Off the Beaten Track: 
An Evangelical Reading of the Psalms without Gunkel

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Since the inception of form criticism, evangelical theology has tried to define its relationship with its main proponent, Hermann Gunkel. This article tries to analyze this ambiguous relationship by means of reviewing interpretive tendencies of major Psalms commentaries from 1935 to 2003 while trying to locate evangelical scholarship within this panorama. One of the conclusions of this brief review is that evangelical scholarship has tagged behind when it could have been in the lead.

Key Words: Psalms, form criticism, Hermann Gunkel, Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalms commentaries, evangelical scholarship, literary criticism, comparative method, iconography, intertextuality

INTRODUCTION

Since the latter half of the last century, evangelical theology has tried to define its relationship to form criticism as proposed and developed by Gunkel and Mowinckel. While in the beginning there were strong voices indicating that form criticism and evangelical theology were incompatible, more recently, scholars have been looking for a moderate approach.

Author's note: The present article has grown out of a paper with the same title, presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, held in Colorado Springs, 15 November 2001.

1. Gunkel originally published Die Psalmen in 1892; in it he presented a form-critical analysis of the Psalter. Mowinckel's Psalmenstudien I–VI followed in 1921–24 and built on Gunkel's work, creating the broad outlines for today's form criticism. We will return to the peculiarities of both works below. See Hermann Gunkel, Die Psalmen (5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968); Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien I–VI (Kristiania: Dybwad, 1921–24). For a working definition of form criticism, see Barton: "In the OT, form criticism is a method of study that identifies and classifies the smaller compositional units of biblical texts, and seeks to discover the social setting within which units of these types or literary genres were originally used" (John Barton, "Form Criticism," ABD 2:838).

2. Gundry strongly criticizes the trend of separating form criticism from its philosophical presuppositions and comes to the following conclusion, focusing on NT form criticism: "Furthermore, on the basis of these considerations it is obvious that a consistent, thorough-going
trying to incorporate valuable aspects of Gunkel’s method into evangelical interpretation. Although there are a number of scholars who speak out against the overly rigid categorization of the Gunkel School (and by no means only from within evangelical circles), for most of the interpretive work done on the Psalms, form-critical analysis has become the point of departure. Tremper Longman III, in a paper originally presented at the 1982 ETS meetings, stated that “the move toward a positive and constructive form criticism as a hermeneutical tool is a proper one and that evangelicals should continue to formulate and apply such a method which is shorn of the negative presuppositions of the method as applied by critics.” Although Longman then moves away from the issue and discusses genre analysis from a mainly linguistic perspective, the basic assumption form criticism will have no appeal to those who desire to recognize the inspiration of the Scriptures and the historical continuity between the Lord Jesus and the early church. And let all ‘conservatives’ who are inclined to adopt some form critical terminology and viewpoints be apprised of the basic nature of that to which they are accommodating themselves” (Stanley N. Gundry, “A Critique of the Fundamental Assumption of Form Criticism: Part II,” BSac 123 [1966]: 149–50).


4. It is interesting to note that the most articulate critique against form criticism does not necessarily stem from evangelical scholars but can be found outside the evangelical circle. See, for example, Meir Weiss, The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984). Kraus already wrote in his fifth edition of his Psalms commentary: “Es hat sich in den letzten Jahrzehnten mehr und mehr gezeigt, dass die Gattungsforschung, wie Gunkel und Begrich sie vorgetragen haben, erheblicher Korrekturen und teilweise grundlegender Neufassungen bedarf” (Hans Joachim Kraus, Die Psalmen 1–2 [5th ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978], 38). Butler, an evangelical scholar, observes that, although there exists a growing number of scholars from all traditions who are asking for a dismissal of form criticism, no real alternatives have been found (Trent C. Butler, “Narrative Form Criticism: Dead or Alive,” in A Biblical Itinerary—In Search of Method, Form and Content: Essays in Honor of George W. Coats [ed. E. E. Carpenter; JSOTSup 240; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 39–59).


6. Tremper Longman III, “Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory, and the Evangelical,” WTJ 47 (1985): 47–48. Longman’s article is a valuable study of genre analysis from modern literary theory, opting for a more flexible definition of genre that clearly criticizes Gunkel’s rigid understanding of it. He then moves on to suggest a wider set of criteria for the identification of different genres, allowing for multiple social contexts for one genre and, with that, substantially modifies Gunkel’s position. One cannot but feel after reading Longman’s paper that this is far removed (if not something drastically different) from the form criticism that was done by Gunkel. Along the same lines, focusing on the genre of communal lament and comparing it with extrabiblical literature, is Paul W. Ferris, The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East (SBLDS 127; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).
behind this statement is that it is possible to isolate form criticism from its presuppositions, which can be summarized in three points: (1) biblical texts originated in oral form; (2) biblical literature can be categorized according to form (Form) and genres (Gattung), and these categories are clear-cut and easily separable; (3) there exists a different sociohistorical context (Sitz im Leben) for each genre, and the texts are dependent on this one and only, mostly cultic (according to Mowinckel), context.7

It is surprising to review the general amount of critique and modification on a theoretical level that these assumptions have undergone since their original formulation without having substantially changed the way in which the form-critical method is applied on a practical level. One has to ask with Seybold, "ob wir fast 70 Jahre nach Gunkels Erkenntnissen von 1911/13, trotz aller oft etwas zu volltönenden Polemik . . . wirklich weit darüber hinausgekommen sind."8 This leads to the question whether form criticism really presents an adequate tool for understanding biblical texts from the perspective of evangelical theology, especially with regard to the Psalms, where the method was first applied. It appears that there is a general uncomfortable feeling about the usefulness of the method, but for lack of alternatives and, possibly, by power of tradition, it continues to be the predominant method.

In the following, I return briefly to the origin of the form-critical method as proposed by Gunkel and modified by Mowinckel—what could be called the “beaten track”9—followed by a survey of the literature pertaining to the interpretation of the Psalter, by means of a comparative chart of major recent Psalms commentaries, showing that the majority of interpreters are slowly moving away from the form-critical method as proposed by Gunkel and Mowinckel. Finally, there will be a short discussion of various initiatives that go “off the beaten track” in that they go beyond Gunkel without—and sometimes even with—leaving him behind.10

7. Ibid., 49; see also Barton, “Form Criticism,” 841–82. It is especially this last point that has drawn criticism from evangelical circles.
9. Although Longman indicates that it is possible to discard the “negative presuppositions” (see above) of the form-critical method, it does not appear that easy to me, taking its philosophical basis into consideration. Longman himself avoids the term form criticism and speaks henceforth of genre analysis and tries to integrate it as one part of the historical-grammatical exegesis (Trepper Longman III, “What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Exegesis: Why I Am Not a Literalist,” Grace Theological Journal 11 [1990]: 148). Nevertheless, form criticism was the method to interpret texts according to Gunkel, but in Longman’s endeavor there may be a partial answer to the issue raised in this article that will be taken up in the discussion below.
10. See James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” JBL 88 (1969): 1–18. In his famous call in 1968 during his SBL address to go beyond form criticism, Muilenburg tried to move away from form criticism toward rhetorical criticism, although he subsequently has been criticized as not having gone substantially beyond form criticism because of failing to provide a clear definition that would differentiate the two approaches. Comments Sprinkle: “One justified criticism of his essay is that his rhetorical criticism is insufficiently distinct from the form criticism that he claims to go beyond, for the way in which he summarized rhetorical criticism
Whereas Gunkel saw the Psalms as individual poems derived from liturgical texts in the cult of Israel, Mowinckel proceeded along Gunkel’s lines but simplified his ideas in establishing an actual preexilic cultic setting for the Psalms texts. Central to Mowinckel’s view was the direct relationship between the Psalms and Israel’s worship, which he tried to reconstruct with the aid of comparative material from other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Especially Yahweh’s Thronbesteigungsfest (enthronement-, or in a more active sense, throne-ascension festival) played a dominant role in his interpretation of the Hebrew Psalter, forming the cultic backdrop to a large number of Psalms.11

In subsequent publications one notices a certain degree of polarization between Gunkel’s and Mowinckel’s views, although since the 1950s the theory of the cultic interpretation and the centrality of the Thronbesteigungsfest has noticeably lost impact on the study of the Hebrew Psalter.12 Consequently, it is Gunkel’s theory that has since provided the major stimulus for exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter,13 although not without alterations and increasing circumspection. Most of the relevant commentaries on the Hebrew Psalter have followed Gunkel’s form-critical method, al-

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11. See Hauge, who tries to demonstrate that the basic assumptions of Mowinckel and his cult-historical methodology could have led to quite a different result in the interpretation of the Hebrew Psalter if followed consistently (Martin R. Hauge, “Sigmund Mowinckel and the Psalms: A Query into His Concern,” SJOT 2 [1988]: 56–71).


13. See, for example, Ridderbos and Westermann, who went beyond Gunkel and came to the conclusion that there are only two general types of Psalms: praise and lament (Nicolaas H. Ridderbos, Psalmen en Cultus: Rede uitgesproken bij de aanwaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar in theologie aan die Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op vrijdag 30 Juni [Kampen: Kok, 1950]; Claus Westermann, Der Psalter [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967]). For a summary of further differentiation and development within the form-critical approach, see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, Die Psalmen I: Psalm 1–50 (NEchtB 29; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 17–18.
though it has to be noticed that the form-critical method in its purest form finds its main support in German, that is, European circles. Currently, form-critical analysis has to face the challenge of being a mere reiteration of a methodology developed under the assumptions and axioms of turn-of-the-twentieth-century biblical scholarship.

**Psalms Commentaries since 1935**

The following synoptic table, while not claiming to be exhaustive, represents a selection of the most prominent commentaries on the Psalms, published since 1935, taking into consideration their respective working methodology and its application on the exegetical process. The table illustrates the shift from a form critical to a literary analysis of the Psalms.

14. There are definite nuances in the application of the form-critical method. Becker has differentiated between the following methodological approaches and their respective proponents: (1) Gebete Angeklagter und Kranker (prayers of the accused and the sick): Hans Schmidt, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 1/15; Stuttgart: Mohr [Siebeck], 1934); Lienhard Delekat, *Asylie und Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum: Eine Untersuchung zu den privaten Feindpsalmen* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); (2) *Die bundesideologische Deutung* (interpretation according to the ideology of covenant): Artur Weiser, *Die Psalmen* (5th ed.; ATD 14–15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959); (3) *Psalmen in der Umwelt Israels* (Psalms in the environment of ancient Israel)—this methodology can only be indirectly linked to Gunkel, because he received substantial impetus for the interpretation of the Psalms from the ancient Near East. Becker stresses the importance of the Sumerian and Akkadian prayers while he bypasses the textual material from Ugarit altogether; (4) Frömmigkeitsliche Psalmendichtung (anthological interpretation of the Psalms): Alfons Deissler, *Die Psalmen I–III* (Die Welt der Bibel 1/1–3; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963–65); (5) *Kollektive Psalmendeutung* (collective interpretation of the Psalms)—although Gunkel rejected this method, it can be added to the list of his methodological offspring via the method of relecture, which revived this approach in the works of Mowinckel and Schmidt. We have made mention of these methodological nuances because they can be linked to, or are derived from, Gunkel’s work, and in this respect can be added to his approach. This has been done for the sake of clarity without trying to simplify matters. See Joachim Becker, *Wege der Psalmenexegese* (SBS 78; Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1975).

15. Obviously, there will be some degree of oversimplification with regard to the working methods of the various commentaries, because they often subscribe to more than one approach, which is reflected in the filling in of more than one of the appropriate columns. The order is in accordance with the date of publication. The following sigla are employed: ✓ indicating the use of specific working method; p indicating philologically oriented comparative method; i indicating iconographically oriented comparative method; G indicating the direction of the form-critical method—that is, Gunkel’s approach; M indicating the direction of the form-critical approach—that is, Mowinckel’s approach. Sigla in parentheses indicate less dependence on the indicated working method. A number of recent Psalms commentaries were not available to me: Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster Bible Companion Series; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Manfred Oeming, *Das Buch der Psalmen: Psalm 1–41* (Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar, Altes Testament 13/1; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000); Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC; rev. ed.; Nashville: Nelson, 2002). Nevertheless, the tendency away from form-critical toward literary method that I am demonstrating can also be observed in these commentaries after an examination of the various reviews that have been published.
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- a. Central to Weiser’s approach is the covenant ideology interpretation, which nevertheless is a variation on Mowinckel’s theme. See above.
- b. Volumes 1 and 2 are numbered consecutively.
- c. The 1st–4th editions of Kraus’s commentary were still in the tradition of Gunkel’s approach. Hans Joachim Kraus, Psalmen 1–2 (BKAT 15/1–2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961).
- d. Volumes 1 and 2 are numbered consecutively.
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g. Anderson seems to try to accommodate all directions of Psalms exegesis, while he sees no drastically conflicting differences between the views of Gunkel, Mowinckel, Weiser, Kraus, and Westermann, which could be consolidated into one overall system only with enormous difficulty. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (2 vols.; NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 30–31.

h. Volumes 1 and 2 are numbered consecutively.

i. Kidner is not altogether clear on his approach to the exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter. After having summarized the various views, he emphasizes the concept of actualization (relecture?) of the Psalms in Israelite worship. Furthermore, he acknowledges the importance of the headings for the interpretation of the psalms, and points out the fallacies of the comparative-religions approach to the Hebrew Psalter. In his somewhat metaphorical conclusion, he expresses his skepticism regarding an exclusively liturgical interpretation of the Psalms: “the Psalter, taken on its own terms, is not so much a liturgical library, storing up standard literature for cultic requirements, as a hospitable house, well lived in, where most things can be found and borrowed after some searching and whose first occupants have left on it every-where the imprint of their experiences and the stamp of their characters.” Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (TOTC; London: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 18; idem, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary on Books III to V of the Psalms* (TOTC; London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973).

j. The commentary is divided into two volumes, in which the pages are numbered consecutively.

k. Although Beaucamp sees the Hebrew Psalter as a witness to the liturgy in the Israelite cult, he prefers to focus on the use and reuse of a psalm instead of determining a hypothetical original author and his intentions: “Ajoutons pour conclure que l’origine d’une pièce liturgique compte moins que son utilisation. Il est plus utile ici de déterminer à quoi elle a servi, que de tenter de découvrir ce qu’elle avait d’abord primitivement signifié. Son sens profond n’est pas à chercher dans les intentions d’un hypothétique auteur; il n’est autre que celui qu’a consacrê l’usage, celui que la tradition a conservé.” Evode Beaucamp, *Le Psautier: Ps 1–72* (SB 7; Paris: Gabalda, 1976), 13. Nevertheless, Beaucamp sees the formation of the Hebrew Psalter as a threefold religious-historical development from the beginnings of the monarchy via the reforms of Josiah to postexilic times, while the written tradition of the Psalms can only be attributed to the time after the exile. His emphasis, however, lies in the realm of the relecture of the Psalms.

l. It appears necessary to also include the 5th edition of Kraus’s commentary on the Psalms, because it has been altered substantially from the first 4 editions. The indicated presence of the form-critical method in parentheses points to Kraus’s modified position: he introduces his own form-groups but tries to make a contribution on a literary-historical level (Kraus, *Die Psalmen* 1–2, 49). However, the practical application in the exegetical part of the commentary is unfortunately inconsistent with his methodological concept and at times reiterates traditional form-critical analysis. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen* 1, 18.

m. Volumes 1 and 2 are numbered consecutively.


o. After introducing the main tendencies in modern Psalms research, Craigie describes the methodological concept of his commentary as follows: “While it [the first volume of the WBC commentary on the Psalms] is influenced to some extent by all the perspectives presented above, it does not stand consciously in any of the particular schools or traditions which have been summarized. I have followed the broad principles of form-criticism set down by Gunkel, at least insofar as I have recognized the importance of attempting to classify Psalms according to their type and to set them in particular life situations.” Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (WBC 19; Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 47. Nevertheless, Craigie also wants to balance form-critical examination with literary analysis inspired by Ridderbos’s “new stylistics.” Additionally, the Ugaritic evidence from the perspective of Dahood’s contributions is taken into consideration, though in a moderate manner (ibid., 48).
p. Tate in his methodology follows in the footsteps of his two predecessors of the WBC Psalms commentary, referring to the introduction of the first volume by Craigie. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20; Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), xxiv.


r. The work represents a more recent commentary that also includes iconographic comparative material. Helmer Ringgren, *Psaltern 1–41* (Kommentar till Gamla Testamentet; Uppsala: EFS, 1987).


t. Although VanGemeren claims to take form-critical categories into consideration, his emphasis lies on the literary aspect of Psalms exegesis, as can be seen from this programmatic statement in his introduction: “In approaching the Psalms I am much less inclined to look for the ‘functional’ element, i.e., how the psalm functioned in ancient Israel. I am also skeptical of understanding the Psalms in the light of Ugaritic studies. In my opinion the expositor is at risk when he explains the text in the context of historical referentiality, liturgy, or cultic *Sitz-im-Leben*.” Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (Expositor’s Bible Commentary 5; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 14.


v. After expressing substantial reservations about the form-critical method, Hossfeld and Zenger proceed to list the influencing factors and exegetical approaches that are reflected in their commentary on the Psalms: (1) literary analysis (*poetologische Analyse*) along the lines of Weiss, Alonso Schökel, Riddersbos, and others; (2) anthological Psalms exegesis under the dominant influence of French scholars with their principle of relecture—that is, the reworking of the Psalms according to the perspective of postexilic wisdom schools; Hossfeld and Zenger acknowledge, however, the danger of a general late dating of Psalms; (3) a more differentiated perspective on individual psalms, taking literary-critical, tradition-historical, and religious-historical aspects into consideration; this would lead to a more moderate approach to a particular psalm, recognizing its individuality and uniqueness as an expression of the religious history of Israel without trying to make it fit into a certain *Gattung*; (4) the study of the Hebrew Psalter as a whole and the inner dynamics of the collection of the Psalms, that is, the redaction-historical and canonical aspects of Psalms research; (5) a reception-historical analysis on three levels: innerbiblical, rabbinic, and talmudic Judaism, and Christian reception (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Die Psalmen I*, 17–25; see also the second part of the commentary: *Die Psalmen II: Psalm 51–100* [NÉchtB 40; Würzburg; Echter Verlag, 2002]).

w. Seybold’s commentary replaces the somewhat outdated one by Schmidt in the same series that was published originally in 1934. It represents a step away from the traditional form-critical approach, trying to further the appreciation of the correlation between the linguistic form and theological content of the individual psalm. Especially his textual notes, drawn from his familiarity with materials from the Judean Desert, are of great value in the interpretation. Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT 1/15; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1996).

x. Broyles’s commentary appears somewhat anachronistic in that he is predominantly form-critical in his approach: “This commentary will focus on the psalms’ original use as liturgies . . . if we want to make sense of a psalm as we move from one verse to the next, we must
recognize that it was shaped primarily by liturgical factors, and not simply by literary consideration.” Craig C. Broyles, Psalms (NIBCOT 11; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 8; idem, The Conflict of Faith and Experience: A Form-Critical and Theological Study of Selected Lament Psalms (JSOTSup 52; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

y, Gerald H. Wilson, Psalms Volume 1: From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). The purpose of this new series of commentaries is to bring original meaning across to contemporary significance. Wilson reduces Gunkel’s categories to three (Praise, Lament, and Thanksgiving) but also allows for a number of additional psalm types (royal psalms, liturgical psalms, Yahweh malak psalms, wisdom and Torah Psalms, psalms of confidence, historical psalms, entrance liturgies, and so on), which somehow appears to take the original idea of form criticism ad absurdum. However, Wilson’s approach to the interpretation of each psalm is focused on the literary dimension and contemporary application of the poem, and form-critical issues are not addressed frequently.

z. Samuel Terrien, The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). The orientation of this commentary is literary, focusing on structural divisions and theological issues in the Psalms. However, when the literary study of a particular psalm does not result in a satisfactory reading, Terrien makes use of Gunkel’s genres, which he reduces to three. It appears that form criticism in this recent commentary is limited to a final resort. See my review of Samuel Terrien, The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary (DavarLogos 3/2; forthcoming).

Going off the “beaten track” of form-critical analysis as reflected in the preceding synoptic table could be described as an ongoing process that reflects an increasing dissatisfaction with this method by scholars from different traditions.

An interesting reaction against the insufficiency of the form-critical method is presented by the fifth revised edition of BKAT, which was published in 1978 by Kraus. A noticeable shift in exegetical method has taken place between the fourth and the fifth revised edition, and Kraus points out a number of inadequacies of the form-critical method, of which the fundamental principle of Gattung seems to be the most significant: “Wo immer genauere Untersuchungen durchgeführt worden sind, da kommt es an den Tag, dass die kategoriale Bestimmung nicht sachgemäß ist . . . . Die Defizienz der Gattungsbezeichnungen und der Klassifikationen wird immer offenkundiger.” Kraus also expresses concern regarding the vagueness of the criterion (gemeinsame Formensprache) which, according to Gunkel, determines the Gattung. Furthermore, modern scholarship has gained important insights into Israelite cult and worship, which, like the Sitz im Leben, is the main constituent of the Gattung. One has to ask if these advances would not change Gunkel’s categories altogether.

17. Kraus differentiates between six form-groups (themenorientierte Formengruppen): (1) —Loblieder; (2) —Gehetslieder; (3) —Königslieder; (4) —Zionlieder; (5) —Lehrdichtungen; and (6) Lithurgien/Festpsalmen (ibid., 40).
necessity of form-critical work in the new categories. Kraus’s revised commentary on the Psalms illustrates the tendency to question a traditionalized concept and then to move consciously away from it in the actual exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter.\(^{18}\)

An even more literature-oriented approach to the exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter is taken by Ridderbos, who tries to go beyond a rigid form criticism toward a style criticism of the Psalms, which treats the individual psalms as poetic literary objects of art.\(^{19}\) This understanding presupposes an emphasis on the text as an organic unity, passing by questions of redaction and historical integration. Ridderbos’s aim is to identify the function of certain style-figures,\(^{20}\) especially the stylistic device of repetition and chiasmus, and to demonstrate the inner development of the psalm. Another adherent of a more literary approach to the Hebrew Psalter is Weiss, who is indebted to the works of Buber and Rosenzweig and proposes an exegetical method of Total Interpretation. In criticizing Gunkel, Weiss argues that the form-critical method is an exclusively external method of interpretation through which the poetic character of the Hebrew Psalter is treated inadequately, and the poet’s intentions could even be missed altogether.\(^{21}\) Instead Weiss suggests an internal approach to the biblical text, that is, the Hebrew Psalter, that would emphasize the primary role of the text itself in the method of interpretation, accepting as its tools literary and philological criticism.

Another important aspect of the exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter, which is also my area of interest, is the comparative method in Psalms research.\(^{22}\) Although Psalms exegesis has been traditionally indebted to the study of the ancient Near East,\(^{23}\) only with the arrival of the textual evidence discovered at Ras Shamra/Ugarit has the comparative approach to the exeg-

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18. It appears commendable to see a scholar of Kraus’s stature alter his approach in such a significant way.
21. “Such a non-literary, even anti-literary notion of interpretation finds full expression in the method of study which Gunkel developed: form criticism, still the dominant mode of Biblical research. Form criticism is an external approach to the Biblical text, which treats the text as an historical datum rather than a literary work of art” (Weiss, Bible from Within, 54). He continues to attack the form-critical school from various angles, at times with somewhat sweeping statements.
23. Compare with Mowinckel’s Thronbesteigungsfer festival which he derived from a parallel to the Babylonian New Year’s Festival.
gosis of the Hebrew Psalter become a category in its own right. Climactic
for this approach has been the appearance of Dahood’s three-volume com-
mentary on the Psalms in the Anchor Bible. 24 Dahood’s magnum opus is
characterized by a thorough treatment of almost the entire vocabulary 25
of the Hebrew Psalter against the background of Ugaritic poetic litera-
ture, at times producing rather new and unfamiliar renderings of individ-
ual psalms. Although its first appearance was greeted with enthusiasm in
academic circles, cautious voices soon expressed increasing skepticism
toward the work, based mainly on his disregard for the Masoretic vocal-
ization of the text and his rather uncritical application of the comparative
method in using the Ugaritic material. 26

Along the same line, Korpel has published a study about Ugaritic and
Hebrew descriptions of the Divine in which she takes the results of mod-
ern metaphor theory into consideration. 27 Fundamental to Korpel’s ap-
proach 28 is the notion that Ugaritic is directly compatible with the Hebrew
of the biblical texts, so much so that she even consciously bypasses the dia-
chronic question. 29

Besides the textual comparative approach to the exegesis of the He-
brew Psalter, the iconographic study of the Psalms has gained a growing
influence on biblical exegesis. According to Keel, who is one of the main
proponents of this approach, the relationship between the biblical text and
ancient Near Eastern iconography is as follows: “The relationship between
the Bible and iconography is here understood as the influence of the con-
temporaneous art on the biblical texts in Israel itself . . . and in the neigh-
boring countries.” 30 This type of comparison is not historical in the sense
of illustrating the biblical texts but, rather, in the realm of concepts and
ideas. 31 The biblical text, and especially the Hebrew Psalter with its rich

24. For the bibliography of Dahood’s Psalms commentary, see table note f. The publica-
tion of the commentary was preceded by various notes and articles on the subject.
25. Sauer calculates that approximately 12% of the verses have no comment (Georg
26. One could also mention the work of Dahood’s student, Oswald Loretz, who follows
the Ugaritic approach to the Psalms, especially from the viewpoint of Kolometrie,
exploring the Canaanite parallels to the Hebrew Psalter. However, he distances himself from
his former teacher in his approach and concentrates his efforts on metrical issues in the Psalter (Loretz,
Die Psalmen).
(UBL 8; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990). For a review of Korpel’s study with regard to the study
of metaphors in the Psalms, see my Yahweh Fighting from Heaven, 12.
28. And here she is in line with Dahood, Loretz, and others.
29. “What we aim at is the comparison of the religious language of Ugarit with that of
the Old Testament as a whole in its final canonical wording. . . . Because of the prevalent schol-
arly dissent with regard to the dating of almost every part of the Old Testament, it is unfa-
rible to draw up a study like this according to any rigorous diachronic plan. Although matters
of dating will occasionally be touched upon, the main emphasis will be on synchronic, lin-
guistic and religious comparison” (Korpel, A Rift, 79).
31. “The attempted comparison is that of thought with thought, and pictures are only
one type of evidence, while words are another” (ibid., 372).
imagery and metaphorical language, lends itself to a study of this kind. Keel has opened up this vista of exegesis with his widely read book on the Psalms from an iconographic perspective, in which he attempts a “systematic comparison of ideas about the world, the temple, the king, etc. found in the Psalms, with concepts represented in ANE art, identifying points of contact and divergence.” Although the study represents an early stage in the development of recent iconographic studies and also of Keel’s own perspective on the issue, it nevertheless demonstrates the possibilities of using iconography in the exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter.

A further move away from form-critical analysis can be seen in various recent publications that have stressed the interesting question of context in Psalms interpretation, stressing the organic relationship between individual psalms that exists throughout the Hebrew Psalter. McCann published a collection of essays in 1993 in response to an SBL presidential address given by Mays. While Mays still upholds the importance of form criticism, the responses focus on the literary study of the Psalter and frequently completely bypass form-critical issues. Some of the statements that are used to depart from form criticism read more like an obituary to Gunkel than a recognition of the ongoing relevance of the method. Whybray, following along the same lines—that is, reading the Psalms as a unified book—even takes a step further away from the question of the formation of the Psalter, focusing on the reinterpretation of the Psalms, and states: “All that can be done is to examine the Psalter as it stands in its final


34. If one compares the introduction to the Altorientalische Bildsymbolik with his article on iconography in the ABD, one can see a definite development toward a more clarified methodology of the iconographic approach. Compare also his methodological approach to iconography in a more recent publication: Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden (OBO 122; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 267–73. Along the same line, in my published doctoral dissertation, I try to combine the exegesis of the Hebrew Psalter with ANE iconography along the lines of the comparative method (Klingbeil, Yahweh Fighting from Heaven).


36. For example, Brueggemann: “The work rooted in Gunkel and Mowinckel is exceedingly important and, as Mays indicates, not to be abandoned. That work however, foundational as it is, is no longer an adequate basis from which to consider our current situation in scholarship” (Walter Brueggemann, “Response to L. Mays, 'The Question of Context,'” in The Shape and Shaping, ibid., 29).
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form and to seek in its contents some clues as to its character and intention.”37 In this group, mention should also be made of Holladay’s popular work on the Psalms throughout Judeo-Christian history, which is more a historical sketch of Psalms interpretation, also based on the principle of relecture. Interestingly, there is an observable tendency to return to an early Davidic dating for the Psalms, or at least, their original form.38 This is confirmed by Goulder’s publication on the prayers of David (Pss 51–72), in which he consciously critiques and reverses Gunkel’s and Mowinckel’s late dating scheme for the Psalms, associating their origin with a priest during the reign of David.39

In 1994, Seybold and Zenger published a collection of papers held at the 1993 International SBL Congress in Münster, Germany, with the ambitious title Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung.40 Although not everything presented in this book is “new,” there are a number of essays that represent new avenues of Psalms research, and on the whole, the book confirms again the move away from form-critical analysis toward literary analysis, even by European scholars who, traditionally, have been the strongest defenders of form criticism.41 Reflecting current scholarly interest, Gerstenberger presents a sociological approach to the interpretation of the Psalms.42 This

37. Norman Whybray, Reading the Psalms as a Book (JSOTS 222; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996), 35. See also Miller who already in 1986 mentioned the outline of this approach (Patrick D. Miller, Interpreting the Psalms [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 11). Meanwhile, in his study he focuses on the sociological function of the Psalms in their community—that is, their “theological-homiletical” use (p. 20).


39. Ready to face the critics, Goulder introduces his work: “It is this present volume which promises to be at once the most absorbing and the most scandalous of my Studies: for its conclusion is that the Prayers were indeed written ‘for David’, in his lifetime, by one of his closest attendants, a priest; that they cover the last years of his life serially from the death of Uriah to the succession of Solomon; and that the Selahs in the text provided opportunities for the recitation of sections of the earliest form of the ‘Succession Narrative’” (Michael Goulder, The Prayers of David [Psalms 51–72]: Studies in the Psalter, II [JSOTS 102; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990], 9).

40. Klaus Seybold and Erich Zenger, eds., Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung (Herders Biblische Studien 1; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1994).

41. A statistical look at the essays reveals the following tendencies: five essays follow a form-critical approach, seven represent a literary approach, five follow a redaction-historical approach, one opts for a sociological approach, one uses the comparative approach, and one discusses reception history in the interpretation of the Psalms. One could cautiously, in a wider sense, group the last three approaches with the literary approach, which would bring the number to twelve. This would indeed mean a new tendency in the study of the Psalms, at least from the European perspective, which has, contrary to developments in other parts of the world and possibly for reasons of tradition, remained a stronghold of the form-critical method. This is perhaps an indication that, even in Europe, the study of the Psalms is moving away from an exegetical approach that has provided not much more than a system of classification. However, it remains a question whether a purely literary approach will fill the resulting vacuum.

is followed by a study of typological comparisons between Hittite royal prayers and petitionary Psalms by Greenberg.\textsuperscript{43} Irsigler focuses on speech-act-analysis in the interpretation of the Psalms.\textsuperscript{44} A contextual study on the composition of Pss 2–89 is presented by Zenger.\textsuperscript{45}

**CONCLUSION**

Returning to the governing metaphor of our study, the “beaten track,” there remains one question: where does one find oneself within this scenario from the viewpoint of evangelical theology? On or off the beaten track? I suggest that often the answer to this question can be expressed with the words of Parsons: “The form-critical approach is often helpful but should be used cautiously.”\textsuperscript{46} This demonstrates the ambiguity that many evangelical scholars feel toward form criticism. Although not completely comfortable with the philosophical implications,\textsuperscript{47} we feel that we cannot get around it, because everybody is “doing” it. The startling news for the evangelical scholar is that it is not done anymore. Most of nonevangelical scholars have definitely moved away from form-critical analysis, while finding kind last words for Gunkel’s work. Their change of paradigm is not so much caused by concerns for theological correctness as by frustration with a method that has not been able to contribute much more than a debatable system of taxonomy in almost a century.

This brings me to another observation: there appears to exist a certain delayed reaction in evangelical circles with regard to interpretive approaches to the biblical text. While the initial reaction to form criticism was a negative one, stressing the incompatibility of the method with evangelical theology, the approach has gradually found its way into the evangelical mind, or at least, the Gattungen or genres as proposed by Gunkel have become common vocabulary in evangelical publications.\textsuperscript{48} One could de-

\textsuperscript{43} Moshe Greenberg, “Hittite Royal Prayers and Biblical Petitionary Psalms,” in ibid., 15–27.
\textsuperscript{44} Hubert Irsigler, “Psalm-Rede als Handlungs-, Wirk- und Aussageprozess: Sprechaktanalyse und Psalmeninterpretation,” in ibid., 63–104.
\textsuperscript{46} Greg W. Parsons, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Psalms,” BSac 147 (1990): 173. See also Longman’s position discussed above.
\textsuperscript{47} As mentioned before, a purely literary approach may also not turn out to be the “Gospel” for evangelical Psalms interpretation. Kerbs, in a recent study concerning the philosophical presupposition of the historical-critical method and more recent synchronic methodologies (such as structuralism or the New Literary Criticism) as applied to the Pentateuch, comes to the conclusion that both methods are based on the same philosophical model: Kantian modernism (Raúl Kerbs, “La crítica del Pentateuco y sus presuposiciones filosóficas,” in Pentateuco: Inicios, paradigmas y fundamentos: Estudios teológicos y exégeticos en el Pentateuco [ed. G. A. Klingbeil; River Plate Adventist University Monograph Series in Biblical and Theological Studies 1; Libertador San Martín: Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2004], 3–43.
\textsuperscript{48} The recent commentaries by Wilson and Terrien, both published by more conservative publishing houses, actually confirm this tendency: form criticism seems to somehow lurk in the background as a final resort for interpretation.
duce from this that it will only take time for the evangelical scholar to internalize that form criticism is definitely a relic of the past and that it is intellectually acceptable not to use it. It that is the case, one has to seriously ask if evangelical interpretation is not just an appropriated, tuned-down, and delayed version of the nonevangelical kind.

I am aware that these are sweeping statements, something one should try to avoid, but the topic invites some polemic, perhaps with the objective of swerving "off the beaten track" to find a more original evangelical reading of the Psalms.49

49. As a refreshing example of this, Baker's reading of Ps 121 may be mentioned. After addressing the question of genre as part of the historical background for the psalm, he focuses on a literary interpretation, presenting a thorough exposition of the psalm without ignoring the historical ramifications of the text. David G. Baker, "'The Lord Watches over You': A Pilgrimage Reading of Psalm 121," BSac 152 (1995): 163–81.