BIBLICAL PSALMS OUTSIDE THE PSALTER

JAMES W. WATTS

THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INSET HYMNS

Psalms appear irregularly in the narrative and prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, at Exod 15:1-21, Deut 32:1-43, Jdg 5, 1 Sam 2:1-20, 2 Samuel 22, Isa 38:9-20, Jon 2:3-10, Habakkuk 3, Dan 2:20-23, 1 Chron 16:8-36; in the Apocrypha/Deuterocanon at Daniel 3, Jdg 16:1-17, Tobit 13; and in the New Testament at Lk 1:46-55, 67-79. More often, fragments of hymns and other poems are quoted as natural parts of story-lines (e.g. 2 Sam 1:17-27; 3:33-34) or are employed as elements in prophetic compositions (e.g. Am 4:13; 5:8; 9:5-6). Complete poetic compositions appear less frequently but more prominently. Many of these inset poems are, in form and content, “psalms” since they would fit perfectly well within the Book of Psalms. But instead of being placed in the Psalter, these compositions have been inserted into narrative and prophetic books for literary and religious purposes. The comparative study of these psalms inserted whole into non-hymnic contexts is the subject of this review of research.

Most of these individual psalms have been studied extensively as to their internal structure, time of origin, and original message. Before 1990, however, very little attention had been given to comparing the roles they play in their literary contexts. That situation has now changed. As I was submitting my dissertation on the subject (1990), Hans-Peter Mathys was completing his Habilitationsschrift (1989/90) covering the same range of texts and some others. Three years later, Steven Weitzman added his dissertation (1993) to the literature on

2 Published as James W. Watts, Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative (JSOTSup 139; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).
3 Published as Hans-Peter Mathys, Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlichen Zeit (OBO 132; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1994).
4 Published as Steven Weitzman, Song and Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention in Ancient Israel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana
biblical songs outside the Psalter, while in the same year Johannes C. de Moor and Wilfred G. E. Watson published a collection of essays addressing the appearance of poetry in a variety of ancient Near Eastern prose literatures.⁵ In 1994, Susan E. Gillingham published an introductory survey of “the poems and psalms of the Hebrew Bible” that included cultic poetry outside the Psalter.⁶ In more narrowly focused studies, John Kleinig and Kurt Noll produced monographs on the role of hymnody in Chronicles and Samuel respectively.⁷ This wave of research confirms Lyle Eslinger’s observation that a new sub-field of biblical research has developed on the topic of inset psalms in their literary contexts.⁸

Examination of these various studies shows considerable overlap and agreement about the functions performed by inset psalms within their literary contexts, but also strong differences over certain aspects of the phenomenon and the methods used for its study. In what follows, I will first survey the common findings of the last decade’s research before describing and evaluating disagreements over how to understand the literary and religious functions of inset psalmody.

THE ROLES OF INSET HYMNS

The three monographs by Mathys, Weitzman, and myself agreed that almost all inset hymns are either late additions to pre-existing stories or are original parts of stories composed late in the Bible’s compositional history. They reshape the surrounding literary structures in order to strengthen a theological focus on the acts of God, and/or provide models of proper worship through prayer and hymnody for readers to imitate. The appearance of inset hymns thus provides insight into the efforts of Jewish scribes in the Second Temple period to shape biblical literature for its use as scripture.