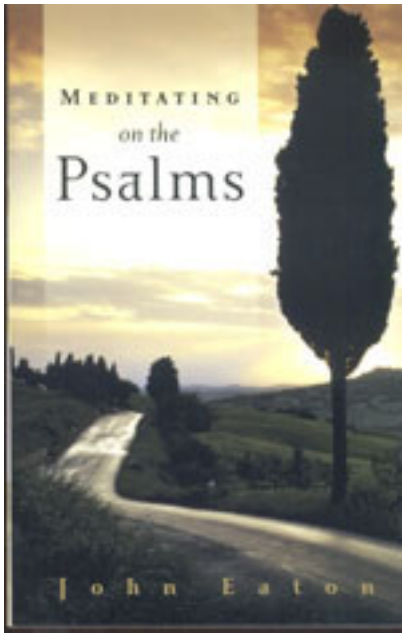


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**Eaton, John**

*Meditating on the Psalms*

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. viii + 189. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0664229301.

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In *Meditating on the Psalms*, John Eaton offers a short devotional commentary on the Psalter. This work is a vastly scaled-down effort from his recent major commentary, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary* (T&T Clark, 2003). *Meditating on the Psalms* targets a general Christian audience, and Westminster John Knox places it in the subject category “inspiration.” Eaton writes out of his Christian faith and helps readers understand the Psalter as part of the Church’s Scripture.

*Meditating on the Psalms* opens with a brief introduction (fifteen pages) to the book of Psalms. I found this section to be average at best. It contains discussions of background information such as questions of authorship, the cultic setting for many psalms, Hebrew prosody, and a section on difficulties that the modern reader will encounter. All these topics are standard fare for introductions, but I suspect that many lay readers will have trouble following Eaton at points. For example, he opens the book with the following sentence: “There can’t be many Iron Age songs still in constant use today” (1). To what extent will the term “Iron Age” connect with most contemporary readers of inspirational books? Likewise, in his discussion of the poetic techniques of the Psalms’ composers, Eaton attempts to describe Hebrew parallelism by asking his reader to look up particular verses. He focuses principally on synonymous parallelism. Although he hints at other

techniques, Eaton provides little help for the beginning student of the Psalter. I think that most readers would have been helped more by the inclusion of printed examples of different prosodic styles along with Eaton's descriptions of them.

Regardless of the weaknesses of the introduction, readers will not be disappointed by the quality of the textual commentary. Each entry includes Eaton's translation of the psalm, a short section of commentary including Christian reflection and appropriation, and a concluding prayer that incorporates the themes of the psalm. Eaton offers commentary on fifty-two psalms (1; 8; 15–17; 19; 23–25; 27; 29–30; 32; 36; 39; 42; 45–46; 48; 51; 56; 60–62; 65; 67; 72–74; 77; 84–85; 87–88; 90; 93; 95; 98; 103–104; 113–114; 121–122; 126–127; 130–131; 137; 139; 148; and 150). Here Eaton is at his best. He clearly loves the psalms and seeks to share his scholarly wisdom and personal piety with his readers. His exegesis is synthetic and engaging. He consistently tackles the pressing interpretive issues present in each psalm in order to help guide the reader to an understanding of its message. He provides brief explanations of key words, notes intertextual links with other passage in the Old Testament, describes connections with ancient Near Eastern customs, beliefs, and practices, and helps his readers to appreciate geographical references as well as images drawn from the flora and fauna of Syria-Palestine. Scholars who desire a wider audience will find in Eaton's commentary sections a model for making serious scholarship accessible to the masses. For example, Eaton teaches his readers about ancient Israelite religious practices that perhaps stand behind Ps 29 (an ark procession) and Pss 15 and 24 (temple entrance liturgies). These added touches set Eaton's work apart from the typical devotional fare in the "inspiration" section.

In sum, lay readers will find Eaton to be a trusted guide of the psalms upon which he comments. This leads to a question that will surely be a burning one for those who purchase this resource: Why does Eaton include commentary on only fifty-two of the psalms? Eaton suggests that such a cross-section is a convenient number, as it matches the number of weeks in a year. This may be true, but by leaving roughly two-thirds of the Psalter without comment, Eaton (and his publisher) has decreased considerably the value of this work.

Individuals will quibble with Eaton's selection of psalms for inclusion. Each of us will have favorites that are missing. Christian readers will ponder the absence of key psalms such as 2, 22, and 110 that are so important christologically in the New Testament. Readers with an awareness of recent discussions of the intentional shaping of the Psalter will note that Eaton provides no treatment of Ps 89, which serves a key role in understanding the theological movement and contours of the Psalter.

On the other hand, Eaton does treat some of the more difficult psalms, such as Pss 88 and 137. In the discussion of these two psalms, Eaton offers several lessons in hermeneutics for his Christian readers. Psalm 88 is generally recognized as a prayer of one who is suffering a severe illness and is near death. It is a tragic and forlorn lament. Eaton rightly recognizes its sullenness and the fact that the psalmist feels abandoned by all but Sheol. As Eaton seeks to appropriate it for his modern Christian audience, he reminds his readers that Ps 88 has been read imaginatively as the prayer of the Christ who suffered alone for the salvation of the world. The implication is clearly that, although modern pray-ers may share in the psalmist's sense of hopelessness and despair, the God who raised Christ from the grave stands ready to hear their laments and petitions.

Readers have long been troubled by the concluding verses of Ps 137. How can a blessing for those who would kill an enemy's children be integrated into one's life of faith? Eaton tackles the issue head on by pointing to the need for a canonical reading of the text. Difficult texts such as Ps 137 must be understood in light of the whole of Scripture. Unlike many Christian writers, Eaton does not immediately flee to the New Testament for a corrective. He rightly points to other Old Testament texts (Jer 29:7; Prov 25:2) as well as a single New Testament text (Matt 5:44). This is an important lesson for Christian exegetes who often unnecessarily pit the Old Testament against the New.

A pleasant surprise for readers will be the high-quality prayers that conclude the commentary section for each psalm. Readers will learn much about praying the psalms through Eaton's models. Eaton is able to capture concisely and profoundly the meaning of each psalm and shape it into a brief prayer that readers can use to close their own devotional reading of a psalm. As an example, after reflecting on the poignant Ps 73, he prays, "Be our shelter, Lord God, in all the perplexities that assault our faith; guide us with your counsel, and bring us close to you, that in this communion we come to know the fulfillment of all our hope and desire" (112).

For those in academia, this volume offers a glimpse of the spiritual vitality of a fellow scholar who has drunk often and deeply from the living water that flows from the Psalter. Educated lay readers will find *Meditating on the Psalms* a good entry point for study and spiritual reflection on the Hebrew Psalter. It is a welcome development for a leading Psalms scholar to write explicitly for a general audience.