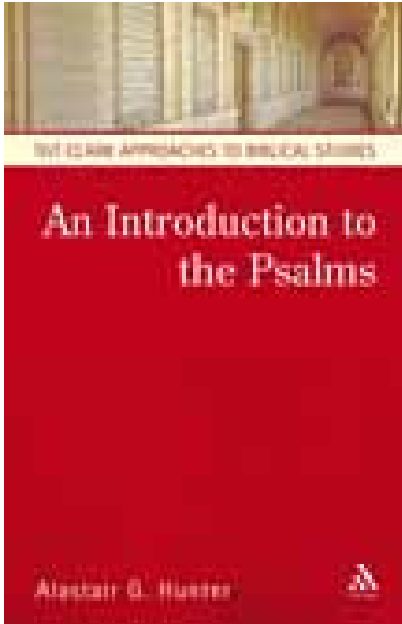


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Hunter, Alistair G.

An Introduction to the Psalms

T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies

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Alastair G. Hunter is Senior Lecturer in Hebrew and Old Testament Studies at the University of Glasgow. Readers should approach the book within the boundaries of expectations set by the work itself. The author typifies his work as a “short book” (136, 137). In 158 pages (including the bibliography [143–51], an index of topics [153–55], and an index of modern authors [157–58]), he covers a wide range of topics. Hunter expressly states a twofold purpose: “to provide a helpful overview of the current state of the academic study of the Psalms without ignoring the work of past scholars; and to offer my own, perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic, take on the subject” (136). The book “belongs to a series of similar introductions” (the T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies) trying “to bridge the ever-increasing gap between professional scholarship and foundational studies” (vii). Read in this context, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. It is an introduction to the field(s) of Psalms research rather than an introduction to the book of Psalms in the technical sense that the term “introduction” usually carries in Old Testament scholarship. In a short preface (vii–viii) Hunter indicates that he tries to review “the relevant literature” and to cover “the range of topics which populate the field of study” (vii). In seven chapters Hunter then reveals what he regards as the “range of topics” populating the field of study.

In chapter 1, “Getting Started” (1–16), Hunter indicates that the book of Psalms has fascinated religious laypeople and academic scholars alike for centuries. In the first section (“Why Study the Psalms?” [1–8]), he indicates that the book of Psalms has a profound influence in the Christian and Jewish religious conscience and therefore is still relevant today. The majestic praise of Ps 8, the profound awareness of one’s own failing in Pss 51 and 130, the calm reflection in Pss 23, 27, 84, 121, 125, and 131 articulate personal experiences that still find resonance in religious communities today. Royal psalms such as Pss 2 and 110 find resonance in the messianic expectations of the Qumran community and in the New Testament. Liturgical poems such as Pss 24, 96, 105, 132, and the so-called Hallel (Pss 113–118) played a role in ancient Jewish and Christian worship, and the tradition is continued to the present. On the other hand, poems such as Pss 58 and 137, with their “emotions of hatred, revenge and malice” (6), pose moral and ethical problems for modern readers. In the second section (“Techniques and Critical Methods” [8–16]), Hunter indicates that the scholarly community has also continuously grappled with the book of Psalms. Ever since the “pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel” (8), historical questions and questions about the nature of poetic expression in the Psalter have dominated the field of study. Gunkel’s form-critical approach is popular to this day, “to the extent that almost every commentary automatically includes a form-critical description” (9). Hunter criticizes the approach, especially the often oversimplified correlation between form and *Sitz im Leben*, but still regards Gunkel’s approach as valuable. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, several other approaches to the study of the Psalter emerged, notably a renewed interest in the poetry of the book of Psalms. Hunter refers to the growing interest in the phenomenon of parallelism (see the work of Kugel, Watson, and Berlin) as an example of these new developments.

Chapter 2, “The Diversity of Collections of Psalms” (17–30) focuses on the headings present in most of the poems in the Psalter and argues that they “define smaller groups of psalms” (17). The divergence between the Masoretic tradition and the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests “a living, developing corpus of works whose relevance is continually renewed as the communities to whom they belong develop and change” (18). Hunter discusses the Psalms of Ascents (19–20), the Psalms of Korah and of Asaph (21–24), Books 3 and 4 (24–26), and the Psalms of David (26–27) as examples of the grouping of poems into meaningful collections. For each group he gives a short history of interpretation and proposes a possible setting. His treatment of the Psalms of Ascents serves as a typical example of his approach in this chapter. Hunter critically discusses the treatment of these poems in Jewish traditions and in three books on the subject (Crow, Hunter, Goulder). Hunter reiterates the point of view expressed in his earlier study (*Psalms* [Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1999]) that the Songs of Ascents constitute “a coherent set of songs relating to a pilgrimage liturgy” composed “to meet the

particular needs of the Maccabean kings of the Hasmonean dynasty” (20). For the Psalms of Korah and of Asaph he refers to studies by Goulder and Nasuti. For Books 3 and 4 of the Psalter he discusses studies by Cole on Book 3 and Howard on Book 4, for the Psalms of David studies by Flint on the deliberate “Davidic character” of the Psalter as represented in 11QPs^a and by Goulder on the Davidic psalms in Book 2. Hunter concludes the chapter with a short discussion of the Qumran Psalms (28–29) and the Syriac Psalms (29). For each he again refers to a number of recent studies. He finally provides a list of publications on the Psalms of Ascents. This chapter thus provides an introduction to research on groups of poems dispersed throughout the Psalter. His critical discussion of some of these publications (especially those by Goulder) becomes a useful tool for further study on the subject. The chapter also has deficiencies, however. I especially miss reference to the important work done by German scholars such as Erich Zenger and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld in this field. Their most important publications (especially the two volumes of commentary in the Hermeneia series) are readily available in English translation. Although it must be granted that the collections of Psalms are indeed diverse, Zenger and Hossfeld also indicate thematic, redactional, and compositional threads that connect these various collections.

In chapter 3, “Historical-Critical Approaches” (31–57), Hunter first provides an overview of the critical methods related to Psalms research (“Overview of Critical Methods in Relation to the Psalms” [31–36]), especially “source-, redaction-, tradition- and form-criticism” [31]). He critically discusses the usefulness of these methods for the study of the Psalter. According to Hunter “[i]ndividual psalms do not respond well to source and redaction criticism” (32), but a “slightly different picture emerges ... when we turn to the question of redaction criticism” (33). Several features in the book of Psalms “suggest strongly some kind of editorial intervention” (33). Among these are the various psalm titles, the doxologies at the end of Pss 41, 72, 89, and 106 dividing the Psalter into five “books,” and the additional editorial note at the end of Book 2: “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (34). Hunter also refers to form criticism as a critical approach to the psalms, especially the pioneering work of Gunkel. He finally refers to “the history of the reception of the Psalms” (35), which has become an important approach in recent years. A commentary series such as the Blackwell Bible Commentaries is devoted to this approach, especially looking at the reception of the Psalter in the early church and in rabbinic Judaism. In the two following sections Hunter concentrates on two critical approaches: redaction criticism (36–43) and form criticism (43–54). As far as the former is concerned, he focuses on the pioneering work of Gerald Wilson with regard to the “editorial aspects of the Psalms as a book” (36). He adds his own view, that “a bipartite Psalter in which a Davidic collection is followed by an exilic ‘update’ in the form of Psalms 73–89” has been expanded “as part of the post-exilic liturgical process” by

“various groups of psalms tailored to its own needs: the festivals of Pesach, Shevuot and Sukkot (cf. Psalms 113–118); the growing sense of a messianic ideal which would in the fullness of time ‘restore the fortunes of Zion...; the possible use of Psalms 120–32 in an autumn festival; and the central importance of Torah (Psalm 119)” (37). Hunter points to the importance of closing doxologies in the division of the Psalter into five books, indicates that similar doxologies occur in the book of Chronicles, and speculates that such doxologies could have influenced the Lord’s Prayer in Matt 6:9–13. He also provides a short discussion (rather a speculation!) upon possible preexilic compositions and oral traditions that might have existed but concludes: “I am convinced, in short, that the book of Psalms is both in form, and to a large extent in substance, a post-exilic composition” (43). As far as form criticism is concerned, Hunter provides a useful introduction to the subject and discusses Gunkel’s *Introduction to the Psalms* at length. It is a valuable aid in understanding Gunkel’s approach. He indicates that the study of form criticism has developed into various directions since the pioneering work of Gunkel, notably in the studies of John Eaton on royal psalms and in the studies of Nasuti, Westermann, and Brueggemann on psalms of lament. In a last section (“Reception of the Psalms” [54–56]), Hunter indicates that the Psalms played a major role in the development of Jewish and Christian tradition. He especially refers to the important work of Holladay on the history of Psalms use. He concludes the chapter with a list of modern editions of classical Christian and Jewish commentaries. This chapter gives a very useful overview of and introduction to the historical-critical approaches to the Psalms. To the uninitiated it provides useful introductory information, and to the initiated a good summary of research, without neglecting to voice Hunter’s own opinions. I am again disappointed by the lack of any reference to the work of German scholars such as Zenger, Hossfeld, Janowski, Berges and Levin (to name but a few) in especially the field of the redaction and composition of the Psalter.

Chapter 4, “The Psalms as Literature” (58–77), is especially devoted to the translation of the Psalms in various (English) traditions. Hunter argues the point whether the Psalms should primarily be regarded as poetry if they in the end played a liturgical role, but answers his question in the affirmative. He discusses various attempts in the English literary tradition to translate the Psalms as poetry. To me this is a rather disappointing chapter with very little application in the field of Psalms research outside the English literary and ecclesiastical traditions. The title creates the expectation that various literary approaches toward the study of the Psalter will be discussed. In reality, Hunter refers only to his own previous publication on the Psalms and Robert Alter’s *Art of Biblical Poetry* as examples of literary approaches to the Psalms. Thus he does not really engage in any meaningful discussion of a subject that deserves attention as a legitimate approach toward the study of the Psalter.

In chapter 5, “Liturgical Approaches” (78–107), Hunter reveals his own preference in approaching the Psalter, as this is the longest chapter in the book (78). He discusses Israel’s festivals and possible references to the use of psalms in the liturgy (“Israel’s Festivals” [78–83]). He concludes that Pss 68, 74, 77, 78, 80, 81, 99, 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136 might be associated with the Passover and can be compared to Exod 15:1–18. References to the idea of a cup (see Pss 75; 116) might even refer to the rituals associated with Passover. Psalms reflecting the joy at harvest (see Pss 65; 67; 107; 126; 128; 129) might reflect an autumn festival. The procession hinted at in Ps 118 can be associated with Sukkoth. Deuteronomy 31:10 hints at an association between Sukkoth and Torah, which, according to Hunter, indicates that the sequence of Ps 118 followed by the great Torah-poem (Ps 119) and the Songs of Ascents (Pss 120–134) is not accidental. He associates all these poems with “an autumn pilgrimage” (83), then asks: “is it significant that almost all the psalms which we have at least tentatively associated with Passover and Sukkot belong to the later books of [sic, one of the very few printing errors in the book] Psalms, predominantly IV and V, with a few in III?” (83). He then turns to liturgical settings in individual psalms (83–85), notably Pss 15, 24, 47, 68, 100, 118, and 132 and a number of psalms with refrains (Pss 42/43; 136; 147; 150) and indicates that these poems all contain the possibility of “congregational responses” (85). In a section titled “Liturgical Settings Elsewhere in the Old Testament” (85–89), Hunter points to parallels between and sometimes quotations of psalms in other liturgical settings (Pss 96; 105; 106; 132), notably in 1 and 2 Chronicles, neatly summarized in a table (86–87). In “Festivals and Liturgies in the Ancient Near East” (89–94), he points to parallels between biblical psalms and ancient Near Eastern literature (especially the parallels between Ps 104 and Akhenaten’s Hymn to the Aten and between Ps 29 and the Ugaritic Prayer to El). He then critically discusses the theory of an enthronement festival of YHWH as proposed by Mowinckel, Johnson, and Weiser. Lastly (94–107), Hunter discusses references to the liturgical use of various groups of psalms in the Mishnah and indications of the liturgical use of psalms in the growth of the early Christian tradition as expressed in the New Testament. In the end, he comes to the somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion “that the Psalms must almost certainly have been put to liturgical use, but with little or no clarity as to what the use might have been” (107). He does, however, support the notion of the liturgical use of specific psalms during the (theoretical!) New Year festival and at Passover.

Chapter 6, “Theological, Philosophical and Anthropological Reflections” (108–35) contains a wide array of themes from and reflections on the book of Psalms. Hunter refers to Jewish contributions to the study of the Psalter (Magonet, Sarna), discusses Christian theology and the Psalms (Westermann, Brueggemann), and points to the Psalms as a problem for modern readers (referring especially to psalms of lament, prayers for vengeance, references to unmerited suffering, and songs about the hiddenness of

God). He also discusses positive themes in the Psalms (especially psalms containing references to salvation [though often shrouded in mythical language], psalms containing “Messianic notes” [127], and the presence of piety and personal prayers in many psalms). This chapter summarizes the modern reception of and reflections on the Psalter in a very succinct fashion and confirms the observation in the first chapter that the study of the Psalter is indeed still a relevant exercise.

Chapter 7, “Conclusions and Retrospect” (136–41), contains a very helpful overview of introductions to and commentaries on the book of Psalms, the latter neatly categorized in commentaries aimed at a professional or lay audience. A thorough bibliography (143–51) is included, as well as indexes of topics (153–55) and authors (157–58).

The book provides a very good overview of current approaches to Psalms research. In spite of a number of shortcomings pointed out in this review, the book can be recommended for both professional researchers and laypeople alike. For the first audience the book provides a handy summary of current themes and trends, for the latter audience an accessible introduction to what can be an overwhelming field of research.