divided into three parts:
 - a) That every sacred poem accompanied a ritual act: i.e. the setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*). What it means is that every psalm in Israel's religion has a kind of a ritual act behind it, like Lament psalms, etc.
 - b) That the Psalms have common forms:
 - i) Common occasion
 - ii) Common moods and ideas
 - iii) Common vocabulary
 - iv) Common motifs
 - c) That the Psalms grew and developed with time.
2. Evaluation:
 - a) Tracing the evolution of the form is impossible to determine and any attempts would be highly speculative, therefore this philosophy is unacceptable.
 - b) The classification of the forms of the psalms (point b) is acceptable in that there is biblical record of it in 1 Chron. 16:4. This aspect of the approach is valuable and can be accepted.
 - c) The danger of forcing the Psalms into preconceived models do not allow for individuality amongst the 150 Psalms. When the setting in life is given in the Psalm, then this approach is invaluable.

D. The Cultic Approach

1. The method: It builds upon the Form-Critical approach of Gunkel. It is promoted by Mowinckel, a student of Gunkel. The Psalms must not be separated from their cultic¹ setting. The actual setting of the worship is indispensable in understanding the formal worship of cultic songs.

¹"Cultic" means "a specific system of religious worship." For example of cultic setting is the Psalms used in the Autumn Festival OR Enthronement Festival where the LORD is enthroned in the whole universe (e.g. Psalms 47, 93, 95-99). Traditional assignment of Psalms used for Temple worship are: Psalm 24--1st day (recounting God's creation of the world); Psalm 48--2nd day; Psalm 82--3rd day; Psalm 94--4th day; Psalm 81--5th day; Psalm 93--6th day (which seemed appropriate for the completion of Creation); and Psalm 92--7th day (A Psalm for the Sabbath Day which is so titled in the Hebrew Bible). (Bullock, 143)

2. Evaluation:

- a) If the cultic setting is given in the headings, then this method can be used in our study.
- b) If the setting is not in the biblical texts, then the reconstruction applied is unwarranted. In short, let the psalm speak for itself.

E. The Eschatological-Messianic Approach

1. The method: It interprets all the Psalms Christologically.

2. Evaluation:

- a) Positive: When the New Testament interprets the many Psalms as Messianic, then they do the same for those Psalms.
- b) Negative: They do not see Christ in all the Psalms if they are not mentioned in the New Testament. This is allegorization without biblical justification and will harm your hermeneutics. The authority of the Bible would be lost. The interpreter can make silly putty of the Bible and make the Bible say what the interpreter wants it to say.

CONCLUSION: The acceptable approach is the Eclectic approach -- finding principles whenever applicable. The nature of that particular Psalm dictates the method employed. The only approach to be rejected in its entirety is The Literary, Analytical Historical Method because it has no biblical basis. The conclusion is that no one approach can be used for ALL the 150 Psalms.