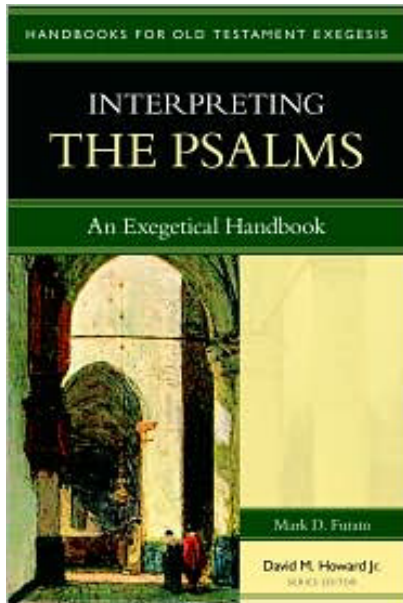


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Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook

Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis

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There has been a plethora of introductory works on the Psalms in recent years, most of which have made their own contributions to the study and teaching of Psalms. This volume is another to add to the list, with its own contribution to make. The volume belongs to the series Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis edited by David M. Howard, and the layout, approach, and general intent of the volume are to some degree governed by the series. The series is designed with two purposes in view: “to present the reader with a better understanding (principles) of the different Old Testament genres” and “provide strategies (methods) for preaching and teaching these genres” (13). The series seeks to draw on “evangelical scholarship” and is clearly aimed at graduate-level students (in the U.S. system) with a basic knowledge of Biblical Hebrew, although as it claims it is accessible to those without the language.

A description of the contents of the volume is important before some assessment of it. The volume follows the general format of the series. It begins with a look at “the nature of the genres,” although in this particular volume that becomes in chapter 1 (23–55) a lengthy discussion on the psalms as poetry, covering the nature of Hebrew poetry. The rest of the chapters follow the series outline closely. Chapter 2 (57–116) “Viewing the Whole,” is a discussion of the intention of the Psalter as a whole as instruction for

happiness and holiness, touching on the theological themes of divine kingship, human destiny, and the coming of the king as well as the Lord as refuge and the blessing of the nations. Chapter 3, “Preparing for Interpretation” (117–38), focuses on two matters: the question of historical setting of the psalms alongside their “timelessness”; and matters of text criticism in the psalms. Chapter 4, “Interpreting the Categories” (139–82), narrows the definition of “genre,” or “category,” as it is often named here, and discusses the more familiar genres of hymns, laments, songs of thanksgiving, songs of confidence, divine kingship songs, and wisdom songs. The chapter ends with a section headed “What Do the Categories Have to Do with Christ?” and a brief excursus on royal psalms. Chapter 5, “Proclaiming the Psalms” (183–208), goes through a process of preparation for preaching on the Psalms, while chapter 6 (209–30) seeks to put this into practice using Ps 29 as an example.

There is much that commends this book to those who teach Psalms in colleges and universities. The discussion on Hebrew poetry in relation to the Psalms in particular is helpful and clear, with plenty of examples to illustrate the points. It deals well with the complexities of parallelism and has some very helpful remarks on patterning of lines, strophes, and so forth within individual poems. The material in chapter 2 on “Viewing the Whole” also introduces students in a clear way to recent discussion on how the Psalter as a whole can be interpreted. Alongside the detailed exegesis of individual psalms or sections of them, this approach to the whole Psalter gives students a sense of the multivalent nature of the Psalter and its interpretation. The emphasis on preaching from the Psalter is also to be warmly welcomed, in my view, against traditions that maintain the use of psalms only in response to the other readings in the liturgies of the church. The brief glossary at the end of the book also helps those less familiar with theological and literary terminology.

There are inevitably a number of comments or points made in the book that are likely to draw criticism from other Psalms scholars on technical grounds. For the most part, these are not major. For example, the conclusion (63) that the Psalter is in five “books” that reflect the five books of Moses is drawn too quickly, given the arguments that have been mounted in this matter and that there is no ancient evidence that the five books of Psalms were ever considered or used in this way. The idea that Ps 119:165 “sums up the purpose of the book of Psalms” in espousing that those who love God’s teaching/law enjoy well-being and encounter no adversity ignores the message of other psalms that draw more measured conclusions about the relationship between faith and life experience (e.g., Ps 73) and indeed glides over the presence of so many lament psalms. There is a difference between eschatological hope and life experience. The focus on the blessing of the nations (103–16) is overstated, in my view. It is certainly a theme in the Psalter, but I would not see it in so positive a light. It competes with the ever-present theme of the judgment of the

nations. The author sees the blessing of the nations present in the Psalter from “beginning to end” (116), but even in the penultimate Ps 149 we read strong words of vengeance and judgment against the nations (149:6–9). How is this related to the blessing on the nations that is also undoubtedly there?

Finally, there are a number of points at which the author’s theological stance or view on the nature of preaching dominates biblical interpretation and the conclusions he draws. At these points the book’s potential as a text for students is at least severely hampered. First, in the discussion on mythopoeic language on pages 53–55 the conclusions drawn, namely, that the biblical writers “did not believe the myths themselves” but simply used mythopoeic imagery for polemical purposes, simplifies the situation. Certainly the Old Testament writers had a task on their hands to distinguish Israelite faith as they saw it from Canaanite and others, but they lived in a world in which mythopoeic thought was the common currency and were not averse to using it to speak about Israel’s God in a positive light (e.g., Pss 24:2; 65:7).

Second, there is too literalist an approach to the question of the relation of psalms to history. The author properly stresses the need to pay attention to historical context in the process of interpretation (e.g., 118–19) and points out rightly that most psalms defy efforts to locate them in Israel’s history. However, he then, for example, assumes that Psalm 90’s association with Moses in the superscription indicates an original context “around 1400 B.C.” (119), presumably at the time of Moses. This presumes a great deal about the historicity of the story of early Israel as we encounter it in Scripture, much of which is rightly questioned. The assumption about historicity in this present volume, with its extension to the superscriptions of the Psalms, often called “titles” and regarded as “canonical” and authoritative, can lead to some strange manipulations of the text. The attribution of Ps 89 to one “Ethan the Ezrahite” is a case in point. The only biblical character of this name belongs to Solomon’s court (1 Kgs 4:31 [5:11]), but since verses in the psalm do not fit Solomon’s reign as well as that of his son Rehoboam, Ethan is conjectured to have lived into Rehoboam’s reign. My point is that a historical reading of, in this case, the superscription of a psalm leads easily to conjecture beyond the letter of the text itself in order to make sense of the historical reading. There is an inherent contradiction built into such methodology. The difficulties of such a reading become more evident when genre or “categories” are brought into the discussion. In a discussion about how psalm “categories” guide expectations, a point that needs to be made, the author makes assumptions about the historicity of the biblical narrative in places that lead to some strange perceptions of the world in which we live. He compares the fable of the trees concerning kingship in Judg 9:8–15 and that part of the Balaam story in Num 22:28–30 where Balaam and his donkey converse. Because of the different categories of story, Futato concludes that the reason “why we believe that talking trees are not

historical and the talking donkey is can be answered in one word: category.” The trees are characters in the fable and so are not to be taken as historical, but in the Numbers story the donkey is actually a character in the narrative, so what is reported of the donkey is historical (143–44). This is a case where historical assumptions about the biblical text, presuming its inspired and possibly inerrant character, override the function of categories to produce a view of the world that defies historical experience.

Third, the discussion of the psalms in relation to Jesus briefly on page 95 and generally at the end of chapter 4 (173–181) raises some interesting questions about how the psalms have been appropriated within the life of the church and Christians in general. Much of what is said in chapter 4 especially is helpful, depending on what assumptions are made about the discussion. The church might want to rightly see the psalms as the prayers of Jesus, but that cannot negate their place in Jewish faith nor presume a simplistic fulfillment of their hope in Jesus, neither of which points are made in the book itself but could easily be taken for granted. The work of D. Bonhoeffer (e.g., *Life Together* [London: SCM, 1954], 30–35) in this area would be a good support for the present text. Likewise, the attribution of Psalms to David in tradition is much more subtle and complex than the references on, for example, 123 and 187, with their presumption of authorship, could imply to readers.

Finally, I would make a comment on the assumptions in this book about the nature of preaching (see 189, 202, 206, etc.). In the method of sermon preparation outlined, much of the content of which has a good deal of merit, there is the assumption that preaching is a task that very much functions from text to congregation. The text is where the sermon preparation starts, and the preacher’s concern for or knowledge of the congregation’s life comes later, particularly in terms of how the language of the sermon will be shaped. In my view, the questions that arise from the congregation’s life need to be in the mix of questions the preacher asks of the text right from the start. The preacher’s aim is to foster an encounter between the text and the congregation, and that encounter is not just a one-way affair. The model of preaching put forth in this book is still tied largely to the old model from the mid-twentieth century of discerning *what the text meant* followed by discussion of *what the text now means for the congregation*. Meaning, according to Ricoeur at least, is generated in the space between conversants; it does not simply reside in the text to be ferreted out by the preacher and handed complete to the congregation.

There are a few typographical errors that need to be noted, although generally the type is clean. On page 60 there is an error in the Hebrew for *torah* (next to last line). On page 107 the author speaks about book 3 of the Psalter in relation to the blessing of the nations but includes in this discussion Pss 65–67 as if they are part of book 3 (Pss 73–89). Finally, on page 132 the word “second” (next to last line) should read “third,” if I read it correctly.

While I have clearly found this volume a mixed blessing, I would thank the author for a stimulating and provocative read. There are sections of the book that I will use to assist my students. The clarity of explanation and breadth of discussion in those places commend themselves.