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INDIVIDUAL LAMENT SONGS
IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

DOCTORAL THESIS

Abstract

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PLOT AND PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

The present dissertation explores - throughout the 150 psalms - the theme of individual lament specifically, and more precisely the pure form of it. In my opinion, the investigated psalms carry an equally important message for today's reader as they did in the time of the authors, since they are of creed value and formulate eternal thoughts, from which strength can be drawn for everyday life. The question might be raised: why is further inquiry on this topic necessary and why especially the psalms of lament? What can justify such a highlighting and at the same time narrowing? The answer is quite simple: I consider my study to fill a gap, since such a comprehensive, new evaluation has not appeared in the Hungarian research of psalms recently. My dissertation is a pioneer investigation, which can offer an overall view of the newest scholarly researches at academic level, as the individual lament songs have not yet been examined in such depth. Throughout the dissertation, instead of individual lament psalm, I consistently use the term "individual lament song" everywhere.

THE THREE MAIN CRITERIA OF MY THESIS:

By way of introduction I propose three new categories of the psalms of individual lament, and I classify them as follows:

1. pure individual lament songs
2. incomplete individual lament songs
3. mixed individual lament songs

Following Gunkel's list, which identified 39 psalms of individual lament, I have found it necessary to make a further distinction between the pure, incomplete and mixed forms of psalms. This kind of categorization of the individual complaint songs is new among scholars; namely that they do not offer a description of the pure format, but merely speak about it in general terms. This is how I get to further narrowing by identifying and analysing the pure individual lament songs.

SCHEME AND STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The **first chapter** opens with a general introduction to the Book of Psalms, its meaning, origin, authorship, literary work, as well as its composition which contains various types, genres, categories. The psalms witness to diverse moods and situations. It is noteworthy that the individual psalms of lament are highly represented in the collection. One should emphasise however, that the most remarkable message is not the complaint, but the confidence in God: trust, praise and worship Him. I also refer to the composition of the Book of Psalms, to the development of this constantly and consciously compiled book. I illustrate the work of outstanding scholars from the 1920s onwards up to the present day, whose achievement is the starting point of my own research. In order to follow up with the international results and debates on this matter, I give an insight into the different criteria used in my interpretation of the psalms.

In the **second chapter** I firstly survey the research history of the individual lament songs. The theological significance of individual lament songs lies primarily in their giving voice to suffering. Despite the complaint the sufferer does not turn away from God, since the centre of human existence is God. Suffering does not rule out the connection with God, but rather confirms it. The lament has by now lost its original meaning and received a negative report, because in the eyes of today's humanity complaint is an expression of unbelief and a distrustful attitude. This aspect, the importance of lament songs, has been ignored by scholars until now. However, the predominance of lament songs in the Book of Psalms means that the issue of complaint is not something marginal or unusual, but an important element of faith. One of the most important characteristics of this genre is the sudden change of mood, when the complaint unexpectedly turns into praise. This poetic form involves the transition from hopelessness to joy, for the form not only contains a description of the problem, but also the solution to it as well. In the following, I examine the differences within individual lament songs, illustrating the numerical classifications of particular researchers with a spreadsheet. It is intriguing that, although there are overlaps, opinions about the classification of lament songs are varying among researchers, and there is no uniform numbering: everyone uses a different list. On the basis of content Gunkel's detailed analysis classifies the psalms into two major categories, he speaks of a pure and a mixed form, but does not specify clearly the lament songs with a pure form. There is no such definition, as genres rarely appear in pure form.

In the **third chapter** I interpret the individual lament songs which I consider to be pure and I present in detail the selected: 5., 13., 22., 26., 27., 54., 56., 140., 142. psalms. Nine psalms are considered to be pure individual lament songs in my research, since they represent the purest forms according to my criteria. These texts reflect a well-structured regular system, whose formal elements are:

1. Turning to God
2. Description of the complaint
3. Confession of trust
4. Petition
5. Doxology, a vow of praise, the so called: “*Lobgelübde*” according to Gunkel’s wording.

The primary condition was to include all the five formal elements. These five elements are clearly presented in each of the nine psalms. I focus on the Hebrew text and, in accordance with the classic method of the commentaries, I explain each psalm uniformly according to the following structure:

1. translation of the Hebrew text
2. comments
3. interpretation

Firstly, I translate the Hebrew psalms in the original poem form. My purpose was to find the proper language to transmit the spirit of the original text, to give back its atmosphere, dynamics, to define its meaning as precisely as possible in the proper form. This is followed by notes on the translation, I give my interpretation about the phrases and the structure. I continue with a detailed exegetical analysis, I explore them from the point of view of dating and of literary form. Finally, I conclude the exegesis with the theological concept.

APPLIED METHODS

In my working method, I tried to attend to all aspects considered to be important, which were included in the explanation of each psalm during the research. In addition to the various aspects, I pay special attention to the dating of the psalms. On the other hand, dating has been the biggest challenge in my investigation of the psalms as we have very few evidence about it. Although, in absolute chronological terms, this is often only possible approximately, relative chronology also serves our purpose well. The decision should suffice which of the two psalms of the same genre may have originated earlier or which may have influenced the later, so that we can arrive at the development of the genre. I would like to draw attention to whether any further clarification can be provided on the issue of *Sitz im Leben*. Obviously, the individual tells his/her complaint (and talks about his/her salvation as well); however, it is important to note how the individual relates to his/her case. The poetic prayer may be performed in isolated solitude, in a family circle, possibly in a cult community, or simply before the public of the inhabitants of his/her settlement (village, city), he/she might have a friendly or perhaps hostile, sympathetic, or indifferent reception with his poem. However, since the psalms inform us relatively poorly these issues, all possible aspects should be taken into account, even the tiniest piece of information must be gathered, which may suggest the above.

In view of the above, it can be stated that the work is considerably large and cannot be done within the framework of a dissertation. Therefore, I further narrowed the subject of the investigation to the so-called individual lament songs in a “pure” form, hoping that the necessary investigation could be completed at a later stage. The adjective “pure” is first in parenthesis (later I avoid it), because it is not the result of a principle, but simply a result of statistics: the elements of the “pure” form are attested most frequently in all psalms of individual lament, therefore I look for those psalms which use all these elements exclusively. At the outset it remains unclear whether this striving for minimum represented the original genre or if it was the result of a theological reflection on the form. Were the additional elements of the expanded form originally parts of the genre (and omitted only later), or are they a later elaboration of an originally simple form – this question should be discussed later, and the whole of the history of the genre should be the subject of future studies.

I cannot avoid mentioning the case of mixed forms of individual lament, as they are greater in number than the “pure” form. Logically, the question may arise: why this? Obviously, the examination of mixed forms is also necessary to answer this question, but this would be the subject of a further research. On the basis of frequent use, I can safely assume that the genre might have been extremely popular as the large number of individual lament songs proves this. At the same time, this is also confirmed by the fact that the variety is in favour of frequent use: the individual complaint was presented by many believers in the form of poetry, and formal changes can also be considered as a literary precipitation of a wide variety of experience. What could be the main characteristic of the poetic manifestation of an individual complaint? In the appropriate form, the psalmist began by addressing God, and then comes the lament section. Naturally enough, faith is not limited to voicing a complaint: whoever turns to God with his/her lament, hopes his/her complaint will be heard by God and He will remove his/her trouble; this is after all the essence of the lament! I suggest that the psalmist’s expression of trust in God was the essential part of the form. While this is significantly different from the representation of the complaint itself, it still belongs to faith as well as to the prayer, which comes from faith. The core of the “*Stimmungsumschwung*”, raised to an artistic level perhaps later, may be part of the form in its earliest stages. The fact that the author intends to finish the psalm in some positive way, can also be considered evident. Although, this is not a “happy ending”: the end (the doxology) follows directly from the formulation of hope. One should not be surprised that this form in its simplicity has survived to such a small extent: it is clear that the individual experience, the various dangers and pain, or the manifesting of trust in God, may cover an extremely wide spectrum. Thus, on the other hand, it can be assumed that a great number of psalms were created in this form, but not all of them were worth being included in the canonical collections. At the same time, we can also suppose that, under the influence of personal experience, there were many variations of the form: the simple form could be expanded by further form elements. However, it is extremely difficult to catch this in act. What is certain, it may have meant a change in the development of form, when the psalmist wanted to integrate his/her personal emotions institutionally. In the psalms which I have examined, it appears, that this may have happened most in connection with the last element: the author wished to pay his gratitude to God in an institutional form. It is obvious here, the “*Lobgelübde*” can no longer be imagined in the silence of the inner room of the psalmist, but in public, in the institutional framework of the Temple, in a liturgical context.

No doubt, the above mentioned thoughts would require further elaboration to outline the history of the genre of individual lament songs, since I should have to consider those psalms which I left out of the study as an expanded form, or as a narrowing of it, or as a torso. This task remains the subject of a possible future research. At the same time, I have succeeded to outline some clues to understand the century-long nature of this fundamental genre and to get closer to the historical explanation. Individual experience, its institutional integration, as well as community experience, or its interpretation as a community model are certainly parts of the genre's long history.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion from the remarks above we can make the following observations: first, the large number of individual lament songs within the Book of Psalms is conspicuous. This very fact proves clearly that the genre was very popular in ancient Israel. Beyond any doubt there were many people who intended to express their grievances, eventually to record retrospectively how God had saved them from difficulties. It is very likely, that the variability of the form of a popular genre is also related to this extraordinary frequency: what is often used is certainly also subject to variability. At the same time, one cannot ignore what has happened to several genres in a recent research. It wanted either to clarify or to modify Gunkel's classification precisely, since the formal delineation seemed to be less satisfactory. The fact that the task is not small is also shown by a simple overview: in general, researchers classify 39 psalms into the category of individual lament songs, of which only nine can be called pure in their form. This number is low enough to examine all the psalms in a monographic way, but high enough to draw some conclusions in comparison with the basic characteristics of the individual lament songs.

What results can be expected from the study? I will certainly neither overthrow nor reform the form critical study and genre of the psalms. However, I hope to have achieved some further clarification of the form and genre research and I could give a proper approach in understanding the group of individual lament songs. As this study is the first of this kind in the field of the individual lament songs, I consider it to be successful and worthy to be continued in future.