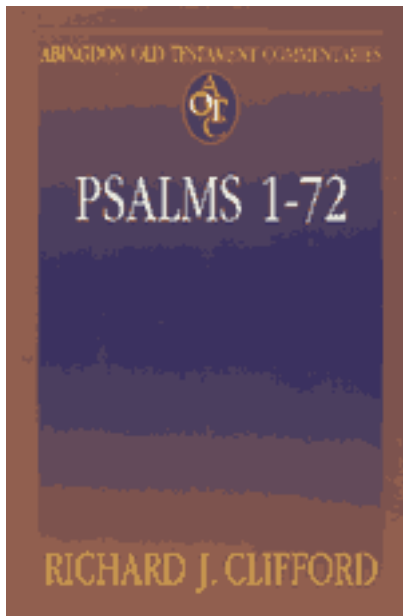


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Clifford, Richard J.

Psalms 1–72

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

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Richard Clifford, who is Professor of Bible at Weston Jesuit School of Theology and a well-respected authority on the Psalms, has produced a rewarding commentary on the first two books of the Psalter. Clifford views the Psalter as a collection of Israel’s prayers (corporate and individual). As such, he focuses on helping contemporary “pray-ers” to understand the intricacies of Hebrew prosody as well as the themes and thought patterns implicit in its imagery so that its message may be appropriated for the Christian church.

The introduction treats the standard issues that arise in Psalter studies: the shape of the Psalter, its relationship to the worship in the Second Temple, the genre of individual psalms, and the rudimentary features of Hebrew poetry. Moreover, under the rubric “Observations on the Theology in the Psalms,” Clifford provides a discussion of two implied narratives that reside beneath four recurring themes in the Psalter: divine kingship, the temple, the Davidic king, and YHWH’s deeds. He roots the first three in the implied narrative of the biblical adaptation of the old Mesopotamian and Canaanite “combat myth.” In the Old Testament, this account culminates in God’s creation of Israel or the world. The implied narrative for YHWH’s deeds is exemplified in Ps 114, in which a mixture of cosmic and historical language is employed to describe the foundational actions of God in the creation of Israel as the people of God. The introduction concludes

by focusing on the problem of the appropriation of Israel's psalms as prayers for the contemporary church. Clifford offers his reflections on three obstacles (the violent and vindictive imagery present in certain psalms, the sometimes subtle allusions to Israel's past, and the dramatic language and rhetoric employed across the Psalter) that serve as impediments for modern Christians who wish to pray Israel's psalms as their own.

Psalms 1–72 follows the standard format for its series. The exposition of each psalm unfolds under three headings: Literary Analysis, Exegetical Analysis, and Theological and Ethical Analysis. Clifford navigates between these categories in an exemplary fashion so that the reader gains an integrated understanding of how these various dimensions inform one another. Most psalms receive approximately four pages of text. Clifford writes in an engaging style that provides a portal for the reader into the world of the Psalter. When he does include Hebrew words, Clifford provides both a transliteration and an English translation.

Clifford's approach in the Literary Analysis sections is eclectic. He is sensitive to the variety of means by which the Israelite psalmists have fashioned their product. He weaves together insights from form-critical observations, rhetorical features (especially repetition), and prosodic conventions (word count, parallelism, acrostics) and explains how such formal features aid the interpretive process. Overall, he stresses the necessity of understanding the flow and organization of each psalm: "The structure of a poem has to be sufficiently visible to guide pray-ers through it" (249).

In the Exegetical Analysis, Clifford engages in a close reading of the text that follows the structural divisions that he observed in the Literary Analysis. The Exegetical Analysis is the longest section for each psalm. He explains the meaning of key words and phrases, situates the psalm in its ancient Near Eastern context, notes links with other biblical literature, and includes comments on how the New Testament authors interpret the individual psalm.

The interpretation of each psalm concludes with a Theological and Ethical Analysis. Clifford's gift of brevity without superficiality shines through in this section. He concisely captures the core message of each psalm and helps modern pray-ers to appropriate the ancient text for use in their own prayers. Several times in these reflections, Clifford takes on the role of a seasoned spiritual guide who speaks on behalf of the text to the reader. For example, on the silent suffering described in Ps 39, he remarks:

Many people today endure alone painful matters that they cannot easily speak about to others. Sometimes the matter is an illness considered shameful by many

people, sometimes it is a family unhappiness that is difficult to share (a wayward child, an incompatible spouse), and sometimes it is a failure that cannot be talked out. Right or wrong, the sufferings are borne alone. Psalm 39 provides a model for such people. (201)

In each of the three sections of analysis, Clifford demonstrates a penchant for dealing with key interpretive questions. Clifford does not avoid offering comments on difficult passages but instead helps the reader make sense of the phrasing and imagery of each psalm. In other words, Clifford offers answers to precisely the types of questions that have caused students to turn to commentaries in the first place. Here are a few examples: He discusses the question of unity for psalms such as 19 and 40, which evidence a mixture of genres. He helps the reader to navigate through the storm imagery in Ps 29. He explains competing interpretations of the phrase “refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Ps 36:7). He reviews the options for interpreting the referent of “your throne, O God” (Ps 45:6), which is much debated, especially in light of the messianic reading offered by the author of Hebrews (1:8).

Studies in recent decades by Gerald Wilson, James Mays, and Clinton McCann (among others) have argued for an overarching macrostructure for the Psalter. Clifford is hesitant to embrace fully such an understanding. He acknowledges the presence of certain indisputable elements such as the dual introduction formed by the juxtaposition of Pss 1–2, but he stresses that the Psalter as a whole is comprised of individual prayers in which “ideas are subordinate to prayer” (16). He argues that Jews and Christians historically have read the psalms as individual prayers or in light of neighboring psalms rather than in the context of the entire Psalter.

Additionally, Clifford provides his readers with hints at the rich interpretive heritage of premodern Psalter study. It is beyond the scope of the Abingdon Old Testament Commentary series for Clifford to engage in extensive dialogue with the history of interpretation, but he does on occasion include representative remarks from important voices. Students and pastors will encounter snippets from the learned reflection of Jewish interpreters, the early church fathers, the voices of the Protestant Reformation, and even hymnody. I suspect that Clifford hopes to encourage his readers to delve into this premodern exegetical heritage, not by any means as a replacement for critical scholarship but rather as a theologically fertile supplement. Regarding the modern study of the psalms, Clifford’s dialogue with critical interpretation is mostly implicit. His writing exhibits a mastery of the field, and he clearly articulates his viewpoint in light of the issues raised in scholarly settings.

The book's only weakness is its lack of a substantive bibliography. To be sure, this is not a critical commentary, but Clifford includes only a list of works cited—a mere seventeen entries (a rather eclectic lot including several German titles). Readers would have benefited greatly from a list of major resources (modern and premodern) available in English for additional study.

Overall, *Psalms 1–72* is an excellent commentary. Clifford has succeeded in providing his target audience of theological students and pastors with an exegetically informed and theologically sensitive treatment of Pss 1–72. In addition, college students and educated laity will be richly rewarded through the study of this volume alongside the Psalter, and biblical scholars will benefit from having Clifford's mature reflections in print. The exegetical and theological depth that Clifford achieves in such an abbreviated format is exemplary and demonstrates that the relative brevity of a commentary need not be indicative of its importance.