

Alliance Theological Seminary
Manhattan, NY

Psalms DML970.NA

**Assignment 3: Book Review of David Bellinger's
Psalm's: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises**

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May 31, 2023

Content Summary

W.H. Bellinger provides a concise but comprehensive overview of the book of Psalms in his guide entitled *Reading and Studying the Book of Praises*, which serves as both an introduction to the biblical psalms but also a helpful reference for practical sermon application. While not exhaustive, Bellinger seeks to give the reader a baseline foundation for approaching the psalms in terms of literary background and feature, as well as a basic introduction to the generally accepted ways the psalms have been classified and historically understood. In a relatively short amount of space, Bellinger provides the reader with a structured path for understanding the wide scope of the psalms' content and relevancy for today, as a guide to what is likely the most read book of the Bible. In short, Bellinger's book serves as a helpful handbook for understanding both the language and content of the Book of Psalms for the sake of the psalms' message being better heard and applied.

To begin, Bellinger points out the general historical and religious-cultural framework of the psalms as a whole in terms of the psalms reflecting the distinct viewpoint of Hebrew monotheism against the backdrop of the wider context of the Ancient Near Eastern world and its polytheism. The application point to see from the start is that the psalms provide a framework for faith that revolves around Yahweh as the one, true God, a worldview in need of renewal today. Bellinger then locates both a modern understanding of the psalms' general dating (which most argue is likely a late date but pre-exilic), as well as the generally accepted modern approach to categorizing, or classifying, the 150 psalms that make up the book. Citing Gunkel, Bellinger identifies both major and minor types of classifications that help thematically understand the psalms as a whole. As major types, he identifies hymn psalms, enthronement psalms, and laments, as examples. For minor types, he lists Gunkel's other classifications, such as

pilgrimage, wisdom, or prophetic type psalms, such as psalm 95 that concludes with a prophetic warning. He argues that classifying the psalms this way helps our overall study of the book. More specifically, recognizing that there are different types of psalms helps the student, or preacher, discover the right questions to ask of a particular psalm by considering its structure, its historical use in worship, and how in the past it has been interpreted, which helps to receive a psalm more accurately in terms of its originally intended purpose, which in turn will lead to a more faithful exposition and explanation – and application – of the text.

Once a basic understanding of the psalms' historical and thematic framework has been identified, Bellinger then moves to pointing out the various literary devices and features that can be found in a text that when given attention will reveal a psalm's intended interpretation. As examples, Bellinger lists literary elements, such as repetition, wordplay, figures of speech, or specific terms that are used, especially names in reference to God – all ways of the text creatively emphasizing its interpretative point. In addition, he also cites structure, such as parallel structure that can be found, for example, in Psalm 103. Paying attention to literary features and structures, Bellinger argues, will help a reader properly begin to understand a psalm's focus in terms of it being written in a certain way to give emphasis for a particular interpretation. The more one pays attention to how a psalm is written and what that reveals, the more one will accurately expound upon its message.

After laying the foundation of historical context, thematic classification, and literary structure, Bellinger then breaks down the various major types of psalms to give the reader a grounding in their nature and unique voice, beginning with psalms of lament. Bellinger notes that the psalms is a book of praises but one that includes lament with the caveat that most psalms of lament end in the positive – though not all. He qualifies that the term lament in regards to a type

of psalm might be better understood as ‘complaint,’ as a statement of hope and faith in God’s willingness to hear, where there are complaints of individuals but also of the community, of the people of God. He cites Psalm 3 as an individual lament and Psalm 58 as an example of a psalm expressing communal lament.

Lament is an aspect of praise, Bellinger explains, that addresses, not God’s presence, but his seeming absence. He also notes in regards to precatory lament psalms that the mention of ‘enemies’ is really about “a fight against injustice” and that curses are always directed at God as ultimate judge and not the enemy themselves (54). This is a particularly helpful observation, not just in terms of determining the right application of such a psalm but also apologetically in terms of answering concerns about how a precatory psalm could reflect godly living. Bellinger suggests that lament psalms that are precatory should be viewed as honest prayers that are seeking vindication amidst crises, such as Psalm 26. This is a helpful explanation and guide to lament psalms, in that they give voice to honest prayers in the pain of life.

After lament, Bellinger then gives overviews of psalms of praise, or enthronement, that fulfill a lament’s vow to once again give God praise. In this category, he cites and lists psalms that praise God for his creation and praise that declares God’s greatness and presence with references to Zion, such as Psalm 84. These types of psalms of praise can also be understood as declaring trust, such as Psalm 23. Bellinger also identifies royal psalms that focus on the theme of kingship with the king being understood as the channel for blessing, both in regards to earthly monarchy, such as the Davidic monarchy (Ps 132), but also picturing Yahweh as being king. A smaller, additional category that Bellinger also mentions is wisdom – psalms that express instructions for daily living, such as Psalm 119 in regards to God’s Word, or Psalm 112:5 that speaks of conducting your affairs with justice. The benefit of being able to identify these various

types of psalms, both major and minor, is that they give a preacher and student of the Word a thematic starting place within the psalms in terms of where to start when wanting to address a felt need in the congregation with a timely Word.

As Bellinger states in his conclusion, the psalms “is not a systematic presentation of theological constructs, but it is fundamentally theological”, which necessitates a preacher having a grasp of how to categorize, contextualize, and properly interpret the literary nature of the psalms to best apply them liturgically and to the spiritual and practical needs of people’s lives. Bellinger’s overview provides a good starting place to begin either looking for a psalm or understanding a particular psalm in the practice of faithfully preaching God’s Word in a way that accurately draws out the hope and life revealed therein.