
Preface

In the preface to his 1528 translation of the Psalter, Martin Luther wrote that the Psalter

might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.¹

Luther's oft-quoted description of the Psalter well illustrates both the ready accessibility of the book of Psalms as well as the deeply theological nature of its poems. The Psalms—filled with potent metaphors, raw cries of pain, clear confessions of faith, and joyous songs of praise—have been central to the life of faith because the people of God have had no trouble finding points of contact between these poems and their own lives. Moreover, God's people have not found those points of connection to be fleeting, shallow, or disappointing. Once tapped, the theological well of the Psalter

does not go dry but rather becomes a flowing stream of living water to which believers long to return. The durability and accessibility of the Psalms has meant not only that believers have returned to them again and again as texts vital for the life of faith, but so too have theologians returned to the Psalms again and again as a source for reflection, wisdom, and revelation about the living God. In short, the psalms are both a source for faith and for theology—which is, after all, the systematic reflection on faith statements.

The present volume adds another chapter to the conversation about the theology of the book of Psalms. It does not seek to offer a definitive theology of the Psalms, but as indicated by the title of the series to which this volume belongs, it seeks various soundings regarding the theology of the Psalms. The essays by Jerome Creach, J. Clinton McCann, Beth Tanner, and myself first saw light as part of an invited session of the “Book of Psalms Section” of the Society of Biblical Literature at its 2008 annual meeting, in which participants were asked to address the question of the theology of the book of Psalms. Those essays were expanded and/or rewritten and now appear here in final form. Additional invitations were sent, and I was very pleased when Harry Nasuti, Nancy deClaissé-Walford, and Joel LeMon were also willing and able to contribute. Finally, Walter Brueggemann agreed to allow his seminal essay “The Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function” to be reprinted, with the permission of Fortress Press, as part of the ongoing conversation.

In North America, the conversation surrounding the theology of the Psalms has largely been hosted by the Reformed tradition—one thinks of such luminaries as James Luther Mays, Bernhard Anderson, Patrick Miller, William Brown and, of course, Walter Brueggemann. The strong presence of Reformed voices in this volume (Brueggeman, Creach, McCann, and Tanner) bears further witness of how fruitful the conversation between Reformed theologians and the Psalms has been and continues to be. This volume also intentionally includes voices to represent other traditions. So added here are essays by a Wesleyan (Joel LeMon), Roman Catholic

(Harry Nasuti), Baptist (Nancy deClaissé-Walford), and Lutheran (Rolf Jacobson). All of the scholars here write both as biblical theologians of the guild and as representatives of their own theological traditions. Invitations to scholars representing other traditions were also issued, but life circumstances did not permit them to participate in this round of the conversation.

I wish to express my gratitude to Victoria Smith, who helped with preparation of the manuscript, and to Neil Elliott at Fortress Press, without whose encouragement this volume would not have been finished. I also wish to thank the Society of Biblical Literature and especially the book of Psalms Section for being the seedbed for scholarly research into the Psalms. I am also grateful for the colleagues whose essays appear here. Beth Tanner, Clint McCann, Harry Nasuti, Joel LeMon, Jerome Creach, Nancy deClaissé-Walford, and Walter Brueggemann are not only scholars and teachers for whom I have great respect, they are friends whom I love. Working with them on these essays has been for me an experience of divine grace—an instance, to borrow again from Luther, of the “mutual conversation of brothers and sisters” as a means of God’s grace (*Smalcald Articles* 3.4). This volume is dedicated to my first two teachers in the Psalms—Diane Jacobson and James Limburg. Both are prime examples that the promise of Psalm 1 is trustworthy. They have spent their lives sinking their roots deep into the life-giving water of the Word of the Lord. In all they have done, they have prospered.

Rolf A. Jacobson