
Hossfeld and Zenger have provided us with volume 2 in what will be a three-volume commentary on the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, in the Hermeneia series. This volume addresses Psalm 51-100. Hossfeld is professor of Old Testament at the University of Bonn, and Zenger fills the comparable chair at Munster. The former has previously published Der Dekalog (1982), Vom Sinai zum Horeb (1989), Prophet gegen Prophet (1973), and Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie des Ezechielbuches (1977). Zenger is the author of numerous
works, including To Begin With: God Created (2000), and A God of Vengeance (1996). Hermeneia is a flagship commentary series for Augsburg Fortress and Peter Machinist of Harvard is the chairman of the Old Testament editorial board, while his colleague at Harvard, Helmut Koester, chairs the New Testament editorial board for the series.

We have become accustomed to the volumes in the Hermeneia series being massive, meticulous, profound, detailed, and current, as regarding the relevant scholarly database. This volume measures up to those high standards set by such heavy weights as Zimmerli on Ezekiel, Wolff on Minor Prophets, Haenchen on John, Betz on Galatians, and Conzelmann and Debelius on Pauline Epistles and James. The authors make their apologia for starting their series of three volumes on the Psalms with what is in effect, volume 2, on the grounds that they assume the book of Psalms of the Old Testament is not just a catch basket for 150 songs, but rather that the book of the Psalms is crafted in such a way that there is a cumulative effect for the meaning of each Psalm that derives from its place in the entire corpus and its meaning. Thus, they correctly argue, since the introduction to the entire work must normally go into volume 1 and cannot properly be written until each Psalm is thoroughly analyzed in its own right and in its place in the whole corpus, the authors cannot possibly know how to write the introduction until they have finished the work on all the Psalms. We can expect volume 3 next, and then finally, volume 1.

The methodology of this commentary is predictable but also brilliant. Each section begins with a most valuable bibliography of about twenty-five volumes, followed by the authors’ original translation of the ancient Hebrew into English. This is followed by a detailed analysis and exegesis of the text of the individual psalm under consideration, followed by a brief history of the scholarship on the Psalm, and a hermeneutical explication that describes the nature of the Psalm together with its multilayered message. This is accomplished for the Psalm, section by section in a form-critical and literary-analytic process. Then the setting as to date, provenance, cultural context, purpose, and origins is set forth, followed by an exhaustive exposition or interpretation. Such interpretation expresses the theological burden of the Psalm as well as the import of its place in the book of the Psalms, that is, its literary context in the canonical tradition. The study of each Psalm is drawn toward its theological and cultural conclusion with a careful description of the hermeneutical context, reception, significance, relationship to the preceding Psalm, and such related data as its place in or relationship to the Psalter of Asaph. Final details include relevant light from the way in which the Psalm is employed in the LXX, what the Targumim have to say about it, and its role in the New Testament. All these contribute to the total picture of the Psalm’s specific significance.

It is generally the case that commentaries of any kind have only limited value for the scholar who has done his own sturdy work with the original languages for a substantial number of decades, but this work is filled with interesting nuances of insight that will illumine any student or teacher who wishes to
reflect the highly refracted light shining here from this stellar ancient poetry. Moreover, any preacher who wishes to really savor the flavor of these hymnic cadences and convey them with the poetic style they deserve will find this volume by Hossfeld and Zenger indispensable.

—J. Harold Ellens