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Reading, Preaching, and Teaching the Psalms

by André Resner

Christians throughout the centuries have focused on the New Testament documents as the primary source for their theological reflection and ecclesial deliberation. A good case can be made for this. After all, the New Testament is the record of the earliest church's theological reflection and ecclesial deliberation. The Old Testament has typically played the role of supporting actor in this situation. If used at all, it has functioned in a John-the-Baptist-type mode, preparing the way for the Testament which was to come.

One Old Testament book which has received greater recognition and use has been the Psalms. Publishers have recognized for a long time that their Christian customers enjoy having at least one Old Testament book bound in with their coat-pocket New Testament. Thus it is not unusual to see "The New Testament with the Psalms" (and sometimes even the Proverbs) on bookstore shelves. I doubt, however, that there have been many meetings at Holman, Nelson and Zondervan debating the merits of publishing "The New Testament with Habakkuk," or "The New Testament with Obadiah and Haggai."

The Psalms have been consistently appropriated by Christians as their own. I think this is because of their fundamental character as prayers. Just as Jesus' disciples entreated him, we still want to entreat, "Lord, teach us to pray." Thus, the Psalms have functioned as the church's speech-teacher for prayer.

That brings me to a bias that you must know that I have about reading, preaching or teaching the Psalms. They are prayers. The French have a proverb: "One learns to cook by cooking." My bias is that if one wants to learn to pray, the best way to

learn is by praying. A sermon on prayer ought to do more than talk about prayer. It ought to be framed by prayer, both in its preparation and in its delivery, and it ought to compel the hearers to prayer. A class on prayer ought to lead to prayer, and in some sense itself be a prayer. One succeeds in reading, preaching and teaching the Psalms when genuine prayer is the result of one's study, one's proclamation and one's instruction.

Not all scholarship on the Psalms agrees with my bias. That is because different people read the Psalms for different purposes. Some readers of the Psalms are not at all interested in prayer, or in God for that matter, but rather are interested in ancient forms of kingship or cultic activity. Some read the Psalms as an example of poetic Hebrew; i.e. their interests are literary. All of these ways of reading are important and have their place in serious readings of the text, but you need to know that my primary interest in reading, preaching and teaching the Psalms is theological and confessional. I write as a believer and suggest literature here that I hope will help you to appropriate the Psalms in your life of faith and witness.

Commentaries

To let you know how I operate, I like to have at least two commentaries on the book of the Bible that I am studying--one that is more technical, historical-critical in approach, and one that is more theological in emphasis. I rank the following works in order of their usefulness for my study.

Technical

1. Hans-Joachim Kraus (**Psalms 1-59** and

Psalms 60-150, Augsburg Press, 1988, 1993) has written a two-volume technical commentary on the Psalms. Kraus asks form-critical questions as well as more theologically oriented questions and is interested in the poetic aspects of the literature. I always consult Kraus when studying a psalm.

2. P. Craigie (**Psalms 1-50**, 1983), M. Tate (**Psalms 51-100**, 1990) and L. C. Allen (**Psalms 101-150**, 1983) have completed the Three-volume commentary set for the **Word Biblical Commentary** series (Word Publishing). It contains much technical information, including a good but now dated bibliography, yet tends to lack theological muscle. My preference would have been for one person to have written the whole, for the sake of continuity.

Theological

1. James Luther Mays' recent contribution in the **Interpretation** series is a truly theological commentary in that Mays asks of each psalm what it "says about God and God's way with human beings and the predicament and promise of human life before the reality of God." This is a good (though too brief) help, especially as one contemplates the sermon or class that must be presented from any particular psalm.

2. D. Kidner's two brief volumes on the Psalms in the **Tyndale Old Testament Commentary** series are quite helpful theological conversation partners on the Psalms (Intervarsity Press, 1973, 1975).

3. Also worth exploring is W. VanGemeren's "Psalms" in **The Expositor's Commentary** (Zondervan, 1991).

Special Studies

The real gold mine in psalm studies is in the many excellent special studies which focus on the overall theology of the Psalms, while often including insightful essays on individual psalms. It is more difficult to rank these, but I will do so in order of their usefulness in my own work.

1. Bernhard W. Anderson's **Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak to Us Today** (1970, 1983) is worth mentioning. From its lucidly written theological explanations to its helpful appendices on psalm types and classifications, I find that I use this slim volume often. I found mine at a book fair for 25 cents. Good luck.

2. Walter Brueggemann has written a number of very useful studies on the Psalms. Chief among these are: **The Message of the Psalms** (Augsburg, 1984), **Praying the Psalms** (St. Mary's Press, 1986), and **Israel's Praise** (Fortress, 1988). If you don't know Brueggemann, you should.

3. Patrick D. Miller wrote a helpful study of

the **Psalms** in 1986 (Fortress) and added to that a recent book which expands his earlier work into a theology of prayer not only in the Psalms, but also in the larger Old Testament canon (**They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer**, Fortress, 1995).

4. Not to be overlooked is the important work that Claus Westermann has done in psalmic studies. I recommend his **Praise and Lament in the Psalms** (John Knox, 1981), **The Living Psalms** (Eerdmans, 1989), and **The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message** (Augsburg, 1980).

5. Two quite different works should also be included here.

a) Hans-Joachim Kraus' **Theology of the Psalms** (Augsburg, 1986) is a thoroughgoing critical study of various aspects of the Psalms; i.e. the enemies, the king, God, the sanctuary, and the individual and the presence of God. It is worth the effort.

b) Eugene Peterson's **Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer** (Harper Collins, 1991) has proven helpful for my students and is the most popular-level "special study" in this list.

Preaching

An ongoing debate in the homiletic literature has had to do with the preachability of the Psalms. Are the Psalms to be preached? Different conclusions have been drawn based upon different perceptions of the nature of the literature and its function in the community. The operating procedure of Donald Gowan's **Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit** (John Knox, 1980) is to allow the form of the Old Testament text to shape the form of the sermon. He argues that because the Psalms were poetry and usually direct address to God, they cannot function for preaching. Thomas G. Long's **Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible** (Fortress, 1989) overcame Gowan's rigidity by recognizing that in preaching we are not attempting to reduplicate the form of the biblical text in the sermon, but rather we are attempting to reduplicate the "deed" of the text. For Long, the text's form does something to the reader. The preacher's task is to ask what in fact does happen to the reader in, for instance, the reading of a psalm. When he turns to produce a sermon on that psalm, the preacher must choose an appropriate sermon form which will produce the same action or deed to the hearers of the sermon as was produced in the reader of the psalm. Long's book is the single most helpful book in showing the preacher how to go from text to sermon.

Two other helpful books on preaching from the Psalms are Elizabeth Achtemeier's **Preaching from the Old Testament** (Westminster/John Knox

Press, 1989) and Ronald Allen and John Holbert's **Holy Root, Holy Branches: Christian Preaching from the Old Testament** (Abingdon, 1995).

The Laments

I include a special section for the lament (complaint/outcry) psalms because they have been the most neglected in Christian appropriation. Through personal loss, and ministry to others in grief, I have discovered the faith-giving power of this pocket of psalmic literature. One book of particular usefulness in understanding the laments in the context of biblical literature and theology is Robert Davidson's **The Courage to Doubt** (SCM Press, 1983). Davidson urges Christians to critically evaluate their hymnbooks in view of Israel's (and our only canonical) hymnbook. Brueggemann has written prolifically and helpfully about this psalm-type. See his already mentioned books above as well as the following articles: "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," **Journal for the Study of the Old Testament** 17 (1980) 3-32; "The Formfulness of Grief," **Interpretation** 31 (1977) 263-275; and, "From Hurt to Joy, from Death to Life," **Interpretation** 28 (1974) 3-19. Recent hymnals have attempted to take seriously the Psalms in their canonical shape and with their canonical message rather than clean them up for evangelical consumption. One in particular that puts all 150 psalms to music, leaving intact even Psalm 88 without Christian qualification, is **The Psalter Hymnal** (CRC Publications, 1987, 1988). This new hymnal has an index which even includes these biblical--though rarely seen in Christian hymnals--entries: "Afflictions," "Brevity and Frailty of Life," "Doubt," "Enemies and Persecutions," "Laments," "Pilgrimage and Conflict," and "Poverty." Hymn #576 is a contemporary lament entitled, "A Congregational Lament." Inspired by the psalms of lament, this hymn is a beautiful hymn of questioning and petition which teaches the church how to pray together to God in

honesty. Another study on the theological and spiritual import of the lament psalms is my own "Lament: Faith's Response to Loss," **Restoration Quarterly** 32 (1990) 129-142.

Conclusion

One thing I've learned about preaching and teaching the Psalms: They are community property. Their theology is in the public domain. Our people have lived within this region of the biblical literature in ways that they have not elsewhere. Some psalms especially fit this description. Psalm 23 is perhaps the greatest example of it. The people to which you are called to speak in preaching and teaching have experienced this psalm at the most intense times of their lives. Any reading of Psalm 23 conjures up ghosts from funerals, hospital rooms, and graveside services. When people hear "The Lord is my shepherd. . ." they see faces, they smell smells, they feel feelings, they hear sounds from other contexts in which that psalm was used. The text of the 23rd Psalm has become authoritative in the most powerful manner possible: our people have experienced the promise, the presence, and the power of God by its use in their lives at their most critical moments. About the only thing the good preacher and teacher of the Psalms can do in the face of such a situation is to reflect the congregation's experience of the psalm. Interweave their experiences of the psalm with your study. Don't overwhelm their experience with expertise gained from historical and literary study. It won't hold a candle to the grave of their dead and beloved mother. Rather, interweave things they may learn from your exegesis with things they already know from their own experience, and be in awe. Be thankful that in preaching and teaching the Psalms, we stand on a ground made holy by the God who really does speak to us "out of the depths."

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