

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

BOOK REVIEW:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS  
BY C. S. LEWIS

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## INTRODUCTION

In the text by C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis writes from a self-proclaimed, people's point of view, "avoiding controversial questions as much as possible", with the intention of providing his readers with a contemplative book, on certain Psalm sections, so as to remove some of the mysteries that surround the great poems.<sup>1</sup> Although *Reflections* was widely criticized at the time of its release, today, more than fifty years since the original publication date in September 1958, *Reflections* remains a popular and valuable resource when examining the Psalms. While not "an apologetic work" by Lewis, *Reflections* has firmly rooted its place in modern literature, as a place to "feed" and understand God's word.<sup>2</sup> This critique will briefly examine the context in which *Reflections* was written, a summary of the overall content, and attempt to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of this classic book.

### THE AUTHOR AND CONTEXT OF *REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS*

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) was an author, literary critic, and Christian apologist, who wrote both scholarly and popular works, including both fiction and non-fiction novels and books. *Reflections* came about by suggestion of Lewis' friend, English theologian and philosopher Austin Farrer, at a time in Lewis' life when both he and his wife were in ill health.<sup>3</sup> At the time, in 1957, Lewis had not written a religious work for almost ten years, making *Reflections* his "first religious work since *Miracles* (1947)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York, NY: Harcourt Books, 1986), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 390.

<sup>4</sup> Perry C. Bramlett, "Reflections on the Psalms," in *The C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey Schultz and Jr. John G. West (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 353.

While Lewis had written other works between 1947 and 1957, some have suggested that a scathing critique and debate of *Miracles* by Elizabeth Anscombe had led Lewis to remove himself from the work of apologetics and use *Reflections* as a less serious book than that of *Miracles*, one that “further[ed] no intellectual proofs of theism or Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> This would seem to be a possibility as Lewis himself uses his introduction to systematically remove himself from a scholarly audience, and further critique, and more towards a lay audience of “the unlearned about things in which I am unlearned myself.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis goes on to say that he is writing “as one amateur to another” and “not presuming to instruct” his reader, although at this time in his life he is far from an amateur, and has been a teacher for many years.<sup>7</sup>

Due to Lewis’ large fan base at the time, especially for a religious author, Lewis’ *Refelctions* received both critical and complimentary reviews. With a rather sizable first printing, the book was hailed as both a “literary masterpiece” by some, and “troubling” by others like his more conservative American evangelical readers.<sup>8</sup> Bryon Lambert recalls for the C. S. Lewis Society in New York that he had “never been made so uncomfortable by a book” as he was by *Reflections*, and many Protestants at the time seemed to share his view.<sup>9</sup> As stated in *Reflections*, Lewis contemplates on the notion that “all Holy Scripture is in some sense – though not in all parts of it in the same sense – the word of God.”<sup>10</sup> For the more conservative theologian, or even just the current day Protestant, this leaves his view on *sola Scriptura*, open for criticism. Even so, *Reflections* should be viewed in the context of Lewis’ theology, which

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<sup>5</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 217.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>8</sup> “Review of *Reflections on the Psalms* by C. S. Lewis”, Vols. 35-36, in *Current History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1958), 173.

<sup>9</sup> Bryon C. Lambert, "Reflections on *Reflections on the Psalms*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* (New York C. S. Lewis Society), no. 13 (November 1970): 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 19.

stems neither from the Roman Catholic Church or a conservative evangelicalism, but from the Anglican view, “written as a member of the Church of England”, and from a distance of fifty years since it’s publication.<sup>11</sup>

#### **SUMMARY AND INTERACTION WITH *REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS***

*Reflections on the Psalms* presents the book of Psalms in ten different sections, not including an introduction and an alternative view on the Psalms, which Lewis titles “Second Meaning in the Psalms.” Each section examines the Psalms not chronologically or in literary order, but clustered into a common set of characteristics such as the “cursings”, “death”, or “nature.” As previously noted, Lewis starts with an introduction by way of disclaimers in a self effacing mannerism to show that this is not intended to be a scholarly work, but one that should enlighten readers of all levels. Lewis also explains that his work will follow the Book of Common Prayer by Coverdale, which is used by many Anglicans.

Chapter two begins the heart of Lewis’ examination of the Psalms with his look at the judgment, cursings, death, and beauty of the Lord. In the judgment section, Lewis sees Christians as viewing judgment similar to how people view being judged in a court of law where the “little man” has less chance to be heard and vindicated. Judgment here is seen as good news to the righteous because they “know their case is unanswerable – if it could only be heard.”<sup>12</sup> Similar in nature to the judgments, next Lewis tackles the imprecatory Psalms, or those Psalms that deal with the cursings, found in various places from Psalms chapter 7 through 139, with “the worst” coming in chapter 109.<sup>13</sup> Here, Lewis sees “some of the Psalms in the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face” and calls on his readers to examine the literary feature allegory, one

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 20.

he often used in previous works, as a possible explanation.<sup>14</sup> Next, Lewis deals with “death in the Psalms” by looking at how Psalms deals with how the Old Testament Jews viewed life after death without the benefit of a risen savior. Lewis states that “it seems quite clear that in most parts of the Old Testament there is little or no belief in a future life; certainly no belief that is of any religious importance” and contrasts that view with how people from other backgrounds and religions viewed death in that time period.

In the following section of *Reflections*, Lewis moves away from the problematic or negative aspects of the Psalms and investigates the delights found within the Psalter. Lewis compares these Psalms with the dancing of David and transitions into a quote borrowed from the writer of the book of Hebrews, “sweeter than honey”, to describe “an enthusiasm for God’s commandments or prohibitions which modern people find hard to empathize with.”<sup>15</sup> Lewis then briefly returns to the problematic, with a section on connivance, and how dangerous such an attitude can be when professing to hate God. After which the author then moves back again into a more positive section that looks at how the Psalmist used nature as part of the divine life. Lewis ends this section of the text with “a word about praising” that he hopes will be “unnecessary for most” readers.<sup>16</sup> As the author sees it, the Psalms are seen by most, in their most natural state, as poems of praise rather than cursings and evil, and he suspects most familiar with the *Common Book of Prayer* are also familiar with the praiseworthiness of the Psalms.

The third major section of the book, which deals with “second meanings” and how scripture relates to the Psalms, is something Lewis spends the remainder of his time discussing. Here Lewis takes a very current topic, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and discusses the “hidden

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Donald T. Williams, *An Apologist's Evening Prayer: Reflecting on C. S. Lewis' Reflections on the Psalms*, Vol. 3, in *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, ed. Bruce L. Edwards, 237-256 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 242.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, 90.

meanings” or ways Christians can take an understanding of the Psalms in any way they choose, usually far removed from the original writers context. By way of three examples, Lewis looks at how a Christian can find a coincidental meaning, one in “which the speaker [or author of the Psalms] did not know” to explain current situations.

#### EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION OF *REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS*

Lewis’ *Reflections* has been widely criticized and praised, by both scholars and lay people, since it was first published in 1958. With fifty years hence, an emotional review of *Reflections*’ strengths and weaknesses can be somewhat more objective than it could be in the late 50’s. Lewis certainly provides a unique perspective on the Psalms, one that can still be seen as a unique study fifty years later. His writing style, much like his other works, is easy to read, yet deep in thought. *Reflections* transitions well from one subject to another, but the author has a tendency to move back and forth between sections of negativity to those sections, which contain a more positive evaluation.

Early on, Lewis tries to remove his own history of apologetics and religious knowledge from the rigors of scholarly criticism by stating the book is written for lay people, basically by a layperson, but this is hard to take at face value. For an author of apologetic works like *Mere Christianity*, and a professor at the prestigious University of Oxford in England, this request may have at the time, fallen on deaf ears. If the reader is to take *Reflections* as a serious literary work on the Psalter, a conclusion hard to argue against, one must also evaluate the arguments and suppositions of *Reflections* as such. Lewis’ use of modern day “common” language, or perhaps crude in some cases, which is used throughout the book, like “priggish”, goes towards his approach to appeal to the more modern lay reader, but his scriptural references and ideas have a much deeper meaning. Lewis claims in the introduction to only be “comparing notes” and not to

“instruct”, but *Reflections* helps the reader to understand ancient poetry and literature, and takes an more Anglican approach to the Psalms that is almost foreign to a modern day evangelical Protestant. In this respect, *Reflections* largely instructs from beginning to end. Lewis does not gloss over the most difficult issues presented, though he does leave the reader wondering what he has left out “as his own interests” led him to do.<sup>17</sup>

Where Lewis leaves himself open to criticism is in his view, and somewhat veiled ideas, of scripture. As previously quoted, early on Lewis states that “all Holy Scripture is in some sense – though not all parts of it in the same sense – the word of God” leaving open to the reader which parts of the “Holy Scriptures” Lewis finds to be the true “word of God” and which parts he does not.<sup>18</sup> Only a few pages later Lewis explains.

At the outset I felt sure, and I feel sure still, that we must not either try to explain [the Psalms] away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious... and we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.

So should the reader understand the Psalms “as the word of God in a different sense than Romans”, and if so, in what sense are they different?<sup>19</sup> This phrase, “in some sense”, is not isolated to *Reflections*. In one of Lewis’ letters, written to Clyde Kilby on May 7, 1959, just after *Reflections* was published, Lewis again stated “if every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of Lights, then all true and edifying writings, whether in Scripture or not, must in some sense be inspired.”<sup>20</sup> This interpretation of the Psalms may not adequately take into account the enormous context of the Psalms being a large collection of poems, written by many

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>19</sup> John W. Robbins, “Did C. S. Lewis Go to Heaven?,” *The Trinity Review* (Trinity Foundation), no. 226 (November, December 2003), 2.

<sup>20</sup> W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C. H. Lewis*, Revised Edition, ed. W. H. Lewis (New York, NY: C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd., 1988), 480.

different authors, dating back to at least King David. While the task of trying to summarize such context into a small book would be difficult on any account, Lewis' view of the evil portrayed from within the scripture could need further examination, especially in light of current Hebraic poetry research, which has come about since *Reflections*.

Overall, *Reflections* shows itself to be a worthy and valuable text when taken in it's own context of mid-twentieth century Anglican scholasticism. Although Lewis may not have wanted to see *Reflections* viewed as a scholarly work, it is hard to put aside a masterful author such as Lewis, and he more than accomplishes his goals from beginning to end. *Reflections* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be best viewed as one part of a whole in the complete works of C. S. Lewis, but it still instructs and teaches a better understanding of the Psalms. In a short but thoughtful work, Lewis "helps to remind us [that] we worship the one true and eternal God."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, 44.

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