

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

J. V. Fesko. *Songs of a Suffering King: The Grand Christ Hymn of Psalms 1–8*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014. 128 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-60178-310-3. \$7.50.

John Fesko is academic dean and systematic professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Having spent a decade in pastoral ministry, he has made a habit of publishing smaller devotional books. *Songs of a Suffering King* is actually his sixth book that is under 150 pages, and this book is a great example of his ability to offer theological insight without sounding pedantic. Fesko's goal is to edify Christians by providing easy-to-read yet biblically sound books. The author understands that many find it difficult to read an entire book in a single sitting. So Fesko has designed this book to be read "reflectively" over time. While the chapters build on one another, he provides ample repetition so that readers who have left the book for a period of time can easily pick up where they left off.

The focus of the book comes across throughout—"Scriptural psalms should be a regular staple in our personal spiritual diet" (ix). Fesko contends that the book of Psalms should be part of the church's preaching, teaching, singing, and prayer. He finds in the biblical poetry of the psalms, especially chs. 1–8, a resource for Christian living—the hope, confidence, and comfort we need in times of rejoicing and lament.

As the book itself claims to be a self-professed "devotional exploration" (9), the introductory section is expectedly short. However, Fesko recognizes that for many churches, "large portions of the Bible are a mystery because they never surface in preaching, liturgy, or worship" (122), and so he seeks to remedy such deficiency. The short introduction presents a useful teaching on how to approach the Psalms. Coming from a

Reformed perspective, Fesko presents two hermeneutical principles for interpreting Psalms 1–8.

The first principle is that the “entire Psalter is connected to the person and work of Christ” (2). Though not all scholars hold this position, Fesko is keeping himself in line with the Reformed perspective of seeing Christ as the interpretive *telos* of Scripture as Luke 24:44 presents. He suggests the idea of seeing David as a character preview of Christ, that is, David as a prototype of the Messiah. Nevertheless, Fesko is not given to extremes of parallelism or decontextualized interpretations. While he boldly states, “we must identify all of the psalms as messianic—they all point us to Christ” (18), he also acknowledges that Christ does not explicitly appear in all the psalms (3). As an interpretive safeguard, he suggests a two-step process for appropriately reading the Psalms. First, an interpreter works towards “establishing the original historical context” and then he or she “can consider the connections to Christ” (9). However, even then, Fesko cautions that “the parallels are not precise—they usually are not” (40). This step process is a refreshing qualification to find in a devotional work. Too often, one reads of wild conjectures and baseless parallelomania in popular level books.

The second principle is that the Psalter has a “specific organizational structure” (4). This principle may be new to some readers, but Fesko is building upon the work of Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. Since Wilson’s dissertation was published in 1985, it has been a continued thesis discussed in Psalm studies. This should assure readers that, even though Fesko writes an easy-to-read book, it is built upon quality scholarship behind the scenes. Fesko makes use of the Psalter’s editorial structure to argue that the “first eight chapters set the tone for the rest of the first book of the Psalter” (108). Psalm 1 opens the psalter by presenting the righteous person, with Psalm 2 indicating that person as the enthroned Messiah. Psalm 8 points to the exaltation and praise of Christ by drawing upon Heb 2:6–9. Such an in-terpretation can be found in many places, but how then are Psalms 3–7 to be read? Fesko considers the overall structure of the psalter to be important in addressing this question. These intervening psalms are not to be disregarded. Instead, just as the anointed David suffered and was threatened

by Saul and Absalom, so also the royal righteous man will endure suffering and death. This is cross-referenced with Matt 16:16–23.

The outline of the book follows the chronology of the eight psalms. Each chapter begins by refreshing the reader with some of the key points from the preceding chapters, followed by a short impression of the key theme of the new psalm. Fesko then explains the psalm regarding its historical situation in David's life. While not a commentary, the book provides some historical insights into the situation of David's life with reference to other scriptural passages. Attention is then given to how the psalm points to Christ and his work as the fulfillment of the text. In connecting the particular psalm with Christ, Fesko applies it to Christians as to what should be learned about Christ and how Christians should pray, live, and praise. He ends each chapter with further study questions and a metrical version of the psalm.

While some readers may want to go deeper than Fesko does in this book, it is nonetheless a solid book for its targeted audience. One critique is that the book does not flow smoothly from one section to the next one. While the numerous illustrations and quotations in the book can be a useful reading aid for the reader, the sections appear disjointed from each other. However, I believe the book will find broad and good reception in our contemporary churches, when used as a small group Bible study or personal devotion resource. The points Fesko makes are practical for everyday Christian life. The study questions are also engaging and thought provoking without being overly challenging. The book can be a useful introduction to orient people regarding the book of Psalms (including both the joy and lament sections) so as to make use of them as part of their Christian life, as it showcases simple ways to read the text, pray through the text, and be encouraged by its content.

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