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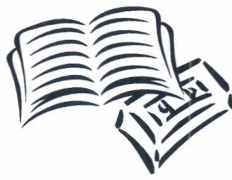


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Resource Guide

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

BRANDON L. FREDENBURG

The biblical book of Psalms continually provides rich resources for believers. Whether they are recited as an integral part of personal daily devotions, “prayed through” in small prayer group settings, investigated in their original Hebrew as part of lesson preparations, or reworded into new songs for the worshipping church, the Psalms play a substantive role in forming our theology, prayers, hymns and responses of faith. They capture (and direct) our hearts, minds and actions to attend more fully to God’s desires, the needs of others and our own interaction between the two.

This essay brings together a wide range of resources for appropriating the Psalms for our personal and corporate worship and service. Inevitably, the items chosen may not be helpful for everyone’s use, and many other items could have been included just as easily. My intention has been to highlight works that are pastorally and academically responsible and relatively easy to procure. Paul Watson wrote a similarly purposed essay, “I Lift Up My Soul: A Resource Guide for Studying and Appropriating the Psalms,” *Leaven* 7, no.3 (1999): 160–64. Although some more arcane matters in Psalms studies have progressed since then, Watson’s recommendations have weathered very well. This guide, then, is primarily a supplement to his. Unless otherwise noted, titles he originally mentioned are marked with an asterisk (*). I arrange my comments primarily by the purposes for which one might approach the Psalms.

PERSONAL USE AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

The most basic interaction with the book of Psalms is through reading, and reading well begins with a good translation. With the rise of many translations during the last few years, I have found two particularly helpful. First, the book of Psalms in the New English Translation is very well done (see <http://bible.org>). Although the poetic arrangement is easily missed because each verse begins on a new line, the translation provides plenty of insights. The edition with the translators’ notes is especially informative, even if one doesn’t know Hebrew. Similarly, Robert Alter’s translation, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), is both masterful and thought-provoking. Free from the expectation to make his version sound “biblical,” Alter newly translates all 150 psalms with comments on word meanings, psalm structure and some conjectures about original uses. In addition, as a professor of comparative literature, his introduction to the history of translation and literary features of the Psalms is expert.

For those who frequently read through the Psalms as part of their personal devotions, I offer two useful approaches. The *Book of Common Prayer* contains a Psalter sequentially divided into morning and evening readings in a thirty-day cycle. Using its plan, it is easy to create a simple double-sided bookmark for one’s reading Bible. For occasional variety, I use *The Paraclete Psalter: A Book of Daily Prayer* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010). Its regimen presents all 150 psalms in a four-week cycle, with brief readings each morning, noon, evening and bedtime. In my view, one is ill-prepared to teach, preach and sing the psalms in worship without a persistent encounter with them through reading and prayer.

General information about the Psalms is readily available in Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias and the introduction sections of good commentaries. Among the best introductory books on the Psalms are those by Bernard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*,* rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Grand

Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990); Mark D. Futato, *Transformed by Praise: The Purpose and Message of the Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002); and Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message** (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980). Each of these gently initiates readers into the academic discussions of psalm types, Hebrew poetry and basic interpretation issues.

TEACHING IN BIBLE CLASS SETTINGS

Those who teach Bible classes in the book of Psalms have many good resources available to assist in lesson preparation. For a beginner level class, in addition to one of the introductory books, one might consider C. Hassell Bullock's *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, *Encountering Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). The book focuses on introductory and theological matters, not in-depth commentary, and its colorful charts and graphics will appeal to visual learners. Another useful class option is Tremper Longman's *How to Read the Psalms* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988). A final good choice is Jerome F. D. Creach's *Psalms,* Interpretation Bible Studies* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998). It has ten sections of representative material from the Psalms. In an hour or two, teachers can use these to prepare lessons with good content and also devise simple exercises that help actively reinforce concepts.

More experienced teachers will want to consult several good commentaries. Newer commentaries, based on Hebrew texts, and that incorporate recent insights from ancient Near Eastern languages and cultures, are preferable to most of those packaged with Bible study software. Watson pointed to the work of James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); the three-volume *Word Biblical Commentary* (Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 [Waco: Word, 1983]; Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 [Waco: Word, 1990]; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 [Waco: Word, 1983]); and J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 639–1280. All these remain quite valuable. To these should now be added John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001); Craig A. Blaising, *Psalms 1–50*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2008); and Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51–150*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2007). Goldingay is Evangelical, Schaefer is Catholic, and the volumes edited by Blaising and Wesselschmidt incorporate material across Christian traditions.

ISSUES IN INTERPRETATION AND THEOLOGY

Prolonged study in the book of Psalms raises difficult questions and requires intensive interpretive labor for both the teacher and the preacher. For those with some knowledge of Hebrew and a desire to dig into the text for teaching or preaching, Mark D. Futato shows the decisions involved in his *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007). Especially helpful is his attention to Hebrew poetry and its importance for understanding a psalm's import. He also includes an up-to-date list of resources for the interpreter on pp. 132–37.

In editors David G. Firth's and Philip S. Johnston's *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), fifteen authors interact with the latest scholarship on the Psalms as a collection, their ancient Near Eastern context, theological problems, pastoral uses and several other concerns. This is the one book that describes the streams of current Psalms studies. Similarly, the eight chapters in editor Rolf Jacobson's *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) explore the stream of theological issues raised by the Psalms, including whether a coherent theology even appears in the Psalter and how to appropriate the "curse" language. The curse psalms are perennially difficult, and the treatments of David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms*, *Paternoster Biblical Monographs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006) and Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) suggest fruitful

solutions. Also not to be forgotten is the older, general work by James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) and the classics by C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms** and Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*.

THE PSALMS IN SERMON AND SONG

Preachers, perhaps, have the most difficult task of all. They must integrate their own devotion, study and knowledge of their congregations each time they deign to speak a message from the Psalms with God's approval. Equally important is the preparation of a congregation's worship leader or team. Arguably, the songs and the sermon should merge in ways that guide worshippers in praise (and, at times, lament!) before God. In the last decade, several good resources have become available to aid worship leaders. The history of Jewish and Christian interpretation and usage is masterfully and exhaustively traced by Susan Gillingham in *Psalms Through the Centuries: Volume One*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). She examines the reception history of the Psalms in liturgy, art, music, hymnody and literature. The anticipated second volume will attend to a number of individual psalms. Somewhat similar is William L. Holladay's *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years** (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). Also interesting is the collaborative effort of Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston. In *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), Houston traces the Christian reception history of thirteen selected psalms and Waltke attends carefully to their exegesis in his inimitable style. Finally, both preacher and song leader will find useful food for thought and resources in John D. Witvliet's *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

For preaching, the numerous books by Walter Brueggemann always provide interesting insights and conviction. Just to select one, *Israel's Praise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) reflects on the pastoral role of the preacher, particularly in helping shape the worship and life-expectations of the congregation. In my own preaching and teaching from the Psalms, I occasionally reach for lectionary resources. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn have compiled *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Rather than the typical lectionary commentary organized by year A, B or C, Van Harn and Strawn organize comments by individual psalms and then by year and Sunday. This preaching and teaching resource is a must-have. Also, James L. Mays' insights from decades of writing and proclaiming the Psalms have been compiled by Patrick Miller and Gene Tucker. The twenty-one chapters of Mays' *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) provide wise counsel and insight on studying, interpreting and preaching from the Psalter.

Few resources yet exist specifically for the song leader who wishes to focus on the book of Psalms, but there are three good resources to be explored by our musical crafters. First, Christian songwriters have frequently turned to the Psalms for direct and indirect inspiration. Isaac Watts (1674–1748) is arguably the most prolific; he composed hymns from every psalm, sometimes multiple hymns. His work is available online here: <http://www.hymnary.org/hymnal/PHW>. Another online resource for psalms set to music is section 9 of the Wikipedia entry on Psalms: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms#Psalms_set_to_music. A second useful resource, mentioned also by Paul Watson, are relevant articles in Robert E. Webber, ed., *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship Part 1*, vol. 4A of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship** (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995). Finally, the CD by Cynthia Bourgeault, *Singing the Psalms: How to Chant in the Christian Contemplative Tradition* (n.p.: Sounds True, Inc., 2005) instructs and explains how to perform chanted psalms.

CONCLUSION

Resources aside, the power of the psalms in believers' lives comes through the essential practice of spending time with them, reflecting on their metaphors and messages and securing them in our hearts through

memorization and prayer. The *how* to appropriate the psalms is not nearly so important as *that* we do so, with a desire to be spiritually formed. By intentional engagement, assistance from faithful resources and interaction with the people of God in worship, prayer and service, we come to see for ourselves why the book of Psalms has been treasured by believers as the rich resource it is. May the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

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