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I Lift Up My Soul: A Resource Guide for Studying and Appropriating the Psalms



By Paul Watson

We are experiencing among our people a renewed and increased interest in the psalms, which is most encouraging. We are turning to the psalms in many different settings—in classes and small groups, in the pulpit, in private devotional moments, in corporate worship. In the process we are beginning to understand the crucial role of the psalms in our communication with God. The psalms teach us to listen—and to respond—to God with both mind and heart. Our rediscovery of the psalms is leading us toward richer, deeper communion with the God who created us for relationship with him.

Fortunately, we have at our disposal many excellent resources to aid us in our appropriation of the psalms. The resources suggested in this article are, of course, but a few of the many available. I have tried to use three criteria in selecting these particular ones: first, that they be solid, responsible efforts to hear and faithfully reflect the biblical text; second, that they be recent works currently available (which is

not to suggest that older resources are not also valuable); and third, that they be readable and accessible to any serious student of the psalms. I hope that you will find these resources as helpful and insightful as I have.

Introduction to the Psalms

Where to start? That is always a good question—and often a difficult one—whether in regard to studying the book of Psalms or any other biblical book or topic. One place to start is with a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. For the Psalter there are a number of good possibilities—*Harper's Bible Dictionary*, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*—but my preference is James Limburg, “Psalms, Book of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:522–36. The introduction section of any good commentary, such as the three discussed below, is a similar possibility. A different type of resource for introductory matters is Jerome F. D. Creach's *Psalms* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998) in

the new Interpretation Biblical Studies series. Intended for use in congregational Bible classes, this is a ten-unit study guide. The first two units provide a general overview of the psalms; the remaining eight units treat briefly eight representative psalms. A fourth and final type of general resource material is a comprehensive introduction to the entire Old Testament (which should be in every student's personal library). Here, my clear choice would be Bernhard W. Anderson, “The Praises of Israel,” in *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1986), 540–67. Anderson is that rare Old Testament scholar who is equally adept at reading Hebrew and writing English. Get to know his work if you are not already familiar with it.

The Forms and Functions of the Psalms

In reading and listening to the psalms, it is extremely important to remember that they are poetry. The psalms do not rhyme—rhyme is not

a characteristic of Hebrew poetry—but they do have a fluid sort of rhythm. Most notable is their structural balance, which arises from their constituent units of two (or sometimes three) parallel phrases: “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (Ps 1:5 NIV). By learning something about Hebrew poetry, and by observing the relatively few categories of form and function into which the psalm-poems fall, great insight can be gained into the messages that the psalmists intended to convey.

The best resource here—indeed, the first book that I regularly recommend when asked about “one good book on the psalms”—is also by Bernhard W. Anderson: *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983). As Anderson explains in his preface, “This study finds a way through the 150 psalms of the Psalter by means of the so-called form-critical method, that is, the study of psalms according to genres that can be classified on the basis of their literary form and setting in worship” (10). Along the same lines, but with slightly different categories and types, are two very helpful works by Claus Westermann: *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) and *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). For those who wish to explore the structures and functions of the psalms at a more advanced level, I recommend two books: Susan E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York:

Basic, 1985; Edinburgh: Clark, 1990).

Commentaries on the Psalms

There is a rich tradition of exposition of the Psalter. The respective commentaries of Luther and Calvin, for example, are among those authors’ finest works. Of the current commentaries readily available, I would single out three for special attention. The first is James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). In keeping with the general purpose of the Interpretation series, Mays’ work “will not replace the historical critical commentary or homiletical aids to preaching”; instead, his purpose is “both to deal with what the texts say and to discern their meaning for faith and life” (vii). To take only one example of Mays’ interpretive skills at work, here are his comments on the first line of Psalm 25, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul”:

In Israel, lifting up one’s hands in a stretched-out position was a gesture of entreaty used in prayer. To lift up the soul to God is a metaphor for what the gesture means. The metaphor portrays prayer as an act in which individuals hold their conscious identity, their life, in hands stretched out to God as a way of saying that their life depends completely and only on the help of God. (124)

A second commentary that is of the more traditional historical-critical type is the three-volume Word Biblical Commentary, with each volume contributed by a different author: Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco: Word, 1983); Marvin E. Tate,

Psalms 51–100, WBC 20 (Waco: Word, 1990); and Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Waco: Word, 1983). In this collaborative effort that runs to a combined total of more than thirteen hundred pages, each psalm is treated according to a standard format: a bibliography of articles on the psalm, a translation of the psalm with extensive notes, a section on the “form/structure/setting” of the psalm, explanatory comments, and a final “exposition” section with expanded theological observations that include other Old Testament and New Testament references. For exegetical details such as textual variants, word meanings, and historical notes, these three volumes are, in my opinion, the best research tool currently available to us in English.

The third commentary that I would suggest is J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 639–1280. McCann’s work presents each psalm in two translations (NIV and NRSV), followed by a “comments” section that is basically exegetical and a “reflections” section that is more expository and applicational. Especially helpful are McCann’s introductory comments on literary features of the psalms (form and rhetorical criticism) and on “the shape and shaping of the Psalter”—how the psalms came to be collected and organized as they are, as well as the significance of such “shaping.”

Interpreting the Psalms

In this varied group of resources I include those works that are more interpretive than exegetical (although some include rather detailed expositions of specific

psalms). Two excellent theological interpretations of the psalms—by two of the commentators recommended above—deserve careful attention. In *The LORD Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), James Mays finds the theological “center” of the psalms to be the exclusive, cosmic lordship of God, as expressed in the frequent exclamation “The LORD reigns!” (or “Yahweh is king!”). Mays says, “The psalms have provided [Jews and Christians] a common and traditional language world, the language that speaks of the world as envisaged by faith. It is the language of those who believe in and venture to live in the everlasting, present, and coming reign of the LORD” (x). In the other volume, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), J. Clinton McCann Jr. emphasizes the instructional character of the psalms, using the organizing rubric of praise, prayer, and profession.

Perhaps the foremost interpreter of the psalms in our generation has been Walter Brueggemann. His major contribution has been *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), in which he treats a total of fifty-nine psalms by using “a ‘scheme’ of orientation—disorientation—new orientation” (following Paul Ricoeur). Brueggemann is especially concerned with “how the Psalms may function as voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community” (10). Brueggemann’s other works on the psalms include *Israel’s Praise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); and

The Psalms and the Life of Faith (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), a collection of fourteen articles on the psalms that was edited by Patrick D. Miller Jr., Brueggemann’s brother-in-law. My favorite article is “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon” (189–213), in which Brueggemann demonstrates how the “movement” of the Psalter—from confident, uncomplicated obedience (Psalm 1) through candid lament (Psalm 25), reperceptive communion (Psalm 73), and gratitude (Psalm 103) to self-abandoning praise (Psalm 150)—mirrors the life of faith. Brueggemann is a must read—not only for the psalms but for the rest of the Old Testament as well. If you haven’t yet discovered his work, these titles are a great place to start.

I mention briefly four other interpretive studies, the first by Patrick D. Miller Jr.: *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). After a five-chapter section on “general approaches” to interpreting the psalms (chapters 4 and 5, on laments and hymns respectively, are particularly helpful), Miller carefully and fully treats ten selected psalms. Nahum Sarna, a sensitive Jewish scholar, also works with ten psalms in *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1993; formerly titled *Songs of the Heart*). C. S. Lewis’ *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: HarcourtBraceJovanovich, 1958) is typically rich and rewarding. Consider his observations on praise (including the frequent call in the psalms for all creatures to praise God):

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped

me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. . . .

. . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. (93–95)

The fourth interpretive study, quite unlike any of the others, is William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). Holladay moves from “The Psalms Take Shape—A Reconstruction” through “The Psalter through History” to “Current Theological Issues,” including the question of how the psalms function for Christians today.

Teaching and Preaching from the Psalms

Of course, any or all of the resources cited thus far can be profitably used by teachers and preachers, but let me mention three additional works that have contributed directly to my own preaching and teaching. One is Tom Long’s “Preaching on the Psalms,” in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989). In this chapter Long not only argues that contrary to some, “there is no good reason . . . why the psalms cannot be sung and preached” (43), but he also shows us how to do it, using Psalm 1 as

his primary example. Elizabeth Achtemeier likewise has a chapter entitled “Preaching from the Psalms” in her *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 137–63. Achtemeier is right on target when she says:

Obviously, every preacher would like his or her congregation to share, from experience, in the psalmists’ relation to God. That is the purpose of preaching from the Psalter—to so instruct a congregation in the life of faith, set forth in these songs, that such a life becomes the congregation’s life; to let the words of the psalms so inspire and work among the gathered people that Israel’s stance before God becomes the congregation’s stance, Israel’s depth of devotion becomes their devotion, Israel’s heartfelt response to God’s deeds becomes their response. (138)

A third homiletical aid is the lectionary treatment of the psalms by John H. Hayes in *Preaching through the Christian Year* (Valley Forge: Trinity; Year A, 1992; Year B, 1993; Year C, 1994).

Praying and Singing the Psalms

The psalms are meant not only to be studied and discussed but also to be prayed and sung. For praying the psalms, there is much to be gained from the works of Eugene Peterson (although I disagree with his categorical assertion that psalms are prayers directed by us to God, an assertion that implicitly excludes psalms as songs or as God’s words to and for us). See his *Answering*

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God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); *Psalms: Prayers of the Heart* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987); and *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms That Summon You from Self to Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). Even more helpful, I think, are Walter Brueggemann’s *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary’s Press, 1986) and his article “The Psalms as Prayer” in the previously cited *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 33–66. The most comprehensive recent work on prayer, one that includes but is not limited to the prayers of the psalms, is Patrick D. Miller Jr., *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

As for singing the psalms—something that we need to do corporately much more regularly than we now do—a number of good resources are available. Among them are “The Theological Significance of the Psalms in Worship,” “Ways of Singing the Psalms in Worship,” “Contemporary Developments in Responsorial Psalmody,” and “How to Introduce Responsorial Psalm Singing,” in Robert E. Webber, ed., *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, vol. 4, bk. 1, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 309–20. Both interesting and useful is the appendix, “The Singing of the Psalms” (176–81), in McCann’s previously noted *A*

Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms. A work that I have not used myself but that comes well recommended is *The Psalter: Psalms and Canticles for Singing* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). And by all means, read the article by Carol Shoun in this issue of *Leaven*—“God’s Word in Us Richly: The Power of the Psalms as Song”—and take note of the resources suggested there.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with one other, hopefully unnecessary, observation: No single resource mentioned here, nor all the resources together, is any substitute for our reading, praying, and singing the psalms for ourselves. As Anderson says in his preface to *Out of the Depths*, “Since this is not intended as another book about the Psalms but rather a guide into the Psalms, it is extremely important that you read the psalms themselves carefully . . .” (10). McCann echoes that sentiment with these words:

For those who read this book, it is my hope that it will assist you in making the book of Psalms your book. I hope it will enable you to make its praises your praises and its prayers your prayers. And finally, I hope that the teaching contained in this book will help to prepare you to be instructed by the book of Psalms itself. (*Theological Introduction*, 15)

There are any number of good ways to appropriate the psalms for ourselves. One old (but newly rediscovered) method is to memorize them. Another is to read three psalms daily in an incremental fashion: thus, Psalms 1, 2, and 3 on day one; Psalms 2, 3, and 4 on day two; and so on. Still another is to pray a specific psalm slowly, line by line, filling the words of each phrase with your own related

thoughts and feelings. Group discussion of a psalm previously studied by the individual members of the group is always helpful. Some groups find writing their own psalms and sharing those with one another to be very meaningful. Certainly, learning to sing the psalms or, perhaps even better, to chant the psalms will help fill us with their richness in ways that reflection and discussion cannot do.

But whatever method(s) we choose, the goal remains the same: To lift up our souls to the One who desires communion with us and who has provided the psalms as a means to that end.

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