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Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement

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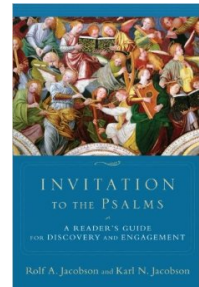
Book Review

Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement

by Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson.

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.

Let me begin in full disclosure: I am not a Hebrew Scriptures expert. I have not written a dissertation on the Psalms. And although I have a rough working knowledge of Hebrew, I have not presented a paper on Hebrew grammar at SBL et al. I am, in fact, a systematic theologian. Why then, you might ask, are you writing this review of *Invitation to the Psalms*? In the fall of 2013, I will team teach a course on the Psalms with a Hebrew Scriptures scholar, who will serve as the Psalms expert while I bring in Luther's voicing of the Psalms. He suggested I rather than he write this review, and for good reason: there is no better way to know a book than by writing a review. Further to this, a non-specialist sometimes sees things differently, which can be either a bane or a blessing, or most likely both, for a task such as mine. What then, do I have to offer in review?



Invitation to the Psalms is written by the Jacobson brothers, who explain in a promotional video on YouTube that the purpose of the book is to give students confidence to read the Psalms. The goal of the text is to put readers to work by helping them to ask the right kind of questions that enable the reader to engage the text in a manner attentive to genre, historical questions, textual variants etc. In support of this effort, the authors make use of the best of scholarship – translated for the benefit of non-specialists – and various contemporary resources such as modern poetry.

The book begins by introducing readers to the phenomena of Hebrew poetry, focussing on various themes such as parallelism, the two broader categories of form-genre and theme-genre. These genre chapters help readers to understand that attending to context is the condition for the possibility of understanding the text. Readers are then invited to ponder the *persona*, or voice, of the psalms; remembering that the psalms had speakers whose faithful engagement of their particular situations in life has been passed over to contemporary prayers of the Psalms. The *persona* of each psalm enables our engagement with it. The psalm then becomes ours via this voice that enables an emotional and imaginative exchange. The book then explores the significance of metaphor, imagery and symbolism in the book before concluding the text with an exploration of the theology of the psalms. This latter piece asserts that the primary message behind the Psalter is “God is *ḥesed*.” Much of the forgoing is helpful, especially the chapter on persona and voice, which trade upon a strong appreciation of the psalms as poetry. I do, however, have some concerns with the chapter dealing with metaphor and imagery.

The authors, not unlike many writers, tend to use “metaphor” as if it were an over-arching place holder for literary tropes. So we see, for instance, that they claim that “*metaphorical thinking is psalmic thinking*.” (119) I am uneasy with such a notion as “psalmic thinking.” While the psalms surely engage our thought, it is really the singing, praying and reading of the psalms for the sake of engaging the divine that is the purpose of the psalms, by the authors’ own admission (174). Moreover, this tendency to over-extend

the term metaphor results in the unfortunate instance of identifying a simile as a metaphor (127) in one instance and utter blindness to other tropes in other instances. We see this, for example, in their commentary on Psalm 18:46 “The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock.” In noting the “God as rock” metaphor, it is asserted that rocks do not live. (123) Two observations are pertinent. First, rocks are very much alive in certain culture – especially certain indigenous communities in North America. Metaphors, like meaning, cannot be nailed down. Second, it is important to note that the phrase “The Lord lives!” can also be understood as an instance of the trope of analogy. God lives, but in a manner that exceeds my experience of living. Whereas a metaphor trades on “is/is not” as a literary device, analogy attends to the “so much more” implicit in the comparison.

Despite this reviewer’s consternation with some of the above, I fully appreciated the manner in which the book invites readers to experience the psalms as poetry: and so not as pretty, but rather gritty, words that work truth by jarring our senses as much as our thought. The “Going Deeper” section at the end of each chapter provided opportunity for readers to ponder more fully lessons acquired in the chapter, and to integrate those lessons with life. These alone make the book invaluable. Text boxes throughout the text also provide historic and contemporary excursions that enliven the text and enlighten the task of singing, praying, and reading the psalms, the very task for which I feel more ready as a result of this fine book. I heartedly recommend its reading to any students of the Psalter.

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