

Wenham, Gordon J. *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

Chapters Three - Five

As I mentioned in the first part of this review, the manuscript from which this review comes is a galley proof which the publisher generously provided me. Pagination and other similar technical matters will therefore be contingent. My purpose in the review (in its multiple parts) to follow is to summarize and analyze Wenham's work.

To that end, in Chapter three Wenham wishes to stress that, in his view, the psalter is actually an anthology of songs and prayers which its final redactors intended to be memorized. He bases this view on an analysis of the use of sacred texts in the ANE and so, by analogy, believes the psalter was conceived in the same way.

If Israel's scribes operated like their neighbors did, many of the documentary methods by which Old Testament texts supposedly were created seem most unlikely. For example, it becomes hard to envisage a scribe redacting two different written sources to create a third version (p. 45).

That because ANE scribes would blend two existing texts rather than inventing a third.

These ANE texts (and so Psalms by implication)

... were intended to be memorized, with a view to being publicly recited for the purpose of inculcating the nation's values (p. 46).

This view certainly has much merit and much in its favor.

Wenham's fourth chapter is something of an 'interlude' in that, before plunging into the heart of the matter (the ethics of the Psalms) Wenham takes a sidestep to describe what he calls 'the unique claims of prayed ethics'. He draws on the work of Dorothea Erbele-Küster's *Lesen als Akt des Betens*

... in which she uses reader-response theory to illuminate the rhetorical situation of praying the psalms (p. 58).

So, Wenham continues, with this methodology in hand readers are sensitized to the shifts between first and third person voice in the psalms and how the psalms work as prayers.

Another aid for interpreting the psalms is the recently utilized in Old Testament studies 'speech-act theory'. Wenham asserts that the psalms contain promises, directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives, and assertives. Each of these has a particular purpose and so particular significance. Wenham illustrates them at length and then observes in summary

Praying the psalms is a performative, typically a commissive, act: saying these solemn words to God alters one's relationship in a way that mere listening does not (p. 75).

Certainly there is much to learn from these methodological approaches. They do open potential windows of understanding on the psalms but their problem is that they are anachronistic. They simply import into the Psalms meanings which moderns see and may well blind those same moderns to the sense of the text itself.

Furthermore, such approaches – while igniting discussion briefly – generally turn out to be nothing more than momentary fads. Like the seed sown on the rocks (in the parable of the Sower), these methods spring up quickly but come to nothing.

In his fifth chapter which W. titles 'The Concept of the Law in the Psalms' he comes to the heart of the matter. And he begins with a survey of 'psalmic ethics'. What he means by that is

... what the psalms have to say about the law and, in particular, their attitude toward the law as an idea and an institution (p. 78).

Wenham shows the importance of Torah to the redactor of Psalms by pointing out that the introduction to the book of Psalms itself highlights Torah (cf. Ps 1:1-2). W. next goes to a great deal of trouble explaining the importance of Torah in Psalm 119. The love which the psalmist has for the Law

... 'expresses a deep affection which drives the psalmist to fulfill the commandments because they express God's will, which he loves more than anything' (p. 86).

But then Wenham does something a bit odd. He writes

These comments show that the psalmist has internalized the law in a way that anticipates a Christian understanding of the place of the law in ethics. ... [The] law is no longer 'seen as something imposed on you from without', but rather as God's wisdom for our good (p. 86).

While I understand what Wenham is attempting I think it might be more correct to say that a Christian understanding of the place of the law in ethics is 'appropriated' from the Psalms rather than that the psalmist 'anticipates' a Christian understanding. Claims that this or that Old Testament passage 'anticipate' some or other Christian belief take us in the direction of supersessionism. I'm not confident that scholars should lead us down that road.

Moving forward, Wenham intriguingly suggests that Psalm 119 may also be understood as a lament and that such an understanding has implications for prayer and ethics.

The psalmist, and all who pray this psalm with him, are aware of their shortcomings and their need for divine aid to live up to those standards (p. 93).

That's quite an important perspective.

The volume, to this point, is really, again, quite well done. Readers new to the subject and advanced in age in terms of it will all learn. No higher praise can be heaped on any book. Any book that teaches is worth reading.

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