THE CULTIC AND PIOUS CLIMAX OF ESCHATOLOGY IN THE PSALMS OF SOLOMON

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Late post-exilic and intertestamental psalms are usually devalued as second-rate literary pieces because of a dependence on the canonical psalmody which was produced during the heyday of the early temple cult. This dependence is perceived as evidence of stagnation and an inability to conceive in new forms\(^1\). Then, when the “uninspired” stigma of the intertestamental era is combined with the incessant search for historical touchstones, late psalmody is often relegated to the junk-heap of private piety.

The Psalms of Solomon do contain numerous historical references which lend the collection to rather precise dating in the first century B.C.E., but this certainty contributes to many of the interpretive excesses surrounding the psalms. With a few facts in hand, some have overinterpreted many lines with a strict schema of Pharisaic/Sadducean polarization. Indeed, it is readily obvious that these psalms have often received “bad-press” or little interest because of their assignment to that brood of vipers, those wretched Pharisees. Or, if there is marked interest, it is usually focused upon the messianic motifs and the implications for Christianity in the seventeenth and eighteenth psalms.

\(^1\) H. E. RYLE and M. R. JAMES, Psalms of the Pharisees, Cambridge, 1891, 1xii, comments that the “method is to appropriate a phrase or sentence of Scripture as preferable to one of his own coining because already sacred and familiar to his reader and to fuse it with his own words, introducing some slight alteration or modification.” Ps. Sol. 11 is an excellent example of this hermeneutic, as it grows out of apocalyptic images from Is 61,10-62,2. This psalm is also strikingly similar to Bar. 5, 1-9, suggesting, as does W. PESCH [“Die Abhängigkeit des 11 Salomonischen Psalms vom letzten Kapitel des Buches Baruch,” ZAW 67 (1955), 251-63], that the author was dependent upon a noncanonical source. On the other hand S. HOLM-NIELSEN [“Die Psalmen Salomos,” Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, Gütersloh, 1977, 57] prefers to originate both texts in the development of common tradition.
Holm-Nielsen has attempted to salvage the psalms from these regrettably negative evaluations. While we do have important references to historical situations and potential party conflicts, many of the O.T. traditions have been incorporated regardless of the composer’s situation to assume life in a community. Granted, this cannot be called cultic in the usual sense of an approved temple worship, but such a definition wrongly excludes the possibility of worship in the synagogue. This essay offers a hypothesis which is developed from prior research into the form and thematic content of these psalms. New data is hopefully offered in support of previous scholarly hints about a community which is responsible for the appropriation of canonical psalmody through the creation of a psalm collection for liturgical purposes.

The Structure of the Collection

Form-critical research on the psalms has resulted in three different and general approaches. Eissfeldt atomizes the collection by breaking apart individual psalm units and isolating four types of language: hymn (2, 20.33-37; 3; 12), lamentation (2, 19-25; 7; 8, 22-34; 16, 6-15), thanksgiving (13, 1-4; 15, 1-6; 16, 1-5), and didactic poem (3, 3-13; 6). These forms are then intermingled with amplified reflection on the contemporary situation, so that Ps. Sol. 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 16 “are outpourings of a pious heart, expressed in fairly general terms and relatively colorless” contrasts of the pious and the sinners. Another approach, followed by Holm-Nielsen, is more sympathetic and wholistic. It designates particular complaint psalms (4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17), thanksgiving psalms (2, 13, 15, 16) and hymns (3, 6, 10, 11, 14). These traditional categories are useful and instructive as general classifications when exegeting a particular psalm, but with G. Nickelsburg’s distinction between psalms of the individual and psalms of the nation, we are moving away from mere form labels.

2) Holm-Nielsen, “‘The Importance of Late Jewish Psalmody for the Understanding of the Old Testament Psalmodic Tradition,’” StTh 14 (1960), 1-54. See also his article, “Erwägungen zu dem Verhältnis zwischen den Hodaqot und den Psalmen Salomos,” Bibel und Qumran (Hans Bardtke Festschrift), Berlin, 1966, 120.