

***Singing the Songs of the Lord in Foreign Lands: Psalms in Contemporary Lutheran Interpretation*, edited by Kenneth Mtata, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, and Miriam Rose**

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The present volume is the second in a series. The first volume, “*You Have the Words of Eternal Life*”: *Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, focused on the Gospel of John. The present collection “seeks to explore how we read the Old Testament together as Lutheran churches in our different contexts” (9). The essays have their origin in a conference held at Eisenach in 2013, co-organised by the Lutheran World Federation and the University of Jena, Germany. The conference brought together scholars and church leaders from all seven regions of the Lutheran World Federation (Africa being one of them) and included a number of ecumenical guests.

The “Introduction” (13–15), by Kenneth Mtata, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and Miriam Rose describes the origin of the volume and briefly presents the emphases of the different parts of the book. Regarding the theme of the volume, the authors write:

The contributions in this book underline the value of reading the Psalms and how the Psalms can contribute to our broader understanding of biblical interpretation. The Psalms remains an important section of the Bible through which Christian life can be shaped and challenged. As Christian readers of the Bible we affirm that God speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures of both the New and the Old Testaments. The process of understanding biblical texts reaches its aim when the text becomes effective in the lives of the readers and listeners. Employing Lutheran hermeneutics requires that we pay attention to the manner in which Luther read and subsequent generations of Lutheran interpreters of the Psalms applied them to their contexts while we seek faithfully to speak to our own contexts through the same Scriptures. The Psalms provide both

examples and language for individual and communal repentance for sin that alienates humans from God and from one another. In the Psalms we encounter the honest language of concrete human life before God (15).

Part I is devoted to hermeneutical approaches and challenges (“an overview of the spectrum within which the Psalms can be read”, 14) and contains two essays. Hans-Peter Grosshans examines “Luther’s Early Interpretation of the Psalms and His Contribution to Hermeneutics” (19–32). Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon’s contribution is entitled “‘Protect Me from Those Who Are Violent’ Psalm 140: A Cry for Justice – a Song of Hope” (33–56, relating the biblical Psalms of Lament to contemporary contexts of violence).

Part II presents two contributions on past and present methodologies in the exegesis of Psalms: Corinna Körting writes on “Singing, Praying and Meditating the Psalms: Exegetical and Historical Remarks” (59–71) and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld traces the recent development “From Psalms to Psalter Exegesis” (73–77). Hossfeld notes that “in his *Prologue to the Psalter* of 1524 Luther distinguishes between the ‘Psalter’ as the designation for the whole Book of Psalms and the ‘Psalm’ respectively, the ‘Psalms’ as the designation for individual texts. This corresponds to the main concern of more recent exegesis of the Psalms” (77). In addition, Luther contributed to setting the course for a history of reception: “On the one hand the Psalms are turned into texts for reading and meditation, on the other hand, the Psalter serves as a basis for new musical settings of literary work” (78). Hossfeld notes:

For Luther, the Psalter was the book of books of the whole Bible. It is the ‘little *Biblia*’ of the Old and New Testaments. It is the *Enchiridion*, the handbook for the entire Holy Scripture. The historical-critical exegesis seeks to investigate the function of the handbook in the context of the Old Testament. With regard to the New Testament the function of the Psalter as a handbook assumes the prophetic character of the Psalter and emphasizes the exceptional dignity the Psalter has for the New Testament, because in spite of the appearance of the incarnated son of God the New Testament does not create a new Psalter (78).

Part III addresses a number of difficult topics in Psalms and their Lutheran interpretation. Jutta Hausmann examines “The Topic of Violence – a Hermeneutical Challenge in Reading Psalms” (81–90; compare Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon’s essay on pp. 33–56). Urmas Nommik contributes “Between Praise and Lament: Remarks on the Development of the Hebrew Psalms” (91–104). Roger Marcel Wanke addresses “The Vengeance Psalms as a Phenomenon of Critical Justice: The Problem of Enemies in Luther’s Interpretation of Psalms” (105–17).

Three essays in part IV are devoted to the reception of the Psalms in early Judaism and in the New Testament. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr studies “Psalms Outside the Biblical Psalms Collection – the Example of Jonah” (121–37; Jonah’s psalm as part of the Book of Jonah, Jonah in early Jewish literature, references to Jonah in the Synoptic tradition,

Jonah as a model in biblical theology). Craig R. Koester offers fine case studies of the “Interpretation of the Psalms in the New Testament: Witness to Christ and the Human Condition” (139–55). The focus is on the role of the Psalms in the book of Acts and in the Gospel of John. Anni Hentschel traces “The Christological Reception of Psalms in Hebrews” (157–77).

Part V examines, in three case studies, Luther’s interpretation of the Psalms from a contemporary perspective: Vítor Westhelle, “Luther and the Psalms: How Stories Shape the Story” (181–90), Brian Brock, “The Psalms and Luther’s Praise Inversion: Cultural Criticism as Doxology Detection” (191–212) and Lubomir Batka, “Theology of the Word in *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521)” (213–30).

As if Luther’s interpretation and the other essays offered so far had nothing to do with a particular “context”, part VI offers what are called “Contextual Approaches to the Psalms”. South African Old Testament scholar Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele), from the University of South Africa, notes in her contribution “Being *adam*: A Contextual Reading of the Psalms Today” (233–43), that “the Psalms constitute an important content of the believers’ prayers and one could argue that, more than any other book of the Christian Scriptures, the Psalms live in the veins of many African Christians to whose lives the Bible is central” (233). Her focus is on Psalm 8. Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele) argues that

if read from the perspective of those at the margins, Psalm 8 challenges the unequal status quo. The psalmist affirms the common humanity of all irrespective of age, belonging or non-belonging to the *Golah* Community, irrespective of whether they had experienced the exile or not, location and gender because we derive from the one common source and have a common mandate to care for mother earth. Understood in the preceding sense, all humans, including those of African descent, can wholeheartedly agree with the psalmist’s affirmation of the majesty of YHWH’s name (243).

Andrea Bieler follows this with her study “The Wounds of War: Engaging the Psalms of Lament in Pastoral Care with Veterans Against the Background of Martin Luther’s Hermeneutics” (245–59; the veterans are US soldiers suffering from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder; discussion of the Psalms as resources in pastoral care with trauma patients, 257–59) and Dorothea Erbele-Küster closes with “Luther’s Poetic Reading of Psalms” (261–270).

The particularly Lutheran approach to the Psalms is described as follows:

The Lutheran perspective gives priority to the Christological reading of the Old Testament as a crucial point for reading the Psalms in contemporary church settings. A Christological reading of the Psalms implies a deeper understanding of who Christ is for us in light of the Psalms. In this we share the experience of Martin Luther, whose understanding of Jesus Christ was further developed and deepened by the Psalms. In his humanity, Jesus carried in himself the human condition in the presence of God. In this

human condition we participate. Such a Christological reading of the Psalms suggests a hermeneutical spiral; the Psalms help us to understand Christ as much as Christ enables us to understand the Psalms. This raises the question what such a reading implies for Christian–Jewish relations. Can Christians read the Psalms without taking into consideration other communities with whom they share this rich resource of faith? (14).

Despite some inconsistencies in the arrangement of the volume (the Introduction does not match the remainder of the material presented, e.g., the description of part III on p. 14 does not sketch the content) and several curious suppositions, the essays shed fresh light on the Psalms, Luther’s interpretation of the Psalms, and on interaction with them from a Lutheran perspective in scholarship, liturgy, and application. Some of what is presented in the volume reflects standard Old Testament scholarship on the Psalms, without a distinctly Lutheran perspective.