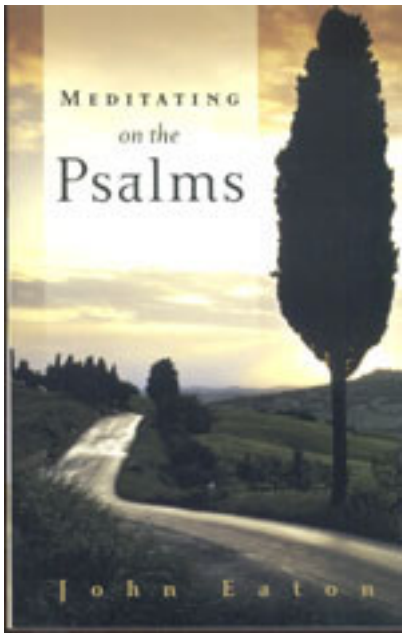


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Eaton, John

Meditating on the Psalms

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This book in A-5 format presents the reader with inspirational commentary on a selection of psalms by the well-known author and retired Old Testament scholar, John Eaton of Birmingham University. Its purpose is to provide material for a spiritual pilgrimage into the Psalms, be it for individuals or groups of believers. With fifty-two devotionals, provision is made for one meditation per week for a year (fifty-three psalms are actually introduced, since Pss 42 and 43 are treated together). Each chapter has a translation of the particular psalm, taken from Eaton's 2003 work, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary*.

The Psalter is the most-loved, most-read book in the Bible, often the first biblical book to be translated in any language. Eaton explains why this is so, how it happened that a number of Iron Age songs came to be still in constant use today and still serve to foster communion with God as they have done for almost three millennia. In the introduction, he discusses the psalms as poems that not only survive translation but flourish in almost every conceivable language. The reason for their appeal is the weaving of meaning and images that plays such an important role in them—more important than the patterns of rhythm and sound that were also used in composing them.

Eaton goes on to discuss the simple and unpretentious wording of the psalms, the various types or forms into which they can be sorted, and how they were sung in biblical times. He explains the reasons why so many psalms are attributed to David, the role they played in religious ceremonies, the events of history that influenced their composition and use, the geographical features of Israel that are reflected in the language of the Psalms, and obscurities and cultural or theological difficulties modern worshipers sometimes experience when reading certain psalms (such as the idea that death is the end of life and communion with God, and the prescientific description of the cosmos we encounter in these poems).

Each meditation has a title that gives a succinct description of the main idea of the particular psalm being discussed, such as “The Secret of Happiness” for Ps 1 and “Coming Home” for Ps 23. The translation of the particular psalm is followed by a short introductory paragraph, a commentary on the psalm divided into sections of verses that should be read together, an application within the Christian context, and a short prayer based on the theological ideas abstracted from the psalm. The choice of psalms is evenly spread through the Psalter, with the widest gaps being the eight psalms intervening between Pss 104 and 113 and again that between Pss 139 and 148. There is also a very short index at the end with possible themes for meditation (for example “angels,” “animals,” “humility,” “penitence,” “praise,” and “trust”).

Eaton intends the booklet to offer the reader a discovery of how one can come near to God in the Psalms so that the believer who makes this discovery will want to return there often and with delight in the company of countless other psalm-pilgrims “and in fellowship with all the creatures of God” (viii). I think he has succeeded in doing that. The book contains the essence of the commentary on the selected psalms found in his larger work but in a simplified form for the instruction of the general Christian public, with specific hints for a Christian interpretation.

As is the case with his commentary, the author’s point of view in certain aspects of interpretation is clearly visible, such as the tendency to connect very many psalms to the institution of kingship in ancient Israel or to the celebration of the chief festival in the autumn (e.g., Pss 24; 29; 46; 48; 65; 87). Very often the reader encounters the opinion that some or another psalm can be visualized as being spoken by the king (e.g., Pss 16; 17; 25; 27; 42; 51; 56; 61; 62; 73). Psalm 23, for instance, becomes clearer if it is seen as the song of a king who uses the images of shepherd and host to testify to the care and protection of the Lord as his King (37). In the application, this royal link often leads to the role of messianic expectation in Israel and to theological links with Jesus Christ. In Ps 23, for instance, one can think of the relationship between Christ and his Father as being

depicted in the image of a shepherd and his sheep, so that the psalm evokes the passion and new life of Jesus, and also the gifts of the Lord's table (39).

A salient feature of this inspirational commentary is the author's interest in nature and the environment. So, for instance, he says in his comment on Ps 85: "The psalm reflects a sense of the connectedness of the spirit and the earth; the world of prayer and faith is also the world of nature." Humanity's responsibility to care for all of God's creatures and the expectation that humanity and nature will be made perfect in re-creation is everywhere visible in the book (cf. the commentary on Pss 8; 24; 29; 65).

It would have been helpful if more was said about the relationship of the single psalms to the Psalter as a whole, in other words, the literary connectedness of the single poems to form a composition that should be read as any other biblical book. In all fairness, however, it is difficult to do this when working with a selection of chapters, and Eaton has indeed explained the function of Ps 1 as an introduction that was inserted at a late stage, and he has also noted the individual life of Ps 150 before it came to be used as the "Psalter's seal of praise."

Eaton has done believers a great favor with this booklet. People who are not interested in the more technical detail given in his commentary can share in his great insight in the psalms as songs and prayers. Each page contains some or other interesting remark, novel translation, insightful comment, or eloquent image that not only illustrates the religious vitality of these age-old songs and prayers but also helps to make their beauty even more accessible to modern-day worshipers.