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**Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar, and Erich Zenger  
Baltzer, Klaus, ed.**

***Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100***

Translated by Linda M. Maloney

Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on  
the Bible

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Scholars working on the Old Testament in general as well as those specializing on the Psalter in particular will inevitably come across the names Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Bonn, Germany, and Erich Zenger, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Münster, Germany. Both have individually published a number of relevant monographs in the field and together accomplished two volumes of a commentary on the Psalms accompanied by the German *Einheitsübersetzung* (*Die Psalmen: Psalm 1–50* [NEchtB 29; Würzburg: Echter, 1993]; *Die Psalmen: Psalm 51–100* [NEchtB 40; Würzburg: Echter, 2002]) with volume 3 still to be published. However, the common project of the two is their meticulous work on a three-volume commentary in the Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (HTKAT) series with volumes 1 and 3 still to come. Their commentary on Pss 51–100 (*Psalmen 51–100* [HTKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2000]) alone comprises 727 pages (compare the 212 pages of the appropriate volume in the NEchtB series). Although a massive volume, this middle part of the three-set commentary has not become a classic due to its physical weight. Hossfeld and Zenger provide fresh translations, text-critical and philological details, comments on contents and structure, and some notes on the text of the Septuagint and the survival of specific topics in the New Testament for each psalm.

The editorial board of the Hermeneia series (see my notes on the series in my review of L. Edward Phillips, Paul F. Bradshaw, and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Apostolic Tradition*, RBL 34 [2003: [http://bookreviews.org/pdf/2989\\_3104.pdf](http://bookreviews.org/pdf/2989_3104.pdf) ]) has made a wise decision to choose this fine example of a historical-critical commentary to be translated for Hermeneia, something that is in accordance with the series manifesto (xi: “Occasionally the series

will offer translations of distinguished commentaries which originally appeared in languages other than English”). The translator, Linda M. Maloney, is also not unknown to readers of the Hermeneia volumes, as she has already shown her skill and expertise in translating, for instance, Georg Strecker’s *Johannine Letters* and Kurt Niederwimmer’s *The Didache* for the same series. Needless to say, she has done a brilliant job again. An attentive reader may even get the impression that her English rendering is more fluent—sometimes even more colloquial and so readable—than the German original, which consists of paragraphs saturated with technical terms and abstract theological phrases and then of those written in a more narrative and fluent manner.

The table of contents and structure slavishly follow the German edition, something that is to be expected from a good translation, but the layout is different. As is typical of all the previous volumes in the Hermeneia, series the text is set in two columns per page. Being used to single-column pages with letters of regular size, I must admit that the layout caused some trouble as far as reading is concerned. It is fortunate that the sketches of ancient Near Eastern and ancient Egyptian iconography by Hildi Keel-Leu, Fribourg, are reproduced in their original size. Of course, it would have been rewarding to have “the reception of the Psalms by the rabbis and the church fathers” side by side with the commentary (xii). Nonetheless, due to “the size of the individual volumes” Hossfeld and Zenger refrained from integrating those interesting areas of research and excluded them for special projects in the future, to be carried out by other scholars.

What makes this commentary stand out from all the others formally is, next to the reception of the Psalms in the New Testament, the significance given to the Septuagint. Ariane Cordes, who recently completed her doctoral thesis (to a quite extent based on the cooperation with her colleagues in the Psalm Section of the Septuaginta Deutsch project: <http://www.lxx-deutsch.de>) and worked “in the special research division ‘Functions of Religion in the Societies of the Ancient Near East’ at the University of Münster, in the subproject ‘The Septuagint Psalter and Hellenistic Culture’ under the auspices of Erich Zenger, is largely responsible for the sections on the Septuagint text of each psalm. Without a doubt there are several commentaries that take the Septuagint seriously and write about it to some extent. Here I have Klaus Seybold’s *Die Psalmen* (HAT 1/5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), in mind, which provides text-critical notes from the Septuagint, somewhat more than the Hebrew text of *BHS* does. Real hermeneutical judgments about the Greek text of the Septuagint, as presented in Hossfeld and Zenger’s work, are hard to find. Nevertheless, commentaries specializing in the Septuagint and therefore underscoring its significance are still missing even today, so the initiatives of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/ioscs>) are unique in their extent and variety, above all the new

project to bring forth a series of commentaries on the Septuagint: the SBL Commentary on the Septuagint (see <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=429>).

Although some readers may justifiably ask why these two scholars started with Pss 51–100 and not from the very beginning of the Psalter, they immediately get an appropriate answer (xi): “Because we do not regard the Psalter, as some other commentators have, as nothing but a ‘storage cabinet’ for individual psalms, but rather as a successively developed, but nevertheless compositionally structured entity whose form gives an additional dimension of meaning to each individual psalm, the ‘introduction’ can be meaningfully composed only when we have analyzed all the individual psalms.” Nevertheless, following a general bibliography (xvii–xxv) Hossfeld and Zenger supply readers with a brief “Sketch of the Origins of Psalms 51–100” (1–7) before they start commenting on Ps 51.

Each of the fifty psalm-sections is introduced by a specific bibliography. Then the Masoretic Text is translated into English, supplemented by text-critical and philological notes in order to make the decision in favor of or against an alternative reading comprehensible to readers. These notes are themselves rewarding in most instances, even if there is a great variety of length and precision between certain psalms and the two authors, who indicated at the end of each psalm which of them is responsible for the previous display of the psalm. The various positions of scholars are presented analytically before questions of origin, date, and purpose are tackled. Consecutive comments on verse units form the main part of each psalm chapter. Some remarks are then given about context (the psalm in its specific context), reception (Septuagint, Targum, New Testament), and significance (theological and doctrinal). Of course, the length of treatment differs according to the problems encountered and the importance attached to each psalm. A detailed index of biblical quotations (499–552) enables readers to find their way through the meticulous volume. Unfortunately, other indices (e.g., names of modern authors, subjects, and nonbiblical references) are missing, as in the German original.

Hossfeld and Zenger adopt a historical-critical approach, which means that they attempt to explain each psalm against its potential historical background and that, when appropriate, they integrate information from their (often contemporary) geographical vicinity. Thus, readers find drawings of reliefs and cylinder seals accompanying the interpretation of LXX Ps 87 (see plates 1–4 on pp. 383–84), which contributes to one’s impression of temples, its foundations by gods, and mythological scenes of how mighty gods sat enthroned in the midst of springs arising beneath them. Even if one of the drawings—the Akkadian cylinder seal from Mari (384 plate 3)—originates from a time

much earlier than the psalm (2200 B.C.E.), these drawings are a good help in visualizing various ideas and topics.

Additionally, the authors provide an introductory section to the religious-historical and theological background where necessary (for Ps 87, p. 379). Even if “Literary-Critical Observations” (for Ps 84, pp. 351–53) are made and “Redaction-Critical” aspects (for Ps 81, p. 321) are taken into account, Hossfeld and Zenger refrain from emendations of the Masoretic Text as much as possible. Rather, they try to explain and interpret the Hebrew text as it is given in the manuscripts and traditions, check interesting readings of the versions and in the scrolls of Qumran, and then reflect upon the semantics of the Hebrew lexeme in order to present a sensible translation that fits the context, a method that works fairly well. So, even if a phrase is occasionally quite complicated and obscure, the text is accepted as it was handed down (cf. other classical German commentaries, such as those by H. Gunkel or H.-J. Kraus, who were free with emendations of the Hebrew text). Of course, such a method enables the reader to access the text in an unbiased way and to trust the manuscripts and traditions. At the same time, readers are implicitly encouraged to think twice and not to be satisfied with the main meaning of a lexeme as presented in the classical dictionaries and also to take into account alternative vocalizations of the Hebrew words and phrases.

Without doubt, this commentary should be one of the first choices among commentaries on the Psalms for every scholar involved in research in the field. Its methodology is clear, honest, and logical; the material presented is rich; and the structure is effective so that—even without a detailed set of indices—readers will find their way to whatever psalm and its background they are searching for. The editorial board of *Hermeneia* is to be thanked for its decision to publish a translation of such a first-class commentary and, thus, to facilitate access to its rich contents for an international audience. With the publication of volumes 1 (introduction; Pss 1–50) and 2 (Pss 101–150), this commentary set will likely become the standard reference tool for future research on the Psalms, although even students and laypeople interested in the Psalms will profit from the narrative display, the translations, the analyses, and the interpretations.