APPENDIX B

A NEW CRITERION FOR IDENTIFYING “WISDOM PSALMS”

Gunkel’s systematic investigation of the literary types (Gattungsforschung) in the book of Psalms provided biblical scholars with a methodological introduction to the study of the “Wisdom Psalms.” Gunkel employed the expressions Gattung and Sitz im Leben, which combine two planes of thought: the former defines and thus distinguishes among the various genres, while the latter determines the “situation,” i.e., the life setting from the genre (in this case the psalm) developed.¹

Gunkel’s meticulous application of aesthetic laws to identify literary types left many psalms relegated to the category of “mixed psalms.” Later scholars, though, have pointed out thematic parallels between Akkadian literature and the individual lament-prayer in Psalms. Both literary sources include descriptions of physical distress and pain, a sense of having been abandoned by the deity, and various hymnic elements that seek to placate the god. The common range of themes in both the Mesopotamian psalms of lamentation and the biblical mixed psalms call Gunkel’s assumption into question.² His a priori assumption that short psalms and “pure” types are early compositions,

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while “mixed” and expanded types are “late,” is now considered a dubious criterion in the reconstruction of form-critical history.3

The stylistic and thematic complexity of many psalms led to a subdivision of the main genres: e.g., the “song of prayer” was partitioned into the “individual prayer” and the “public prayer” and the former teased even further into the “prayer of the afflicted individual” and the “confessional prayer of the accused.” But even such sub-subcategorization proves to be unable to identify the main theme of a psalm.

For cult psalms, one can easily identify the cultic ritual or festival background as their *Sitz im Leben*. The identification of the original context of the Wisdom psalm, though, is much more complex. There are no references to temple rituals or court ceremonies, or allusions to historical backgrounds or traditions that might facilitate identification of the cultural background. Moreover, as long as scholars cannot agree on criteria for identifying a “Wisdom psalm,” there will be a methodological problem about its origin and message.

It was von Rad who asked who stands behind the intellectual activity that crystallized practical and empirical knowledge into a proverbial rule, wisdom saying, or poetry.4 He examined the relationship between this literary activity and other biblical genres such as historiography and prophecy. It is precisely when we discuss the psalms as liturgical literature that von Rad’s question takes on sharper focus. This is because of the difficulty in determining the *Sitz im Leben* of psalms that exhibit the ideas and language of Wisdom literature and their link to the creative workshop of the circles of the wise. Von Rad defused this difficulty by stating that we must not treat the copresence of prayer and didactic instruction as a dichotomy. His view was that texts originally composed as cultic psalms were reworked into didactic texts in the post-exilic period. Moreover, the Wisdom-literature features found in some psalms does not reflect a concrete picture of the *Sitz im Leben* but serves only to point out their literary link to the Wisdom milieu.

Murphy summed up the problem of defining the term “wisdom psalm” as follows: “The very idea is as broad as the wisdom literature.”5 In fact, the only criterion agreed upon by scholars is the

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5 Roland E. Murphy, “A Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom Psalms’”