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Review of *Songs of the Son* by Daniel Stevens

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In the task of interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is clear that not everything is clear. Its authorship is uncertain. The location of its original audience is unsure. Melchizedek's full identity remains a mystery unanswered. But, despite all that we will probably never know, the letter is fruitful ground for many pursuits of theological understanding. Hebrews holds a crucial position in the biblical canon as it grabs handfuls of previous Scripture and reveals how the story of God is carried forward in Christ. In *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews*, New Testament scholar Daniel Stevens wants to show us how.²

Summary

Stevens' goal is to reexamine the psalms that are quoted in Hebrews in their original context in order to understand how the church today can read them as Christian Scripture (2). While the book is primarily about the Psalms, it holds a dual interpretive concern. On one hand, this book is aimed at understanding the Psalms on their own that are quoted in Hebrews (Psalm 2 [cf. Heb. 1:5; 5:5], 8 [cf. Heb. 2:6-8], 22 [cf. Heb. 2:12], 40 [cf. Heb. 10:5-7], 45 [cf. Heb. 1:8-9], 95 [cf. Heb. 3:7-11, 15; 4:3, 5, 7], 102 [cf. Heb. 1:10-12], 110 [cf. Heb. 1:13-14; 5:6; 7:17, 21], 118 [cf. Heb. 13:6]). But on the other hand, this book considers how Hebrews rightly interprets these psalms. Each chapter takes the reader on an interpretive journey with each psalm as it is (1) explained in its original context, (2) read into the argument of where it appears in Hebrews, and then (3) reread for its contribution as Christian Scripture.

So, how does Stevens read the Psalms Christologically? Because Stevens wants to listen for Jesus' voice (3), and know how each entire psalm "speaks of, to, and for the Son" (7), there are three ways that a psalm (or any Old Testament passage for that matter) can refer to Jesus (45). *First*, through predictive prophecy, which is a foretelling of things that will be true when Jesus arrives (e.g., Isa 7:14; 52:13-53:12). *Second*, through typology, where a person, thing, event, or institution forms a mold that only Jesus fully fits into. *Third*, through speech, when the discourse of the psalmist is ultimately the discourse of the Son. Therefore, Jesus is the son of Psalm 2:7. Jesus is the true humanity of Psalm 8:4-6. Jesus travels the entire story arc of Psalm

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² Daniel Stevens, *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2025).

22 in its misery leading to hope. Jesus is the faithful sufferer of Psalm 40:6–8. Jesus is the anointed king of Psalm 45:6–7. Jesus is where Psalm 95:7–11’s rest is found. Jesus is the creator and sustainer of reality in Psalm 102:25–27. Jesus is the one equal in authority with Yahweh in Psalm 110:1, who is an eternal priest-king like Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). Jesus is the true helper of Psalm 118:6. This Christological reading invites us to see Jesus embodied in the Psalms – whether he’s predicted, personified, or pronouncing. In doing this, Stevens believes, we are not forcing something foreign into the Psalms. Instead, we are reading with the grain of the Psalms, because “no story can explain the Psalms other than the story of the Son of God made man, crucified, risen, and exalted” (149). This conviction springs from paying close attention to how the author of Hebrews reads the Psalms and seeking to read likewise.

Critical Evaluation

There are three points of comment that I would submit to the reader in evaluating Stevens’ excellent work. First, is Jesus really speaking in the Psalms? As the title of the book indicates, Stevens offers a reading of the Psalms that is interested in how the eternal Son appears in them – following in the footsteps of Hebrews’ author. In going about this task, Stevens’ work leans towards the interpretive practice of what is often called “prosopological exegesis.”³ This exegetical strategy attempts to see the persons of the Trinity “differentiated and identified as speaking subjects in certain Old Testament passages.”⁴ Debate lingers about the usefulness of prosopological exegesis. Is the exact identification of Trinitarian persons in OT passages warranted? Stevens believes so. For example, because of the familial language in Heb 2:10–12 (“many sons,” “brothers”), he claims that Psalm 22:22 is “what Jesus said” (46). He then concludes that all of Psalm 22 “contains Jesus’s words” (47). Or, when the speaker in Psalm 40 drowns in sorrow and affliction (40:6–8), Stevens holds that “Jesus himself speaks” (61). This identification arises from Heb. 10:10 which labels the speaker as Jesus Christ. While the danger of prosopological exegesis is misreading the source text (OT) by too narrowly defining speakers, Stevens adds this metric: “When a text itself creates tensions that no character in its context can resolve, the author to the Hebrews helps us to see that it may be Christ speaking” (48). All of the Bible should be read with Christ as its focus (Luke 24:27), but Stevens’ approach could be stretched in unhelpful ways to *overidentify* speakers and thus collapse an OT text’s original nuance. What makes prosopological exegesis at times compelling is that (1) ancient interpreters carried out a form of it, and that (2) Christians should be relentlessly Trinitarian. I believe, however, that Stevens overplays prosopological convictions in his reading of Psalm 22 (Heb 2:11–12) but exemplifies a helpful form of it where the author of Hebrews offers textual reason for person-specific readings (like Ps 40:6–8; Heb 10:3–10).

³ This term arises from the Greek word *πρόσωπον* (*prosōpon*) which would later be translated *persona* in Latin. Matthew Bates believes that the term “originally referred to a ‘face’ or a ‘mask’ that an actor would wear on stage, but by the time of the New Testament had come to refer to ‘personal presence or the whole person’” (Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 7).

⁴ Gregory Goswell, “Trinitarian Exegesis of the Old Testament,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 18.1 (2024), 45.

Second, some of Stevens' conclusions are left vague. There is scholarly humility in the acknowledgement of uncertainty, and debate is often valid. But take, for example, Psalm 22. As Stevens brings his reading of the psalm to bear on Heb 2:10–12, he questions if this psalm is only about Jesus (45). That's when he provides the threefold grid to understand how OT texts can refer to Jesus (through *prediction*, *typology*, or *speech* [45]). In bringing a conclusion as to which of these options appear in Heb 2:10–12, he states, "Hebrews cites the first full verse after the speaker is rescued, Psalm 22:22, and plainly tells us that this is what Jesus said" (46). So, at least Jesus' speech is meant to be heard in Psalm 22. But what else? Stevens then moves to highlight the familial language that connects Psalm 22 and Heb 2:10–12 thematically (46–48). Should Psalm 22 be read as a typology of the family of God, of which Jesus is the head of the household (so to speak)? Stevens refrains from firm conclusions. Or, in his reading of Psalm 44, Stevens asks the reader to consider who is speaking. He believes there are different ways of answering this question that "amount to the same thing" (62). He gives two options: it's either Jesus, or it's the believer (62). But then what? A clear answer is not given, nor is one conclusion shown as more favorable than the other. Stevens wants the reader to see elements of speech from both, but we aren't told why—at least not clearly (see 63). Some additional statements that offer clear conclusions from the questions raised would strengthen moments like these.

Finally, Stevens writes beautifully. His care and effort in the craft of writing compellingly adorns the beauty of the content in a way that leaves the reader inspired and edified. Consider these lines: "There is no element of cosmic experience that does not testify to God's glory" (23). "Let the Psalm speak for itself. After all, why can a psalmist not also be a prophet?" (70). "No sigh is so small that it does not fill the halls of heaven" (103). His style is not wordy for the sake of head-scratching flourish. Rather, he is both compelling and articulate—a rare combination for works of biblical studies!

Conclusion

Songs of the Son is a helpful work for pastors on two accounts. First, every interpreter of Scripture should seek to read the Bible like Jesus and the New Testament authors. This book is a strong aid to that end (even if one is not fully on board with prosopological exegesis). Second, this book is a helpful tool for teaching through Hebrews and wisely reading its use of the Psalms. It rejuvenated my own contextual reading of each psalm as I recently taught through Hebrews. Therefore, for its theological content, intertextual aim, and Christological focus, *Songs of the Son* is worth adding to any pastor's collection of resources on Hebrews.