

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

Chapters Nine - Ten

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.

Here in the final chapters Wenham does, I have to say, his most outstanding work. In fact, chapter nine, in which he discusses the psalms of lament and the imprecatory psalms, is the very, very best treatment of the topic I have yet seen in my 51 years.

As Wenham notes, the most common sort of Psalm is the Psalm of lament. And verses like Ps 10:15 and 11:6 are prime examples of imprecation. Noting that these sorts of Psalms have been denigrated and denounced he observes, I think so correctly,

But are these gut reactions to the outspokenness of the psalms fair?

Essentially the answer is no. W. continues

What light does reading the Psalter canonically shed on the issue, and do reader-response theory and speech-act theory clarify the ethic of these laments? In an attempt to clarify these issues, I will look at three of the harshest of the so-called imprecatory psalms: Psalms 35; 69; 109 (p. 168).

Wenham's examination of these texts is superb. He brilliantly observes

These urgent appeals, then, are not merely for the vindication of the psalmist, but for the vindication of God's own power and character... (p. 170)

and

In these Psalms there is no suggestion that the psalmist will personally intervene; vindication is left to God (p. 171).

Quoting Hossfeld and Zenger, Wenham writes, further,

His [i.e., the author of Ps 69] sole concern is the credibility of his God... The truth of *this* God is at stake. If the speaker of the psalm fails as a witness to these traditions about God, the groups who ... orient themselves to him as their 'model'. And who join him in opposing the ... 'ridiculing of God' will also be disappointed and shamed' (p. 172).

Wenham writes a bit later on (after examining Zenger's work a bit more in detail)

These psalms view attacks on the people of God as attacks on God himself (p. 177).

Finally does Wenham remark

Those who pray these psalms today may be taken aback by their directness, but could that reflect our own sheltered existence and the blandness of the piety that we were raised in and have continued in? These psalms shatter our illusions and make us face life in the raw... (p. 179).

Words to ponder for certain. Perhaps our discomfort with the psalms of lament says more – far more – about our own 'spirituality' than about the spirituality of the psalmists.

If you pick up this book (and you ought to) and can only manage to find the time to read one chapter- read chapter nine. It is stupendously good. It's as good as a hot fudge cake on a hot summer afternoon.

The closing chapter is Wenham's take on the use of the psalter in the New Testament. In particular, he writes about the suffering of the righteous as a theme from the psalms adopted by the authors of the Gospels; Paul's use of the Psalms; Hebrews and the Psalms, and Revelation and Psalms.

Of the latter W. remarks

But it is not only the phraseology and theology of the psalms that Revelation draws on: many of the Songs of Revelation are similar in genre and flavor to the psalms, especially the laments. Moyise notes that ‘the language of the psalms is frequently echoed in the hymns and praises of Revelation’ (p. 198).

In sum, Wenham’s work is accessible, readable, engaging, and informative. Readers of this review (or at this point, preview, since the book has not yet appeared) are urged in the strongest possible terms to ‘Tolle, lege!’ You will not be disappointed.

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