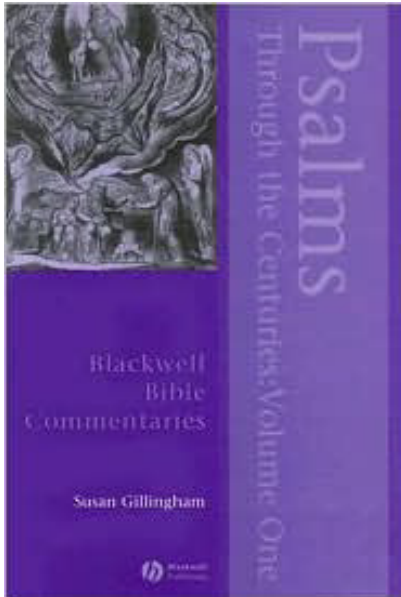


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Gillingham, Susan

Psalms through the Centuries: Volume 1

Blackwell Bible Commentaries

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Joachim Vette, Heidelberg
Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg
Heidelberg, Germany

Susan Gillingham's book is an ambitious project that grew over ten years of diligent work. As the first in a two-volume reception-history commentary on the Psalter, she gathers material on psalm composition, redaction, and reception from the beginning of the text's history until the present. Gillingham narrows this enormous amount of material somewhat by intentionally working from a bias toward the English-speaking world, particularly Britain. This bias is evident throughout the book, which aims to be a "kind of reference work" (311) for the second volume still to come, in which individual psalms will be discussed based on their specific reception histories. An undertaking of this size inspires admiration; it also has no choice but to stay at the surface on most issues. It would, however, be completely superfluous to state that more detail could be added at any point or that individual issues may be debated (such as setting the earliest dating for psalms in the eleventh century B.C.E.). Gillingham makes the most of the space in this book and provides a well-chosen and well-presented survey. In addition, a wealth of footnotes and a supporting Internet site (www.bbibcomm.net) provide access to literature for any who wish to delve deeper into particular issues.

The chapters of the book cover successive periods in time, with chapter 1 covering 1100 B.C.E. to 500 C.E., chapter 2 ranging from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, chapter 3

from the eleventh to the fifteenth, chapter 4 from fifteenth to the seventeenth, chapter 5 the eighteenth and nineteenth, and chapter 6 the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The continually decreasing time span already indicates the increasing complexity of psalm reception, especially when we consider that Gillingham's focus narrows throughout, dealing finally only with material from Britain. Each chapter organizes its material into five types of reception: exposition, instruction, liturgy, translation, and aesthetic representation. At times, Christian and Jewish reception is considered separately in these categories; at times they are discussed together. It does not always become clear what the defining criteria are for these categories, where exposition becomes instruction, for example, or where the boundaries are between liturgy and aesthetic representation. Nevertheless, even if the choice of these particular categories might be debated, structuring the presentation along separate types of representation is a great help to the reader, as it would otherwise be easy to lose oneself in the vast amount of material.

It would be counterproductive in this context to attempt to further condense and summarize the overview presented by Gillingham in her book. Instead, I will highlight a few important issues that emerge from Gillingham's survey in order to stimulate the reader's interest in this impressive undertaking.

Already in her first chapter Gillingham makes clear that psalm reception is equally dependent on the person or group interacting with the texts and on the use to which these texts are put. We can thus observe from late antiquity on that exegesis, most often apologetic and polemical, focuses on an entirely different set of psalms than what is used in liturgy. As Gillingham states, "Clearly liturgical occasions address different needs from polemical concerns" (44).

The diversity of use and receiving community increases as Christianity and Judaism expand throughout the Western world, yet Gillingham does postulate that certain trends are evident at different times. Whereas the early church was mainly interested in psalm reception for apologetic reasons, the fifth to eleventh centuries focus on the psalms primarily for their liturgical and artistic value, with only marginal exegetical work. This is the era in which illuminated manuscripts flourished, such as the *Utrecht Psalter*, the *Stuttgart Psalter*, or the *Khudov Psalter*, for which Gillingham provides Internet sites where scans of these manuscripts can be studied. The book itself includes several beautiful illustrations, unfortunately only in black and white. Whereas narrative illustrations are rare on the Jewish side, even here geometrical designs embellish textual manuscripts, and the Hebrew script of the psalms is used to decorate synagogues (Cordoba and Toledo are mentioned as examples). A further important aspect of reception is exemplified in the *Abbreviated Psalter* by the Venerable Bede, in which the whole of the psalms was reduced to "a spiritual core, using verses which would have been

most familiar from the offices” (60). This tendency toward verse selection and reduction can be seen throughout the reception history of the Psalter. Thus, the 1968 Daily Office continues a long-standing mode of appropriating psalm texts when it edits heavily the psalms in its collection.

At many points in the book, it becomes clear that a discussion of psalm reception cannot take place without embedding this discussion in the issue of biblical reception history in general. One example is the christological reading of the Old Testament by the church, which focuses to a large degree on the psalms and there on the relationship between David and Christ. In this context, Gillingham mentions the pervasive “Jesse Tree” depiction in many medieval cathedrals as well as the portrayal of the synagogue as “false mother” alongside depictions of Mary. Exegetically, this “christianizing” of the psalms is perhaps seen most clearly with Thomas Aquinas, for whom the Psalter embodies the gospel itself. From a Jewish side, in direct reaction against such christological interpretation, rabbis such as Abraham ibn Ezra, Rashi, Rashbam, and Radak use the psalms as “a spirited defence of Judaism” (87). Again, the Psalter becomes the textual center on which these apologetic conflicts are based.

A further interesting aspect to emerge from Gillingham’s collection is the close connection between translation and power. The examples of Wycliffe and Tyndale show clearly how translation can become a challenge to both the church and the university, by embodying a certain theological tendency in the translation and by presenting the text directly to a wide group of people, thus bypassing institutional interpretive intermediates. Yet this democratization of the text through translation, far more a factor within Christian than within Jewish reception, also undermines the sense of a common text, an issue that Gillingham discusses repeatedly. The process of making the text available to a wide audience is also enhanced by the development of metric psalmody, or psalms songs, particularly within Lutheran and Calvinistic traditions.

In her discussion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Gillingham points out that a post-Reformation focus on individual piety led to a decline of psalm use in the public sphere. Instead, the paradigms of Enlightenment thought advanced a renewed and vigorous interaction with the psalms within the academic sphere, where exegesis shifted away from a christological focus to grammatical, philological, and especially historical questions, including a comparative approach in the context of comparative religious studies (de Wette, Gunkel). When discussing Enlightenment theology, it is notable that Gillingham somewhat departs from a purely descriptive presentation of her material; her language, particularly her choice of adjectives, becomes partial to a more conservative theological stance, dismissing perhaps too readily the positive aspects of exegesis during the Enlightenment.

The movement of the psalms from the church to the cafés and restaurants (see Gillingham's discussion of Edvard Grieg, 226) continues as we move closer to the present. Whereas a highly diversified and experimental use of the psalms still occurs within liturgy, the psalms seem to move out of the boundaries of particular faith communities and raise interest as they address universal questions of what it means to be fully human. As a consequence, joint collaboration between different faith communities and those of no faith is occurring in psalm reception to a degree not known before. Gillingham evaluates this development very positively, despite the concerns she voices over losing a sense of common text due to the ever-growing diversification in psalm reception.

Susan Gillingham's collection underscores impressively the central status of the biblical Psalter for the theology and liturgical life of both Jews and Christians in the Western world. She confronts us with the fascinating fact that many central figures of both traditions were concerned with the Psalter not only at the fringes of their work but often as their prime focus.

Psalm reception has thus been a continual source for translation, hymnology, and theological and liturgical reform. This realization is perhaps the most valuable insight to come out of reading Gillingham's survey. In light of the second volume yet to come, it will be interesting to see how "reception" and textual "meaning" will be brought together. The preface to the first volume states that the idea of a reception-history commentary works from the premise "that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant" (xi). There can be no doubt that such a study is "interesting" and "important," yet some hermeneutical reflection will be needed on how such a study becomes a commentary on the meaning of a text and not merely a commentary on cultural history. I am very much looking forward to the second volume.

The book concludes with a helpful glossary of terms used, an extensive bibliography (expanded at www.bbibcom.net), indices of psalms and names, and a subject index.