



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Psalms in an Age of Distraction: Experiencing the Restorative Power of Biblical Poetry

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Jones, Ethan C. *Psalms in an Age of Distraction: Experiencing the Restorative Power of Biblical Poetry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2024. 152 pp.

Ethan C. Jones is quite aware of the distracted digital age in which we live. Yet Jones is clear that his book, *Psalms in an Age of Distraction*, is really about the biblical Psalms and not simply about the distractions of this age. As readers, we receive a largely devotional take on selected Psalms, along with a challenge to slow down and absorb the message being communicated through the medium of written poetry. While not a book on biblical interpretation, the author offers a course correction away from mere objective scholarly approaches and towards a more personal engagement with the text. Jones wants us as readers to immerse ourselves in the poetic detail. Instead of looking at the forest, we should look at the trees. Stop and smell the roses, if you will.

The book is divided into two unequal parts. Part one, "Psalms, Poetry, and the Distracted Self," takes time to explain the author's approach. In this section, there are some meditations on the modern age, a small pushback on modern psalm interpretation, and a development of the author's method. The final two-thirds of the book, "Experiencing the Restorative Power of Poetry," has the author exploring various poetic devices through the lens of individual Psalms. In this section, we are offered examples of how to read the Psalms as poetry and how being open to the aesthetic is beneficial.

Chapter 1 tackles the subject of distraction in our current age and offers "a brief theology of attention" to cultivate the ground for reading the Psalms (p. 5). Jones discusses the nature of boredom and how overstimulation and distraction, rather than solving the angst of apathy, mute the fullness of life in God's world. Psalms as poetry become a means of "focal practice" in which one must be more attentive to "sound, movement, images, and more" (p. 9). Jones argues that poetry has no shortcut and requires an investment of time and mental energy (p. 10). Through attention to the poetry, the biblical Psalms direct believers toward prayer and worship.

Chapter 2 notes the current trend of reading Psalms in a manner more connected with the narrative context of Scripture. While the author is aware that the Psalms can be read as a story, he is unsure if this is always profitable

(p. 24). Jones suggests that reading the Psalms canonically may undermine the unique voice of each individual Psalm in expressing theology through beauty (p. 21). Further, the fact that Psalms are poetry does not negate the potential to reap significant theological benefits from reading them (p. 27). The author contends that the poetry of the Psalms is intended to develop habits of prayer, not simply asserting information. I wonder if the author overstates his case by setting narrative against poetry. Good stories have their own aesthetic benefit, and this is true of biblical narrative. However, Jones does well to remind us to not to jump too quickly to abstraction with the Psalms, instead letting their uniquely poetic voice be clearly heard.

In Chapter 3, Jones asserts the canonical expression of the Psalms as inspired scripture. As Scripture, the Psalms are clear and understandable sources of revelation. Biblical poetry, in contrast to the unnecessary and at times overblown sophistication of modern poetry, is designed to be accessible (p. 35). In a world where true art is often untouchable and guarded in museums, biblical art has a practical application in the believer's life (p. 38). Jones gives a general overview of poetic literary devices, including metaphor, paradox, and concise wording. I appreciated his reminder to embrace the emotional nature of poetic language (p. 47). Turning to chapter 4, "A Scaffold for the Soul," Jones looks more specifically at the qualities of Psalms as poetry and how they invite us into a "praying existence" (p. 51). Jones touches on how lament, praise, God's reign, thanksgiving, remembrance, and meditations on creation bring clarity and focus to life, and touch on future hope. Psalms invite the believer into God's structure for life (p. 63).

With part one as an introduction, part two invites the reader to experience the richness of biblical poetry, drink deeply with the author highlighting specific poetic features in ten Psalms (p. 18). Jones demonstrates how to read the Psalms with careful attention to poetic detail and devices. For example, in Psalm 1, he examines human flourishing through juxtaposition (p. 67). In Psalm 8, he examines the importance of purposeful repetition in shaping followers of God. In Psalm 42, the author explores how nuanced metaphors provide rich imagery to awaken life with God (p. 106). He also identifies how the intentional ambiguity of poetic language, drawing from Psalm 62, gives room for further reflection and wrestling with rich theological concepts.

In essence, this second section of the book is a devotional commentary with a particular purpose. Jones continually draws attention to how the Psalmist uses poetry to evoke and stimulate the reader. There is a dedication to engaging with the Psalms on an emotional level. The reader is instructed to experience the deep delight of life (p. 73), be surprised or offended (p. 80), hear the intensity of creation's praise (pp. 88–89), and even feel tension (p. 118). Jones obviously loves the Psalms.

There are many books written on the biblical Psalms. What allows Jones's work to stand out is a wholehearted engagement with the poetry. The devotional commentary would be a valuable accompaniment to study, or simply as a source for personal spiritual growth. Jones is clear that his book is not designed for the specialist. As such, the writing is clear, and the Psalms are made accessible to the reader.

While a beneficial volume, there is some dissonance and difficulty involved in experiencing poetry through the tool of exposition. Jones makes a good argument for a more emotional engagement with the Psalms and then provides a good foundation through his own devotional comments. As the book is meant to develop aesthetic interpretive skills, readers might benefit from additional guidance with directed activities and exercises.

Jones has written a helpful volume, offering a beneficial counterpoint and additional interpretive tools for preachers or teachers of the Psalms. *Psalms in an Age of Distraction* would also be a good accompaniment for a devotional reading of the Psalms. The author invites readers to slow down and immerse themselves in the artistry of God's revelation.

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