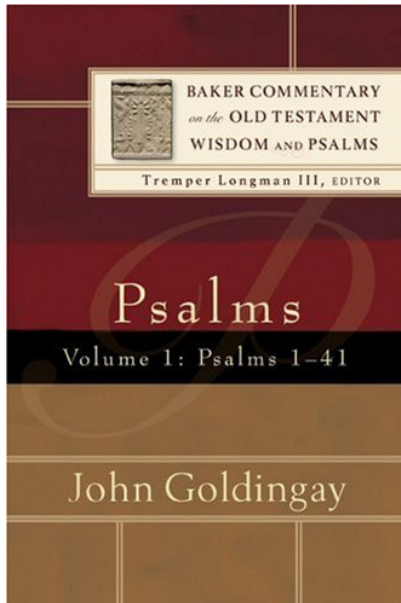


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Goldingay, John

Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41

Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms

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This book, which was published in 2006, is the first of a planned three-volume commentary on the book of Psalms. The Baker Commentary series in which this work appears has a definite audience in mind. According to series editor Tremper Longman III, this audience consists of “scholars, ministers, seminary students, and Bible study leaders” (7–8). The editor further tells us in the series preface (7–9) that clergy and theological students are the primary target but that an attempt is made to make commentaries of the series accessible to nonscholars by putting most of the technical discussion and interaction with secondary literature in the footnotes. The reader can thus expect to find a scientific commentary, but one with a softer approach and with a focus on the message of the book of Psalms and on the message of each individual psalm. The reason why quotations from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic are transcribed in the commentary must then probably also be sought in this attempt to expand the range of possible readers of the commentary.

The author has also written a preface (11–13) in which he gives a schematized version of his *modus operandi* in writing the commentary. This reviewer is particularly grateful for the notes he makes there and regards this honest glimpse into his private life as an invaluable aid to understanding the features and contents of the commentary. After the

customary list of abbreviations, there follows an introduction of fifty-one pages (21–78) that discusses the nature of the Psalter, the relationship between the psalms and the history of Israel, the psalm headings, the predecessors of the biblical psalms, collections in the Psalter, poetic characteristics of the psalms, their use in Israel’s worship, their use as a manual for spirituality, and their theology. The author mentions very aptly that in terms of theological content the Psalms are the densest material in the entire Old Testament (69). In this section on the theology of the Psalms, the author discusses what the Psalms have to say about God, the king and the Messiah, life and death, and also the connection between the Psalms and the New Testament.

From the introduction one can already get a taste of what is to come in the commentary on the individual psalms: thorough engagement with the Hebrew text (and ancient versions of it); reflection on the work of a wide array of investigators into the Psalms (including some church fathers and other early Christian and Jewish authors); and original thinking from a prominent Old Testament theologian who is not afraid to differ from predecessors and contemporary investigators and translators. It seems that thorough investigation and very hard work following the procedure as described in the author’s own preface do pay dividends!

At each individual psalm in the commentary proper, the author provides his own translation with explanatory notes (especially when his translation is at odds with modern English ones). He does not hesitate to propose an alternative translation if the Septuagint, Jerome, the Targum on the Psalms, other Greek versions, the Vulgate, or the Peshitta seem to represent a different Hebrew tradition. This is followed by two main sections: “Interpretation” and “Theological Implications.” The interpretation of the individual verses or, sometimes, larger units is preceded by a short introduction on the psalm as a whole. The section on the theological implications is usually steered by the conviction that the individual books of the Bible should be interpreted within a broader canonical context. But the notes in this section are usually based primarily upon the literary features of the psalm and its context in the Psalter as a whole. There is no forced Christian application, and Jewish believers might also benefit tremendously from the mature and realistic theological reflection and challenging remarks found in these sections.

The strophic (or stanzaic) structure of each psalm is reflected in the way its translation is printed, although some of these sections are longer than seems viable for biblical Hebrew poetry. One gets the impression that the author does not attach particular importance to the structure of individual psalms as carriers of meaning. Psalm 1 is, for instance, represented as consisting of one strophe (or stanza), and there is no word on its segmentation into three antithetic strophes of descending size, with a climax in the shortest of these, verse 6 (cf. Beat Weber, *Werkbuch Psalmen 1: Die Psalmen 1 bis 72*

[Kohlhammer, 2001], 48–51). The author does, however, refer to the summarizing role played by Ps 1:6 and its forming a bracket around verses 5–6, verses 4–6, and around the psalm as a whole (89).

The choice of English words with which consistently to translate certain Hebrew words are at times puzzling, for instance the regular translation of חַטָּאִים (“sinners,” so translated in Ps 26:9) as “failures” (1:1, 5) or “people who fail” (25:8) or the translation of the cognate verb with “to fall short” (e.g., 4:5). The explanation given in the glossary (593) about the everyday usage of the verb and the deduction that it must have a similar meaning of “coming short of Yhwh’s expectations or a failure to live up to them” in religious texts actually both also fall short in terms of modern semantic theory. A similar confusing idea was to consistently translate סָלַח with “Rise,” since, it is explained, “[d]ictionaries usually connect the word *selâ* with the root *salâl*, ‘rise’” (599). This is actually only one of about four possibilities suggested by *HALOT* for finding the meaning of this obscure poetic term.

The author should be commended for the importance he obviously attaches to significant extratextual material that forms part of the Old Testament context for understanding expressions and ideas in a particular psalm. This appreciation extends to his references to New Testament contexts, since he has faithfully exercised the conviction that Christian interpretation of the psalms necessitates a consideration of the whole canonical context. He notes the lack of concern in the New Testament about questions that trouble modern Christian readers in the Old Testament and explains that the New Testament should not be seen as a theological filter by which unacceptable aspects in the Old Testament could be strained out by being reinterpreted. “The NT itself rather implies that the OT provides the broader context in which the NT needs to be understood” (76).

It is perhaps possible that Goldingay has given too little thought about the possibility that other books from the Old Testament might constitute sources employed in the composition of certain psalms. The similarities between Ps 1 and texts such as Josh 1 and Jer 17 are discussed, but Goldingay stops short of considering these texts as sources the author of the psalm might have alluded to on purpose. Some important co-texts seem to have been overlooked. One example of this is the many contacts Ps 19 seems to have with Proverbs. Cognizance of these contacts can help one to see how both creation and the Torah are described in Ps 19 as taking over the role accorded to wisdom in Proverbs (see Bernard Gosse, “Le livre des Proverbes, la Sagesse, la Loi et le Psautier,” *ETR* 81 [2006]: 387–94). Since both parts of Ps 19 show this characteristic, there are important counterarguments to those listed by the author in arguing that “two separate units have been brought together on the basis of linguistic links” to form Ps 19 (285). Attention to these links of both “units” with Proverbs would also have prevented him from remarking

that the heading and the reference to the suppliant as “your servant” within the psalm “might suggest that the psalm was written for David or for one of his successors.” The close contacts with the postexilic part of Proverbs definitely seem to suggest a late date for the psalm as a whole, one far removed in time from the monarchy.

These concerns, however, relate only to a small number of places and should not distract from the overwhelming feeling of admiration I would like to voice for the author’s work. The comments on Ps 23 can be used as an example of the original thinking one encounters in the commentary. The author translates the opening line: “My shepherd is Yhwh; I do not lack.” He chooses to deviate from the usual “Yhwh is my shepherd” for the sake of defamiliarization, since the conventional interpretation of this phrase as a statement about Yhwh is challenged by the succeeding lines that suggest that it is rather a statement about *who* shepherds the suppliant in a polemical context of polytheism. Goldingay further also brings us back to reality by pointing out that the image of shepherding in the Old Testament is not always a gentle, pastoral one, but one for authority and power (348). The image further applies naturally to the people as a whole rather than to individuals, and the worshiper who declares that Yhwh is his shepherd acknowledges that Yhwh’s shepherding of Israel through the wilderness is also applicable to him as an individual. In the section on the Theological Implications of this psalm, Goldingay reminds us that the implicit background of Ps 23, a psalm of trust, is “that food and water are known to fail and enemies to threaten.” The psalm therefore “invites people into a declaration of trust that is both extraordinarily courageous and coldly rational.” When Yhwh’s shepherding does fail, it “invites people to keep trusting that Yhwh is our shepherd,” holding on to his word and promise.

The commentary on the forty-one psalms is followed by a glossary of eighty-two English terms that are used as translations of particular important Hebrew words or concepts. This list will be particularly helpful for that segment of the readership that has no training in Hebrew or access to Hebrew dictionaries, although there are one or two entries that might actually be misleading (see the comments made above). There is a subject index containing the names of important ancient as well as some modern authors, a number of general topics, and the pages where aspects of each of the forty-one psalms are discussed, such as groups of verses of each psalm as well as themes that might have surfaced in the commentary on that psalm or a completely different one. This is followed by an author index of five pages and, finally, an index of Scripture and other ancient writings in which one can find all the notes made on any verse of any of the forty-one psalms in the commentary (as well as most of the verses of the rest of the Psalter!) and also references to other biblical books, Old Testament Apocrypha, documents from Qumran, rabbinic writings, and even some church fathers. This index will be of great value to those who would like to find notes on a particular psalm or verse quickly. In the author index, I

found the name of only one South African scholar, my colleague Gert Prinsloo. Even if one considers the standard of South African scholarship and research on the Psalms to be below average and somewhat obscure, this silence seems out of proportion when the growing availability of publications via the Internet is taken into consideration.

In conclusion, I can confidently state that this commentary is a worthwhile addition to the library of every Old Testament scholar, theological student, and perhaps especially every minister who needs to prepare sermons from the Psalter. It contains a host of suggested solutions to all of the well-known problematic texts, and although some of these solutions might seem to cross the border of the probable, none are thoughtless or without merit. It contains a treasury of learning and recent research into the Psalms. Its strongest feature might be the stimulating and challenging remarks the author makes in the discussion of the theology of each psalm. The commentary was written with a sympathetic understanding of the contexts of both the original authors as well as modern Christian interpreters of these ancient texts. I am sure that everyone who makes use of this book will also look forward with great anticipation to the two volumes yet to be published.