

Disruptive Grace: Reflection on God, Scripture, and the Church

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, FORTRESS PRESS,
MINNEAPOLIS, 2011, 394 PP, ISBN 978-0-8006-9794-5

This collection of essays by significant Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann stems from his many public appearances between 2002 and 2009. Brueggemann orders his reflections around the themes of God, Scripture, and the Church by dividing them into four parts: Torah, Prophets, Writings, and Canon and Imagination. Especially inspiring is his use of a wide range of scriptures in order to honor the multi-vocality of the Old Testament. Additionally, Brueggemann adeptly shows that he reads the Old Testament from the foot of the cross as he expertly weaves New Testament passages into his various arguments. Brueggemann uses his skills to argue that just as the priestly, Deuteronomistic, and prophetic traditions were struggling with their conceptions of God in the midst of dominating empires, the present day Church must continue to struggle with its conception of God in the face of continued exclusionary absolutism in order to imagine an alternative reality.

In Part I - Torah, Brueggemann seeks to show the need for a dialogic lifestyle in the face of totalizing systems. Throughout his essays, Brueggemann refers to the totalizing systems of the Pharaoh in Exodus in the same vein as the economic-military globalism in which the United States currently engages (49). A dialogic life that is in conversation with God realizes that this type of system is equivalent to idolatry and is, therefore, powerless to provide deliverance for humanity. ([49] see Ps 115:4-8). For Brueggemann, the dialogic life that is connected to God understands the meaning of Sabbath and, therefore, not only speaks against Pharaoh's system of production and consumption, but is also in conversation with present-day consumerism in America. Brueggemann argues that honoring the tenets of the Sabbath command is the first step toward a dialogic life with God as an alternative to the anxiety-ridden lifestyle that envelops American society. The Sabbath commandment is part of the alternative reality used by Israel to "enact a transformative alternative which is the first step to the refusal of the commoditization¹ of life in order to make room for social relationships that are not so ordered in coercion" (65).

In the essays of Part II - Prophets, Brueggemann opens by noting the multi-vocal voices of the prophets. Focusing on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Brueggemann shows how each prophet extrapolates different elements from the pentateuchal tradition in order to point out the problems that run rampant in Jerusalem. Namely, Isaiah denounces acquisitive commoditization in urban areas with various woes (110). Jeremiah meditates on Deuteronomic torah in order to show awareness of exclusionary antineighborliness (111). Finally,

¹ Brueggemann does not define "commoditization" until his first essay on the prophets (104) as "the reduction of daily life to things, to buying and selling and getting and having and owning and eating, which the emerging impression that everything is purchasable, everything is for sale, everyone is a 'thing'—no more people, because you are alone in the land."

Ezekiel ponders the priestly holiness from Leviticus to show his abhorrence of life-emptying pornography² (111). For Brueggemann, the multiplicity of these voices cohere in order to bring about the idea of an urban theology that must remind the holy city what Torah teaching is all about: preventing the development of a permanent underclass. Torah teaching secures an economy that allows a certain infrastructure. This is why God orders the “year of release” in Deut 15:1-18. Israel is not to be a community of “free-market” profiteers but a group whose public task is the “construction and maintenance of a covenantal infrastructure that leaves behind no orphan, no widow, no needy, no illegal immigrant” (121). Torah teaching shows that this ordering is economically possible. For Brueggemann, only public will is lacking, which must come through poetry (121). Accordingly, Brueggemann turns to the Writings to make his point.

In Part III – Writings, Brueggemann returns to the idea of the dialogic life rooted in faith in God as the venue for the Church’s dialogue in the midst of a monologic culture. This monologic culture deems such dialogue an unbearable threat that must be mightily resisted (206). In order to show that the church in dialogue represents a transformative subversion of a *society in monologue* and a *church in monologue*, in Chapter 10 Brueggemann turns to the Psalms to show that dialogic practice is at the heart of Christian faith (210). First, Brueggemann uses Psalm 35 to show that the human person is “himself/herself an ongoing internal conversation, a conversation conducted before God” (210). However, Brueggemann shows that the beauty of this poem serves as a liturgical articulation of all voices acknowledged as commonplace in faith, since faith acknowledges the contest between YHWH and the adversaries who vie for control of our lives. Brueggemann understands this psalm as a *mapping out of social forces*, showing four elements: (1) a yearning needy self; (2) voices of dismantling threat; (3) a surrounding congregation that has not lost its confidence, buoyancy, or nerve; and (4) a holy God who waits offstage to be summoned to intervene decisively (217).

Secondly, Brueggemann shows another facet of dialogic life in the capacity of the Psalms to move from the most intent, concrete personal experience to the great public agenda of the congregation. This acknowledgement places the “one and the many into a conversation of mutuality” (219). This maneuver in Psalm 35 provides the important antidote to both the privatization of much of the life of the church and the loud moral indignation of the church (219). For Brueggemann, the Psalter shows that one cannot pay attention to personal prayers without realizing that these prayers relate to the communal sense of the individual. As such, Brueggemann can easily align the “effort of the Bush administration to dismantle social security as a metaphor for the work of monologic society in its effort to preclude the true human functioning of society” (220). Attention to dialogic life in comparison to monologic society reinforces the Pauline imperative in Gal 5:13 to serve one another by love.

Finally, Brueggemann shows how the Writings lead to a better understanding of the dialogic life with his essay on “Spirit-Led Imagination: Reality Practiced in a Sub-Version” (Chapter 11). Because worship is an act of poetic imagination

2 Brueggemann defines “pornography” as an entire culture that has lost its shame and that can settle or mindless exploitation, abuse, and violence that turns into big bucks. (109)

that aims to reconstrue the world, it offers an alternative world that then invites the church to playfully construct an alternative reality that must then be sustained by an alternative vision (226). Accordingly, Brueggemann cites what he terms “mighty acts of poetic imagination” in the Old Testament that are characteristic acts of worship to which the community returns again and again (226). Brueggemann turns to Part IV (Canon and Imagination) in order to outline how the church can sustain the alternative vision as outlined in Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

The essays in Part IV (Canon and Imagination) highlight Brueggemann’s exegetical work in the New Testament and the empire-critical lens upon which some of his later exegesis is based. Prior to Part IV, Brueggemann’s empire-critical analysis bubbled below the surface with his use of the term “totalizing systems.” It reaches “full throttle” in this last section. Prior to these essays Brueggemann has been entrenched in his historical-critical framework since he consistently acknowledges the importance of Judah’s experience of exile in the sixth century BCE for the overall shaping of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, his postmodern interpretative framework shines forth in these final essays as he shows his dissatisfaction with the overarching explanatory systems that seek to define and control specific instances of cultural expression.

For instance, in “Impossible Talk/Impossible Walk” (Chapter 14), Brueggemann parallels the Roman Empire and the American empire, as both declare that neither the embrace of vulnerability nor loss is a viable way to exist in either empire (289). However, quoting the Pauline writings, Brueggemann notes that the great claims of faith contradict the truth of both the Roman Empire and the American empire. The Christian church embraces the vulnerability of the cross along with its affirmation of the resurrection of Christ. Yet, neither American “exceptionalism” nor the Roman Empire consider a cruciform life to be an excellent life (289). Moreover, the cruciform life is a life that practices hospitality. The empire, which cannot practice hospitality, denies access to goods and power through a rigorous grid of qualification, either by money, pedigree, education, or more blatantly, race or gender (290). Empire is arranged for exclusion while the church for openness.

Brueggemann’s essays are all well-focused and written in language accessible to academics, preachers, and laypersons. They are articulations of a well-established Old Testament scholar who allows his audience to observe his developing exegesis during the course of seven years. Although the foci are similar, one can see how Brueggemann allows his exegesis to speak to the world around him. The result is a wonderful exposition of scripture that must disrupt and challenge one’s understanding of scripture, God, and their places in the church.

The only criticisms that I would submit include a lack of focus on the growing ecological issues to which the contemporary church continues to turn a deaf ear. Just as Brueggemann cites the “urban theology” of the varying traditions in Israel, these same citations also show the importance of the agrarian ideals of Israel. As biblical exegetes continue to note the agrarian focus of the Old Testament, an ensuing theology must develop that places the ecological crises front and center.

Secondly, Brueggemann proposes a practice of scribal interpretation that must shift away from prophetic proclamation as a way that the U.S. church engages in

our society. Brueggemann views prophetic rhetoric's aim as confrontation, division, and a sorting out. (330) However, prophetic proclamation has a strong following in African American churches and has been the standard method of address used by this church to address issues of race in the United States for decades. Transferring to the practice of scribal interpretation shows an elitist use of education that is lacking in many African American churches.

Notwithstanding these slight criticisms, Brueggemann's *Disruptive Grace: Reflection on God, Scripture, and the Church* is another reliable tome that will guide many readers through various texts within the Old Testament while also yielding lives that can imagine alternative realities beyond what we see in our current cultural situations. This fine set of essays is a wonderful work by an esteemed and distinguished scholar who continues to show his astounding breadth and depth in his field of study.

ANGELA N. PARKER
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY