

Why Do We Hope? Images in the Psalms

David J. Harrington, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008.

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This slim book by well known scriptural scholar, Daniel Harrington, is directed to a particular readership but within a wider context: firstly, he says, ‘it seeks to initiate beginners ... into the methods and concerns used in the close reading of these ancient texts’ but, secondly, ‘it focuses on how the book of Psalms can contribute to our understanding and appreciation of the theme of hope’. (p.v) He has thus a theological purpose, one that he feels bears an urgent message for today’s world whose many trouble spots, inequalities, and stark human suffering test the credibility of older certainties and hitherto standard responses – unless these are heard within a deepened and renewed spiritual context. Needed today is the theological virtue of hope, which Harrington convincingly demonstrates is the persistent note of the ancient psalmists (many authors over a considerable time span). In their essentially this-worldly concerns – often voiced with a desperate plea to God for help – they come to find and express, through immediately envioning and powerful imagery, their basic resource of trust and hope. This is not reasoned; it is experientially perceived and felt.

Commenting that many present-day Christian scholars are content to leave the psalms back in antiquity with little to offer for the ‘doing’ of theology today, the author proceeds to show how untested this view actually is, pointing out that this rich imagery of trust and hope becomes full of humanly resonating insight when read from a Christian perspective. As he observes: ‘Do you trust God? That has been described

as the most fundamental question of the spiritual life'. (p.68) It is the perennial challenge of the Psalms, expressed amidst the most human daily needs and emotions.

The book takes forty specific psalms, ranging from Psalm 1 to the final Psalm 150. As the author notes, the book of Psalms has been traditionally divided into 'five books', while within these collections there are also blocks of psalms with related themes. Hence the forty selected psalms can be taken as representative samples of the overall number. Among the themes pinpointed for each included psalm are the Shepherd, the Shadow of your Wings, the Kingdom of God, a Clean Heart, the Ideal King, Abiding in God, the Merciful One, Fear of the Lord, the Rivers of Babylon and the Sound of Music. While these psalms reveal a wide range of experienced reactions, including discouragement, anger, fear, gratitude and joy, each comes to and challenges us to fall back on and internalise – or discover within us – the resource of hope, hope in a God who is always faithful, always caring.

While written in direct and simple language, this book in its analysis of the chosen psalms also illustrates, as the writer intends, contemporary biblical interpretation on literary, historical and theological levels. He aims also to promote in the reader personal application of the psalms' content and their use for prayer. His final suggestion is the form of spiritual reading known as *lectio divina*, meditative openness to the text leading to prayerful reflection. The fact that this collection of ancient Hebrew prayers and songs became the central prayer form, canonically endorsed, for priests and religious, says something about both continuities and the perennial need, within contemporary understandings, to reclaim and re-situate their basic human applicability.
