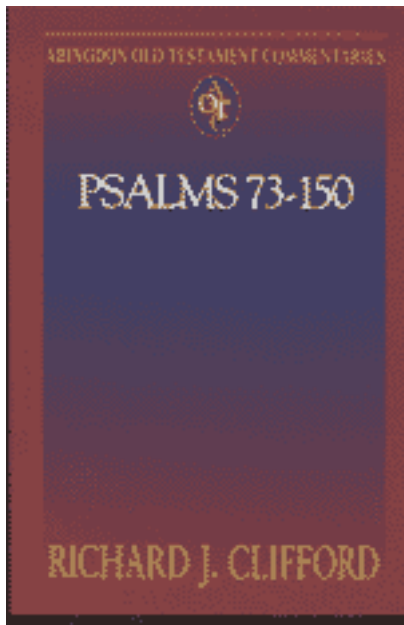


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Clifford, Richard J.

Psalms 73–150

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

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Beth LaNeel Tanner
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

This volume is the second one on the book of Psalms written by Clifford. The first volume was published in 2002 and was reviewed by James L. Crenshaw (see the review at http://bookreviews.org/pdf/3051_3316.pdf). The book is part of the new Abingdon Old Testament Series and is intended for college students as well as for use in the parish.

The commentary format requires the same categories for each psalm: introduction, literary analysis, exegetical analysis, and theological and ethical analysis. Unfortunately, the commentary format also demands that scholarly discussion and debate be kept to a minimum. This type of commentary style that has become popular recently hampers scholars such as Clifford, who have great linguistic abilities and theological depth, and ultimately shortchanges the reader who could benefit from the ongoing debates on how the psalms have been studied as well as from the author's wealth of academic knowledge. Despite this negative however, Clifford provides the reader with a well-presented overview of each psalm. His central focus uses Mowinckel's categorizations for the place of the psalms in Israel's worship (e.g., his treatment of the enthronement psalms).

As noted above, each psalm is presented via four sections. The first is an introduction that looks at the psalm holistically and provides an understanding of how one can understand

the movement of the psalm from its beginning to end. This is also where categories of the small units of the psalms are discussed, such as enthronement psalms or songs of ascent.

The first full category, literary analysis, is quite broad, containing a wide range of topics, including form criticism, ancient Israelite religious practices, any relevant historical information, ancient Near Eastern parallels, and poetic devices used in the psalm. As such, this section functions more as background information than as literary analysis proper. The sections on individual psalms have a great deal of repetition, as would be expected with a commentary format, but Clifford does a good job of emphasizing one or two of the aforementioned aspects depending on the psalm and his approach to its interpretation.

The second section, exegetical analysis, is further divided into sections or stanzas, and the discussion follows this stanza-by-stanza format. Each stanza has a “title” added by the author that summarizes the main point he sees in the section. Clifford does a good job of describing key words and providing information on the appearance of the words elsewhere. The discussions are brief, however, and often a reader wishes for more information. The references to other ancient Near Eastern parallels demonstrate his academic knowledge, but too often in this abbreviated format the reader would need to be fully aware of the ancient Near Eastern myths to fully understand their significance to the reading of the psalm. This is certainly a detriment for use in the parish setting, where one cannot assume that the audience knows anything about these myths. Nevertheless, Clifford’s ability and knowledge of the images that make up the stanzas shines through, and his use of parallels allows the reader, if not full access, at least good glimpses of the greater world in which Israel worshiped. His work on describing the council of the gods and the other gods that appear in the psalms are particularly well done.

The final section, theological and ethical analysis, is the hermeneutical section of the commentary where Clifford works to make the psalms relevant to a modern audience. Clifford is to be commended for addressing difficult issues such as how the “particularity” of place and people in the psalms can be misread against others of different faiths. For the most part, he struggles in this section with the hard questions the psalms pose. These comments can certainly be used by a preacher who wishes to use the psalms as instruction to the faithful in this age. However, while the comments are contemporary, they are not so specific as to be of limited use temporally. Clifford’s comments are general enough to stand the test of time. Another interesting aspect in this section is his use of the church fathers and their thoughts about the psalms and their theology. Often these are overlooked for more contemporary voices, and this brings an older and often-forgotten aspect to reflection on the psalms.

Clifford focuses on some central themes throughout the commentary, such as the center as God as king and ruler of the universe, but the commentary is also missing some of the most recent discussions in academia, such as the shape of the Psalter, poetic devices used both inter- and intrapsalmically, and some of the postmodern readings that bring different questions to the table. The commentary is solid, but the method of approach could have been broader. As is true of most commentaries, it does not explore new ground, but it does give some excellent reflection on psalms and psalms study.

Overall, this is a good resource for the recommended audience and will leave the reader wishing that the format had allowed for a more in-depth discussion by a scholar who has worked with these texts for many years.