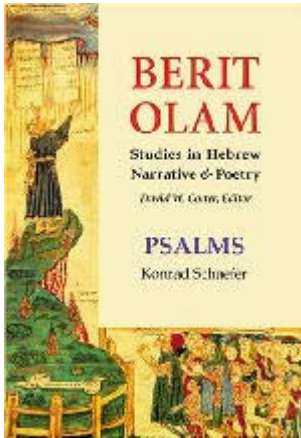


RBL 10/2002



Schaefer, Konrad

Psalms

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry

Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xlv + 399, Cloth, \$49.95, ISBN 0814650619.

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In line with the stated goal of the Berit Olam commentary series, Konrad Schaefer has provided an often fresh literary reading of the Psalter. Accordingly, Schaefer pays particular attention to the poetic structure and metaphorical characteristics of the psalms, with special interest in how these may be “transposed and interpreted in the contemporary life of the reader who wishes to contact God and understand life in relation to God” (p. viii).

The book is arranged with an introduction that covers many of the basic structural—imagery; repetition and parallelism; context and sequence—as well as thematic—disease; enemies; curses—issues the reader will encounter in the Psalter. Highlighting their subordinate status, critical issues such as superscriptions, redaction, and *Sitz im Leben* are left to appendices. An index of Hebrew words is provided. The commentary proper is organized according to the liturgical division of the Psalter into five books. There are no full translations of the texts. The notes themselves display little interest in current critical issues dogging Psalms study (there is little to no discussion of wisdom redaction or form-critical categories, for example), focusing instead on stylistic and rhetorical features, while leaving aside as well the latest literary critical trends (not surprisingly then, there are very few footnotes). Schaefer is, however, cognizant of the likely ancient (and actual modern) liturgical setting of any given psalm. An entire section in his introduction that concentrates on shifts of address and modes of discourse substantiates this assumption, as do references in his notes.

Anyone familiar with the sensitivity with which Luis Alonso Schökel has read biblical poetry will immediately notice his influence on Schaefer’s perspective and style. His similarly sensitive readings are mostly geared to enhancing the experience of those

interested in praying the psalms, personally or communally; in fact, many of his readings suggest that psalms be understood primarily as models for faith (p. xxix). In this, one can imagine he is quite successful. He does a proficient job at making Hebrew metaphors accessible to those reading and appropriating these prayers in translation, providing the Hebrew root and often offering a number of possible connotations as well as supplying whatever cultural background might be necessary for a full appreciation of the metaphor's meaning. His notes are chock-full of useful cross-references to other biblical texts, and although he is clearly focused on modern appropriations of these texts, he is amply aware of their possible socio-historical backdrops and alludes to these whenever such background might enhance an understanding of the poetry's rhetorical intentions. He is an equally keen observer of thematic and lexical connections between juxtaposed psalms (though the hermeneutical usefulness of pointing out these sometimes obscure relationships is somewhat dubious).

Although he appears somewhat conversant with, and sensitive to, Jewish interpretive concerns, Schaefer is not afraid to make plain his Christian (Roman Catholic) background, nor to interpret from that position (the term "Jesus" merits a place in the index, although it is absent). One full page of notes on Psalm 22 is dedicated to a balanced consideration of its recontextualization in Christian scripture, and uses of the terms "devil" and "Satan", as well as his note of the "striking" absence in the psalms of doctrinal expressions of faith in eternal life (p. xxv) make explicit a Christian point of view.

As part of his objective to assist readers in putting the psalms in service of their own relationship to God, he finds it necessary to assume a "benign judgment on the use of violence" (p. viii) in the poems of lament especially. Although he doesn't wince from addressing the legion expressions of vengeance and retribution, his discussion of these in general often borders on apologia. On the one hand, he disdains any attempt to "soften these violent images", but on the other can't help doing a considerable amount of it himself. Illustrative is his discussion of Psalm 137 in the introduction (p. xxxix-xl), in which he sanitizes the "little ones" of "dash them against the rock" infamy by describing them not as children, per se, but as standing for "the future generations of evil which must be destroyed". He handles the ancient poets with kid gloves as well by making the undefended claim that when they invoke a curse they are consciously transferring their anger into the care of God and thereby trusting that sooner or later justice will be done. As such, he distances the poet from the emotion of his or her poetry: Rather than reading it as literal, "[the expression of violence] belongs to the poet's critical concern over the messiness of life" (p. xlii). Thus, there is an overriding tension between Schaefer's admirable challenge to the church to include even the most troubling psalms in its prayer life and his own obvious discomfort in reading the very same psalms on their own terms.

All in all, this volume is not exactly a sustained commentary, but something more along the lines of a collection of discretionary notes on aspects of each psalm that the author finds most relevant for religious edification. This approach seems well enough suited to his goal, but it might prove frustrating for those expecting to find verse by verse explication. Too often he comments on a quote or aspect of the psalm without citing the

verse and without indicating if the translation he is assuming is his or the NRSV: Catholic Edition—not an insurmountable obstacle, but frustrating. Some kind of organization, with subsections perhaps, would have made the analyses easier to follow. As it is, the volume reads almost like a devotional piece in its own right. This is not to say that there aren't many uniquely insightful observations, only that without some kind of obvious organization or sustained discussion of any one point, they are not always easily located or appreciated.