

Preface

THE ESSAYS IN THE present volume began life independently of one another, as individual forays into specific locales in the biblical terrain. When Brent Strawn and Patrick Miller encouraged me to publish them in a single volume, it was envisioned simply as a collection of free-standing essays on loosely connected themes occurring largely in the Psalms. In arranging and retouching them I noted that in one foray after another I was crisscrossing trails I had already trodden, and that again and again, explicitly or implicitly, the topic concerned the *topos*, the *place*, of prayer in a world that may or may not make room for such an act. This triggered the question with which the introductory chapter opens: When Jesus prayed, where was he? Following the English maxim, “in for a penny, in for a pound,” I then ventured a few high-risk forays into the New Testament, to see how some of the terrain crisscrossed in the Old Testament essays might be mapped within its pages. As I say, high-risk, for the New Testament is nowadays a field well trodden by highly specialized investigators intimately familiar with each other’s work. To put the matter in the words of some of Caleb’s fellow spies on returning from their foray into the promised land, there are scholarly giants in that field, and one who comes to it from a lifetime spent in the wilderness of the Old Testament does well to feel “like a grasshopper” in their eyes. But I resolved, doggedly, to proceed as under the urging of my own “inner Caleb.” The result is three forays into what I have called a “New Testament Afterword” (Part Five) on themes traced in the Old Testament. In these I make no claim to adequate familiarity with the breadth and depth of current New Testament scholarship on the texts and themes they address; in that respect I offer what no doubt are comparatively “naïve” readings. But what I do hear in these New Testament texts is informed by a long formation in the same Scriptures that *informed* the writers of the New Testament, and this schooling, for that reason alone, may give my readings a peculiar interest.

What is my method? In the Fall of 1978 I began a year-long sabbatical in which I aimed to extricate a method for biblical interpretation from the many-dimensional writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge—his theories

Preface

of poetic diction, of imagination as both a mode of perception and the fount of creativity, and of the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity; his philosophical theology; and not least his own prolific practice in reading biblical texts. As a formal effort, the project failed—I discovered that I had neither the appetite nor the competence for developing theories of interpretation. For better and for worse, I find texts themselves more enticing, more engrossing, than any theories put forth about them. This includes Coleridge’s own texts, which I have since continued to read in an unsystematic way, and his influence—no doubt refracted and distorted—underlies these essays and surfaces from time to time. Catherine M. Wallace, who wrote a seminal study of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, and who for several years taught courses in the history of literary theory, later in life has written, “what is theory, after all, but explaining what it is you do by instinct, by instinct and through love?” Looking back over the essays in this volume in an attempt to identify my “method,” I suppose that I might claim at least to exemplify the meaning implied in that word’s Greek root as my *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (second edition) puts it: from Greek *meta* (“after”) + *hodos* (“way”), “method, investigation following after.” In this sense, my method is to follow the trail of words and images as they lead me from one passage to another, sometimes by direct quotation, sometimes by one text echoing another, sometimes simply by the resonance that arises between them. In an attempt to justify this method more explicitly, especially in respect to the notion of “resonance” between texts, I have written a lengthy “interlude” (Part Four), placed between the Old Testament and New Testament essays, in the attempt to clarify for myself what it is I have done “by instinct and through love.” For it is through love of biblical texts that, in Coleridge’s words, “*find* me at greater depths of my being,” that I have been moved to engage in these forays. It is in hope of serving such a love in others that they are offered here.

I am indebted to Brent Strawn and Patrick Miller for their editorial work in fitting these essays for publication, and especially to Pat for the seasoned wisdom and patient tolerance with which he responds to my frequent off-the-cuff email comments on some intriguing nook or cranny in the Psalms. I want to acknowledge also the contagious influence of my colleague, Joe R. Jones, whose penetrating theological judgments, arresting use of language and companionship in faith are a constant stimulus. And, always, there is my wife, Eileen, with whom I am privileged to read a psalm each day at that time when prayer takes place.

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