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Gerstenberger, Erhard S.

Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations

Forms of the Old Testament Literature 15

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During the more than ten years after the publication of FOTL 14 (1988), the first part of Erhard S. Gerstenberger's commentary on the Psalms, the scholarly community often inquired after the second volume. Hence it is grateful to hear the author say: "Here it is, finally" (xvi). The first volume proved to be a very useful and informed commentary on the Psalms (Pss 1–60), and the second one meets its expectations. The decade that passed since the publication of FOTL 14 evidenced a wide stream of literature on the Psalms and several new approaches to ancient Hebrew poetry. Gerstenberger admits that he has learned much from the new avenues of Psalm exegesis starting in the 1990s. However, he also remains true to his principles, and one can clearly agree with his statement in the preface: "I still think that a form-critical and social-historical analysis like the one begun with FOTL XIV may be helpful to recognize the multiple roots of psalmody in different types of human organization and ritual practice" (xv).

This sentence contains the key words for the commentator's approach: The term *form-critical* shows Gerstenberger's emphasis on distinct genres; that is, the individual psalms are specimens of praise and lament, reflection and exhortation, mirrors of the experiences of faith of many generations of Israelite and Jewish

communities. This leads to the term *social-historical*. Gerstenberger regards the use of these songs, prayers, sermons, and meditations to be more important than the authorship of the texts. No one can determine the author and the exact historical situation of the emergence of a certain psalm, but still every psalm is anchored in the communicative processes of a congregation, that is, a social organization. "Exegesis needs to respect this social contextuality in order to understand better what ancient texts are talking about, and how we in our own time and environments may articulate our own search for truth, life, and justice, that is, for God" (xvi).

The volume opens with six pages of additional bibliography containing the most important commentaries and studies on the Psalms, cultic poetry, and ceremony from the last ten years (and earlier, if not already listed in FOTL 14). Gerstenberger is to be commended for including a variety of studies in the German language, especially the important contributions by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Norbert Lohfink, Matthias Millard, Klaus Seybold, Hermann Spieckermann, and Erich Zenger. The bulk of the book is dedicated to Pss 61–150 (3–461), while the last two chapters deal with Lamentations (introduction: 465–76; commentary: 477–505). The book comes with an extensive glossary containing entries such as account of pilgrimage/*Pilgerbericht*, acrostic psalm, beatitude, complaint element, confession of faith, dirge, entrance liturgy, hymnic participle, instruction, intercession, liturgy, oracle (of salvation), protestation of innocence, vow, Yahweh-kingship psalm, just to mention some of the longer articles. These brief explanations seem to be intended as short but helpful reminders for those not so familiar with the elaborated terminology of form criticism on the Psalms. The concluding list of formulas (539–43) is also very advantageous in order to find at a glance the meaning of terms such as blessing formula, call to attention, enthronement shout, formula of confidence, and thanksgiving formula.

The commentary on Pss 61–150 dedicates approximately six pages to each psalm. This average value can increase to a maximum of eight pages for very long psalms such as 78 and 119. Each entry follows the same pattern that is common to the format of the FOTL series. The heading assigns each psalm a specific genre term (e.g., Ps 80 is labeled a "Communal Complaint"). Then follows the largest section, called "Structure," divided into two parts. The first portion comprises the outline of the Psalm that provides an overview of the composition and the content of the text. It carries the verse numbers of the Masoretic Text (MT) as well as the NRSV in synoptic columns, since these numbers notoriously differ in the Psalms. This feature will complement a common translation such as RSV /NRSV, since the text of the Psalm itself is not given. In the second part, Gerstenberger

describes the structure of the Psalm in general and verse by verse, including brief remarks on the superscription. There are no footnotes in the commentary; however, from time to time brief references to secondary literature are included. Technical terms that are briefly explained in the glossary are set in small capitals (e.g., "INVOCATION").

Three smaller sections deal with genre, setting, and intention. The genre section often refers back to the first volume and its large "Introduction to Cultic Poetry." Here, dealing with the individual units, Gerstenberger clarifies the characteristic features of each psalm where the text converges with or deviates from the genre. Genre is obviously discerned not only on structural and formal grounds, but matters of content seem to be decisive, too. The setting section, which is sometimes merged with genre (e.g., Ps 79 [102]), provides an explanation for the congregational background that might have been responsible for the origin of the psalm. Gerstenberger discusses the dating of psalms, a notoriously difficult task, if ever possible, only very briefly and points to possible or plausible speculations. In most cases one must assume a longer period of growth during the transmission and use of the text in different historical situations. The section called "intention" does not deal with the intention of the historical author(s) of the text—this is something that cannot be discerned for most Psalms. *Intention* here rather refers to the community: the goals that the people who pray the psalm try to achieve. Here Gerstenberger uses formulations that describe what the community is *doing* by *praying* (e.g., "the whole community promises loyalty to God" [106]). In this way the reader is open to apply the prayers of the Psalms to present situations. Gerstenberger himself correctly refrains from pointing to certain possibilities of "application."

The last section of each entry, "bibliography," is helpful and valuable for the scholarly readership. Even for such psalms that are not of central interest, such as Ps 80, Gerstenberger provides two-thirds of a page referring to the most important articles and monographs. These bibliographies are a good starting point for further studies.

Gerstenberger treats each psalm as a single ("individual") unit. This belongs to his intention and outline, and hence he does not concern himself with the compositions of psalm collections or the Psalter as a whole. One may ask whether it is possible to exclude the question of the arrangement of psalms completely from a commentary. Of course, commentaries of such a compact size as Gerstenberger's FOTL volumes cannot discuss this issue at length. However, one should be aware of the fact that reading a psalm as a single unit and reading

a psalm as part of a collection or the Psalter as a whole will make a difference. It is not so important to find out if there are any intentions of historical collectors or redactors of psalm collections or if there are any deliberate criteria for arranging certain psalms—there are such criteria, no doubt—but from a reader-oriented perspective one can always say some words about how the preceding (or following) psalm(s) might influence the perception of the individual unit. This is something that is new, and there is no commentary at hand that argues in such a direction. Although the works of Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger in the series *Neue Echter Bibel* and *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament* dedicate a section in the treatment of each psalm to the question of *concatenatio*, of the arrangement and mutual influence of neighboring psalms, they focus mainly on the intentions of composers and arrangers and try to find traces of their work in the texts of the Psalms. They do not follow a reader-oriented approach throughout. For the issue of the composition of the Psalter, one also needs to consult Matthias Millard, *Die Kompositionsgeschichte des Psalters* (FAT 9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), and other important works in that direction, all mentioned in Gerstenberger's additional bibliography (xxii).

Having said that, this reviewer does not want to criticize Gerstenberger's commentary for leaving out something that the commentator never intended to do but wants to point to another "new avenue" in Psalms exegesis.

The introduction to Lamentations comes with two full pages of bibliography and five sections. The "history of the Booklet" does not discuss the emergence of Lamentations but rather the book's reception in the Jewish canon (part of the Megilloth) and liturgy as well as some ancient Near Eastern analogies. The second and third sections are dedicated to "meter and literary forms" and "contents and purpose," respectively. The formation of the book is discussed in section 4: "historical situations and social roots." Since the texts are liturgies, "we simply should not expect too much information about historical events" (473). Finally, Gerstenberger touches briefly on the issues of "theology and ethics" in Lamentations.

The commentary on Lam 1–5 follows the same pattern as the commentary on the Psalms. Gerstenberger adds a short section before "structure" called "text." Here he deals with matters of meter and acrostic effects as well as with difficulties with the poetic form, including text-critical problems.

Erhard S. Gerstenberger, professor emeritus of Old Testament Literature at Marburg University, Germany, has written a functional and useful commentary

on the Psalms and Lamentations containing extensive information, starting points for further study, and valuable hints for understanding Psalms and Lamentations in the context of social, cultic, religious, and theological conceptions of Israel and its neighboring people. Although keeping close to the text, Gerstenberger also opens ways for further thinking and application of Psalms for contemporary readers and praying congregations. One can confirm the sentence on the back cover of the book: "This volume completes Erhard Gerstenberger's widely praised discussion of the psalms literature begun in Volume XIV and includes as well an admirable study of the book of Lamentations."