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BOOK REVIEW

John W. Hilber. *Psalms*. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. xv + 149 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780310492108.

Zondervan has shown a desire to assist laypeople interested in better understanding the historical and cultural background of the Bible by providing this set of attractive, accessible, paperback commentaries. Hilber's volume on Psalms is immediately recognizable as a part of this series, with its rich collection of illustrations and images found on nearly every page. The depth of knowledge of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) background materials provided by Hilber is obvious, since significant discussion of the traditions of a number of cultures contemporaneous to Israel can be found in the text.

Hilber's strength lies in the connection of specific parallels of phraseology found in the Psalms with other ancient literature. Because of his survey of the usage by other cultures of select concepts and figures of speech found in the Psalms, the reader is better prepared to grasp catch-phrases and allusions that are all too easily glossed over. Furthermore, many of these parallels are found in religious texts, making them particularly helpful for better understanding the distinct emphases of the worship of Yahweh in contrast to the deities of surrounding nations. For example, one piece of information that would provide meaningful insight to most non-specialists is the divergence in the evaluation of the worth of human life between the Hebrew Bible and other ancient sources. Building off the phrase "What is man?" in Ps 8:4, Hilber cites Mesopotamian materials detailing how the gods created humans solely for the purpose of providing food to feed them, but then became annoyed at how noisy the humans were and so decided to destroy them in a flood. This

certainly highlights the high value placed on humanity by the Bible as opposed to the mythology of surrounding cultures that viewed them as “expendable slaves to the gods” (p. 13).

Hilber’s exposition of Psalm 29 is similarly illuminating, noting the multitude of phrases throughout that have close parallels to ancient Ugaritic hymns to Baal. The precise purpose of the dramatic descriptions of Yahweh’s power and majesty in Psalm 29 is placed in much sharper relief when they are compared with the characteristics of competing deities; the point is being made that it is Yahweh, not Baal, who does all these things. Traditional characteristics of Baal that are attributed to Yahweh in Psalm 29 include speaking with thunder (v. 3), gaining victory over the sea (v. 3), using lightning as a weapon (v. 7), and earning the right to enthronement due to victory over the flood (v. 10). Thus Psalm 29 functions as a radical polemic asserting that the true referent of these actions is Yahweh, not Baal.

Despite the catalogue of parallel concepts offered by this work, several concerns coincide that make me hesitant to recommend *Psalms* to anyone, layperson or student. First, almost the entire book is devoted to investigating individual parallels of phrasing or figures of speech. Not only is this quite atomistic to someone wanting to understand the meaning or use of a given psalm as a whole, it often results in several potential parallels being offered with no aid given in deciding which one (or none?) is being alluded to by the psalmist. Furthermore, little help is given as to how the data provided actually gives additional meaning to a psalm that could not be gathered by simply reading an English translation. To the layperson looking for assistance in this area, this would seem to be a major flaw. For example, in his discussion of Ps 36:7, Hilber notes that Ugaritic texts use wings to symbolically refer to swiftness of motion and freedom, even though the context of the verse makes it quite obvious that the idea of protection is being conveyed. Additionally, for the reader wishing to go deeper, an extra layer of difficulty in gaining access to these background documents is created by the fact that Hilber often only references his ANE sources through the barrier of quoting secondary sources, or by simply noting that they are found in *ANET* or a similar collection, without telling readers

what these are or how to access them. Because of the frequently recurring imagery in the Psalter, cross-references are often used to direct the reader to see a particular discussion elsewhere. The closer one gets to the end of the book, the more often a discussion of a given Psalm is a patchwork of commands to visit previous materials.

More significantly, Hilber completely omits significant discussion of the dating, compositional background, and cultic and other usage of the Psalms themselves. After a brief introduction scarcely filling two pages, which quickly overviews the existence of similar poetic compositions in other ancient societies, Hilber jumps right into expositing phrases in the Psalms as described above. This blatant neglect of the usage of psalms in the cult and life of the community not only fails to fill the reader in on their “background,” it renders murky their usage as prayers, laments, and expressions of thanksgiving, and instead seems to treat them merely as a collage of vague allusions to other ANE materials. Features such as the helpful sidebar explaining the function of community laments in different ANE cultures (p. 42) are the exception rather than the rule. Here the interested reader would be much better served by consulting the introduction to a good commentary on the Psalter, such as that of John Goldingay (*Psalms 1–41*, Baker Academic, 2006), which provides a history of research on various theories of the usage of the Psalms in different festivals, as well as an introduction to genres of the Psalms and a discussion of various theological issues arising from the place of kingship and first person pronouns in the Psalter. A book purporting to be a “background” commentary on Psalms ought to deal with their historical use in Israel’s worship and issues such as the function of the figure of David.

While it may seem overly critical to find fault with a bibliography, one will be surprised here to find several recent helpful evangelical works on Psalms completely absent (such as Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, IVP Academic, 2005) while several incomplete, technical works translated from German are included. This is not helpful for a layperson seeking to go deeper.

In conclusion, I am sorry to say that for the background study

of the Psalms, other materials are available that would be far more helpful to interested laypeople or students. However, Hilber himself cannot solely be blamed for this phenomenon, since it is all too common in evangelical scholarship to assume a text has been expositied when what has been provided is far more akin to background data dumping. In the case of the Psalms in particular, far more reflection should be included on how these compositions functioned in the life of the ancient community so that Christians today can allow them to serve as inspired examples of prayer and worship.

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