

## REVIEW

**Title:** The Case for the Psalms: Why They are Essential

**Author:** Wright, NT

**Publisher:** New York: HarperOne, 2013. Pp. 1-200. Hardback.  
\$ 22.99. ISBN 978-0-06-223050-8

This work, by New Testament scholar, NT Wright, is a delightful and theologically rich commendation of the Bible's great hymnbook. The book is, in fact, a "personal plea" for Christians to take up the Psalms, to sing them, to ingest their transforming power, and live out the message they collectively inspire.

Many in the Reformed tradition are accustomed to Psalm-singing as a regular part of both personal and corporate worship. But Wright is concerned that much contemporary worship fails to sufficiently appreciate the power of these ancient poems. Therefore, he works to articulate a theology of the Psalms and to inspire their use for Christians. He even shares personal stories of how the Psalms have spoken to him at various moments in his life.

The book is not a work of scholarship, strictly speaking, but it is the work of a scholar. Wright is not an Old Testament specialist, but he is well acquainted with the Psalms (as one of the most quoted books in the New Testament) and the world of both Second-Temple Judaism and early Christianity. These contexts, especially their "implied worldview(s)" are important for Wright's understanding of the power and purpose of the Psalms. He does not address issues of authorship or dating in this book. Though like many scholars, he thinks their final form was "collected and shaped in the time of the exile in Babylon (beginning in the sixth century BC)" (9). Wright is also an Anglican clergyman. This means that he daily encounters the Psalms in personal prayer (through the Daily Office), and that he ministers to Christians in need of the kind of support he believes the Psalms can provide. And so, there is a pastoral purpose at the heart of this work.

Wright summarizes the Psalms as being "full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope" (2). And he adds, "Anyone at all whose heart is open to new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright light and dark corners of the human soul – anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn't had a good meal for a week or two. It's all here" (2).

Supporting the pastoral intentions of the book is a strong, and possibly original, theological framework. Wright argues the Psalms "invite" the reader to "inhabit" a certain worldview – or, at least to give a particular shape to one's worldview. He orders his argument around three themes: *time*, *space*, and *matter*. In contrast to

the way these concepts are understood in ancient Epicurean or modern western worldviews, Wright argues that the first-century Jews and Christians understood such concepts as “creational monotheists.” This, in part, means that “God’s time and ours overlap and intersect, God’s space and ours overlap and interlock, and even (this is the really startling one, of course) the sheer material world of God’s creation is infused, suffused, and flooded with God’s own life and love and glory. The psalms will indeed help us understand all of this” (22). Much of the book is given to exploring and explaining these ideas, with chapters given to each of the three themes. Many Psalms are quoted in both small and large portions to demonstrate, or illustrate, the relevant points. And the theological framework is further elucidated throughout.

It is also important for Wright that Christians see how the Psalms informed Jesus’ own sense of identity and vocation. For Wright, Jesus is the one who stood at the intersection of God’s time and our time, God’s space and our space, God’s matter and our matter (with “our” meaning more than just “humanity’s, but rather referring to all of creation). If that is the case, then Christians will also want to pray and live in such a way, filled with God’s spirit, and inspired by the Bible’s hymnbook, to bring more of God’s saving power into the present. The Psalms “invoke the past and anticipate the future” (163) in order to give shape to the present. The worldview behind the Psalms is one “in which past, present, and future, heaven and earth, creation and new creation all overlap” (164). These ideas are so important for Wright’s vision of the Christian life that he can say, “I find it impossible, therefore, to imagine a growing and maturing church or individual doing without the Psalms” (165). Thus, Wright urges all Christians to find ways of engaging the Psalms and “allowing the hymnbook God has given us to be the means of personal and communal transformation, renewal, and growth” (168).

This book takes the reader on a journey through the Psalms. Along the way, one is carried back and forth between the theological and the devotional. The theological insights are intertwined with devotional fervour and exhortation. The formal scholarship is present but mainly under the surface. This enables Wright to compose an easily-read book for readers at nearly any level (layperson, student, or scholar). One should not be misled though by the book’s simple style or brevity. It is a deeply faithful and thoughtful work. Anyone who cares about the health of the church, the relevance of theology for living, or exploring an all-encompassing Christian worldview should read this book. Wright’s reputation as a scholar is well-established. Here, the scholar helps the Christian disciple to worship God more faithfully and fully.

The personal *Afterword*, “My Life with the Psalms,” is a delight to read as well, and adds to the overall purpose of the book. Readers are given a glimpse into the author’s own life (all too rare in theological works). Wright’s own experience with the Psalms serves as evidence of their truth and power. I recommend this work to

all Christian, but perhaps especially to scholars who might wish to be reminded of why they chose to give their lives to the study of God (or Scripture, or Church History, etc.), who might appreciate one of their own exhorting them once again to true worship, devotion, and practice.

Jonathan Ray Huggins, Ph.D., Research Associate at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Addresses:

Berry College, 2277 Martha Berry HWY, Mount Berry, GA 30149.

Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, 171 Dorp Street, 7600 Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Email: [jhuggins@berry.edu](mailto:jhuggins@berry.edu)

