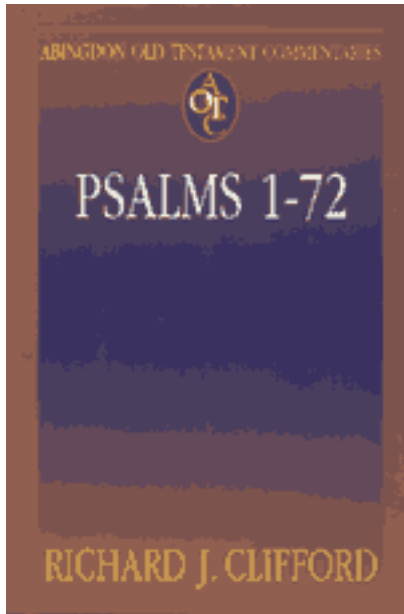


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Clifford, Richard J.

Psalms 1–72

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The intended readers of this commentary, theological students and pastors, are well served. Clifford writes simply and clearly, concentrating on theological and literary features of individual psalms. The commentary format requires considerable overlap, given the preponderance of laments in the first seventy-two psalms, but repetition is kept to a minimum, except for the guiding rubrics: (1) literary analysis; (2) exegetical analysis; and (3) theological and ethical analysis. Perhaps in future volumes such discussion can be integrated and the themes controlled by the nature of each psalm.

The author of this commentary provides the obligatory introduction, albeit quite brief. In it he discusses the Psalter as a book and as a window into Israelite worship at the temple; treats the major literary types of psalms (hymn, lament, thanksgiving, and other); emphasizes the monotheistic context of biblical worship; mentions two implied narratives (the combat myth and Yahweh's mighty deed); addresses the problem of the deleterious effect on modern praying of violent expressions against enemies in some psalms; and asserts that the psalmists had no interest in history as it really happened but did have a fondness for carefully crafted logic.

I begin with the last point, for Clifford belongs to a small group of scholars who seem to think that some psalms, at least, were intentionally structured to yield an exact word count for each unit. He points to Ps 7, with two parts: 7:1–5 and 6–10, with thirty-nine words in each. Furthermore, he thinks of two subsections, 7:1–3, 8–10 with twenty-four words each and 4–5, 6–7 with fourteen words each. In Ps 12 he isolates verses 1–4 and 5–8, each having thirty-seven words. Psalm 48 is said to employ a framing device, 48:1–3 and 12–14, with twenty-four words each, and Ps 56 has two refrains, with eighteen words *before* the first and eighteen words *after* the second. Clifford draws similar conclusions about frequently occurring words, such as the seven different terms for nations in Ps 67 and the fourfold use of the Hebrew word for *earth*. He considers this phenomenon a device indicating universality. Similarly, the twelve divine names in Ps 30 suggest to him the number of tribes in Israel.

Clifford's firsthand knowledge of Ugaritic literature informs his analysis of a few psalms, especially 18, 24, and 43. Because Yahweh is said to have been in the temple, Clifford concludes that the battle against chaos has already taken place, for the construction of a temple in Ugaritic mythic texts follows victory over Yam or Mot. The taming of the sea was the central act of creation (Pss 24; 89; 93; 95; 102; cf. Isa 48:13). The summons to "lift up your heads" in Ps 24 is clarified by reference to an Ugaritic text in which the dejected gods have lowered their heads between their knees and are instructed to raise them in exhilaration. Just as the gods of Canaan send out divine servants in pairs, Yahweh sends Light and Truth in Ps 43.

A commentary for students is not expected to break new ground, but Clifford does offer alternative readings in at least two instances. He describes Ps 28 as a thanksgiving for a declaration of innocence in an ordeal rather than a lament, as customarily understood. Again, he challenges the usual understanding of Ps 39; in his view, the psalmist does not inquire about the length of his life but asks how long he must endure the present affliction. Clifford notes that the psalmist already knows that life is brief. One could also add Clifford's reading of Ps 45:9b, which is taken to be a reference to the Queen Mother rather than the bride.

Some of Clifford's observations belong in a scholarly commentary, especially those pointing to uniqueness of expressions (e.g., "there are many who say" in Ps 3 [and 4:6]; "love vain words" and "seek after lies" in Ps 4:2b; "turn to Yahweh" in Ps 22). In a few places further information would have been helpful. On what does he base the claim that Ps 5:3 associates God's hearing of prayer with sunlight because the administration of justice took place early in the morning?

The intriguing suggestion about the motif of a sleeping warrior in Pss 44:23; 59:4; 78:65; 121:4; and Isa 51:9 needs to be developed more fully if the information is to be processed by readers.

I find Clifford's observations about so-called wisdom psalms to be salutary. He doubts the usefulness of the category and points out that Ps 34 is not wisdom but thanksgiving, which can also be didactic. He remarks that in wisdom literature the righteous person is singular whereas the wicked are plural. Is the reason not readily apparent in the individualism of the sages, their focus on the specific person at risk or poised for success? Clifford wonders about a proverbial background for the pun in Ps 56 on a wineskin (his word is bottle) and the psalmist's tossings during the night. In at least two instances, Clifford indicates his disdain for doctrine (165) and theory (191).

Occasionally, Clifford ventures into the realm of the psalmists' personal history. The most notable of these concerns Ps 69, which he views as the composition of a person who had angered others by opposing animal sacrifice. In Ps 40, Clifford does not find opposition to sacrifices of grain and animals as such (cf. also 51:16) but views the language as dialectic negation.

The issue of divine justice, which scandalizes the psalmist in a few cases (Ps 7), prompts Clifford to an extreme observation that the biblical psalmist accepts the ancient Near Eastern view that the world was created for the gods. This assumption allows him to justify divine zeal against injustice that disfigures God's world. Quoting Bernard Abbot of Clairvaux that God pitched a tent in full view of the sun so that even the dimmest eye could see him, Clifford emphasizes divine solicitude despite the powerful cry in Book I, where the disparity between the righteous and the wicked reigns supreme. He also views divine justice as interventionist (Ps 72); an awakening of the sleeping warrior was the hope of many psalmists.