Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. *Psalms* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xxvi + 639 pages. Paperback. Price US $34. ISBN 978-052160076-7.

Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner. 2014. *The Book of Psalms* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. xx + 1051 pages. Hardcover. Price US $42. ISBN: 978-0-8028-2493-6.

Brueggemann and Bellinger Jr.

Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger Jr. are distinguished professors in the field of OT studies and the Psalter in particular. This jointly produced commentary in a highly regarded series (the NCBC) will certainly not disappoint a variety of readers—students, scholars, pastors, and higher-level teachers.[1] It is segmented into the three usual commentary divisions: introductory material, a sequential textual exposition (based on the NRSV translation) and application of each psalm, followed by the essential indices of authors, biblical texts, and subjects. This "new" series of Cambridge Bible Commentaries (the older set being popular in the 1960-70s) seeks to "utilize recent gains in rhetorical criticism, social scientific study of the Scriptures, narrative criticism, and other developing disciplines to exploit the growing advances in biblical studies" (iii). It also includes, as part of the introduction, a substantial listing of "suggested readings on the Psalms" (13-26), which is helpfully divided into categories: major commentaries, introductory works, literary studies, theological studies, historical studies, and significant articles.

The book's primary "Introduction" is relatively short, as commentaries go (only 12 pages), with a third of it being devoted to a form-critical listing in vertical columns of all 150 psalms differentiated into "Psalm Collections and Psalm Types," for example: (Ps 1) Book 1, Wisdom; (Ps 2) 1-41, Royal; (Ps 3) David, Individual Lament; (Ps 4) 3-41, Individual Lament; (Ps 5) Individual Lament.[2] This arrangement, which is not displayed in a very visually effective manner, is explained earlier in several expositional sections, beginning with "Matters of Organization." An intervening section dealing with "Matters of Poetry" is rather disappointingly brief (3-4), with passing reference being made only to "parallel structures" – paired poetic lines where the second "echoes" the first – and the "use of repetition and poetic images." The authors come to what is a major emphasis in their commentary when considering "Matters of Method" (4-8). This begins with an overview of "form criticism," as originated

[1] All of these groups would presumably be included in the NCBC's rather strange designation of its general target readership: "a wide range of intellectually curious individuals" (iii).

[2] Several errors were detected, e.g., Pss 123 and 125 are not "Davidic"; Ps 127 (not 124) is ascribed to "Solomon."

by Hermann Gunkel, and developed by Mowinckel, Westermann, Gerstenberger, and Brueggemann, before ending with some of the more recent "canon critical" perspectives of Brevard Childs and Gerald Wilson. A consideration of psalmic "genre" is deemed foundational because it "provides a way to organize one's study of the Psalter and a comparative basis for studying individual psalms as part of a category" (5). Five "primary types of psalms" are distinguished in the commentary: individual and community laments; hymns of praise; individual and community thanksgiving psalms; royal psalms; and wisdom psalms. Other points of emphasis in the commentary are: "matters of cultic setting" (6); "the matter of a psalm's relationship to societal issues" (7); "a psalm's context in the Psalter" (7-8);[3] plus any pertinent "ancient Near Eastern connections" (8).

In brief, the central textual commentary aims to provide "an exposition of each psalm with attention to genre, liturgical connections, societal issues, and the psalm's place in the book of Psalms as a whole." After a succinct exegesis of the original text in strophic segments (with occasional Hebrew terms transliterated and italicized), the authors include two types of excursive "Supplementary Sections" (the titles of which are listed in the introduction on pages xiii-xx).[4] "A Closer Look" presents a more detailed consideration of "particular issues raised by the text" with respect to form, content, or function, while notes on "Bridging the Horizons" suggest insightful "encounters between the world of the psalm and the world of contemporary readers" (i), including certain controversial subjects that pertain to current religious beliefs, social concerns, and a globalized society. These two kinds of focused reflection are an especially valuable feature of this commentary. For example, under the text-centered "Closer Look" we learn about "The Temple—Where God Dwells" (Ps 3); "Job's Similarities to the Psalmist" (Ps 4); "Who Are the Enemies?" (Ps 6); "An Acrostic Psalm" (Pss 9-10); and "The 'Fear Not' of YHWH" (Ps 13). The context-oriented "Bridging the Horizons" includes discussions as diverse as: "The Drama of Prayer" (Ps 6); "An Appeal Against Injustice" (Pss 9-10); "Real Presence" (Ps 12); "Crisis and Covenant" (Ps 18); and "Opposing Baal Worship" (Ps 30). Various topics can be followed up in relation to specific psalms by using the relatively comprehensive "Subject Index" (633-639).

As a short sample of Brueggemann and Bellinger's expert selection and treatment of material, I will survey a selection of their pertinent comments on

[3] Considering the organization of the Psalter as a whole: "The first three books reflect the experience of the Davidic kingdom, initiated with the coronation of the king in Psalm 2 and concluding with the demise of Jerusalem at the end of Psalm 89. Books IV-V respond to the exile that originated from this crisis by asserting the reign of YHWH as a basis for the community's future" (8).

[4] There are over 250 of these interposed notes, none of which extends beyond a page of text, and most comprising a single paragraph.

Ps 1. After reproducing the English (NRSV) text, they summarize the evidence for viewing this psalm as an introduction to the entire Psalter, in close conjunction with Ps 2. The initial beatitude ("Blessed . . .") alerts us to the fact that this is a didactic "wisdom psalm" that offers "a poetic affirmation of the fruitfulness of a lifestyle attuned to God's instruction" (28). The thematically focal contrast between the behavior of the "righteous" (godly) [A] and that of the "wicked" (ungodly) [B] is clearly reflected in the text's alternating parallelism of structure: A (1-3)—B (4-5) = A' (6a)—B' (6b), which also features an *inclusio* established by a framing reference to the "wicked" in vv. 1a and 6b. This structural device is supported by the fact that "the psalm's first word begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the last word of the psalm begins with the last letter of the alphabet, giving the psalm's perspective on life a totalizing effect" (28).

In their comments on the first strophe of Psalm 1 (1-3), Brueggemann and Bellinger focus on the key thematic terms contained in this poetic paragraph. While it is important to distinguish the Hebrew synonyms *ashre* and *baruk*,

> contemporary readers will need to be cautious with the translation 'happy' [for *ashre*], for the term does not connote pleasing external circumstances in life, but rather a deeper joy about the fruitfulness of the way of living urged on readers of the psalm (29).

Within the theological frame of reference of this psalm, "the wicked are those who oppose God's instruction, and the righteous are those who live according to that instruction" (29). As the preceding quote suggests, "law" in English is not the best way to render the original *torah*, but rather words like "guidance," "teaching," or "instruction," for "YHWH's *torah* [is] a gift that provides a way to respond to the God who has given new life and as a means of response to God's granting new life to the community" (29). The prominent tree—water imagery of v. 3 "is a strong poetic assurance that life according to *torah* prospers" the people who abide by its divine principles.

Comments on the second half of Ps 1 (vv. 3-6) focus on the contrastive imagery that characterizes the life and fate of the ungodly – useless windblown or fire-bound chaff. In the final verse of the psalm, these thematic contrasts converge as "God becomes the subject of the verbs;[5] God 'knows' the way or path – the lifestyle – of the community of faithful ones," which "thus connotes YHWH's care for the life of the righteous" (30). In contrast, "the wicked" continue (from vv. 4-5) to forge their own determined way to inevitable self-ruin (6b). There follows a "Bridging the Horizons" comment on "The Way of the Righteous," which observes that the key term "righteousness" of Wisdom literature implies "seeking to work out the divine-human relationship" above all the

[5] Actually, only the first verb in v. 6a.

relationships of life by "embracing the tradition of God's instruction" (30-31). As the designated "preamble" to this sacred poetic corpus, Ps 1 suggests that the whole "Psalter is now part of that divine instruction," with a significant emphasis on the nature and purpose of prayer "as the honest dialogue of faith carried on in the community that worships God" (31).

Brueggemann and Bellinger have admirably succeeded in producing a useful, jargon-free, intermediate-level guide to the book of Psalms that is "clear in structure and lucid in style, up to date in scholarship and astute in application."[6] It is not a "scholarly" commentary in terms of text-based critical detail, extensive footnoting,[7] or comprehensive exegetical discussion (*for that, see the book reviewed below*), but it nevertheless provides an excellent model also for scholars in its clarity of exposition and perceptive comments regarding the everyday contemporary relevance of this consecrated collection of prayers and praises. This commentary could readily serve as a point-of-entry didactic guide that serious Bible students turn to in order to enrich their reading of this poetic, precatory "little Bible," as Martin Luther affectionately called it (1).

DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and LaNeel Tanner

Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, representing "the best and the brightest of a new generation of Psalms scholars,"[8] labored long (well over ten years) and hard (in various scholarly *fora*, xvi) to collaboratively produce their substantial (over 1000 page) NICOT contribution to research on the Psalter. Instead of an initial Table of Contents that lists the individual psalms and a translation of their superscription (if any), as in Brueggemann and Bellinger, deClaissé-Walford *et alibi* attempt to provide a theme that covers a psalm's main thought (viii-xiii). Often this procedure is helpful, but at times this generalizing approach can be somewhat misleading, as in the case of Ps 1: "The Way of Life" (viii), which unfortunately obscures the crucial contrast that stands at the heart of this psalm's message. This volume begins with a scholarly Introduction (see further below), which includes a "Select Bibliography" of four pages, continues with the detailed "Text and Commentary," and concludes with three lengthy indices, of: "Authors," "Names and Subjects," and "Scripture and Other Ancient Literature." I found the second of these to be especially useful for a topical study; for example, the entry under "Torah" includes 34 distinct references within the commentary.

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6 From the endorsement by Susan Gillingham (back cover).

7 The limited number of footnotes is largely reserved for directing readers to recommended sources to follow up on a particular text problem or point of linguistic, theological, or literary significance, for example, footnote 4: "For a delightful exposition of Psalm 1, see R. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), 114-117" (31).

8 From the endorsement by J. Clinton McCann Jr. (back dust cover).

I will proceed with an overview of this commentary's Introduction, depending mainly on selected quotations to give readers a taste of some of the many informative nuggets to be mined therein. The Psalter is aptly described as "a great choir of witnesses" that "with great diversity of emotion and perspective . . . gives voice to the faith struggles, theological insights, and liturgical witnesses of many different people" (1-2), who are nevertheless united in their common trust in Yahweh and their dependence on the covenantal relationship that sustains and binds them together in a community of faith. In section I, "Title, Text, and Translation," it is noted that the two designations found in the Psalter itself – "prayers" (*tephilloth*) and "praises" (*tehillim*) – represent "two fundamental types of psalms: prayers in time of need, or laments, and songs of praise, or hymns" (citing James Limburg, 3). As part of a thorough consideration of the Hebrew text, the relative quality of which is regarded as "fair" (3), and its disparate lines of transmission, the authors propose that their "text-critical task . . . is to establish the text of each psalm as it may have been at the beginning of the Masoretic tradition," using all available ancient witnesses, especially the Septuagint on account of its preference for "literal, nonidiomatic Greek" (5). The commentary provides a new translation of each psalm with critical notes, following "the traditional English versification" and keeping the rendering "as literal . . . as possible" (7). One major exception is the decision not to translate, but rather to transliterate the Psalter's central concept, *hesed*, thus treating it "as a loan word from Hebrew to English" (7). As part of the extensive rationale supporting this decision, the authors observe that

> *hesed* is a relational term that describes both the *internal character* as well as the *external actions* required to maintain a life-sustaining relationship. . . . *hesed* is both who the Lord is and what the Lord does (8, original italics).

Section II of the Introduction, "Authorship, Superscriptions, and Date," leads off with the obligatory discussion of the meaning of *le-dawid* ("to/for/of David"), concluding that "it is likely" that this familiar element of a psalm's superscription "did not originally indicate authorship" (10). The four components of these often mysterious superscriptions are then described, to the extent possible: "subcollection identification (authorship)," "directions for liturgical/musical performance," "indication of genre" (which is perhaps the most helpful), and "historical superscriptions" (12-13).

Section III deals with "Form Criticism and Historical Approaches to Interpretation" (13). "Two broad approaches to form-critical interpretation of the Psalter" are surveyed (14). The earlier method sought to "'get behind' the texts of the psalms to the [original social and religious] 'life-settings' that produced the forms" (14), for example, Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Gerstenberger (14-16). "A second form-critical approach . . . rather focused more directly on the forms themselves" (16), which are closely analyzed as "literary" as well as

"theological" categories, for example, Westermann ("praise and petition"), Brueggemann ("orientation-disorientation- reorientation") (17). Jacobson, the primary author of the commentary's Introduction (except for section IV), criticizes form-critical approaches for their "basically unquestioned assumption that form and function cohere with each other" (18), whereas the reality often turns out to be more complicated (or "artistic"!) than that, for example, "psalms that share common thematic [also functional?] aspects, but which might differ in literary form: royal psalms . . . pilgrimage psalms . . ." (19). The following "literary forms of the Psalter" are identified: "Prayer for Help (both the Individuals and of the Community," "Psalm of Trust," "Hymn of Praise," "Song of Thanksgiving (both of the individual and the community),"[9] "Instructional Psalm," "Royal Psalm," and "Liturgies" (19-21). In closing, Jacobson cautions that "many of the psalms do not fit perfectly into one of the 'forms' of form criticism," and this approach serves simply "as a way into the interpretation and understanding of a psalm" (21).

Section IV, by deClaissé-Walford, is by far the longest section in the book's Introduction and reveals the author's scholarly specialty, which derives from the approach known as "canon criticism" (e.g., Childs, Sanders, McCann Jr.). In short, "the purposeful placement of psalms within the collection seems to have given the final form of the Psalter a function and message greater than the sum of its parts" (22). The five "books" into which the Psalter is divided, each concluding with a deliberate doxology, plus clear collections of psalms within the whole (e.g., Korahite, Asaphite, Ascents, etc.), would support this conclusion, as does the additional detailed structural and thematic evidence that deClaissé assembles in this instructive section. Representing "a constitutive document of identity for postexilic Israel," the Psalter is posited as being a poetic history of Israel's survival as a nation (cf. Brueggemann and Bellinger 8):

> Books One and Two (Psalms 1-72) chronical the reigns of kings David and Solomon; Book Three (Psalms 73-89) tells of the dark days of the divided kingdoms and their eventual destructions; Book Four (Psalms 90-106) recalls the years of the Babylonian exile during which the community of faith had to rethink their identity as the people of God; and book Five (Psalms 107-50) celebrates the community of faith's restoration to the land and the sovereignty of God over them (38).

Section V of the Introduction, "The Poetry of the Psalter," considers only two distinctive features, "parallelism" and "evocative language." Various permutations of parallelism are described and illustrated, but the literary device

[9] This is quoted exactly as written; note the difference from the earlier similar title of "Prayer for Help." Jaconson's form-critical inventory is very similar to that proposed by Brueggemann and Bellinger above.

itself is rather minimally defined as "the juxtaposition of two or more grammatical elements" (39). A broader perspective would view lexical-semantics and phonological correspondence as being also integrally involved in this (normally) paired lineal convergence of form, content, and function.[10] On the other hand, deClaissé correctly calls attention to the fact that parallelism is manifested in biblical poetry beyond the cola level, including "between stanzas and even between psalms" (41).[11] The Psalter's "evocative language" includes features such as "metaphor, simile, hyperbole, imagery, drama, intensity, repetition, and so on" (42) which serves to complement a psalm's "theological meaning," thus conjoining artistic form with religious content to accomplish its manifold communicative function in relation to both God and fellow members of the community of faith.

In section VI, "Themes and Theology," Jacobson observes that

> the various form-critical categories express the main themes of the Psalter: pleas for help . . . praising testimony, trust in the midst of crisis, thanksgiving . . . and instruction on walking in God's ways (43).

Other macro-themes are suggested, for example, "the Lord reigns," "God as refuge," "the Lord is faithful," but "in the end, what is of enduring and vital significance to the psalms is that they do testify to the character and activity of the Lord" (45). Section VII, "Analysis of Contents," presents a canon-critical analysis of the Psalter's organization, based on the lengthy discussion of section IV (46); it is much more perceptible than the corresponding outline given in Brueggemann and Bellinger. The commentary's Introduction concludes, as already noted with a "Select Bibliography" (VIII).

Book One of the Psalter is preceded by its own separate Introduction (by R. Jacobson). Much of this is devoted to a discussion of Psalms 1-2 as "the two-part introduction" to this initial collection, both thematically and structurally, that is, a prominent literary *inclusio*: the first and last psalms in the group, 1/41, both lead off with the pronouncement "Happy is/are . . ." (*ashre*). Thus, these two psalms – the first instructional, the second royal – function to point to two primary ways that God is working to effect God's will in the world: "through God's Word (which forms a specific community of followers) and

[10] Furthermore, it is not quite accurate to say that "at its most recognizable level, parallelism happens between *phrases*" (40, my italics), with the two poetic lines (cola) of Ps 96:1 given as an illustration. These lines a better described as "clauses," "predications," or given their fundamental oral essence, "utterances."

[11] Non-adjacent, or remote, parallel lines often serve an important text-demarcational function in poetic discourse – not only *inclusio*, but also to mark the respective beginnings (aperture) and endings (closure) of different stanzas (cf. Ernst R. Wendland, *Translating the Literature of Scripture*, Dallas: SIL International, 2004, 123-128).

through God's messiah (who also gathers a specific community of followers around him)" (57). Psalms 1-2 could also be viewed as an introduction to the Psalter as a whole, for they suggest "two ways of reading the psalms – as wisdom and as prophecy" (57).

R. Jacobson also offers the textual commentary on Ps 1, which will be briefly overviewed in partial comparison with that of Brueggemann and Bellinger, given above. The proposed title for this psalm, "The Way of Life," has already been critiqued. The commentary (throughout the Psalter) begins with a consideration of poetic structure. In contrast to the outline of Brueggemann and Bellinger, Jacobson sets forth a chiastic structure that underscores "a basic contrast between the wicked and the righteous" (58):

St. 1 The way of the wicked (v. 1)

St. 2 The Torah of the Lord (v. 2)

St. 3 The prosperity found in the Torah (v. 3)

St. 4 The judgment of the wicked (vv. 4-6)

Besides the obvious imbalance in "stanza" length, this scheme appears to obscure the more natural development of the psalmist's paraenetic message. Thus, the first stanza could also be interpreted as describing the Torah (cp. stanzas 2-3) – however, by way of contrast through activities that the observer avoids. Furthermore, stanza 4 is not only about "the judgment of the wicked," for the Lord's vindication of the righteous is actually the climax of the unit (vv. 5b-6a). Finally, the proposed structure excludes this final summary verse, where the contrast between the righteous and the wicked reaches its peak. This example illustrates a problem that all such structural summaries face (my own included): they may certainly instruct and enrich one's understanding of the text; on the other hand, they might also complicate, confuse, or conceal the psalm's poetic organization as well as its primary sense and significance.

The commentary continues with the author's relatively literal rendering and annotation of the Hebrew text. A helpful comment occurs with reference to the verb "meditate" (*haga*) in v. 2b, which "should not be understood to imply an internalized, cognitive meditation" (59), but rather some sort of verbal rumination, perhaps even a "recitation" (cf. Ps 2:1, where this text-linking catchword describes the hostile "murmuring" of pagan peoples against the Lord). Most modern commentators, including Jacobson (60), doubt that there is any implication in v. 4 of an *eschatological* judgment of the wicked; in contrast, this seems to be the allusion present in the LXX's expanded rendition of the chaff being blown away "from the face of the earth."

The commentary's third, text-focused section presents a closer analysis on a stanza by stanza basis. In the case of Ps 1, the first three verses are treated

separately, while vv. 4-6 are considered together as a unit. Jacobson notes that in the beginning "the poem expands upon the difference between the righteous and the wicked by describing both groups in terms of the other" (60), the former as individuals, the latter as an antithetical assembly. After introducing the thematically central notion of the *torah*, "instruction," in v. 2, its individualized agent "this one" (the "joyful" person of v. 1) is described by "one of the most striking similes in the Psalter" (61), namely, as a tree that has been "(trans)planted" beside a constant source of life-giving water, the point being that "the environment created by the wicked cannot extinguish the righteous" (62) – just the opposite, in fact, occurs. The "sharply disjunctive" transition "Not so . . ." (*lo' ken*) introduces the contrast in imagery between the righteous (well-founded tree) and the wicked (floating chaff) which is underscored by "the lack of balance in terms of poetic length," namely, four full cola versus one (62). In vv. 5-6 "the meaning of the psalm is enhanced through a brilliant, threefold strategy of poetic delay": the attribute "righteous" occurs for the first time; it appears in the plural form, as a "community"; and "God – the 'proper subject' of all theology – finally is named as an actor," who "watches over" his faithful people (62-63). "A subtle syntactic change" distinguishes v. 6 as the summary climax of the psalm: "In the first colon, *the way of the righteous* is the object of the verb; in the second, *the way of the wicked* in the subject" (63, original italics). Thus, the righteous are the objects of God's gracious care, while the wicked choose their own fate and hence "march down the path of self-destruction" (63). These are indeed cogent hermeneutical insights.

Every exegetical section in the commentary is followed by one or more "Reflections" (corresponding to Brueggemann and Bellinger's "Supplementary Sections" – "A Closer Look" and "Bridging Horizons"). Jacobson includes two reflections on Ps 1: "God's Way of Life" and "The Tree of Life and Streams of Water." The first involves an interesting contrast between the "my way" of the contemporary American "self-made man" and the way set forth by the divinely moved singer of Ps 1. The message is that choosing our own way in life "leads only to our own destruction," but following "the way of God's instruction is a gift for those who cannot guide themselves" (64), which is everyone, by sinful nature. This is not a teaching of "work-righteousness," but rather "the psalm offers the free and gracious gift of a better way" (64), that which is clearly enunciated in and empowered by God's Torah – his holy Word. These thoughts are reinforced poetically in Jacobson's ensuing reflection on "The Tree of Life and the Streams of Water." "In the ancient world, the tree was a symbol of divine blessing," metaphorically applied in the psalm to the righteous person "transplanted next to a stream" – the life-sustaining waters of "God's instruction" (64). "Like a tree the quietly, invisibly, constantly receives strength and life through its roots, so we are given God's Word as a steady source of life" (64). As in the case of Brueggemann and Bellinger's periodic "Supplementary Sections," so also it is this sequence of insightful "Reflections" that distin-

guishes – and refreshes – the commentary of deClaissé, Jacobson, and LaNeel Tanner.

Either one, ideally both, of these commentaries would be a most profitable addition to any scholar or student's library on the Psalter. A person might benefit most by beginning with the shorter, more accessible text, and then proceed to fill in the inevitable information gaps by accessing its longer textual complement. In any case, the result of such delightful daily instruction and verbalized reflection (Ps 1:2), whether in the Psalms or any other portion of Scripture, will surely be a fruitful harvest of life-giving spiritual nourishment (Ps 1:3), and the assurance that this way of life is "known" by the Lord (Ps 1:6a).

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