

PREFACE

This collection of essays has accumulated over time, so that they are diverse and pluralistic in their subjects and approaches. There is nonetheless a consistency to my work with recurring theme and accents. Several of these essays are a bit more programmatic as I articulate my angle of interpretation. Not least among my concerns is the recognition that the practice of interpretation is an act of imagination that goes beyond “the given,” that is, the capacity to entertain and take seriously a “world” other than the one that is in front of us. Thus with reference to “psychological criticism,” the human person is indeed a world-maker in the exercise of productive imagination that is not merely reproductive and reiterative, but capacity for fresh initiative.

The more important accent of my work, however, consists not in programmatic interpretive efforts but exposition that is text specific. And while I have done other things as well with my interpretive energy, the recurring focus of my work, as is evident in this collection, concerns the book of Jeremiah and the book of Psalms.

The book of Jeremiah, with its demanding, excruciating, buoyant imagery, is a primal script wherein Israel is, by the poet, walked into its sixth-century displacement and walked out of that displacement in hope for restoration and new historical possibility. It is this two-fold interpretation into that abyss and out of the abyss that gives the book its immense contemporary power for us. In this collection I have included four pieces on Jeremiah, though the essay, “The Creatures Know,” does not major in Jeremiah. But it takes up the text from Jer 8:7 on the wisdom of creatures and the contrasting foolishness of Israel. This essay shows the poet utilizing an appeal to “nature” (creation, creatures) as way to illuminate the self-destructive obtuseness of his contemporaries. The accent of that essay is powerfully explicated by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her recent book, *Braiding*

Sweetgrass (Milkweed, 2013). Her subtitle, *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, exhibits a vigorous awareness, not unlike that of Jeremiah, about the lively and pertinent testimony of the “natural” world. The other Jeremiah essays included here offer empowering images and illuminating metaphors that leap off the page into our contemporary work of faith in a cultural context where we are slowly walking into an abyss with the profound yearning for restoration.

The other recurring interest for me, the book of Psalms, is represented here by two essays, one a close reading of Psalm 37, and the other a notice of the ambiguous pronouns, “we, us” in Psalm 67. The ambiguous interpretive possibilities in both Psalms make clear the immense power of the Psalter to evoke interpretation that both *conforms* to our presuppositions and that alternatively *speaks against* such presuppositions. Thus the Psalms may be read for “us” (Psalm 67) and our possessiveness (Psalm 37) in a narrow self-confirming way, or they may be against that, toward an expansive, inclusive “us” beyond our tribe (Palm 67), and against and assumed entitlement to affirm wisdom of a demanding kind (Psalm 37). When read innocently according to privilege, the Psalms may substantiate “the Dream” of glorified entitlement expositied by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015). When read with critical alertness, however, the Psalms open that “Dream” for the sake of a better vision of historical reality. Thus readers are invited into the playful crevice of imagination where new life may come and push up against old life that is too much treasured.

I am glad that these essays can be republished, because they were originally published as tribute and thanks to some of the most important and influential scholars in our discipline. For that reason I am grateful to those scholars who originally edited the several honorific volumes and invite me to contribute; their work as editors is characteristically tedious, demanding, and under-appreciated. And I am, as always grateful to K. C. Hanson (along with his colleagues at Cascade Books and Wipf and Stock) for their attentiveness to my work. I will hope that these several probes into the text will invite fresh engagement for readers with these remarkable and demanding biblical texts.

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