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Sabourin: the Psalms, Their Origin and Meaning

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Book Reviews

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

THE PSALMS, THEIR ORIGIN AND MEANING. By Leopold Sabourin, S.J.
Two volumes. New York: Alba House, 1969. XIX, 253 pp.; XIX,
373 pp.

With renewed interest among Catholics in the liturgy as an authentic community act of worship and with the increased variety of Scripture readings for Masses on Sundays as well as weekdays, there is the widely-felt need for ever more practical books that explain the background and the meaning of the biblical literature. The psalms have been used almost from the very beginnings of Christian worship. The future recitation of the breviary by priests and religious groups may have less emphasis on the psalms, but their position in the Mass as responses and hymns has enhanced their importance for the laity. Fortunately, several fine English translations have appeared in recent years, such as in the Confraternity version, the Grail singing version, and the Jerusalem Bible. Now Father Sabourin, a professor in the Roman Pontifical Biblical Institute, gives us the first major introductory work on the psalms in English that includes a comprehensive view of the latest results in biblical scholarship. The new liturgical and pastoral needs have clamored for such a book.

In Volume One the first two chapters (pp. 1-64) deal with the usual introductory topics of text, titles, dates, poetic elements, especially the classification of literary forms according to Hermann Kunkel and the origins of the psalms in Israel's cult, along with a brief survey of comparative material from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Canaanites. A hefty third chapter (pp. 65-178), entitled "The Beliefs of Piety," gives handy encyclopedic treatment of "themes and patterns of religious thought" in the Psalter. These include the name of God, his attributes, creation and myth the *anawim* (the "poor").. sin, cult festivals, eschatology, messianism; ten pages discuss the Christian approach to the psalms.

Chapter Four (pp. 179-246) and virtually all of Volume Two are devoted to brief treatments of the individual psalms according to the usual literary types.

The bibliography of over 700 entries indicates the erudition and careful scholarship of the author. His method of contrasting scholars with divergent views and highlighting the strong and weak points reveal his competent mastery of the immense material. In fact — in the author's own words — "the main purpose of the present work is to present in readable form the best material now available on the biblical psalms." This should be a godsend for seminaries that do not have access to many European journals.

Should readers expect the traditional form of a commentary, the first lines explain: "Not a detailed commentary but a substantial introduction to the Psalter and to each psalm will be found in this work. A special attention is paid to the original setting of the poems and to their essential message." But the author's overriding pedagogical concern has led him to explain the psalms, not in the usual chronological order from 1 to 150, but rather according to five general literary groupings. This procedure underlines the common elements in the various types of psalms and thus helps the reader to understand them more readily. To facilitate locating the individual psalms, the appendix in each volume contains both a "logical" listing, i.e. according to the types, and a chronological listing, with the types conveniently abbreviated. A full table of contents and a subject index are also happily repeated in the second volume.

The psalms are discussed in five general groupings: the hymns; the laments, psalms of confidence and thanksgivings of individuals; then the same for the community (as in the commentary of H.J. Kraus); the royal psalms; finally the didactic psalms, which are subdivided into wisdom psalms, historical psalms, prophetic exhortations, and liturgies. But is "didactic" a suitable term for describing exhortations and liturgies?

The full text of each psalm in the Confraternity version is a welcome and practical feature. New translations are also offered from various sources, generally with no preference indicated. There is a healthy contribution from the remarkable insights of Mitchell Dahood, based on Ugaritic and expanded in the latter's three-volume commentary for the Anchor Bible. Not unexpectedly, his more controversial suggestions have not found entry here.

The most useful introductory book on the psalms to date, *The Psalms, Their Structure and Meaning* by Pius Drijvers, is still valuable for students and has a certain religious warmth and unction not conspicuous in the present work. This is twice as long, a serious study tool and reference book, more suited for the professor with its discussion of

conflicting views and copious references. Since the treatment of each psalm, though substantial, is fairly brief, the superb commentary by Arthur Weisser has not been replaced; it should continue to be of inestimable worth and serve as a necessary companion volume.

The author makes frequent use of quotations from different scholars and from standard popular works like the *Jerusalem Bible* the *Oxford Annotated Bible*, and McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible*. If something is well said, why not repeat it? The presentation of a problem, however, by a juxtaposition of conflicting quotes does not help for clarity. The little essays on OT topics may not lend themselves to extensive explanation. But at times the reviewer wished for a firmer, or at least clearer, summary of the author's own position, as in the discussion of monotheism (I, 76), myth (78-79), and of the enthronement feast (121ff.). The proposed date for Ps 132 is confusing: "post-exilic" (I, 24), or reference to "probably a reigning king in Judah... although perhaps a post-exilic descendant" (II, 254). Mowinckel's hypothesis of a New Year's Feast and the Enthronement of Yahweh is confronted with the standard arguments as presented by Ganzelles and Kraus. But these have already been answered, to the satisfaction of even Catholic scholars, by E. Lipinski (with works cited) and W.L. Moran in the semi-popular *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (with articles not cited). A more surprising omission is the treatment of the Wisdom Psalms by R. E. Murphy in *VT Supplement IX*, Bonn Congress Volume, 1962, 1963.

Some statements about material not directly pertinent to the psalms would raise an eyebrow. Naturally disagreement is the warp and woof of scholarship investigation, but the quote from the *Oxford Bible* on 2 Samuel 7 as "a late theological commentary" (II, 254) does not represent the best — or at least the latest view (as in the works of S. Hermann, M. Noth, A. Weisser, and the reviewer). One might seriously question if "the Egyptians knew of one God, almighty, providence and judge" and if there was ever a "widely spread henotheism" (I, 50) and if the Messiah is really referred to in Sirach 44:21 (I, 53). More nuanced affirmations could be expected. The eminently readable text occasionally lapses into bumpy English or a Gallicism: "Byrd asked to the convinced metricist" (I, 24); "adv'ersaries" (25); "Mowinckel esteems" (37); "the Sheol" (50). And what will Copenhagen say about the scholars who are "mainly Danish and Scandinavian" (43)?

It might seem ungracious to note the specks in a brother's eye — but they can be irritating and infectious, and a second edition of this extremely useful book can easily remove them. Hopefully that re-edition will be in paper — and in one volume! (McKenzie's *Bible Dictionary* is a fine example that the publishers can imitate.) The list price of the two volumes will be, unfortunately, too steep for individuals in the English-speaking lands of Asia and Africa, but the work is indispensable in any serious theological library.

With the present era of the Roman liturgical reform at an end, Catholics stand at the threshold of an era of creative development for the liturgy in new cultural contexts. The psalms that spread from Jerusalem to the Near East, then to Rome and throughout the world are deeply rooted in the human heart and responsive to man's basic religious spirit. Thus, when properly understood they should prove to be a highly relevant expression of those attitudes and aspirations that are genuinely Asian and African. Only gratitude to Father Sabourin for his invaluable work can be the sentiment of seminary professors, preachers and teachers, catechists and liturgists and all who wish ready access to the Word of God as it is enshrined in the perennial and universal songs of God's people.

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SELF-CONFRONTATION: A METHODOLOGY

TOWARD SELF-UNDERSTANDING: Group Techniques in Self-Confrontation.

By Daniel I. Malamud and Solomon Machover. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1965. xii, 269 pp.

In an age which places a premium on human relations, and at a time when the pace of life is producing anxious individuals, techniques by which dynamic self-insight may be achieved should be welcomed by all. The authors' purpose, in writing this book, was mainly to provide an empirical account of a method of self-confrontation designed to stimulate intense, personal-emotional involvement in order to sharpen one's perceptiveness, examine one's biases and effectively deal with one's various defense mechanisms. More specifically, the self-confrontation approach is concerned with such questions as: can adults be "taught" in a planned course to understand themselves better in ways which made a difference in their lives? What planned group procedures are available for promoting growth in self-understanding? What concepts and principles should make up the content of this course? What are some possible roles of the leader in this course? What typical opportunities and anxiety-producing situations arise and how may the leader best deal with them?

Part I describes in detail two clinic Workshops, supplementing its narrative with critical commentary and the participants' own evaluation of their effectiveness. Overtones of many personality theorists appear in the critical commentary of this section, e.g., psychoanalytic, with its belief that unconscious phenomena are real and meaningful and that childhood experiences have a crucial bearing on personality development. Rogers' Client-Centered therapy emerges with the emphasis on self-