Hossfeld, Frank Lothar, and Eric Zenger

Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150

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Hermeneia

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This volume is the second part of the classic commentary on Psalms by Frank Lothar Hossfeld and the late Erich Zenger, both distinguished scholars and experts in Psalms exegesis. The first part of the three-volume commentary (Psalms 1: A Commentary on Psalms 1–50) is still missing, but work on it will continue in spite of the sudden death of Erich Zenger on 4 April 2010. Johannes Schnocks will serve as a partner for Frank Lothar Hossfeld. After its publication in 2000, part 2 (on Ps 51–100) was published in English in 2005, and in this case it took only four years for an English translation of the 2008 part 3 to appear. Linda M. Maloney translated the commentary into English, and again she did a brilliant job and accomplished a pleasantly readable and smooth text. As before, the commentary is state-of-the-art and a must-have for every serious interpreter of the Psalms.

This volume corresponds closely with the previously one, both in its German original as in its English translation, but two slight alterations have been made. In his review of Psalms 2 Bernd Jankowski (“Das Buch der unverfälschten Spiritualität: Zum neuen Psalmenkommentar von F.-L. Hossfeld und E. Zenger,” BZ 47 [2003]: 43–65) made two suggestions: (1) for each psalm there should be a structural scheme in the analytical section; and (2) the Septuagint should get more space so that differences and peculiarities can be dealt with in more detail. Hossfeld and Zenger adopted both suggestions for each psalm. In addition, there are some longer excursuses than in Psalms 2.
The volume opens with two prefaces (Hermeneia series and present volume), a list of abbreviations, and a general bibliography, before the authors provide a rather short but very dense and helpful introduction to Pss 101–150. Again they point out that a more detailed introduction will only make sense after the publication of Psalms 1 (1). Of course, they briefly refer to particularities and specific parts of the Psalter, above all the David trilogy (Pss 108–110), the twins 111–112 and 135–136, Hallelujah acclamations in Pss 104–106, 111–113, and 115–117, the pilgrim Pss 120–134, the fifth Davidic Psalter 138–145, and the ending Pss 146–150.

On pages 11–670 the authors deal with the psalm texts and their backgrounds according to a fixed pattern: there are a specific bibliography for each psalm, a translation of the Masoretic Text into English, text-critical and philological notes, an analysis (form and genre, structure, redaction criticism, and structural plan as it is given for Ps 101, but not necessarily for every psalm to follow), and an exposition with notes and comments on individual verses and/or verse units. The “Context, Reception, and Significance” section can include comments on the links to other psalms or psalm units, superscriptions, quotations, and remarks about relations to the New Testament. But this alters from psalm to psalm so that the pattern allows an individual treatment of each psalm according to its particularities and peculiarities. Only the features of the Septuagint version are an integral part of that section for every psalm.

Personally, I again find the text-critical and philological notes very rewarding. They enable readers to follow the decisions the commentators made in their translation and to reflect upon significant alternative readings or different interpretations by other scholars. Another strength of the volume is its clearness in structure. By getting accustomed to the layout and the pattern, it is easy to identify at which place within the treatment of a psalm one is and to find one’s way through the massive volume. Of course, the index with passages supplies references to the Hebrew Bible (671–707), the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (707), Qumran/Dead Sea Scrolls (707–8), the New Testament (708–9), rabbinic literature, Josephus, early Christian literature, and ancient Near Eastern literature (all of them on 709), though the last four categories do not even cover half a page. The attentive reader might be surprised not to find any more indices when reading on page 671 the headings “Indexes” and “1. Passages.” Unfortunately, as was the case for Psalms 2, there are no additional indices, which are also lacking in the two German volumes.

There was no need to modify or give up the historical-critical approach Hossfeld and Zenger had already applied in the other volume. Thus, I do not repeat or even cite remarks I have already made (see my review of Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100: http://bookreviews.org/pdf/4830_5011.pdf). Nevertheless, one difference between
Psalms 2 and Psalms 3 must be mentioned: the present volume includes only a few drawings and/or iconographical images, while the other one rewarded the reader by rather many and often stunning ones that helped to visualize the background of a psalm and the world into which it was embedded.

Of specific interest are the excursuses: (1) Zenger discusses the function of the “Hallelujahs” in the redaction of the Psalter, the acrostics in the Psalter, the composition of the Egyptian Hallel or Passover Hallel (Pss 113–118), the composition of the so-called Pilgrim Psalter (Pss 120–134), the so-called Great Hallel (Ps 136 or Pss 135–136), the composition of the so-called Little Hallel or Concluding Hallel (Pss 146–150), and Ps 151 LXX as an afterword to the Septuagint Psalter. Especially the last-mentioned excursus proves that the Septuagint gains more space and importance in Psalms 3 than it previously had, although occasionally it receives only a few lines and there would be more to say about the Septuagint version, especially after the publication of the translation and comments of the Septuaginta Deutsch project. (2) Hossfeld tackles the problem of redaction criticism of Ps 101–106 and writes about the conception of the fifth Davidic Psalter (Pss 138–145).

Be that as it may, again Hossfeld and Zenger succeed in making psalms more accessible, better comprehensible, and, above all, more vivid for their readers. The second part of this first-class commentary is a landmark and—after the completion of Psalms 1—the three-volume set will be one, too, and remain so for a long time to come. It is wonderful that this piece of scholarship is now available in English and thus accessible to scholars who may have trouble reading German.