

“Assignment 3 – Book Review”

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This is a book written by Psalm scholar W.H. Bellinger, who is a professor of religion emeritus at Baylor University. This book briefly summarizes the history of the study of Psalms, provides a comprehensive methodology for reading and interpreting, and lists out different genres of Psalms. It is a primer that emphasizes the skills of reading and studying Psalms. The primary intended audience of the book is students (preface) but I put this as an immensely helpful guide for pastors who are preparing to teach and preach, as well as for those who are interested in exploring the beauty of ancient hymns and the Old Testament liturgical literature.

At the beginning of the book, the author explained how the three elements of a Psalm – setting, shape, and poetry, can work as a practical vehicle for proper reading and interpretation. For the setting, one should note that writing psalms is an ancient practice; therefore, we should take into consideration the broader setting of the ancient Near Eastern world (p. 4). For the shape of the Psalter, the author outlines the title, structure, superscriptions, and collections of the book of Psalms (p.7). He also gives Psalm 57 as an example of embracing the three elements of superscriptions: the liturgical collections, technical terms related to use in worship, and historical notes (p.9). Following this, the author explores the history of psalm study as a means of comprehending three issues: type/structure, use in worship, and reinterpretation/redaction (p. 31). The works of Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Childs (along with others) have raised these questions for effective reading and studying. (p. 31).

In Chapter 3 with the title “Reading the Psalms”, the author calls for a careful treatment of the function of language in the texts and how a psalm uses language to communicate persuasively in the message (p. 36). An initial examination of a psalm’s rhetoric is subject to four questions (p. 37):

1. How does the psalm use divine names?
2. What words or phrases does the psalm repeat?
3. How does the text use “loaded” terms such as “justice”, “righteousness”, and “steadfast love”?
4. What figures of speech (metaphors, images) does the psalm incorporate?

This book offers helpful tips for interpretation: first, note how the psalmists use echoes as an effect by employing parallel structures; and second, identify the plot of the psalm by asking these four questions (p. 37). Bellinger uses Psalms 103, 86, 1, and 101 as examples and illustrations to demonstrate the rich languages of the Psalms (p. 41).

Furthermore, the book emphasizes the importance of complementing historical analyses and rhetorical analysis to the study of language and literary features of the texts (p. 42). This emphasis raises another four questions to ask when examining a psalm:

1. What is the type/structure of the psalm?
2. How was the psalm used in worship?
3. How did the community “shape” the psalm?
4. To what end does the psalm use language – parallelism, divine names, repetition, “loaded” terms, figures of speech? (p. 43)

This book outlines different types of Psalms (Laments, Psalms of Praise, Royal Psalms, and Wisdom) in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, and uses the suggested methods to demonstrate how to do proper studying and interpretation for selected Psalms. For example, Psalm 6 is selected as one of the representative laments. This provides the readers with practical step-by-step work examples of how to do exposition for an individual lament (p. 48, 49). For Type/Structure – the

stanzas alternate between petition and complaint; Use in Worship – the psalm is a prayer originated in a ritual seeking healing; Shaping – it is shaped by the community of faith who faced crisis; Rhetoric – it is a plea to God (p. 60-63).

In addition, the author offers helpful theological insight for the learners. He argues that the Wisdom psalm is appropriate for a class of psalms but requires separate treatment because the texts originated from ancient Israel's wisdom circles (p. 124). The text of this book is full of examples and the author occasionally uses Hebrews to explain the text. However, it is also accompanied by English definitions; thus, those who do not know the original language will not miss the meaning of the original language. Using the Hebrew language deepens the readers' appreciation of the ancient literary texts.

This is a great book for readers to understand the Book of Psalms in light of its historical background, theology, literary structure, and grouping methods. In addition, the book is not lengthy (166 pages) and is relatively easy to read. I like how the author adds a phrase after each genre, highlighting the genre's essence. For example, he writes "Out of the Depths" for the Laments; "Enthroned on the Praises of Israel" for the Psalms of Praise; "A covenant with the Chosen One, David My Servant" for the Royal Psalms; and "I will instruct you" for the Wisdom Psalms. This arrangement is helpful to give a clear introduction to each type of Psalm.

In terms of sermon preparation, chapter 8 lists eight theological themes preachers shall consider. These themes link common human experiences in a community of faith that transcend time because the Psalms, as the author indicates, function as pilgrimage songs of faith from the depths of human experience (p. 145). The writer appreciates the reminder not to neglect that the Psalter calls the worshipping community to create and support just societal structures (p. 150).

This insight helps us to appreciate the sociological approach of the Hebrew bible and have a deeper understanding of God's attributes (p. 150). This is not a commentary but a good guide to help learners engage in the texts in a fundamentally theological manner.