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# Recurrent and current trends in the study of the Book of Psalms

## ABSTRACT

*In the past one hundred years, two approaches to the study of the Book of Psalms have tended to dominate, namely form criticism and shape and shaping (canonical criticism). Other studies such as the theology of psalms, the poetics of psalms, the redaction of psalms, as well as psalms and intertextuality have also been done. These approaches to the Psalter will continue to be points of focus for studies – the recurrent trends. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, other approaches to the Psalter emerged such as, among others, rhetorical criticism, liberation theology, feminist criticism, the psalms and spirituality, and so forth – the current trends. This article offers a summary of the current state of the form critical and the shape and shaping studies of the Psalter – the recurrent trends – and then moves on to examine a number of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century approaches to the book of Psalms – the current trends. The article concludes with some tentative thoughts about the future of psalm studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

## 1. INTRODUCTORY WORDS

Scholars have been studying the Book of Psalms for millennia. In the past one hundred years, two approaches to the book have tended to dominate, namely form criticism and shape and shaping or canonical criticism.<sup>1</sup> Gunkel's seminal work, *Die Psalmen* (1926),<sup>2</sup> led to the form critical approach



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- 1 This article will use the language of shape and shaping rather than canonical criticism throughout.
- 2 See also Gunkel & Begrich (1933).

to the Psalter being the dominant methodology for nearly forty years, only eclipsed, but not discarded, by Wilson's *The editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (1985). Since that time, questions of the shape and shaping of the Psalter have been a large, but not the sole, focus of psalm studies, especially in North America. Other studies such as the theology of the psalms, the redaction of the psalms, psalms and intertextuality, the reception history of the psalms, and so forth have also emerged. There is hardly any doubt that all of these approaches to the Psalter will continue to be points of focus for studies – thus the recurrent trends.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have witnessed a plethora of other approaches to the Psalter (many new, some renewed), examining the psalms from the viewpoints of, among others, rhetorical criticism; postcolonial interpretations; feminist readings; psalms and the Dead Sea Scrolls; the powerful and the powerless; violence, abuse, and exclusion; the environment; preaching the psalms; the psalms and spirituality; body imagery and performance in the psalms, and so forth – thus the current trends.

Space will not permit a rehearsal of all the various methods that have been and are being employed in the study of the Psalter. Rather, this article offers a brief history of interpretation of the Psalter, a summary of the current state of the form critical and the shape and shaping studies of the Psalter – the recurrent trends – and then move on to examine a number of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century approaches to the Book of Psalms – the current trends. The article concludes with some tentative, and most likely, very subjective thoughts about the future of psalm studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. EARLY INTERPRETERS OF THE PSALMS

### 2.1 Early Jewish interpreters

The Babylonian Talmud Tractate 14b, dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, states with regard to the Book of Psalms:

David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah.

Thus, according to the Talmud, David wrote the Psalter in the tradition of, and in consultation with Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah.

The Midrash *Tehillim* states as a preface to Psalm 1:

As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel, the Book of Psalms entitled Blessed is the man (Ps. 1:1), the Book entitled For the leader: Maschil (Ps. 41:1), the Book, A Psalm of Asaph (Ps. 73:1), the Book, A Prayer of Moses (Ps. 90:1), and the Book, Let the redeemed of the Lord say (Ps. 107:2). Finally, as Moses blessed Israel with the words Blessed art thou, O Israel (Deut. 33:29), so David blessed Israel with the words Blessed is the man" (Braude 1959:5).

The consensus of the early rabbis, thus, was that David was the author of the Psalms, in consultation with a few ancestral others, and the five books of the Psalter are fashioned as a reflection of the Torah.

One of the medieval controversies surrounding psalm studies was whether they were to be understood as the words of humanity to God or the words of God to humanity, as were the words of the prophets. While the Karaites in the 8<sup>th</sup> century maintained that the Psalter was written under prophetic inspiration by David and other prophets, Saadia Gaon, who wrote in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, maintained that the psalms were speeches by humanity addressed to, or about God. Moses ibn Giqatilah, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, attempted to analyse the psalms in their various historical contexts, stating that they came from a number of different authors and reflected their own historical contexts. Abraham ibn Ezra, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, discussed the "great controversy" surrounding the authorship, dating, and character of the psalms. He summarised and critiqued two opposing views about them. First, they are all Davidic prophecies and, secondly, they are neither prophetic nor necessarily Davidic, being songs and prayers of various dates. He concludes with his own view, ending up somewhere in between the two opposing views (Simon 1991; Brown 2014:9-10).

Without doubt, though, the most influential medieval Jewish interpreter of the Psalms was Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, generally known by the acronym Rashi, who lived from 1040 to 1105 CE. He was a French rabbi, acclaimed for his ability to present the basic meaning of the text in a concise and lucid fashion. His commentary on the psalms, which blended philological insight with rabbinic midrash, became the starting point for all subsequent traditional studies of the Psalter (Gruber 2007).

## 2.2 Early Christian interpreters

The Church Fathers evinced a varied view of how to interpret and understand the psalms – typologically, as pointers to Christ; allegorically, that the words of the psalms could reveal a meaning beyond their literal words; or literally, reflecting the historical situations of the psalmists. Justin Martyr, writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, interpreted the psalms using the typological approach. He maintained that Psalm 22 anticipated Christ's suffering and resurrection and that Psalm 96 reveals how Christ will rule after his ascension. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, concurred with Justin Martyr, reading the psalms primarily in relationship to Christ.

By contrast, Origen of Alexandria, who worked in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, employed the allegorical method for the Psalter. For instance, he interpreted the words of Psalm 137:2, "On the willows there we hung our harps", as the soul in a state of "shadow and ignorance". Theodore of Mopsuestia, writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, held to a firm historical, literal view of the psalms. He maintained that they originated in ancient Israel as the cries, laments, and songs of the people and that no psalm was ever intended to point to Christ (Brown 2014:7-8).

Athanasius of Alexandria, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, observed the great variety of psalms in the Psalter and wrote that the Bible is "like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit", and that the Psalter is one that grows "some of those of all the rest". Further, he likened the psalms to a mirror whereby the reader sees him-/herself as what s/he is and what s/he ought to be (Athanasius 2003:98, 103). Brown (2014:8) writes about Athanasius' description of the Psalter:

The Psalter, in other words, contains various themes featured throughout much of Scripture, from creation and exodus to priesthood, prophets, and moral instruction and anticipates Christ's incarnation, passion, and resurrection. But what is particularly unique about the psalms, according to Athanasius, is that they portray 'in all their great variety the movements of the human soul'.

## 3. THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Martin Luther spent a great deal of time studying the Book of Psalms and wrote in the preface to the 1545 German edition of the Psalter:

The Psalter might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible ... In my opinion, any man who will but make a trial in earnest of the Psalter and the Lord's Prayer will very soon bid the other pious prayers adieu, and say, 'Ah, they have not the sap, the strength, the heart, the fire, that I find in the Psalter; they are too cold, too hard, for my taste!'

Interestingly, Luther's hermeneutical approach to the Psalter seemed to change over time. Early on, he interpreted Psalm 1:1 as a reference to Christ alone and Psalm 6 as a prayer of Christ. Later, he interpreted them both as reference to "all men", reflecting a move from a typological to a more historical understanding of the message of the psalms (Brown 2014:10).

John Calvin produced a detailed commentary on the Psalter in 1557, in which he focused on the "literal sense". He stated, for instance, that Psalm 8:5, "Yet you have made human beings and mortals a little lower than God (the heavenly beings), and crowned them with glory and honor", does not refer to Christ, but to humanity in general (Calvin 1843-1955:1.103-105; Brown 2014:10). In the introduction to the commentary, Calvin (1843-1955:1. xxxvii) refers to the Psalter as

an anatomy of all parts of the soul ... for which there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.

#### 4. THE FORM-CRITICAL APPROACH

The historical-critical approach to the biblical text, which grew out of the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-centuries movement in Europe known as Enlightenment and Humanism, would change the landscape of biblical interpretation for all time. Humanist philosophers sought out Greek and Roman literature and culture and were interested in "original sources" of materials, including the biblical text. Humanity could unravel the mysteries of the biblical text and decipher its words and its message in "human terms", in understandable categories.

Without doubt, the scholar whose work had the greatest impact on the study of the Psalter in the wake of the Enlightenment was Hermann Gunkel, who lived from 1862 to 1932. He studied, in particular, the books of Genesis and Psalms, noting the great variety of literary types in each book, and out of that developed a method of study called form criticism. The basic premise of form criticism is that there are many different kinds of literary types and uses of those types in any given culture. We look for passages of similar types (*Gattungen*), study them in terms of form, style, and theme, and then attempt to determine where those types originated in the life of that particular culture (*Sitz-im-Leben*). The form-critical interpretation of the Psalter, thus, pays attention to the common patterns that emerge from comparing the psalms and interprets each psalm as an example of a particular pattern. Gunkel went even further, however, and eventually maintained that the majority of the psalms in the Psalter were late compositions, modelled on ancient types or forms that were traditional in ancient Israel, and thus the psalms we read today are "late

compositions”, “copies” of ancient forms (Gunkel 1926). Sigmund Mowinckel built upon Gunkel’s work, but he diverged from many of his conclusions. He maintained that the psalms in the Psalter were genuine early compositions, but that the original setting of each type of psalm was not as important as understanding how it was used in the cultic life of ancient Israel. He thus attempted to identify the original cultic setting for the use of each of the psalms in the Psalter. Mowinckel maintained that many of the psalms in the Psalter were used in the annual autumn New Year celebration in ancient Israel – a celebration of re-enthronement of the god-king in ancient cultures, and of Yahweh in Israel (Mowinckel 1962:2-5).

The impact of the form-critical approaches to psalm studies is immeasurable. It gave us a marvellous gift of classification and analysis that has enhanced and enriched our understanding of the great variety of poetic forms in the book. But, as is usually the case, with every good come some perils. Much of the work of psalm scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries focused on “regrouping” the psalms into their various *Gattungen* and *Sitz-im-Leben* and studying them together, rather than in the order they occur in the Psalter. The form-critical approach to the study of the Psalter became so prevalent that Miller (1986:3) wrote:

Form-critical study of the psalms has dominated, if not controlled, the way in which this part of Scripture has been handled during this century – a fact that is evident in popular treatments of the psalms and commentaries as it is in the scholarly literature.

## 5. THE CANONICAL APPROACH – THE SHAPE AND SHAPING OF THE PSALTER

A movement began in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to “put the biblical text back together again”.

Traditional biblical scholarship has spent most of its efforts in disassembling the works of a complicated watch before our amazed eyes without apparently realizing that similar efforts by and large have not succeeded in putting the parts back together again in a significant or meaningful way (Polzin 1975:82).

The biblical story has become eclipsed by the work of the very professionals in seminaries and departments of religion who seem to know most about the Bible. The experts have lost perspective on the very object of their expertise. Biblical criticism has reduced the Bible to grist for the historian’s mill, the province of the professor’s study (Sanders 1987:78-79).

In his work titled *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Childs (1979:73) maintained that the final form of the Hebrew scriptures is what the ancient Israelites preserved, not the underlying layers of tradition of which it consists. Therefore, the best critical method for understanding its message is to study its final shape – that which “became normative for all successive generations of this community of faith” (Childs 1979:73).

Thus began a new era in the study of the Book of Psalms. Wilson’s (1985) *The editing of the Hebrew Psalter* proposed an overall “story-line” for the book. By a careful study of the psalms that occur at the ends of each of the Psalter’s five books, he determined that the Psalter told the story of the rise of the Davidic monarchy, the divided kingdoms, the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, the exile, and the return from exile, and the reestablishment of worship at the temple in Jerusalem. In 1989, an entire session of the Society of Biblical Literature Book of Psalms Section was devoted to the topic of the shape and shaping of the book.<sup>3</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ranks of those studying the shape and shaping of the Psalter has grown enormously.

But not everyone agrees with such an approach to the Psalter.

Modern ‘holistic’ readers of the Psalter pay much (in my opinion, too much) attention to this very late redactional division of the canonical collection of Psalms. Redactional activities, by and large, were not able to thoroughly mould transmitted texts to interconnect them and give them new meaning (Gerstenberger 2001:252).<sup>4</sup>

## 6. NEW WAYS TO READ AND INTERPRET THE PSALTER

A number of other approaches to reading the Psalter developed or flourished in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Many of these approaches were borrowed or appropriated from studies undertaken of literature outside the biblical text – what one psalm scholar characterises as “looking over the back fence” (Jacobson 2014:242). While space will not allow for a rehearsal of all the approaches, a brief sampling should suffice to explicate the breadth and depth of them.

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3 The papers were published in McCann (1993).

4 See also Willgren (2016).

## 6.1 Rhetorical criticism

While the discipline of the shape and shaping of the biblical text was still in its infancy, Muilenburg introduced a “cousin” discipline to biblical studies, rhetorical criticism.<sup>5</sup> In his 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Muilenburg (1969:1-18) stated that, while form criticism was a perfectly valid and satisfactory methodology for studying the biblical text, it might be time to move on from its competence in studying individual pericopes and return to the project of trying to understand texts in their entirety. Barton (1996:199) summarises Muilenburg’s argument as follows:

What was needed ... was a close attention to the articulation of biblical texts, so that one might see how the *argument* of chapters and books is constructed and thus how it is that chapters and books have persuasive ('rhetorical') force with their readers.

Numerous students of psalm studies took up Muilenburg’s challenge and applied rhetorical criticism to individual psalms and groups of psalms.<sup>6</sup> Foster (2014:392-93) states this about the rhetoric of the whole book of Psalms:

While the editors of the book of Psalms began with the image of the straight path of justice in Psalm 1 and ended with a resounding summons to praise in Psalm 150, they also facilitated a generative tension between voices that laid the threat to praise at the feet of sinful Israel and voices that questioned YHWH’s compassion and faithfulness. In so doing, the editors have ensured that those who participate in the Psalms do not come prematurely to the end but consider every voice before praise reaches its symphonic climax (Psalms 146-150).

## 6.2 Reception history

Reception history is the study of how a particular text or book in the Bible has been used and interpreted throughout the millennia. Holiday’s *The Psalms through three thousand years: Prayerbook of a cloud of witness* (1993) was the first work in modern times to closely examine the Jewish and Christian use of the psalms. Ten years later, Gillingham (2008:1), of Oxford University, undertook a massive study of the reception history of the Book of Psalms, studying, in her words, “commentary, homily, translation, liturgy, literature, music, and art”, which resulted in a three-volume work, published respectively in 2008, 2018, and 2022.

5 In an article examining the rhetoric of Psalm 44, deClaisse-Walford (2008:123) observed the similarities between her work in shape and shaping and the discipline of rhetorical criticism.

6 See Foster & Howard (2008).



Four chapters of the 2014 *Oxford handbook of the Psalms* are devoted to the reception history of the Psalter, with topics including Jewish interpretation, New Testament interpretation, and Islamic interpretation. Breed (2014:297) writes of the psalms:

The very general and open-ended nature of the references to enemies and trials in the lament psalms, for example, allows readers facing quite different problems nevertheless to find that the Psalter elucidates their peculiar situation.

His comment regarding the lament psalms can apply equally to the other types of psalms – wisdom, creation, thanksgiving, and so forth. Miller (1983:35) summarises well. He writes that the Psalter’s “openness to varieties of application and actualization continues through the history of interpretation to the present”.

### 6.3 Feminist readings

Over the past few decades, feminist readings of the Psalter have explored various aspects of women’s readings and appropriations of the psalms and feminine images of God in the book. Brenner and Fontaine’s (1998) volume in the series “A feminist companion to the Bible” included essays by Bail (1998), “O God, hear my prayer”: Psalm 55 and ‘Violence against women’; Schroer (1998), “Under the shadow of your wings’: The metaphor of God’s wings in the Psalms, Exodus 19.4, Deuteronomy 32.11 and Malachi 3.20, as seen through the perspectives of feminism and the history of religion”, and Tanner (1998), “Hearing the cries unspoken: An intertextual-feminist reading of Psalm 109”.<sup>7</sup>

In 2010, Liturgical Press commissioned a “broadly feminist” commentary series on the entire Bible called *The wisdom commentary*. The volumes in the series, in the words of its managing editor, pay

particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice (deClaissé-Walford 2020:xxi).

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7 Brenner & Fontaine (1998:242-301). In an article titled “Feminist interpretations of the Psalter”, in *The Oxford handbook of Psalms*, Knowles (2014:426) wisely cautions though: “[N]aming and associating behaviors as feminine runs the danger of composing an essentialized femininity that conforms to socially prescribed behaviors and attributes – reifying ‘feminine’ into a construction that constricts women instead of understanding it as cultural performance”.

The author of this article was privileged to write the commentary on Psalms 90-150 for the series. The undertaking allowed this shape and shaping scholar to put on “new glasses” and examine the psalms in new and enlightening ways. The examples I give herewith will, of course, come from Psalms 90-150, but the topics are found throughout the entire Psalter.

One result of these “new glasses” was finding ample feminine depictions of God in the psalms. The one that stood out most to me was the image of God “birthing” the earth in Psalm 90, verse 2. Many English translations mask the imagery of the verb “*hiyl*”, to writhe in childbirth, choosing a more nuanced translation. Another was the image in Psalm 131:2 of the psalm singer’s soul as either a satisfied child at her mother’s breast or a weaned child who now no longer cries in hunger, but clings to the warm embrace of her nurturing mother (deClaissé-Walford 2020:217-220).<sup>8</sup>

Another reading of the book of Psalms from a “broadly feminist” viewpoint is that of earth care, particularly as we find in the Enthronement Psalms, Psalms 47 and 93-100, where all of creation – the trees, the hills, the ostriches, the crashing waves of the sea – are invited to participate in celebrating God’s care for creation. A close reading of these psalms highlights humanity’s place in the created order and gives us pause to reflect on our responsibility for it. Three works that have informed my work are Walker-Jones’ *The green Psalter: Resources for an ecological spirituality* (2009), Bauckham’s *The Bible and ecology: Rediscovering the community of creation* (2010), and Brown’s *The seven pillars of creation: The Bible, science, and the ecology of wonder* (2010).

In an article titled “Certainty, ambiguity, and trust: Knowledge of God in Psalm 139”, Pressler (2003) provides a new insight into the interplay of the powerful and the powerless as it could be interpreted in a much-loved psalm. Psalm 139 characterises God as one who knows and observes the psalmist’s every movement and no matter where the psalmist may go to flee from God, God will find them. While for most readers, the psalm provides words of comfort, for those – children, partners, members of certain social communities – who are relentlessly monitored and controlled by others – parents, partners, those in power or privilege over others – many of the words and sentiments of Psalm 139 could be difficult to hear. Rather than finding comforting assurance in verse 5 “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand on me”, a person caught up in such a relationship might wonder if God [is] another figure in their life who “hems me in,” restricting and controlling me, never letting me out of his sight (Pressler 2003:91-99).

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8 There are also feminine images of God in, among others, Pss. 22 and 91.

## 6.4 Body images in the Psalter

Another aspect of psalm studies is the extensive use of body imagery in the Psalter. In “Body images in the Psalms”, Gillmayr-Bucher (2004:301, 305) maintains that there are over 1,000 explicit references to the body and its parts in 143 of the 150 psalms in the Hebrew Psalter:

The persons in the Psalms do not so much have a body, they rather are a body. ... The use of body imagery (in the Psalter) always includes some kind of body performance. It puts the body on stage ... Instead of a static description, the presentation of the body shows the events as they unfold.

The Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120-134) – those psalms depicting pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for various observances and celebrations – present a stirring picture of humanity's bodily interactions with God and with one another as they travelled to, arrived in, and celebrated various festivals in Jerusalem. In the Songs of Ascents, there are no less than 20 references to bodily movement. Among them, wandering or sojourning (גָּר) in 120:5; going out (צָא) and coming in (בֹּא) in 121:8; standing (עָמַד) and going up (עָלָה) in 122:2,4; seeking (בִּקֵּשׁ) in 122:9; lifting up (נָשָׂא) the eyes in 121:1 and 123:1; lifting up the hands in 134:2; planting (זָרַע) and reaping (קָצַר) in 126:5; and rising early (שָׁכַח) and sitting down (יָשָׁב) in 127:2.

In *Phenomenology of perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1962:285) writes:

motion is little more than an instance of cause and effect. But there are occasions of experience where movement is inherently significant and possesses a thematic logic of its own. This is something skilfully employed by the arts, by the media, and of course, by religion.

I found these words, by the way, in an unpublished essay by Jonathan Weidenbaum titled “You have to take it with you: The embodied nature of the religious self”, an apt title, I think.

## 6.5 Additional emerging studies

In the summer of 2023, I undertook a quick search of recent articles (over the past five years) on the book of Psalms and found a heartening array of topics. Below is a sampling:

### *Trauma studies:*

Brown, J.E. & Collicutt, J. 2022. Psalms 90, 91 and 92 as a means of coping with trauma and adversity. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 25(3):276-287.

Li, X. 2021. Post-traumatic growth, belief in a just world, and Psalm 137:9. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 51(3):175-184.

Ndoga, S.S. 2021. Reading Psalm 13 as a strategy for the cathartic release of negative emotion. *Old Testament Essays* 34(1):254-267.

Reid, S.B. 2022. Finding her voice: #SayHerName and Psalm 22 as trauma response. *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 48:401-414.

### *Economics and food issues:*

Martin, L.R. 2022. The Psalms and economic justice. *Die skriflig van die Gereformeerde Teologiese Vereniging* 56(1):1-6.

Stinson, M.A. 2021. Turning tables in Israel's history: Food language and reversals in Psalms 105 and 106. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 83(4):588-598.

Stinson, M.A. 2018. "A table in the wilderness?" The rhetorical function of food language in Psalm 78. *Tyndale Bulletin* 69(2):313-316.

### *Land, space, and ownership issues:*

Neuber, C. 2021. Space in Psalm 73 and a new perspective for the understanding of Psalm 73:17. *Biblical Interpretation* 3:279-307.

Prinsloo, G.T.M. 2021. From desperation to adoration: Reading Psalm 107 as a transforming spatial journey. *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 32:392-425.

Bremer, J. 2019. "Land" as a topic in the Book of Psalms? *Old Testament Essays* 32(2):687-715.

Ramantswana, H. 2019. Song(s) of struggle: A decolonial reading of Psalm 137 in light of South Africa's struggle songs. *Old Testament Essays* 32(2):464-490.

deClaisse-Walford, N.L. 2018. The importance of place in Book Five of the Psalter. *Review & Expositor* 114(2):176-182.

## 6.6 Psalm studies in a new light

I address two undertakings on the Book of Psalms that I think could provide an interesting way forward as we look to the future of psalm studies. The first is the work of Wallace (2017:239-48), who was a classmate of mine at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. As a professor of undergraduate students in a fairly conservative university in Illinois, he devised a method of teaching the Old Testament, using a concept called “context-based teaching” that began with the Book of Psalms. For instance, when teaching the book of Genesis (one that can really challenge students’ long-held theological ideas), Wallace began with the creation Psalms 8, 74, and 104 before dealing with Genesis 1 and 2. He did the same with the ancestral stories in Genesis and their references in the Book of Psalms.

My *doctor Vater*, William H. Bellinger, Jr., of Baylor University published, in 2022, *Introducing Old Testament theology: Creation, covenant, and prophecy in the divine-human relationship*. In the book, he uses the analogy of a three-legged stool of creation, covenant theology, and prophetic tradition as “hooks”, on which readers can hang the seemingly myriad theological ideas in the Old Testament. But the interesting thing is that Bellinger uses the Psalter as a starting point for exploring this “three-legged stool”. Bellinger (2022:45) observes that many scholars have pondered over a proper starting point for understanding the theology of the multifaceted texts of the Old Testament, and he concludes:

If the task is to find the faith confessed in the Old Testament, perhaps the fullest source for the ancient community’s articulation of faith is the Psalms.

Rather than sidelining the Psalter as “that book of poetry”, we may be seeing a trend to make it more wholly a part of the larger theological discussion and exploration of the Old Testament.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here? In an article titled “Imagining the future of psalm studies”, Jacobson (2014:242) wrote:

I imagine that scholars will look over the fence from their own backyards and imitate the methods that they see scholars in other fields employing. ... In our era, methods of study are like soups de jour – people employ a method for a while, but then seek out new methods, because they ask new questions and approach topics from fresh angles.

As I reviewed the articles and books published over the past few years and then contemplated the future of psalm studies, a few ideas came to mind – topics that I did not observe in my meanderings through the library and website catalogues and entries. While I found many feminist readings of psalms, I was not able to locate any womanist or masculinity readings. Such would be, in my opinion, fruitful undertakings. Postcolonial reading of the psalms is another topic with great potential for future study, along with constructions of identity. And as I move into my retirement years, ageism and the psalms is a tantalising topic. And tangential to that, disability or other-abled studies and the Psalter would be interesting – again, an approach that I did not find in my review of recent literature, studies of the psalms borrowed from “looking over our back fence”.

This article reviewed past approaches to the Book of Psalms, the current and recurrent trends in the book’s study, new approaches that are developing, and a look to the future of psalm studies. This is not a comprehensive look at the state of psalm studies, but perhaps a snapshot of where we are at present.

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DeClaissé-Walford

Recurrent and current trends in the study

*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

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