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The Psalms of David
BIB/THO 556X
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Fall 2006

Reflections on the Psalms
By C.S. Lewis
A Critical Book Review

C.S. Lewis begins his work by noting that it “is not a work of scholarship.” He goes on to explain that he is “no Hebraist, no higher critic, no ancient historian, no archeologist.” (1) After reading his book, I tend to agree. Though he does pull from many sources, including historical sources of pagan authors, his book has many problems. I will discuss the major ones in this brief critical review.

It is important to note that Lewis has structured his book with eleven chapters, but even more so (though the table of contents does not reflect this), it is in two parts. The first part of the book, he looks at some Psalms as he believes Jews must have and do look at them. In the second half of his book, he attempts to show how Jesus, whom he calls “Christ” or “Our Lord,” can be not only placed in the Psalms, but how that placement is intended all along, whether the author of the Psalm understood it at the time or not.

The reader also needs to know that Lewis uses the Coverdale translation of the Psalms found in the Anglican Prayer Book. He acknowledges that the translation has problems, and that Coverdale knew very little Hebrew. While he occasionally corrects the translation using a version by Dr. Moffatt, he has kept the Coverdale by in large because of the beauty in the poetry he believes is in that translation (7).

The first problem I find in Reflections on the Psalms is in its poor writing style. While I have read Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, and found Lewis to have a real talent for fiction writing, I find this effort on his part to write a work of non-fiction very poorly written. He has some sentences that are so

convoluted that one has to re-read them just to figure out the subject of the sentence. Quite frankly, some of his sentences qualify as run-ons. This problem is exhibited in his chapters as a whole. He is all over the place. He starts on one topic, goes on a very lengthy tangent, seems to remember what he was talking about to begin with, and returns to the original thought. Sometimes he seems to argue one way at the start, the opposite during a tangent, and back to his original way of thought when he returns. After pages and pages of this, a reader can get lost as to what Lewis is trying to say. All and all, he has made his book quite difficult to read.

Turning to the actual content of the book, the first section, that on the original meaning of select Psalms, as its Jewish authors must have meant, has some serious problems. He has chosen for this section only Psalms of which he is highly critical. For example, one chapter is titled “The Cursings” and seeks to show Psalms with “the spirit of hatred” (20). He begins this chapter with a misinterpretation of what he considers the worst of such Psalms, Psalm 109. His main error here, is putting the words of those who curse the Psalter, in the mouth of the Psalter himself. In doing so, he completely ignores verse 19, which makes it clear that these are the curses of the enemy of the Psalter. Throughout the first part of the book, Lewis contrasts the primitive, sometimes hateful world view of the Jews with what the ideal Christian should be. While he acknowledges that not all Christians live up to this ideal, he still has a rather low view of Judaism. For example, on page 28, he says “that the Jews were much more vindictive and vitriolic than the Pagans.” That is not to say that his view of Judaism and Jews is

uniformly low, however, Judaism is seen as a mere evolutionary step along the way to Christianity.

The second part of the book, as mentioned above, exists as a sort of Christian apology. He hand picks Psalms from the Anglican Prayer Book and purports to show how reading Jesus into them is perfectly legitimate. While perhaps this is true, from his Christian point of view, he has to torture the text, figuratively, to paint this picture. It should be noted that he also paints Jesus into pagan sources, assuming that the dying and resurrected deities of the pagan world were put there so that those pagans would know the truth when Jesus came. He seems to believe that mankind needed to be brought to the Christian truth in stages, each preparatory for the final Truth. For example, on page 114 he mentions "...the whole Jewish experience of G[-]d's gradual and graded self-revelation..." That, I suppose, is the overarching theme of the book: the Jews are imperfect, but needed to lead the world to belief in Jesus as Christ.

Had the book been better written and Lewis not so overwhelmingly negative in his views of Jews, it would have been a more interesting experience to read his very different views. If asked, I would not recommend this book to anyone. I am sure there are better written Christian works on the Psalms that would lead a Jewish reader to a better understanding of how Christians read our Psalms. I would hope they would also be more sympathetic to the authors of that magnificent collection of Jewish poetry, praise, and song.

Bibliography

Lewis, C.S. Reflections on the Psalms New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.,
1958.