

Book Review

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Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Dispute, Advocacy, Testimony* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997)

At the end of the millennium it may not at once be readily apparent why someone would write an Old Testament theology. As it is the shelves are already filled with attempts at such a project from the last two centuries. For the most part, these works have either adopted the perspective of the so-called history of religions school, in which case they are concerned to articulate ancient Israelite practice against the backdrop of the Near Eastern world in which Israel was situated; or the works have been overtaken by the categories of systematic theology which, while also being concerned with "what really happened" have been heavily driven by the need to sort and classify under classical (Protestant) theological rubrics. If one were to survey the field of Old Testament theology one would doubtless conclude that these two paths were representative of the only ways to undertake the enterprise of writing an Old Testament theology. Recently, however, the project in general has fallen out of favor, not so much because the methodological limits of Old Testament theologians have necessarily been reached but because the underlying rationale for pursuing such an aim has increasingly been called into question. On the one hand, it is argued, the literature of the Old Testament defies the sorting and classifying impulse of the theological task, being too diverse for such reductionism. On the other hand, as the problem of language in general has become a critical issue for scholarship across the board in recent times, so too has the matter of religious language become an issue in biblical studies. Increasingly, what one finds practiced in the discipline is either the writing of particular histories divorced from the speech of faith or literary critical analyses solely devoted to aesthetic issues. In particular, many younger scholars of both historical or literary bent have become avoidant of any and all theological discourse in their work.

So why write an Old Testament theology now? For Brueggemann, all of this is precisely the point: a new theology of the Old Testament must be written based on the answer to the question "What time is it?" He goes to great lengths to justify his project based upon his understanding of the fundamental shift in perspective, namely postmodernism, which calls into question both the positivism and skepticism of scholars on both sides of the issue, a commonality which in his view stems from both groups being heirs to the Enlightenment.

What Brueggemann has done is to write what perhaps is the very first postmodern Old Testament theology. Though trained in the old order, he does not wax nostalgic for the bygone days of positivistic history or the easy certitudes of establishment Protestantism. To the contrary, he is acutely aware that the interpretive situation has shifted decisively and that any new theological project of whatever sort must first of all take this new factor into account. This means at least two things generally. First, the text is open to a variety of perspectives, none of which has an exclusive lock on the truth, a reality which must be acknowledged by both historical critics and dogmatic theologians. Brueggemann rejects the smug certitude of both the historians and the

dogmaticians, though he does not reject their insights. Quite the contrary, he is acutely aware of their contribution and the continued validity of their labors, though true to his postcritical methodology neither is automatically given pride of place in his work. This leads to a second general point concerning Brueggemann's turn towards the postmodern, which is, that by extension, in the new milieu in which we now find ourselves, our conversation partners in the theological enterprise will have to expand to include those who have been heretofore excluded from the discussion. What this means in Brueggemann's work is that there is within it an extensive dialogue with a number of theologians, particularly Jewish and feminist scholars, whose writings have been largely dismissed or overlooked by mainstream practitioners of Old Testament theology (e.g., in the work of Brevard Childs).

In the end, however, what counts in writing a biblical theology is not just one's openness to other ideas but the compelling way in which one reads and interprets the text. It is in this aspect that Brueggemann makes his most significant contribution. The central device which propels his account, drawn both from a form of Israel's speech as well as the work of Paul Ricoeur, is the metaphor of a trial in which Israel's scripture is understood to be *testimony*. Though the primary subject of the Old Testament is God, that God is not disclosed in any "coherent and comprehensive offer" but is instead embedded in Israel's texts and practices. Consequently, for Brueggemann, the object of Old Testament theology must therefore be Israel's *speech about God*. For most of this century, the prevailing view in Old Testament theology has been that the locus of God's activity has been history, thus necessitating the recovery of "what happened." Brueggemann, however, brackets all questions of historicity and instead focuses on the matter of "what was said." The end toward which his study aims is not therefore to search for history but instead to listen to the rhetoric.

The matrix of trial-witness-testimony is one of the few social contexts in which it is clear that reality is dependent on speech. That is, the eyewitness purports to have seen something that happened, and witnesses are characteristically "eyewitnesses" But "what happened" is unavailable, and so everything depends on the witness. Everything depends on the credibility of the witness, but credibility may be heavily influenced by gesture or phrasing or inflection, by any detail, whether intentional or unwitting (134).

The complexity of Israel's rhetoric mitigates against the common flaw of much of biblical theology, which is the imposition of categories from systematic theology onto descriptions of the contents of the Bible. What Brueggemann proposes instead is to examine Israel's polyphonic testimony about God in all of its diversity. The main lines of its theological discourse, which the older examples of biblical theology referred to as "kerygmatic" is what Brueggemann himself calls Israel's "core testimony." True to his goal of attending to the rhetoric of the text, Brueggemann does not examine this material through the alien theological categories of Protestant dogmatics but instead engages in an extensive analysis of first the verbs, then the adjectives, and then the nouns of this core testimony, insisting that his object is the thematization and not the systematization of Old Testament theology.

Verbs, Brueggemann notes, are the basis of the sentence, which is the standard unit in which revelation is presented. In the Old Testament, Yahweh the God of Israel is

characteristically the subject of the active verb in declarative sentences. Furthermore, the relevance of verbs can be seen in the fact that the object of the active verb is the one who is the recipient of the verb's activity, for example, when God *saves* Israel. That the writers of the biblical material frequently assert that Yahweh has in fact acted upon them in powerful ways makes the verbs they use in their descriptions of Yahweh's activity exhibit #1 in any theological analysis. It is the verb which is the glue that binds subject and object together in Israel's theological utterances and the primary descriptive vehicle for making Yahweh known. For Israel, Yahweh was known as the one who *creates*, who *makes promises*, who *delivers*, who *commands* and who *leads*. In great detail, with intense perspicacity towards the nuance of the text, Brueggemann reads the great declarative sentences of Israel's testimony with fresh eyes, providing us with close analysis of these words. Such attention to verbs, as well as to the other forms of Israel's speech is not an innocent move but rather one which has enormous relevance and consequence for the theological task in that it "commits us in profound ways to a *narrative* portrayal of Yahweh, in which Yahweh is the one who is said to have done those deeds"(145). Again, God is not to be found in "mighty acts" but rather in the fragile form of human speech.

The main lines of theological discourse in Israel's core testimony do not fully exhaust Israel's rhetoric on the subject of God. Extending the courtroom metaphor, Brueggemann delineates what he calls Israel's *countertestimony*. In any trial, testimony is either rebutted or substantiated within the context of rigorous cross-examination. What Brueggemann desires to demonstrate is Israel's "disputatious propensity" in which even its most central theological affirmations are continually being questioned, rehashed, reworked. The core testimony and countertestimony are not opposed to one another as if one had to decide between options, but are instead part of a singular ongoing process of reflection in Israel's life. What this countertestimony offers is a probe into the *hiddenness, ambiguity or instability, and negativity* of God. For his conversation partners here Brueggemann chooses to chat with Jewish theologians and writers—Emil Fackenheim, Elie Weisel, Abraham Heschel, but most of all Jon Levenson—each of whom is acutely aware of what is at stake in such a discussion which takes place in the great dreadful shadow that is the Holocaust. In the upbeat, triumphalist church of late Western Christendom in which, of course, the glass is always half-full, the back and forth process that is constitutive of Israel's cross-examination has widely been abandoned in favor of a one-sided portrait of a God whose character is a seamless whole and who (naturally) legitimates the successes of the commodity-driven society in which we live. To be sure, Israel had such moments in its covenant life as well, but paired with the rhetoric of those moments, no doubt composed at times in which the glass was clearly half-empty, are jolting questions about the inscrutability of God's activity and startling remarks about the ripples in the fabric of God's character.

Nothing is more fearful to an attorney at the bar than a witness who is out of control. Having been asked a direct question, the witness on the stand often extends her remarks beyond the parameters of the lawyer's query into areas of her own choosing. Similarly, Israel's rhetoric about God often deviates from the "normal" patterns of theological discourse offering what Brueggemann calls *unsolicited testimony*. Why Israel offers such testimony may be because Israel likes being a witness, likes being in the spotlight, and therefore prattles on in an attempt to keep the court's

attention focused. Or it may be that Israel wants to help the court by offering details that the court as finder of fact needs to have brought to light, attempting to anticipate the questions before they come. Or it may be simply that Israel has new, previously undisclosed information. The content of much of this unsolicited testimony regards the partners with which Yahweh works. Characteristically, Yahweh's primary partner in the Old Testament is Israel, to which Israel abundantly testifies using three primary verbs to describe the relationship: *love*, *choose*, and *set heart on*. This testimony about Yahweh's faithfulness is matched by Israel's confession regarding herself as a *recalcitrant partner*, which she tells through the lens of the experience of exile and the characteristic verb *scatter*. Israel laments her grief in complaint and even protest, hoping somehow for a renewal and regathering. She then tells of Yahweh's abrupt turn and how that the broken relationship was restored. This testimony of Israel regarding her partnership with Yahweh is for Brueggemann paradigmatic of Yahweh's partnering practices with humanity in general, the nations, and even creation itself. The basic process of this that he sees unfolding in the text begins with the *creation for glad obedience* of Yahweh's partner, which then devolves to a *failed relationship*, only to be drastically reversed by Yahweh in *rehabilitation for a new beginning*.

In the book's final section, Brueggemann details what he calls Israel's *embodied testimony* in which the presence of Yahweh is mediated to Israel, first of all in theophanies and then later through various figures in Israel's life—especially kings, prophets, and the cult. There is also an excellent chapter on creation as Israel's partner. The most fruitful phase of this line of inquiry, however, is his treatment of Torah and ritual practice as concrete embodiments of Yahweh's presence. As Brueggemann sees it, Torah was not simply a book which Israel read to find information about Yahweh, nor was the Temple simply the place where people went to try to earn their salvation, as most of the older Christian dogmatists would have us to believe. Reading, meditating on, and above all, practicing Torah were the primary means for establishing and maintaining relationship with Yahweh. Indeed, Torah and temple were the primary places in which Yahweh was encountered by most people. Where slippage occurred in these practices, or worse yet, where they ceased altogether, Yahweh in turn ceased from being the dynamic presence in whom Israel found its source. On the other hand, where these practices were renewed, Israel found life in dead places as the presence of Yahweh became real in its midst.

This view of the biblical text and the ritual practice of the gathered community has enormous import for the way it is read in the current situation. Brueggemann's book could also have easily been entitled *The Ethics of the Old Testament* because of his commitment to read the text as a variant perspective on the seemingly given cultural context in which the church and Judaism find themselves. As this suggests, his ethical comments are not merely descriptive of the content of the biblical material but are also an attempt at establishing some normative trajectories from which contemporary moral and ethical discourse within these gathered communities might proceed. Here I will summarize what I thought were some of his most helpful contributions. 1) I have already mentioned his extensive interaction with Jewish scholars. In my judgment, he has gone beyond simply chiding the church for its overt supersessionism (which has become commonplace), and has offered some helpful suggestions out of our common text for sharing in dialogue. 2) His ongoing discussion with feminist biblical and theological scholarship offers an important corrective to what is done by most writers

on Old Testament theology, which is, namely, to ignore the work and hope it will go away. 3) He also weighs in on the debate over homosexuality in a powerful section, in which he argues that the church's continuing battle over sexuality has to do more with concern over the loss of the white male hegemony which has dominated church governance for the greater portion of the last 2000 years than it does any concern over doctrinal or ethical purity. 4) Lastly, his most important ethical contribution, in my opinion, is his critique of what he variously calls *commodity militarism* or *military consumerism*. Here Brueggemann offers a social critique from a biblical perspective on the Western system of value in which is embedded the widely held belief that the more "stuff" one has or the bigger the weapons one has will ultimately preserve an ever more unstable-looking future.

Although biblical historians will probably not care much for it, the book is destined to have an important place in the ongoing discussions of both biblical theology and ethics. The perspective on the text is so refreshingly different from previous attempts that it will doubtless be the benchmark by which all future rhetorically-based theologies will be judged. Not only designed for biblical specialists, pastors will find it to be a treasure trove of useful exegetical insights that are well-indexed and accessible. This work continues Brueggemann's long-standing commitment to imaginative biblical preaching, on which he has written extensively. Those of us who regularly preach will be well-instructed not just by the powerful reading of the text contained herein, but also by his movement from text to life situation.