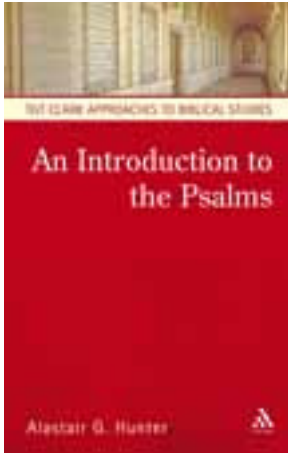


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Hunter, Alistair G.

An Introduction to the Psalms

T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies

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Numerous Psalms introductions fight for space on the bookshelves of Hebrew Bible scholars, and it is a fair question to ask if there is still room for one more. Alistair Hunter's *An Introduction to the Psalms* illustrates that for those teachers and students looking for clear writing and comprehensive (though not exhausting) coverage, there are still options available.

Hunter addresses his text toward five distinct groups. On one side are the Jewish and Christian scholars whose faith remains informed by reading the Psalms as Scripture. On the other side are those whose secularism is still colored by the Jewish or Christian tradition they have left behind. The fifth group he describes is the disinterested scholar, though he expresses credulity that this fifth group even exists (137).

An Introduction to the Psalms divides into seven sections. The first section, "Getting Started," is the closest to a traditional introduction in the text. Hunter seeks to address the "Why should anyone study the Psalter?" question and discusses the value of exploring the Psalter. In this section he also begins a brief outline of the various critical approaches to Psalms studies and the historical contexts that gave rise to them.

Following this introduction is Hunter's second section, "The Diversity of Collections of Psalms." Hunter continues his look at the Psalter by unpacking the implications of the fact that the text is a collection of collections. He discusses the myriad of smaller collections (David, Asaph, Ascents, etc.) and also includes some collections that are

outside the biblical canon (Qumran and Syriac). This section provides a mini-introduction to the general characteristics that distinguish each individual collection from the others. In addition to the traditional assortment of collections, Hunter treats Books 4 and 5 as a distinctive collection marked by interaction with the historical events of the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C.E.

In the third chapter Hunter turns his attention to the traditional form-critical categories. He describes the personal-authorial approach of accepting each superscription as an accurate description of its provenance and why scholarship has ultimately rejected this model. Hunter includes in this chapter an examination of the history of scholarship relating to the redaction of the Psalter. Hunter looks at the groundbreaking work of Wilson and McCann's discussions on the fivefold structure of the Psalter and how it has changed the direction of scholarship over the last two decades. From this macrocanonical look at Psalms, he then turns to Gunkel and his form-critical contribution. Hunter traces the role of subsequent scholars who have focused particular attention on the royal and lament psalms and how these later scholars have built upon Gunkel's initial observations. He concludes this chapter with a brief look at the reception history of the psalms.

In chapter 4, Hunter explores the poetics of the Psalter by looking at the "Psalms as Literature." Beginning with the issue of whether or not liturgical texts may properly be considered as poetry, Hunter then moves on to stylistic characteristics of Hebrew poetry such as parallelism, metaphor, and metonymy. In this area he discusses the inherent difficulties in translating a poetic text from Hebrew into English. Interestingly, he includes several poets and their various attempts at capturing some of the poetic features of the Hebrew text in English. He concludes this chapter with a look at how these psalms have been translated and incorporated into different media, from the Authorized Version to Herbert, Donne, and even the contemporary German disco band Boney M's reconfiguration of Ps 137. At the end of this section on the translation of these psalms, he brings the conversation into the twentieth century by comparing and contrasting American and British translations of the psalms.

Hunter examines the use of the Psalter in various liturgical contexts in chapter 5. He looks at the various theories covering how the Psalter was likely utilized by the ancient Hebrews in various cultic festivals. Hunter clearly notes his indebtedness to Mowinckel and his followers for examining their likely use in various liturgical settings. He also includes how the Psalms have been appropriated in postcanonical settings such as the Mishnah and New Testament. Ultimately, Hunter concludes that, although it is obvious that psalms were used in a variety of liturgical contexts, we have "little or no clarity as to what that use might have been" (107).

In his final substantive chapter, Hunter looks at the anthropological, theological, and philosophical reflections on the Psalms literature. In addition to the expected sections on the explicit themes of messianic hope and personal piety, Hunter spends a great deal of time exploring more difficult themes such as lament, vengeance, and unmerited suffering. He surveys an assortment of responses to these issues by scholars such as Brueggemann, Westermann, and Anderson. Following his section on difficult themes, he concludes that there are numerous “positive” themes, such as messianic hope, a historical focus on the exodus motif, and the overall concept of human-divine communication in these texts.

Lastly, Hunter concludes with a brief summary of his work. He sets forth his twofold intention to give an overview of the current state of Psalms scholarship and to offer his own “idiosyncratic” perspective on the various topics associated with the discipline. Following this statement, he offers some suggestions for further studies in the area of critical commentaries as well as an annotated bibliography that provides a firm approach to the contemporary field of Psalms studies.

Hunter’s approach yields numerous strengths. One positive feature of this work is his exploration of various English translations of the Psalter. Despite the fact that many introductions are composed in English, not many give appropriate attention to the approach and perspective of various translators of the psalms into English. In looking at these translations, Hunter casts a critical net whose corners reach far outside the typical academic pool. To cite just one example, he looks at Donald Davie’s work on the Psalms, despite (or more likely because of) Davie’s credentials as a poet rather than as a scholar of the Psalms.

A second strength is the remarkable breadth of topics covered in this short (141 pages of text) introduction. Hunter manages to cast a flashlight into most nooks and crannies of contemporary Psalms scholarship. Crisscrossing from various criticisms and into the concerns of both lay and critical readers, Hunter examines a myriad of topics.

A final strength, from my perspective, is that the text is also rich in Hunter’s distinctive writing style. Although idiosyncratic writing styles can be distracting, this reviewer enjoyed the elements of Hunter’s personality that he disclosed through the text. Hunter’s reference to Zacchaeus as “vertically challenged” (119) and his description of a contemporary commentator’s work as “an invaluable resource, if a little indigestible” (110) breaks up the well-worn, and often predictable, path through genre, parallelism, and various theories on the imprecatory psalms.

In terms of weaknesses, the few I came across were slight. Hunter offers a paucity of examples from the psalms themselves. When he discusses the royal psalms, he lists

numerous examples but reproduces none of them. Some excerpts from the psalms themselves would have strengthened his description of the various types. Related to this, I was surprised to note that he includes no overall categorization of each of the 150 psalms (e.g., in a chart or table) anywhere in the book.

Hunter also provides little in the way of viewing the psalms as a whole. Is the Psalter a text to be read as a book or simply as a series of individual units? He never suggests how they *should* be read. Hunter's approach is more descriptive than prescriptive. While listing a variety of interpretive approaches, he rarely suggests one that is superior to the others. If the primary strength of his work is to lay out the individual trees, it becomes difficult for the reader to gain a perspective on the forest as a whole. But I think that is less a criticism of this particular introduction than a critique of the genre of the introduction.

Hunter offers an assessment of his own work in which he expresses the hope that its valuation would lie in its utility. Specifically, he desires that readers will carry *An Introduction to the Psalms* around with them and that it will not be kept "dusty and unnoticed on a library shelf" (137). While I am unsure that I would have sufficient cause to carry it around, I will keep it within arms' reach at my desk as a simple, straightforward text to use often. Hunter offers us a substantial and helpful introduction to the book of Psalms.