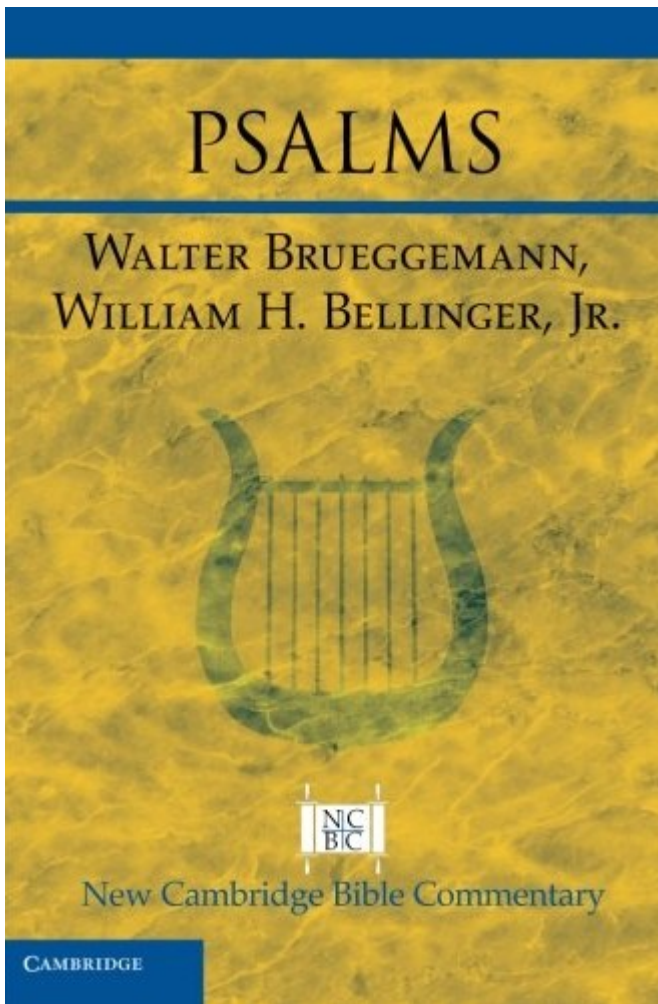


*Psalms*, by Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr.

reviewed by [Jerome F. D. Creach](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue

## In Review



## Psalms

By Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr.

Cambridge University Press

I am often asked by pastors and seminary students, “What is the best commentary available on the Psalms?” I interpret the question to mean, “What commentary will best help me preach and teach from the Psalter?” Even with that more narrow focus,

the question is nearly impossible to answer. In the past 20 years nearly every denomination and university press has published at least one commentary on the Psalms, so we have an incredibly rich trove of such resources at our disposal.

Though it may be impossible to identify a single Psalms commentary as the best for Christian exposition, two have long stood above the rest for their balanced, insightful, and theologically rich interpretation: J. Clinton McCann Jr.'s treatment of the Psalms in the *New Interpreter's Bible* and James L. Mays's commentary in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. This new commentary by Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr. deserves a place alongside the work of McCann and Mays.

The excellence of this commentary should come as no surprise. Brueggemann, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, is one of the most prolific Old Testament scholars of our time. He is the author of more than 100 books, including several important works on the Psalms. Bellinger is professor of Old Testament and chair of the religion department at Baylor University. He is widely recognized as an authority on the Psalter, with four books and numerous articles on the Psalms to his credit.

This commentary is a rare gem. It combines accurate and disciplined scholarship with fresh theological insight in a discussion that is clear and accessible to a broad audience. The format of the commentary includes the NRSV translation of each psalm followed by an expository essay. The essay typically begins with introductory comments about the psalm's genre, purpose, theology, main subject, and literary structure. Then the authors discuss the psalm's contents selectively rather than in a verse-by-verse format. The result displays the authors' significant interpretive skills, theological acumen, and creativity.

In addition to the essays are two brief segments labeled "A Closer Look" and "Bridging the Horizons." The former typically includes discussion of an exegetical issue that the authors find interesting and want to highlight. For example, they use "A Closer Look" to explore the expression "Lord of Hosts" in Psalm 84 and to discuss the meaning and background of "to thank" in Psalm 107. "Bridging the Horizons" is mainly devoted to a broader theological issue or to the history of the use of the psalm. These two sections do not appear in the discussion of every psalm, and the treatment of some psalms includes more than one "Bridging" or "Closer Look" segment.

Brueggemann and Bellinger seldom introduce new or innovative interpretations of individual psalms. They are masterful, however, in their presentation of what is most certainly known about the Psalms and in the illustrative style they use to discuss various issues.

For example, in the discussion of Psalm 93 the authors explain Sigmund Mowinckel's well-established theory that the words "the Lord is king" once served as liturgy for a festival in which Israel's God was ceremonially enthroned in the Jerusalem temple. According to this view, the line was perhaps understood to mean something like "the Lord has become king" and was shouted as the Ark of the Covenant was installed in the Holy of Holies. The theory makes sense against the backdrop of a similar Babylonian festival that celebrated Marduk's enthronement. But Israel believed that its God was always king, so why would the Israelites have gathered yearly to proclaim that the Lord had "become king"? Brueggemann and Bellinger suggest that this liturgical cry in the Jerusalem temple is analogous to the church's yearly declaration on Easter that "Christ is risen!"

One of the tests I have developed for judging a commentary on the Psalms is how the author treats Psalm 119. This psalm of 176 verses is so long and so repetitive that many readers find it uselessly redundant. Commentators often agree and thus, rhetorically at least, throw up their hands in resignation, treating the psalm as a thoughtless recapitulation of established convictions. Brueggemann and Bellinger, however, push beyond such simplistic treatment and give fresh insight into the meaning the psalm.

Psalm 119 is didactic and repetitive indeed, they assert, because "the central truth of Torah obedience cannot be said too often." And what is the "central truth"? It is that Torah presents an alternative to the "self-destructive autonomy" of modern life; it creates "a counter community to the rat race of commodity." In a "Bridging the Horizons" section, Brueggemann (in one of the few places where one of the authors identifies himself) testifies from his own experience concerning Psalm 119:105, a key verse. He refers to it as "A Cliffs Note for Life" and provides a summary of the psalm's message: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." With such discussion Brueggemann and Bellinger set the reader up to look into the psalm again, not as a boring, unimaginative poem by a prudish priestly author (as it is sometimes characterized), but as a work that mimics the drumbeat of wisdom that is meant to direct the path of the faithful into wholeness and peace.

There are places in which the reader of this commentary must be patient. For example, concerning the prayer for the king's success in battle in Psalm 20, the authors say that "this is a characteristic 'God and Country' utterance" and that "there is no doubt that this psalm lives close to jingoistic patriotism." Such comments might suggest that Brueggemann and Bellinger are presenting a way to read against the psalm. They go on to acknowledge, however, that the psalm has another stanza that seems to represent a second voice or perspective that draws attention away from armaments and urges trust in God. Moreover, they seem to suggest that a careful reading of Psalm 20 leads to an understanding of God as transcendent, as One who will not be used to promote the agenda of a state. They further illustrate the psalm's impact by contrasting H. Richard Niebuhr's insistence on trust in God alone with Reinhold Niebuhr's bent toward partial reliance on the use of military and government resources for good purposes.

If a pastor or church leader selected this commentary by Brueggemann and Bellinger as the one commentary to use for interpreting the Psalms, it would be hard to argue against the choice. When asked for my recommendation of the best commentary on the Psalms for the church, I will now suggest this one as part of a three-way tie.