

## ***A Review of Psalms I and II***

*A Commentary on Psalms 1-72*, by John F. Brug. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005. Pp. 671. \$43.50 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-0-8100-1691-5.

*A Commentary on Psalms 73-150*, by John F. Brug. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005. Pp. 520. \$41.50 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-0-8100-1711-3.

A review from the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. Vol. 41, April 2008, No 2, p 103-107, by Ronald L. Cammenga.

The author of this two-volume set of commentaries on the book of Psalms is Dr. John Brug, Professor of Systematic Theology and Old Testament at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Dr. Brug's commentary on Psalms stands in the tradition of conservative Lutheran scholarship. That is certainly a praiseworthy feature of the commentary. One will not find in it higher-critical views of Scripture, but instead a commitment to Scripture's divine, infallible, verbal inspiration. Neither will one find in the commentary a mass of scholarly minutiae assembled to impress the reader, but which is altogether unedifying to the church and the individual believer. There is a glut of such commentaries on the religious book market today. Instead the reader will be gladdened to discover careful exegesis and application of the original text of Psalms that aims to build up the people of God. From the outset, Dr. Brug expresses the purpose of his commentary: "Less detailed and technical than the major academic commentaries on Psalms, this commentary focuses on the translation and interpretation of the Hebrew text as the foundation for a pastor's teaching and preaching on Psalms" (p. 7).

One of the most commendable features of the commentary is the detailed "Introduction" to the book of Psalms that makes up nearly the first one hundred pages of volume one. In this introduction, Dr. Brug covers a wide range of topics, such as: the nature of the book of Psalms, different types of Psalms, the headings of the Psalms, the writing of the Psalms, Davidic authorship of many of the Psalms, the collection and arrangement of the Psalms, the canonicity of the Psalms, the poetry of the Psalms, distinctive features of the grammar and vocabulary of the Psalms, the music of the Psalms, and the history of the Psalms.

The introduction concludes with a very worthwhile treatment of "Luther and the Psalms." I cannot refrain from including some of the quotations from Luther on the book of Psalms that Dr. Brug cites in this section of his introduction.

Every Christian ought to know the Psalms as well as he knows his five fingers. Then the four evangelists will also be understood properly.

What is the Psalter but prayer and praise to God, that is, a book of hymns? ... In this book the dear Holy Spirit supplies us with words and thoughts for our prayers and petitions to our heavenly Father. The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts of fair and happy thoughts

toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for your fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them. The Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself or find or wish for anything better. In a word, if you would see the holy Christian Church painted in living color and shape, comprehended in one little picture, then take up the Psalter. There you have a fine, bright mirror that will show you what Christendom is.

In this part of the introduction, Dr. Brug also recounts the role that the book of Psalms played in Luther's rediscovery of the gospel, as well as in the Reformation more broadly. Luther earned the Doctor of Theology degree from the University of Wittenberg on October 19, 1512. Shortly thereafter, he was called upon to lecture in the university on Holy Scripture. He commenced his task by preparing a series of lectures on the book of Psalms. Many scholars contend that it was in the course of preparing these lectures that Luther came to understand the evangelical meaning of the term "righteousness." Later he indicated that as he worked through the first thirty psalms, he regarded "the righteousness of God" as God's punitive righteousness, according to which he punishes the guilty sinner. But when he came to Psalm 31:1 and David's prayer, "Deliver me in thy righteousness," he became convinced that God's righteousness must have another meaning. When Luther eventually turned his attention to Paul's epistle to the Romans and focused especially on Romans 1:16, 17, it became clear to him that the righteousness of God is the justifying righteousness of God that is imputed to sinners through faith in Jesus Christ. It was Luther's study of the book of Psalms that played a critical role in his arriving at a proper understanding of the gospel, and played a critical role, therefore, in restoring the truth of the gospel to the church.

One special class of psalms is the imprecatory psalms. The imprecatory psalms contain curses over the wicked and prayers for God's judgment on the psalmist's enemies. Psalm 137:8, 9 serves as an example of an imprecatory psalm: "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones." Many higher critics dismiss the imprecatory psalms as remnants of a less-developed stage of religion that through the process of time has evolved and that the contemporary church has outgrown. They claim that such prayers and desires are no longer proper for New Testament believers. This is decidedly not the position that Dr. Brug assumes in his commentary. Rather, he defends the imprecatory psalms and their place in the canon of the Old Testament.

These curses are part of God's inspired Word. It is true that Scripture sometimes reports improper statements made by believers in moments of distress. For example, not all of the statements made by Job and his friends in the book of Job were proper. However, the curses in the psalms do not fall into this category, because Scripture itself shows that they were proper prayers (p. 22).

Dr. Brug goes on to point out that if the believer and church today cannot pray the prayers of the imprecatory psalms, there is something seriously amiss. He also suggests some reasons for the neglect of the imprecatory psalms in the contemporary church. Among those reasons, he includes the following:

Perhaps another reason for the comparative neglect of the imprecatory psalms in the modern, Western church is that we have by and large led a pampered, sheltered existence. We have experienced freedom from persecution unprecedented in the history of the church. It is hard to pray imprecatory prayers from padded pews. If we had seen God's temple burned to the ground and its priests slaughtered by Babylonian soldiers, if we had seen our loved ones dragged away to face a horrible death before lions and a savage crowd in the arena, if our Bibles had been burned, our churches demolished, and our pastors sent to a frozen death in a faraway gulag, perhaps then our hearts would be one with the saints who pray, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev. 6:10) (p. 27).

As far as the format of the commentary is concerned, each section begins with the Hebrew text that is explained in that section, followed by Dr. Brug's own literal translation. In this connection, Dr. Brug's suggestion should be noted that "[t]hose who use [the commentary] are encouraged to translate and study the Hebrew text on their own before turning to the commentary" (p. 7). That is a very worthwhile reminder to preachers for the use of all commentaries. Following the translation is a section entitled "Translation Notes." This section includes identification of forms and grammatical constructions, as well as key word studies. Often the more significant word studies are highlighted and are set apart from the body of the text. After the "Translation Notes" and word studies comes the main part of the interpretation of each text under the heading, "Application."

This commentary on Psalms is written from a conservative, evangelical viewpoint. Dr. Brug offers careful explanation of the text, coupled with insightful applications. Although directed to pastors, the commentary will also be very useful to anyone interested in the message of the book of Psalms, whether as a part of individual Bible study or group Bible study. Seminary professors who teach the book of Psalms and exegesis classes that deal with texts from the Psalms will benefit from the commentary, as will also seminary students who are studying this important genre of Old Testament literature.

The two volumes can be purchased on-line directly from the publisher, Northwestern Publishing House, at their home page.