

# Psalms as a Vehicle for Historiography

**David Tuesday Adamo**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8610-4289>

University of South Africa

adamodt@gmail.com

## Abstract

The Book of Psalms is the most read books of the Bible and one of the most read books in the world. It is also one of the most debatable books of the Bible. The value placed on the Bible as a historical source is fundamentally important. While the maximalists think that the biblical account should be the primary source of the history of ancient Israel, and everything that could not be proved wrong must be accepted as historical, the minimalists think otherwise and rely on the primacy of archaeology because they think that the Bible is not a reliable document in terms of historical account. The centrists acknowledge the value of the biblical texts in preserving reliable evidence on the history of ancient Israel. However, they consider the way the stories were written and presented as highly ideological and believe they were adapted to the needs of the community when they were written. The major contention in this paper is whether the Book of Psalms contains any authentic historical documents/historiography or not. This article maintains that the Bible, particularly the Book of Psalms, contains some reliable historical documents that could be considered as a source of historiography. The Book of Psalms represents the history of ancient Israel in its historical allusions and the praises. This representation of history is, for the writers and readers of the Psalms—whether in chanting, memorising, singing, writing or copying—a way to remember the mighty act of Yahweh and also to participate mysteriously in the actual events that took place in the past history of ancient Israel; so that the present participants can experience the very miracles that took place long ago. It is expected that those miracles and events are able to take place again in the life of the believers who read, write, chant, sing or recount the Psalms.

**Keywords:** Psalms; Old Testament; historiography; history; ancient Israel



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## Introduction

It will be difficult for any serious biblical scholar of the Hebrew Bible to deny the current problems in the academic study of the history of ancient Israel, because the depth of this problem has resulted in some confusion (Adamo 2012a, 67–78; 2010a, 473–501). The main reasons can be traced to the nature of the available evidence for scholars of ancient Israel. Such evidence is “fragmentary and partial-textual, epigraphical, iconographical, archaeological” (Adamo 2010a, 473–501; 2012a, 67–78; Williamson 2007, i). Another reason is the wide gap in our knowledge of the history of ancient Israel that has made it almost impossible to establish “a master narrative to serve as the basis of our interpretation and integration” (Adamo 2010a, 473–501; 2012a, 67–78; Williamson 2007, i).

A further result of the confusion above is the great division among scholars, to the extent that three major camps exist (minimalist, maximalist, centrist).<sup>1</sup>

The study of history in the Book of Psalms has been seriously neglected (Parker 1973, 33–41). There are many studies on various historiographies in the Old Testament such as the Pentateuchal studies in the Torah, the Chronicler, Apocalypticism, the Prophetism, history of ancient Israel and others, but not much has been done on the Psalms as historiography (Parker 1973, 33). It may be because many biblical scholars have the assumption that there is no historiography in the Book of Psalms. Some scholars claim that biblical narratives are ideologically biased and therefore cannot be historical (Ahlstrom 1993, 375–376).

Although biblical writers gave the impression that they speak and write about the past, scholars believe that they are historicised fiction, rather than historically reliable accounts. Many other scholars have proposed various terms such as “historicised fiction” or “fictionalised history” (Alter 1981, 25, 33–34), “storicised history” (Tate 1997, 83), “fictive imagination” (Long 1984, 405) to describe Old Testament narratives. According to Ahlstrom:

Biblical historiography is a literary phenomenon whose primary goal is not to create a record of factual events. Rather, it is a form of writing steered by the writers’ idea that the events being described were expressions of the divine will ... Biblical historiography is dogmatic in character ... Because the authors of the Bible were historiographers and used stylistic patterns to create a “dogmatic” and, as such, tendentious literature, one may question the reliability of their product. Biblical

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1 While the maximalist believes in the primacy of the biblical account, the minimalist accepts archaeology as the primacy and everything that cannot be corroborated with the contemporary event must be rejected (Adamo 2010a; 2012a, 67–78; Grabbe 2007, 57–68; Knauf cited by Neihl 1997, 163). The centralist accepts the biblical account but reads the text in “reverse direction of the canonical order” (Adamo 2010a; 2012a, 67–78; Finkelstein 2007, 9–20).

historiography is not a product built on facts. It reflects the narrator's outlook and ideology rather than known facts. (Ahlstrom 1991, 118)

According to Davies, the fact that biblical narratives' concern is artistry, demonstrates that biblical narratives were meant as literary pieces rather than historiographical materials (Davies 1992, 122; Seters 1983, 311).

Psalms belong to a different literary genre, as they are written in both poetry and prayer rather than the prose narrative which describes Israel's history. However, no informed biblical scholar can say that the Book of Psalms is lacking in either historical reference or narrative force, because it will be totally inaccurate. Many Psalms which contain allusions to Israel's historical narratives are devoted to recounting various aspects of the historical narratives in the Bible. Gunkel agrees that the recounting of such elements is what makes Israelite hymns to be distinctive from the hymns of the surrounding nations (Gunkel 1976, 54).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the allusions in Psalms; whether they can be regarded as historiography or not.<sup>2</sup> It will also examine different ways in which Psalms present these historical narratives to achieve their purpose. This study is interested in examining and elucidating the assumptions about writing the history of ancient Israel in the Book of Psalms.

## Meaning of Historiography

It is difficult to talk about historiography without first discussing what the history is. In fact, any examination of the history and history writing must begin with history itself. There is no simple definition. There is a problem with the definition of history among scholars of history. Joseph Miller, in his presidential address as the president of the American Historical Association, defines history as "a mode of inquiry in which the experience of the present frames the distinctiveness of lives in the past" (Miller 1999, 1–32). Historians have to imagine through non-historical ways of knowing (Miller 1999, 10). The historian's imagination and empirical evidence play an important complementary role. Davies sees history as "not the past" (except in a loose, idiomatic sense) and even not "what we happen to know about the past" but "what we choose to narrate about the past" (Davies 2007, 49–55). He continues that "the meaning is created and not interpreted by means of narrative" (Davies 2007, 49–55). "Narrative *generates* 'history' by means of artificial selection ..." and by "unavoidable circumstances," of which we know very little (Davies 2007, 49–55).

John Fea (2013, 3) sees history as an "act of constructing the past." It is an act of bringing the past to life, it is an exciting act of interpretation, that is, taking the fact of

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2 This article was originally presented at SASSNES Conference at Kwalata Lodge, Sept. 1–2, 2015, South Africa.

the past and weaving it into a compelling narrative or telling a story about the past (Fea 2013, 3). According to Huizinga (1933, 1–10, as quoted by Bosman 1936, 101–112): “History is the intellectual form in which a civilisation renders account to itself of its past.” But Wolfgang von Leyden (1984, 53–77) says that history is “not the past but knowledge of the past.” According to Moses Finley: “History is a systematic account over a long enough period of time not only to establish relationships, connections, causes, and consequences but also to show how change occurs and to suggest why” (Finley 1985, 5–6).

Brettler tries to differentiate between history and ideology and literature: “Ideology is a specific set of beliefs” different from propaganda which is the method used to disseminate beliefs (Brettler 1995, 30). There should be a refrain from calling it literature (Brettler 1995, 30). According to him, history should actually be called historiography or history writing and that history should be understood as “narrative that presents the past” (Brettler 1995, 30). He dismisses literature as the correct description of biblical texts since the authors of biblical text do not see their work as literature but rather as history (Brettler 1995, 30–31). Without denying that there are rhetorical or literary or genre styles used to present history within the biblical text, they were styles used with the intention of writing a narrative history. To the modern scholar, who is judging the ancient text with modern criteria of history, it may not make sense.

According to Davies: “History is a narrative, in which happenings and people are turned into events and characters ... Whenever we try to describe the past we indulge in story-telling ... all story is fiction, and that must include historiography” (Davies 1992, 13–14). Historiography is an ideology (Thompson 1992, 373). Thompson defines historiography as a specific literary genre relating to critical descriptions and evaluations of past reality and events in contrast to more fictional varieties of prose, and that the Old Testament contains no historiography at all (Thompson 1992, 373). Salvation history is different from actual history (Thompson 1992, 373). That resembles the view of Davies, who differentiates historical Israel from biblical Israel. Sternberg demonstrates that ideology, history, and literary aesthetics come together in the Old Testament narrative (Sternberg 1985, 57). The biblical narratives’ concern for recording divine activity precludes one from utilising those narratives as a legitimate historical source (Sternberg 1985, 46). The terms craft, artistry and not fiction should be used to describe the biblical writers’ creativity and selectivity in relating various historical events (Long 1994, 62–63).

Younger believes that “a definition of history that excludes ideology or propagandistic tendencies is unrealistically narrow” (Younger 1990, 31–35), that is, even if a work is propagandistic it can still have historical value.

Davies holds the opinion that the Bible is valuable in reconstructing the history of the period that the biblical authors are describing, but that this evidence elucidates the period in which the account was written (Davies 1992, 104–122; Moore 2006, 77).

Minimalists minimise the importance of the Bible as a historical source and of Israel as a historical subject. They prefer the term historiography to refer to the written product of historical research. It refers to the writing done by historians because the writing done indicates the historian's influence on the final product. Davies, therefore, prefers the term "historiography" to refer to the written product of historical research. He calls historiography a "meter genre" that involves a particular writing about the past including myth, legend, historical fiction and autobiography (Davies 1997, 104–122). To Davies (1997, 117) "historiography is a transcultural and transposal concept and therefore, ancient and modern writers qualify as historiographers. Critical historiography also has a characteristic such as a narrative with plot, sequence, character, the point of view, a beginning and ending. It is critically examined data, which relies on primary sources, excluding bias, employing citation by footnotes, and bibliography, and a discussion of alternative interpretation" (Davies 1997, 119).

Thompson believes "in the modern and useful sense, historiography is the discipline through which one justifies the appropriateness of our assertions about the past" (Thompson 1992, 140–146). Historiography appears to be synonymous to the work historians have done. It is the "actuality of the past." According to Davies (1997, 116), the past is the best meaning of history because, in any sense, history invokes the past in some ways. That is why in his book *In Search of Ancient Israel* he refers to the actual Israel of the past as historical Israel, while the scholarly construction of Israel's past is called biblical Israel. In other words, there is actual past and fictional past (Davies 1992).

Indisputably, all these definitions indicate that history has to do with the knowledge of the past and what we claim to know about it as we interpret it. A very valuable question is: Is it possible to write a history without one's own angle or point of view that informs the historian's thesis? If historiography reflects intention which requires selectivity and purpose, biblical history does not have to be without bias to be regarded as history writing (Younger 1990, 33).

It is difficult for anyone to deny that all historians are influenced by certain presuppositions and goals in mind as they write their history, because such presupposition affects their choice of subjects, mode of explanation and their dealing with evidence and the production of their final form of history (Fea 2013, 1). Lemche is correct when he says: "No scholar is an island isolated from the world ... scholarship is situational, and every person is entangled in a network consisting of a private bias, prejudices, and perceptions of the world" (Lemche 2000, 191).

However, historians should be cautious because texts are their primary sources, and deciding how they are to be interpreted and what sort of historical information can be derived from these texts, is the most important task of historians or historiographers (Miller and Hayes 2000, 68–75). Since the Bible is the main potential primary source for the history of ancient Israel, scholars must try to identify evidence in it.

Although the information in the Bible is likely skewed towards literary or theological ends, asserting these intentions does not necessarily prevent statements that correspond to historical reality from being present in the text. As Barstad has asserted: “Even if the historiographers of the Hebrew Bible have as their prime aim the production of ideology ... this does not imply that these texts do not yield a lot of historical information” (Barstad 1996, 18). Halpern says that there are authorial intentions and authentic antiquarian intentions. They meant and furnished fair and accurate representations of the Israelite antiquities (Halpern 1988, 3).

The fact is that there is a possibility that historical information about early Israel can be found in the Bible and that Israel can be a proper subject of history. Halpern also observes that the Bible and non-biblical, non-Israelite inscriptions cohere on many details about the names and reigns of kings of Israel and Judah (Halpern 1988, 30, 213–218). According to him, this correlation is evidence that the biblical writers had an accurate knowledge of Israel’s past. There should not be a summary dismissal of the Bible accounts. It is unwise because of this correlation. Coherence with other texts does not substantiate the factuality of many or most of the events reported in the Bible, just as the apparent contradiction between biblical and non-biblical texts or inscriptions does not automatically insubstantiate the entirety of either account. It means that using non-biblical ancient texts for blanket substantiation or insubstantiation is unacceptable, though such information can be used as evidence. Since the effort to be objective in history demands that all potential sources of information be taken into account, undertaking this task is another primary responsibility of historians.

It is important to know that history is a representation of the past. Therefore, a historian must employ a language that can offer only the glimpses and interpretation of bygone times. Historians select a language and the form of their presentation not on the basis of evidence but on the basis of the historian’s conceived notion. Historian literary style also influences the possible interpretation of the past and also reveals the historian’s belief or disbelief of the history that is written (Davies 1992, 15). Historical narrative always reveals the historian’s worldview that is in some ways too deep seated and comprehensive to be called bias. Language can never completely and accurately represent the entirety of the past. That is why Davies (1992, 15) asserts that history is “limited by the boundaries of language” and calls histories “literary portraits.”

## **Brief History of Psalm Study**

At the beginning of Psalm interpretation, the Book of Psalms was regarded as a book composed by the individual for prayer and songs and for private devotional use (Adamo 2012b, 11). Interpreters began to search for the authors and the particular historical event in the life of each Psalm. This attempt led to the dating of each Psalm as specifically as possible and that resulted in the tendency to date most of the Psalms very late (3rd and 2nd centuries) (Adamo 2012b, 11; McCann 1993, 16). Since David became

the key for discerning the authorship of the Book of Psalms, the Psalms were therefore read as “the expression of the piety of David” (Adamo 2012c, 11).

The superscriptions were then used as the means by which the authorship of the Book of Psalms was defined. The person of David became a paradigm and prototype in the canonical context (Adamo 2012b, 11; Mays 1995, 147–157). Psalms are regarded as his “prayer, praise, and piety” for the purpose of instruction and prophecy.

In the early middle part of the nineteenth century, Davidic authorship of Psalms was called into question by the historical critical scholars on the bases of some incongruities between some accounts attributed to David in the Psalms and another account of David in the book of Samuel (Adamo 2012b, 11).

After the historical critical scholars examined the Book of Psalms in light of the historical instead of the spiritual and theological perspectives, they found that “the voice of some historical persons or occasions does not match the personal experience of and person of David” (Adamo 2012b, 11–12; Mays 1995, 148). They, therefore, searched the Hebrew Bible for other “plausible people and times for the context with which to interpret the Psalms” (Adamo 2012b, 12). This search resulted in the tendency to locate the Book of Psalms in a later date instead of an early date in the history of ancient Israel. The result of this search was inconclusive because they could not find the exact details that will link the Book of Psalms with the particular historical context (Adamo 2012b, 12; Mays 1995, 148).

Herman Gunkel (1862–1932), to whom modern scholars are indebted for the study of Psalms, recognised the presence of the liturgical materials such as singing, dancing, shouting, sacrifices, prayer, temple courts and others and concluded that the Psalms were related to worship in ancient Israel instead of the prayers of some pious individuals (Adamo 2012b, 12; Crenshaw 2001, 80). Gunkel (1976) classified the Book of Psalms into different forms or types or genres (*gattung*) and then determined “the life setting” in ancient Israel (Adamo 2012b, 12).

Even though Gunkel was not completely satisfied with the historical critical method, he “still maintained that the Psalms were of a later time period,” and that “the composers based their poetic creation on the ‘prototypes’ that originated in the worship life of an earlier period” (Adamo 2012b, 12; McCann 1993, 17). Gunkel believes that hymns, laments of the people, laments of the individual, songs of thanksgiving of the individual, and spiritual poems are still the “real treasure of the Psalter” (Adamo 2012c, 12). Without question, “Gunkel’s form-critical approach to the Psalms was the most widely utilised approach in the twentieth century research” (Adamo 2012b, 12; Hayes 1979, 291).

Mowinckel (1962; 1979) followed Gunkel in Psalm interpretation. He believed that the Psalms “represent the actual songs and prayers produced for and used in the public

worship of ancient Israel before the destruction of the temple in 587/586 B.C.E” (Adamo 2012c, 12–13; Mowinckel1962). This is referred to as the “cult-functional approach.” “The goal of this approach is to, first of all, classify the Psalm literature and then determine the setting of where that particular Psalm functioned in the life of the ancient Israelite” (Adamo 2012c, 12–13; McCann 1993, 17). Both the “form-criticism and the functional approach in Psalms study are inseparable, and also became very dominant approaches in the interpretation of Psalms” (Adamo 2012c, 13). Both methods, though being refined and extended, are still the most influential in contemporary Psalm studies (Adamo 2012c, 13).

Other scholars, who “recognised the limitations of form-critical and functional approaches to the study of the Book of Psalms have called for a totally new direction in which scholarship should travel” (Adamo 2012c, 13; Childs 1976, 378). Scholars have embarked on rhetorical criticism and “joined the form-critical approach to become one of the major forces in biblical interpretation” (Adamo 2012c, 13).

Brevard Childs believes that more attention should be paid to the final form of the Hebrew Bible because there is a need to go beyond the form-critical and functional approaches to the study of Psalms (Childs 1976, 378). This is what scholars call “canonical criticism.” Childs believes that the canonical approach will assist scholars to determine how the meaning of the individual Psalter may be affected by their titles and their placement in that particular place in the canon (Adamo 2012c, 13; Childs 1976, 378). Wilson (1985), after paying serious attention to the study of the Book of Psalms, believed that the Psalter is not “a random collection of songs and prayers” (Adamo 2012c, 13; Wilson 1985).The Psalter is not a mere collection of liturgical materials, but for the purpose of being read and heard (Adamo 2012c, 13; Wilson 1985, 513–514). They are “songs and prayers that originated from the response of the faithful persons to God” (Wilson 1985, 513–514). James Luther Mays maintained that the “Torah Psalms are present throughout the Psalter for the purpose of orienting the faithful to hear the Psalms as instructions of God” (Mays 1987, 3–35).

Uriel Simon (1991) suggested four approaches to the Book of Psalms: the book of “Psalms as a Second Pentateuch”; the “Psalms as mandatory Prophetic Prayers”; the “Psalms as Non-prophetic Prayers”; and the “Psalms as Prophetic and Sacred Poetry” (Adamo 2012c, 13; Simon 1991).

What I consider the most current approach is an African biblical hermeneutic approach (Adamo 2015, 31–52).<sup>3</sup> Adamo has analysed the Psalms using the African biblical hermeneutics methodology (2015, 31-52). Psalms 29, 91, 109, 121, and the wisdom Psalms were analysed in the African context. In his analysis, these Psalms were studied

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3 Adamo, D. T. “The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Old Testament Essays*, 28 (1) 2015: 31–52.



and analysed according to the life interest of Africans: protection, healing and success are the greatest concern of the African people (Adamo 2006, 139–154; 2008, 20–38; 2010b, 126–143; 2012c, 9–26; 2015, 147–165).

## **Psalms as Historiography**

Having given various definitions of historiography/history above, it is important to examine the Book of Psalms to find out whether there is any historiography or not. A cursory look at the Book of Psalms does not seem promising as a source of any historical information, because most of the time they make references to events in a general manner and for specific purposes and interest. However, I think that it will be naïve and, of course, inaccurate to see the Psalms as lacking in either historical references or narrative sources when one considers a number of Psalms which contain allusions to Israel's historical narrative, with some Psalms entirely devoted to recounting various aspects of that narrative (Nasuti 2001, 132–153). Hermann Gunkel recognised those narrative elements as one of the most distinctive features of Israelite hymns in contrast to those of the surrounding cultures (Gunkel 1976, 54).

Disagreement abounds among historians concerning the definition of history and historiography. Ancient Israel did not exist within a political vacuum but among nations and empires that surrounded her (Egypt, Moab, Philistia, Phoenicia, Canaan, etc.). The culture of these nations affected her in terms of cultural diffusion. Yet she has some peculiarities of her own.

Psalmody as a literary genre is not peculiar to ancient Israel because there are many examples throughout the ancient Near Eastern hymns of praise to the national gods. In fact, it was noted that the Hymn to Aton in Egypt was probably borrowed and reworked by ancient Israel to become Psalm 104 (Parker 1973, 34). What is important is not the similarity but the uniqueness. This uniqueness is that Israel treats their God as active in history and as the Lord of history (Parker 1973, 33–39; Taylor 1952, 296). Israel's God did not just act in the history, but gave her faith, laws, land and a royal line (Parker 1973, 35). God's hand is evident in the entirety of the history of ancient Israel, that is, from the call of Abraham to the restoration period (Parker 1973, 35). He has a special relationship with ancient Israel and in their conception, God is not just God of history, but also God of the entire world (Parker 1973, 35).

The hymns and praises in the Psalms can be regarded as historical in that they can be seen as the history of Israel's response to God's action in history. The author/s of the Book of Psalms made use of a literary genre called hymns to present that history of Israel's response to Yahweh's acts of kindness and mercy in history. Hymns, then, become a method that the author/s of Psalms used in writing that history of God's mighty acts, which I believe makes Psalms a historiography.

There are two main unique features of the Psalter's historiography: (1) ancient Israel's relationship to Yahweh; and (2) the existential way of viewing the mighty act of Yahweh in light of the present (Parker 1973, 36). The songs in the Psalms were not mere rehearsals of past events in ancient Israel, but sins were re-examined and confessions were made and "bemoaned" (Parker 1973, 36–37).<sup>4</sup> Instead of the usual boasting of military might in ancient Near Eastern historiography by the kings, the Psalms' historiography was a presentation with humility and the attribution of their victory to Yahweh their God (Parker 1973, 36).

Orality characterised Psalms' historiography. Past events were presented orally from generation to generation. Psalms 44:1 and 78:2–3 are important passages that demonstrate this. The author of Psalm 44:1 expressed that ancient Israel heard with their ears what they have been told by their fathers a long time ago. The author of Psalm 78:2–3 also admonished ancient Israel to listen to the teaching by mouths of the hidden things that have been uttered (Parker 1973, 6).

The above passages indicate that history in ancient Israel was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Even when writing became available in ancient Israel, orality continued and writing was never used as a substitute (Albright 1937, 64; Parker 1973).

The writers of the Book of Psalms became the interpreters of the Deuteronomistic history which sought to provide a specific message to Israel, that is, ancient Israel had violated the law of Yahweh and therefore was punished (Parker 1973, 37). The Psalter reinterpreted such Deuteronomistic history.<sup>5</sup> No one can dispute the fact that there is evidence of literary dependency on the Pentateuchal sources in what is usually called historical Psalms. For example, Psalm 106 mentions Horeb, which is used throughout Deuteronomy except in 32:2; and this is the name given to Sinai. Psalm 135 is a direct quotation from Deuteronomy. In many instances the Psalmist just drew from the vast literature and lore of his people to write history. Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136 are perfect examples of such.

What we called the Deuteronomistic sources are evident in the Psalter. Psalm 44 is an example of these sources when it indicates that sin begets punishment and righteousness begets prosperity (Parker 1973, 37). This passage can be well understood in the terms of Deuteronomistic theology. Psalm 1–6, 40–43, which is connected to moral issues, is full of Deuteronomistic religious historiography.

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4 This is evident in the following Psalms: 106: 6–7, 13–14, 19–22, 24, 28–29, 43, and 47).

5 The above statement does not mean that the author of this article has overlooked the possibility of the Deuteronomistic historian and the Pentateuch drawing from the Psalter because many of the Psalms are ancient.

I am of the opinion that the superscriptions in Psalms should not be totally ignored. They could be sources of historical documents. There are no fewer than 73 superscriptions in the Leningrad Codex and even more frequently in the LXX. They mention very frequently some historical event in the history of ancient Israel (Knowles 2005, 236–249).

The numerous quotes, allusions and echoes of Psalms in the New Testament can be evidence of the Psalm as a source of historiography. There are about 200 of them in the New Testament (Witherington III 2017, 23). The Book of Psalms is very important to the gospel narrative for the telling of the story of Jesus and the early preaching about Jesus in the Book of Acts of the Apostles (Witherington III 2017, 23). In the early Judaism, Psalms are a useful source of historiography, especially at Qumran. The Qumran Psalms scrolls represent the largest number of manuscripts of any single biblical book. There are about 37 such scrolls (Witherington III 2017, 27).

According to Sigmund Mowinckel (1962) these allusions to historical narratives in Psalms are used for the cultic purpose. However, Westermann thinks that this recounting of God's past actions was Israel's praise of God throughout the Psalms for the purpose of affirming her faith in God's continuing involvement in history and his power to save Israel (Westermann 1981, 213–248). He calls these allusions "representation of history" (Westermann 1981, 214–248). It is such a representation of God's past actions that allows Israel to continue its covenant relationship with God (Westermann 1981, 214–248). According to Brueggemann (1999, 34) the historical Psalms derive from and testify to Israel's "originary event and its enduring generative power." Brueggemann (1999, 34) goes further to say that these Psalms intend to re-enact the abiding astonishment of the original experience. In Westermann's view, those who recount Israel's history in the Psalms do so as a way of expressing their belief in God's continuing historical involvement. By evoking the past, through proclamation, singing/chanting, writing and reading, the ongoing nature of the relationship, which God has begun with God's people, is expected to be renewed and continued (Nasuti 2001, 132–143).

In other words, the author of Psalms wrote for the purpose of not only expressing God's action in history, but also for transformation of those who read the Psalms. There is a transformative power of the Psalms for those who use these Psalms because those who use them, take on the identity of those on whose behalf God has acted and they praise God for the actions in the past (Nasuti 2001, 132–154). The Psalms became the means by which Israel experienced the repetition of her origin. It is a re-experience of the salvation history (Mowinckel 1979, 167). It is for making the past events real for the present. It makes those who participate in writing, reading and reciting Psalms to participate in the foundational history of Israel and also take on an identity as a member of Israel (Nasuti 2001, 132–153). Analysing Mowinckel, Nasuti says that "the cult becomes the means by which Israel experienced a repetition of her historical situations of latter Israel" (Nasuti 2001, 132–154). Childs was emphatic that the present

actualisation of the historical past, which constitutes a “real event” that is related to what went on before, yet distinct from its own time (Childs 1979, 85).

The purpose of the representation of history in the Psalms is to bridge the temporal distance between the events in the past and the present (Nasuti 2001, 132–154; Westermann 1981, 224). What Psalms achieve is to do a “representation of history” which I strongly believe is historiography. This is the recounting of God’s past actions in the history and experience of ancient Israel’s praises of God throughout the Psalms. By doing this, ancient Israel reaffirms her faith in Yahweh’s power to save his people. Israel views history in the Psalms as the re-enactment of God’s dealing with ancient Israel and this could be repeated even by the writers, readers, and singers or chanters. This gives the Psalmist the privilege of participating in the event of history (Nasuti 2001, 133–136). Psalms are Israel’s response to the actualisation of historical tradition. An example of this is Psalm 66, which recounts a brief reference to the exodus event when God turned the sea into dry land and Israel rejoiced. Those who used the Psalms became participants in the event. “The verbal appropriation of the text by the worshippers” helps them to “take on the identity of those who were witnesses to the exodus events” (Nasuti 2001, 137). Worship transcends time, so the congregation or persons that read, sing/chant and write the Psalms become part of the astonished, joyful people of the exodus (Mays 1994, 222). Past history is made present through writing, singing, chanting, reading because the singer/chanter/worshippers is made to identify with their ancestors who witnessed the exodus events of deliverance and this can be called “contemporisation” or “actualisation” (Broyles 1999). These worshippers take on the identity of the foundational generations. Psalms 66, 136, 81, 105, 106, 104, 137 are examples of how these historical Psalms bridge the past and present by connecting the present worshipers to past generations. Worshippers take on the role of witnesses to God’s past actions.

The writing of history in the Psalms is for the purpose of reminding God of his former actions and to motivate God to act in this way once again in the present (Westermann 1981, 217).

According to Nasuti (2001, 132–154) “one of the most important sources of the peculiar power of the Psalms lies in their ability to situate those who used them in a relationship with God.” This is because “worshippers appropriate the words of the Psalms as if they were those Psalms’ first person speakers” (Nasuti 2001, 132–154).<sup>6</sup> The Psalmists were certainly aware that the events they recounted took place in a particular historical past. The role is that of an individual who looks back at the earlier foundational events

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6 This way of viewing Psalms resembles trends in modern literary theory, especially speech act theory (Nasuti 2001, 144). Those who use the Psalms that contain the historical narratives take on a certain role with regard to those narratives.

involving God and Israel. This brings past and present together in the worshippers' experience (Nasuti 2001, 132–154).

The study of historical data in the Book of Psalms is expansive and it means that the concept of Psalms as historiography is well attested. For example, no one can deny the fact that Psalms recall the historical moment which keeps alive the memory of foundational events in Israelite origins. For example, Psalm 137 presupposes an exile Jewish community in Babylonia and the mockery they were subjected to. Several Psalms also recorded the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian warriors and the great devastation of major cities in Judah (51, 69, 74, 79, and 102). Psalm 74 went into considerable detail on the manner in which the city fell. The heroic defences of Jerusalem struck the author of Psalm 48. Psalm 87 looks like a rudimentary city registry of town records. Institution of kingship seems to receive the attention or documentation of the author/s of some Psalms (e.g. 2, 21, 29, 47, 72, 93 and 99). Psalms' duplication of 2 Samuel 22 attests to the link between them and also attests to Psalms as a source of historiography.

## Conclusion

I have defined historiography as a presentation of history that is based on the selection of past historical events after the examination and evaluation of such past events. Such is the method of historiography in ancient Israel. In fact, the Psalms or the entire Bible did not claim to write objective history in the modern sense of the meaning of history, but it is certain according to their records, that they made use of some ancient traditions for their immediate purpose.

The nature of historiography portrayed in Psalms as in the Old Testament is not the same type of history as modern history, but is a holy history, salvation history and the history of redemption. According to Weiser, “the difference between the Psalms and their hymnic parallels in the religion of the neighbouring countries becomes even more striking when we consider the *Heilsgeschichte* which forms the subject matter of the Psalms”(Weiser 1962).

The Psalmists have used literary features characteristic of given genres, rhetorical structures, stock expressions, word pairs, and figurative language to communicate their message with vividness, clarity, and impact (Grisanti 2004, 163–178). Through their literary dependence on early sources and by utilising the broad events of Israel's past, we can readily ascertain how they reworked and used oral and epigraphical and traditional materials. The hyperbole and other forms of artistry are part of the dramatic language of communicating the message. They are part of the writers' description of events. Linguistic artistry on the part of the biblical authors corresponds with and accurately represents the reality of the given historical events. Their aim, as they imply throughout, is to record what actually happened in human history (Sailhamer 1995, 54). It should be seen as a true story, and a narrative not only reflecting perception about

events as they actually happened. The Psalms recorded what they know happened in the worship of Yahweh.

Many biblical writers refer to the exodus events and it has become a theme of the Bible. It serves as a paradigm for salvation and deliverance throughout the Bible. It is not likely that the biblical authors would have done that if the event never took place.

This type of historiography in the Psalms has a purpose of bridging the distance between the past and present in the cultic experience of the worshipper. It is also for the purpose of presenting the past of Israelite history as foundational for the identity of the present worshipper. This type of historiography in the Psalms is meant for the worshipper to appropriate. The historical Psalms bring those who used them into contact with God's redemptive acts by affecting the identification of those who used these texts with the original beneficiaries of God's act. The historiography in the Psalms clearly indicates awareness that the events they recount took place in a particular historical past.

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