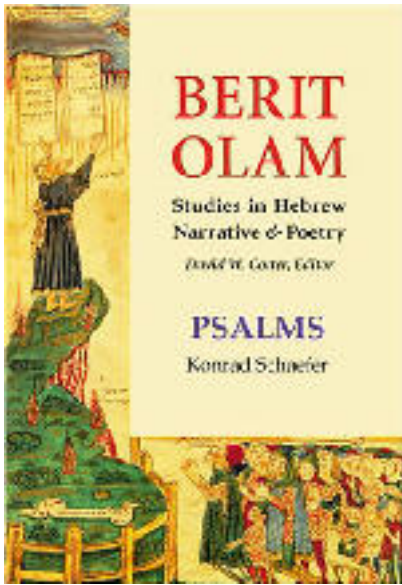


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**Schaefer, Konrad**

*Psalms*

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

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In keeping with the design of the Berit Olam series, this commentary on the Psalms takes a synchronic approach to the received Hebrew text and its literary-rhetorical features. The work is intended to appeal to a wide audience, from lay people to professional biblical scholars. The author shepherds the Benedictine monastic community of Our Lady of the Angels in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he also teaches in the Bible school and the diocesan seminary. The volume has a preface and an introduction followed by the psalm commentary proper, which is laid out according to the five books of the Psalter. Three appendices discuss the superscriptions, prehistory of the Psalter, and literary types. A list of works for further reading contains about forty references. Three indexes are devoted to scriptural references, general subjects, and Hebrew words.

Schaefer recognizes in his preface (ii–x) that many Bible readers are particularly drawn to the Psalter. They repeatedly experience its content in novel ways with new insights. Even so, Schaefer is concerned that the images, phrases, and ideas encountered in the Psalter are sometimes far from the contemporary reader’s life and interest. Therefore, his commentary “seeks to respond to this difficulty by adopting a particular focus in the appreciation of the psalms as poems which chart a profound and vital relationship with God, with all the ups and downs that such a relationship implies” (vii). Since many other studies of the Psalter have emphasized the literary types of psalms, Schaefer relegates this

subject primarily to an appendix and chooses a different slant for his commentary. He presents “a mental snapshot of the psalm and highlight[s] some of the contours of the poetry, the phrases and images which otherwise may be lost on the reader who approaches the psalms in translation. Thus, a decision has been made in the commentary to identify the dynamics of the poetic discourse and thus enhance the reader’s appreciation of the rhetoric and imagery, which are major keys to the meaning of the psalms” (viii). This commentary is based on the Hebrew text but is designed to be used alongside the NRSV translation. Schaefer’s approach to reading the psalms claims considerable indebtedness to three of his teachers: Bonaventure Zerr, Luis Alonso Schökel, and Raymond Tournay.

The introduction (xi–xiv) provides a thorough and effective entrée to Schaefer’s treatment of the psalms individually and of the Psalter as a whole in his commentary. Therefore, it is this introduction that will receive most of the attention in this review.

The introduction is divided into seven subsections. The first discusses imagery and focuses on how the psalmist “depicts reality, both actual and distorted, with a broad panorama of images” (xii). Schaefer grounds this in the conception of the interconnectedness of the moral and physical world that is reflected in the psalms’ use of geophysical and spatial imagery to portray the state of the poet’s soul. Schaefer goes on to categorize several images in the psalms as “ephemeral”: the slippery road (73:18), a dream that vanishes upon waking (73:20), withered grass or chaff blowing in the wind (35:5; 83:13), a forest fire (83:14), a breath or passing shadow (144:4), human plans like puffs of air (94:11), the lifespan as a handbreadth (39:5), and fickle emotions in which weeping comes at evening and shouts of joy in the morning (30:5). Schaefer also lists many metaphors used to describe God in the psalms, finds remarkable the frequent recourse to plant imagery “given that much of Palestine is an arid dust bowl for most of the year” (xiii), and shows how the poet often adds vividness to a composition by using contrasting images.

Secondly, Schaefer’s discussion of repetition and parallelism in Hebrew poetry draws heavily on the works of James L. Kugel and Robert Alter, taking care to highlight the point of the former’s critique of the classical system yet (interestingly) without directly mentioning the work of Robert Lowth. Schaeffer’s commentary gives special attention to the repetition of words, images, and their contrasts, which he finds often couched in parallel structures.

Thirdly, Schaefer considers the present arrangement of the psalms. This discussion draws on the work of Gerald H. Wilson and is complemented later in an appendix devoted to the prehistory of the Psalter. For Schaefer, the first three books (Pss 1–98) take their cue

from two royal psalms (Pss 2; 89) that serve as bookends. Also, the bulk of the Psalter (Pss 1–119) is framed by two torah psalms. Thus he finds in this arrangement that one large collection (Pss 1–118) and two smaller ones (Pss 120–136; 138–150) end with *hallelujah* psalms and that Ps 119 holds a special place. Schaeffer’s view of the synthetic structure of the Psalter is expressed in a helpful chart (xx). Although he finds scant evidence that the positioning of the consecutive psalms in the Psalter has a discernable logic, Schaefer sees various poetic structuring devices as indicating the editorial grouping together of many psalms. Particularly, a “septenary pattern of words bridging two psalms indicates an editor’s hand” (xxi). Schaeffer’s commentary endeavors to make special note “of paired and triplet psalm sequences, their verbal, thematic, and stylistic relation, and how the sense of one psalm complements its neighbor” (xxi).

Fourthly, Schaeffer’s approach to shifts in address and modes of discourse is foundational for his rich and nuanced reading of many psalms in a liturgical context. Shifts of address are the basis for distinguishing when God is spoken about or addressed, when the enemy is alternately objectified and addressed, and when an individual complains to God and suddenly rallies the community to hope. Special consideration is given to frequent shifts between third- and second-person discourse, which are considered a common characteristic of liturgical and prophetic texts as well. Schaefer also tends to consider shifts from singular to plural as reflecting transitions from an individual drama to the community. Some abrupt shifts in the poet’s mood are also explained as affected by an explicit, indirect, or tacit oracle from God. However, Schaeffer admits that there is more often no apparent cause for brusque transitions from complaint to assurance. In any case, for Schaefer, sudden changes in discourse and mood are not surprising if one considers the psalms as liturgical texts. Indeed, “[t]he reader [of the psalms] gets the impression that a stage is missing” (xxiii). However, one is left to wonder what place, if any, Schaefer would give to the use of the poetic device of *enallagē* in the psalms. This is a significant omission by Schaefer, because recognition of a psalmist’s utilization of *enallagē* has the potential to seriously undermine efforts to interpret some psalms as reflecting a liturgical context.

Fifthly, in the subsection entitled “A School of Prayer,” Schaefer takes up the subject of how the *orante*, the devout person who prays the psalms, may appreciate them as poetic expressions of religious experiences that have been preserved by a worshipping faith community that extends to the present. This is a special contribution of Schaeffer’s commentary. Given his understanding of the psalms as reflecting a liturgical context, his discussion of these aspects has scholarly as well as pastoral justification and should not be dismissed as mere trafficking in pious religious sentiments. The Psalter does not avoid confessional contexts.

Schaefer addresses several contexts in which the psalms can be understood and appreciated. The first is the Hebrew poet's culture and experience, which the *orante* accesses through study. The second is the context applied to some psalms by the superscriptions (e.g., Ps 59), which serve to draw readers out of themselves and suggest an analogous setting that can be adopted in prayer. The third setting is the context of the contemporary reader's experience. Schaefer goes on to elaborate the dynamics associated particularly with this third context. He explains that the *orante* establishes communion with the Hebrew poet by praying the psalms and is thereby provided with new possibilities for expression of a deeper religious experience in which the poet's sentiments are translated into the heart of the *orante*. The poet's experience becomes vicarious. Schaefer terms this dynamic "transference" and significantly labels its effect "a happy one"—"the devout heart is deepened and horizons broadened to greater spiritual insight. And so life today becomes richer than before one read and prayed the Psalter" (xxvii). Such transference can occur on two levels, according to Schaefer. One level is when a person has a powerful experience and then selects an appropriate psalm to articulate it. Another deeper level of transference happens "when the believer lets the psalm actually mediate the vicarious experience." In regards to this level, Schaefer speaks of "the Spirit who inspired the psalms [and] affects a like condition in the *orante*" (xxvii). However, he explains that the means for this transference occurs through the symbols that pack the Psalter and represent a point of contact between two worlds (i.e., the reader's and the poet's) and thereby makes the poet's experience accessible. Schaefer finds that the meaning that a psalm bears for the life of the *orante* "expresses itself in prayer and is manifested in virtue." He emphasizes that this transaction "is not just subjective" and happens preeminently when an individual (Jew or Christian) prays the liturgy (xxix–xxx).

Sixthly, Schaefer turns his attention to the subjects of disease, death, and the enemy in the psalms. He understands these as part of the psalmist's depiction of a struggle between life and death. Schaefer insightfully counsels the reader not to disassociate the stress that the psalmist experiences at the hands of enemies from that which the psalmist experiences due to physical illness and psychological depression. Referring to the insomniac of Ps 102:3–5, 7–8 who can no longer eat, is reduced to skin and bone, and is badgered by the enemies' taunts, Schaefer asks,

Is this surprising? In business, under the stress of bosses' demands and the chafe of the competitor, people get sick. In a classroom where students are motivated more by the evaluative process than learning, sickness and the blues pay their visits. In a penitentiary criminals awaiting trial are prone to illness and depression. How many healthcare facilities house patients who feel rejected or merely tolerated by society, even family and friends? The mere perception of scorn can cause sickness. Insidious, malignant is the power of rejection or hatred. And true

to the cultural milieu, the psalmist lumps all assaults of evil, including physical illness, under the category of death's inner workings. The psalms preserve a frank groan before God in the face of death's advances. The unbridled complaints confide one's misery to someone who is supposed to care. (xxxiv)

Schaefer goes on to show how the psalmists are interested in life and its immediate future and not life after death. He considers the metaphorical use of "Sheol," the affinity between the wicked and death, various biblical metaphors for evil, and speech as a deadly weapon. He observes that the poet's strength in the Psalter is not in the definition of evil but in "the images of its power, which alert the reader to its mystery" (xxxviii). According to Schaefer, the conflict with evil is more intense in the earlier books of the Psalter (Pss 1–72) but does not entirely disappear until Ps 144. In Books 3–5 he sees the conflict expand "to a universal battle, where the sovereign God is celebrated as triumphant and praise replaces complaint" (xxxviii).

In the last part of the introduction, "Prayer and the Curse," Schaefer addresses the challenges posed by the vindictive and cursing language found in some of the prayers of the Psalter. Schaefer's liturgical focus on the psalms provides a strong position for this treatment of the difficult biblical-theological problem of the imprecatory psalms. As in his discussion of disease, death, and the enemy, Schaefer demonstrates his hermeneutical and theological prowess. According to him, "[t]he curses in the Bible do not represent uncontrolled outbursts of human emotion, nor are they the abuse of a victim on the rampage. Given their liturgical, communal setting, they are the modulated, if vitriolic, articulation of the desire for the annihilation of evil forces against God's people" (xxxix). He finds that such a violent and vindictive psalm as Ps 137 calls for immediate action as the world is perceived to be in a state of emergency and that violent imagery articulates a hunger pang for a proper world order and a revulsion against the unjust. Schaefer also suggests that "[v]iolence and the desire to get even are part of the sinful condition, and it is better to acknowledge this in a liturgical and prayerful setting than to excise it from prayer, while letting it, often unconsciously, inhabit other spheres of our lives. . . . The controlled liturgical curse can express a healthy outpouring of emotion which piety often denies" (xl–xli).

Schaefer argues that it is hardly possible for theologians, literary critics, or translators to soften the violent images of these psalms without sanitizing the Bible. However, Schaefer may engage in a similar ameliorative procedure when he counsels that the imprecations scattered throughout the Psalter "must be understood in their cultural context. Semitic people are eloquent, and both praises and curses are formulated with elegant exaggeration" (xxxix). He then explains the "little ones" of Ps 137:9 as standing for "the future generations of evil which must be destroyed if the enemy is to be eradicated" (xl).

In any case, Schaefer suggests that when one submits to God by praying one of the psalms' curses, he or she is no longer free to take revenge, because vengeance is thereby transferred from the heart of the speaker to God, who plays an interested role in the believer's life and does justice sooner or later in accordance with his steadfast love.

However, Schaefer continues to struggle with this issue and argues that it is an error to label anger categorically as sinful and shameful and that such fallacious censoring of the psalms on this basis impoverishes the prayer life of the synagogue and the church. He suggests that "[b]iblical anthropology does not stress the theoretical distinction between the wrong, which we hate, and the wrongdoer, who is in essence our neighbor whom theoretically we love. The Bible is more realistic. If wrong exists, there is a culprit" (xli). Schaefer is sensitive to the tender consciences of those attuned to some of the more sublime texts of the New Testament and the Gospels regarding violence and enemies. Yet he still holds the feet of these (Christian?) readers to the hermeneutical fire when he writes,

Along with the discomfort which the reader may feel in the face of violence in the Bible, it is good to investigate, within oneself, whether the discomfort is born of a sincere fidelity to the Gospel which commands believers to love their enemies or whether it is rather a subtle, unconscious tactic of approbation of a dominant ideology which accepts and legitimizes the present politic and feels uncomfortable when someone appears to shake it up. The institutionalized violence of Pharaoh's system is uglier than the subtle, more acceptable forms of aggression which inhabit our own efforts to maintain the face of a peaceful society without oppression. And for devout and believing people, there is always the risk of allowing the rhetoric of forgiveness to conceal the dark areas of unforgiveness that lurk deep in their lives. The prayerful and liturgical adoption of these poems expresses one's necessary revulsion to evil in whatever form, even the most personal and deep-rooted. (xli-xlii)

According to Schaefer, the intense and violent language of some psalms attests to a deep-seated aversion to human injustices and belongs to the poet's critical concern over the messiness of life. Yet Schaefer integrates into his discussion considerations of the nonliteral aspects of vituperative language in the psalms and the frank tension existing between praying the cursing psalms and Christ's teaching on loving enemies. Even though the church "has seen fit to use a bowdlerized version of these psalms in her liturgy," Schaefer is still able to justify asking why one should not pray for the destruction of institutions of injustice (such as pornography) and their promoters (xliii). Schaefer admits that any explanation of the cursing psalms will leave one at least partially unsatisfied. Be that as it may, Schaefer excels in demonstrating how the "vexing

problems and fearful insecurities of life, the travails that afflict every human being are all reflected in the Psalter” (xlv) and that recognition of such is actually a critical element in the scholarly study of the psalms.

Schaefer’s commentary on the psalms should be considered one of the better contributions of the Berit Olam series. In my opinion, anyone who produces a decent one-volume commentary on all 150 psalms deserves recognition. This goes double for Schaefer, whose work is to be praised as one of the finer single-volume commentaries on the Psalter. Even though his commentary may lean more at times towards the concerns of the lay reader with a devotional interest, Schaefer successfully maintains an exegetical thrust and is able to integrate the fruits of modern biblical scholarship on the psalms with theological and pastoral acumen. As is to be expected with a one-volume commentary, Schaefer’s treatments of individual psalms are brief. He typically summarizes the poetic structure of the Hebrew text in an initial paragraph and then works through the psalm in a page or two discussing its poetics and tracing its argument. Along the way he selectively details certain features. Likewise, the appendices are also brief but solid, standard stuff on the superscriptions, prehistory, and literary types of the psalms. Even so, experts on the Psalter will often find Schaefer’s discussions to be fresh, creative, and stimulating. When it comes to the endorsements that one routinely finds on the dust jackets of books these days, I personally tend to take them with a grain of salt. But in the case of the present volume under review, I find myself concurring with William L. Holladay, who writes “I heartily recommend Konrad Schaefer’s *Psalms*—I know of no work like it.”