

Book review

Ron Guengerich

Psalms, by James H. Waltner. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006.

Writing a commentary on the Psalms is like doing an analysis of a diverse forest that spreads across several ecosystems. The forest contains many trees, each of them distinctive. Some are of the same species or are closely related to other trees of the same genus. But some are of a totally different family. And in each ecosystem in the forest, each of the different trees stands in relationship to the community of trees that surrounds it. The different trees also form a distinctive pattern of growth.

So how do you write a commentary on 150 psalms—a forest of 150 trees—both great and small, and from different ecosystems? What comments do you make about this poetry, this collection of assorted prayers, songs, and reflections on life and God? What can you say about a forest that stretches across centuries and geographical locations? No commentary can ever be the final word; we could always say more about both the forest and the trees.

James Waltner has done a significant job of providing brief comments (after all, this is a *comment-ary*) on the 150 trees that make up this forest. Every psalm receives careful attention. The genres—lament, praise, wisdom reflection, liturgy, for example—are briefly identified but not tediously analyzed, the flow or development of the thought in the psalm is noted, and the crucial and distinctive words or word clusters are highlighted.

One of the most insightful and interesting aspects of the book is the way Waltner treats problematic issues in the Psalms. Within the comments on the Psalms he has included bracketed references—[Imprecation], for instance—that point the reader to essays at the end of the book, which address these issues in a systematic way. These essays are essential to Waltner's treatment

of the Psalms and constitute an important contribution of this book. In these essays, he deals with knotty problems that confront all Christians, but especially those espousing nonresistant and nonviolent beliefs.

Waltner's essays on vengeance, war and war images, imprecation, enemies, and wrath of God are an important resource for

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twenty-first century believers who are uneasy about psalm-prayers that include petitions erupting from angry, oppressed, abused, and maligned individuals and communities. These essays should be read and reread as one deals with the respective psalms. Through these essays, Waltner makes a wonderfully nuanced examination of how the psalmist prayed to God in dire, unjust situations. His conclusions are that, rightly understood and rightly spoken in the appropriate settings, these desperate and harsh psalms still have a place

in our prayers today. In these essays, Waltner provides a perspective on the raging outcries in Psalm 35, 58, 59, 69, or 109, for example, that can help us reclaim this "dangerous language" as an appropriate appeal to the God who has true authority and responsibility to deal with atrocities and injustices. References to other authors, whose work Waltner cites in these short essays, provide the inquiring reader with resources for delving deeper into these perplexing and troubling issues.

At the end of each commentary on an individual psalm, under the heading "The Text in the Biblical Context and the Life of the Church," Waltner provides observations about how this particular psalm fits into the forest of the rest of scripture. These helpful notes place the Psalms both within the larger canonical context and within the liturgical and theological worlds the Psalter helped shape. Seldom does one find notes this concise and suggestive in an exegetical commentary.

This commentary is a fitting memorial to James Waltner's powers of observation and deep love of scripture. This volume is the pile of stones that reflects a labor of persistent examination, deep regard for scripture, and practical wisdom about how the Psalms continue to be germane to our lives.

All commentaries are incomplete, but the trusted commentators are the ones who point us in the right direction, so that we can carry on their work. Waltner has pushed us to reconsider that all of scripture is profitable to us, even the psalms that petition God for vindication. I am confident that James Waltner would say Amen to adding Jesus' parable about the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) to prayers for justice and prayers of imprecation. After the widow's prayer, "Vindicate me against my adversary," Jesus asks the enigmatic question, "But when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Will we have the faith to pray all these prayers, even the prayers for vindication?

About the reviewer

Ron Guengerich is on the pastoral team at Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, and taught at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and Hesston College after doing doctoral studies in Old Testament at the University of Michigan.