

***The Psalms. Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary
(Eerdmans Critical Commentary)***

By S Terrien

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Reviewed by Louis Jonker
Department of Old and New Testament
Stellenbosch University

“**I**n this monumental work, his most ambitious undertaking, the late Samuel Terrien brings together a lifetime of scholarship on Psalms, long the wellspring of Jewish spirituality as well as the main hymnal of the Christian church.”

With these words on the flap this commentary is introduced to the reader. It is indeed a monumental work, and indeed the culmination of many studies of and reflections on the Psalms by the author.

The author has set out to fulfil the following tasks: “The first task of the exegete of the Psalms is to clarify the obscurities and elucidate the theological significance of these poems. The second task is to analyze their strophic structure. The third, and perhaps most difficult, may be to discover a link between their archaic language and the intellectual demands of modern thinking and spirituality” (Preface, xiii).

This intent then leads the author to presenting his commentary of each psalm in a tripartite division. After providing an own translation of the psalm, as well as bibliographical references at each psalms, he introduces his tripartite discussion with a section on “Form”. This section provides information on the general setting of the particular psalm in the bigger construction of the Psalter, as well as on the strophic structure of the text. The second section then presents a “Commentary” on each of the strophes that have been identified in the previous section.

The discussion of each psalms ends with a section on “Date and Theology”. This combination seems strange at first sight, but closer reading reveals a strategy of linking the theological intent of the psalm with its presumed circumstances of origin and transmission. This combination should be evaluated very positively, because it takes seriously the contextual aspect of identifying rhetorical-theological strategies.

The “Introduction” to the commentary presents a number of important themes. In a first sub-section, called “Longevity and Ecumenicity of the Psalms”, Terrien provides a good overview of the history of interpretation and *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Psalms both in Judaism and Christianity. In sub-section IV where the “Growth of the Psalter” is discussed, the author gives a good overview of the more recent approaches in Psalm studies that have the overall compositional structures of the Psalter as focus. In this sub-section Terrien then indicates that his own approach is an endeavour towards integrating the insights from a canonical approach with that of structural analysis.

The value of such an integration is indicated as follows: “Canonical and structural approaches may help us to discover that the editors of the Psalter – at each level of its growth – tended to perceive and perhaps even to encourage its eventual quality of ‘document scripture’. For these editors, the book of ‘Praise and Prayer’ contained, just like the Pentateuch, the revelation of God’s dynamic will. This new phase in the hermeneutic of the Psalms presented notable advantages as well as grave dangers.”

Other themes that are also discussed in the Introduction, are the Ancient Near Eastern background of the Psalms, Origins of the Psalms, the Hebrew Text and the Ancient Versions, the Music of the Psalms, Strophic Structure, Literary Genres, the Theology of the Psalms, the Psalms in the New Testament, and a list of selected commentaries (in which the valued recent commentary by Hossfeld and Zenger lacks).

Highlights in this commentary are certainly the thorough discussion of theological themes in the Introduction, as well as the bibliographical references provided at each psalm. This makes the commentary a useful source. A point of criticism is the fact that it is not always clear whether the strophic structure in each Psalm is determined by formal criteria or matters of content. The structural analyses of certain Psalms therefore remain dubious.

Although all the psalm discussions in this commentary do not live up to the expectations of the biblical scholar, this is understandable, seeing that “this work is addressed to both scholars and general readers” (Preface, p. xiv). It is already admitted in the Preface that “Perhaps such a double intent betrays a gratuitous presumption. Can a middle ground be found between the specialist’s technical vocabulary and the literary clarity of a general rendition?” This “double intent” results into a commentary that could not be the only Psalm commentary on the biblical scholar’s shelf, but could certainly provide valuable information.