# Introduction

## Disruptive Grace: The Uncompromising Theology of Walter Brueggemann

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Walter Brueggemann's speeches and presentations have captivated and challenged audiences for many years. Long in demand as a speaker at the national level, Brueggemann addresses standing-room-only audiences at annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature. His thinking draws unparalleled interest from seasoned scholars and newly minted academics alike, but Brueggemann's appeal is by no means limited to biblical scholars. He is regularly asked to offer his dynamic brand of exegetically grounded theology to church groups and clergy, ecclesial judicatories, and gatherings of preachers and hospital chaplains. This volume collects addresses delivered by Brueggemann from 2002 to 2009. The original audiences included faculty and students at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Northern Michigan University, Mt. Vernon Nazarene University, the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, and his own institution, Columbia Theological Seminary; gatherings of Episcopal bishops in Ontario and at Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina; church leaders at the Presbyterian Covenant Network in Minneapolis and the Wisconsin Council of Churches; and preachers at Festival of Homiletics gatherings held in Minneapolis and Nashville.

The pieces here are organized in four sections, corresponding to each piece's primary focus: Torah, Prophets, Writings, and the biblical canon and interpretive imagination. In each address, Brueggemann's passion for the Word of God and his eloquence as a writer are well in evidence. Brueggemann offers vibrant and detailed expositions of texts, these always undergirded by a nuanced

hermeneutical framework and in service of a trenchant ecclesiology. Brueggemann roots his theology deeply in Scripture. His readings are rhetorically sophisticated in the ways in which they address contemporary concerns, and he challenges the church—repeatedly and without compromise—to take the Word of God seriously. Because the diversity of materials here does not lend itself to systematic description, it may be helpful to situate these addresses within the larger landscape of characteristic features of Brueggemann's interpretive work conceived more broadly.

## Brueggemann on God: Biblical Theology

The God whom Brueggemann encounters in the pages of Scripture is a powerful God who refuses all human efforts to commodify or manipulate the divine. This God is fully present in covenant relationship yet is never bound to the expectations of believers who find their identity in that relationship. God is the unique other who calls believers in relational and redemptive love, but God's existence remains an irreducible problematic for every human system, including systematic theology. Brueggemann is interested in probing the dialogical relationship between believers and their Creator. Citing thinkers from Martin Buber to Emmanuel Levinas, he insists that "restless, unsettleable relation is the irreducible core of what it means to be human."[1] Dialogical relationship is at the core of faith: we stand in inescapable relation to the one who made heaven and earth, who knows every human heart, and for whom nothing is impossible.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures cannot be controlled or contained. In Brueggemann's theology, this becomes a crucial point for contemporary believers, given our context of globalization, in which corporations and culture-brokers work tirelessly toward the efficient commodification of everything from natural resources and manufactured goods to political power and social identity. Brueggemann finds that "the God of the Bible is endlessly *irascible*—capable of coming and going, judging and forgiving, speaking and remaining silent—in ways that make the next time endlessly uncertain."[2] God is continually active for transformation, healing, and reconciliation. Much as the church might like to package this holy purpose for evangelism, it inevitably resists commodification and challenges our flawed and exploitative institutions. As Brueggemann puts it, the God of Scripture is "known to be a resilient and relentless advocate of and agent for justice, which entails the complete reordering of power arrangements in the earth,"[3] including ecclesial power relations. Thus Brueggemann finds that the God whom we meet in Scripture can be profoundly destabilizing, not just for secular values but also for the theological platitudes and uneasy compromises that weaken Christian tradition.

His daring interpretations aim to invite us into the drama of the biblical character of God, even though that divine character does not necessarily assent to

the goals and values that motivate contemporary readers and faith communities. During his teaching career, Brueggemann was famous in the classroom for his dramatic renderings of biblical texts. He has been quite intentional about this dramatic approach when he teaches and preaches, and we glimpse his flair for the dramatic in his written work as well. He explains,

> The move toward a dramatic sense of the text permits the reading community to stay with the terms of the text, even with its contradictions, incongruities, and unwelcome lines. Thus the text is "unreadable" . . . because the subject and character [God] who dominates the plot does not conform to our flattened reading propensity, theological or critical.[4]

Focusing on the vocabulary and syntax of biblical rhetoric, Brueggemann has explored biblical portrayals of God as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in faithfulness, righteous, omnipotent, and holy. But he also insists that we attend to Scriptural portrayals of God as hidden, wrathful, inscrutable, conflicted, unreliable, violent, and irrational. The drama of God's character in the Hebrew Scriptures requires that we alternately submit and argue back, yield and wrestle with this Holy One who will not be domesticated by our theologies.

## Brueggemann on Scripture: Hermeneutics

For Brueggemann, Scripture constitutes a multivoiced chorus of witnesses that continually affirm and contest each other as they seek to make visible the God who has called Israel and who calls each one of us. Brueggemann is committed to elucidating the multivocal nature of Scripture. We see this both in his larger interpretive framework and in the way in which he consistently reflects on many Bible passages in a single address. Brueggemann's hermeneutical commitment to honoring the multivocality of Scripture requires that he name and resist two dominant tendencies in biblical interpretation: confessionalism and reductionism. He has little patience for dogmatic theological claims that attempt to tame or constrain the biblical witness, insisting, "It is the work of a serious theological interpreter of the Bible to pay close and careful attention to what is in the text, regardless of how it coheres with the theological habit of the church."[5] Nor does he care for scholarly ways of constraining the meaning of the text. His interpretive temperament has been strongly influenced by rhetorical criticism, and as a result, Brueggemann has been vigorously critical of the dominance of historical criticism in the scholarly guild. In his view, an aggressively historicist approach to the Bible has tended to mean that "much that is 'odd' in the text is explained away, and serious faith claims are relativized or dismissed."[6] What he seeks, instead, is "a fresh honoring of the ambiguity, complexity, and affront of the text without too much worry about making it palatable either to religious orthodoxy or to critical rationality."[7]

While Brueggemann cannot be said to have escaped a historicist framework entirely—for example, he often acknowledges the importance of Judah's experience of exile in the sixth century BCE for the overall shaping of the Hebrew Scriptures—he is sympathetic to certain trends in postmodernist interpretation. Particularly important within postmodern interpretive culture is dissatisfaction with ways in which "metanarratives"—overarching explanatory systems or scripts—seek to define and control specific instances of cultural expression. While Brueggemann is a master at describing broad themes within Scripture in compelling ways, he also sees clearly that the multivocal nature of Scripture requires us to read slowly and locally. His written oeuvre shows a persistent focus on textual "case studies" and exegetical soundings, precisely because his method is conceptually grounded in sustained attention to passages in their literary microcontexts. Indeed, Brueggemann is adamant that this sort of local exegetical attention is the only way to interpret Scripture that will not falsify what these complex and variegated biblical texts are communicating:

> The Old Testament does not (and never intends to) provide a coherent and comprehensive offer of God. . . . For the most part, the Old Testament text gives us only hints, traces, fragments, and vignettes, with no suggestion of how all these elements might fit together, if indeed they do. What does emerge, in any case, is an awareness that *the elusive but dominating Subject of the Old Testament cannot be comprehended in any preconceived categories*. . . . As a result, most of our categories are unhelpful for the elucidation of this Subject, and we shall have to proceed concretely, a text at a time, a detail at a time.[8]

For Brueggemann, we risk far too much when we hurry past individual Scripture texts in our eagerness to create a coherent metanarrative out of all biblical testimony. We are meant to "linger over the troublesome specificity of the biblical text," for "the Bible offers many small dramas, some of which are not easily subordinated to the large 'drama of salvation.' "[9]

There are two chief hermeneutical models Brueggemann uses to describe the dialogical dynamic that he sees underlying the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures. One model, which has come to fullest expression in his work on the Psalms, identifies biblical texts as being about orientation, disorientation, or reorientation. Some texts serve to orient the reader or faith community to God's power, faithfulness, and trustworthiness. In Brueggemann's words, they "reflect the coherence of life" in a "voice of genuine gratitude and piety for [God's] rich blessings," offering a "continued reaffirmation and reconstruction of this good world" that our Creator has given us.[10] Other texts serve to name difficult circumstances, undercut misguided perceptions of God, or subvert idolatrous claims to power. These texts create a disturbing but salutary disorientation that frees us to see the truth more clearly. Brueggemann says they "have the abrasive effect of dismantling the old

systems that hide the well-off from the dangerous theological realities of life," something that is indispensable for the believer because "until there is an embrace of honest helplessness, there is no true gospel that can be heard."[11] Yet other biblical texts serve to reorient the believer anew to God as one who is worthy of all praise. These texts of reorientation testify in wonder and amazement to a God who has exceeded all expectations, in circumstances in which "life has disintegrated but has been formed miraculously again," and in which believers rejoice in "a newness now being given."[12] The dialogical witness of the Hebrew Scriptures taken as a whole, then, offers a lively interplay among texts of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation as those are expressed in the life of the faith community.

Brueggemann's second hermeneutical model is articulated at length in his massive *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (1997). Here he explores four categories of witness about God in the Hebrew Scriptures: core testimony, countertestimony, unsolicited testimony, and embodied testimony. Israel's core testimony celebrates God as a righteous sovereign who has created something new, acting on behalf of Israel "in decisive and transformative ways" to heal and to deliver.[13] Israel's countertestimony gives voice to ancient believers' laments that God has not yet saved, that God seems to have abandoned the people, that God seems disproportionately punitive, remote, or uncaring. These texts dare to express God's "hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity"[14] in hopes that speaking the truth of the people's experience of trauma will spur God to redeem them once again. Israel's unsolicited testimony involves the extravagant and hyperbolic extra testimony of Israel, the human person, the nations, and creation as covenant partners who respond to God in grief and protest, in awe and hope. Finally, Israel's embodied testimony celebrates the ways in which Israel has experienced God's presence through traditions of theophany, kingship, prophetic mediation, ritual practice, and the wisdom of sages.

Elucidating these multiple sorts of testimony requires careful discernment on the part of the interpreter. Thus, in the addresses collected here, Brueggemann displays his characteristic attentive listening to the text and his lavish description of the unique witness that each biblical passage offers. We should note also the seriousness with which Brueggemann takes the speech of ancient Israel. Words not only matter, they are essential; for Scripture is an entirely logocentric witness to the mighty Word of God. In the Bible we have only texts—inscribed speech—about who God is and what God has done. Brueggemann has stirred up considerable controversy with his insistence that we can know God in the Old Testament only through Israel's rhetoric. Critics' misreadings notwithstanding, Brueggemann never intended to suggest that God is not also encountered in prayer, in worship, at the eucharistic table, and in the face of the other—that is, outside of the text. But he has insistently asserted the crucial importance of sacred text precisely as text. For any theology that claims to be biblical, the texts themselves must count as the primary, indispensable, and unique locus of the ongoing

revelation of God. Brueggemann was thinking along these lines as early as 1993, when he wrote, "Speech is not merely descriptive, but it is in some sense evocative of reality and constitutive of reality."[15] Here is his later, controversial elaboration of the point:

> For Old Testament faith, *the utterance is everything.* The utterance leads to the reality, the reality of God that relies on the reliability of the utterance. Presumably other utterances could have been accepted as true, but these particular utterances are the ones that have been preserved, trusted, treasured, and given to us. The upshot of this process is, first, that Israel's claim of reality is as fragile as an utterance, and we must be exceedingly wary of flights from utterance to some presumed pretextual reality. Second, this process makes it clear that a student of Old Testament theology must pay close attention to the shape, character, and details of the utterance, for it is in, with, and under the utterance that we have the God of Israel, and nowhere else.[16]

This claim about the profound power of the word explains the loving and sustained attention that Brueggemann gives to every biblical story or poem that he expounds.

Brueggemann's exegetically based view of Scripture has far-reaching consequences for Old Testament theology. His Scripture-centered hermeneutics requires continued listening to the ways in which particular biblical texts make demands on those communities that read and cherish them. The dialogical interpretive model that Brueggemann has plied so robustly poses a challenge for those who encounter it: we must allow our most cherished interpretive notions and habits to be contested and reframed by these strange, holy texts. Brueggemann has said about the potential impact of Old Testament theology that it "invites the academic community away from self-preoccupied triviality that is such a waste, the ecclesial communities away from excessive certitude that is idolatry, and the civic community away from brutality rooted in autonomy long enough to engage this summoning Mystery."[17] These words may be applied not only to Old Testament theology but also to Brueggemann's hermeneutical style as well. In his writing and speaking, Brueggemann alternately rebukes and invites, fumes and implores, confronts and coaxes his audience into heeding the wild words of God no matter how unsettling they may be.

Without being dogmatic about it, Brueggemann models for us the truth that Christian readers necessarily interpret Scripture in light of our redemption in Jesus Christ. He does not tend to introduce sacramental theology overtly into his exposition of biblical texts, but we glimpse this underlying faith conviction whenever we see him attending to scriptural voices of brokenness and despair, voices that struggle to make sense of God in difficult circumstances, voices that dare to speak words of hope despite communal traumas of exile and loss.

Brueggemann may bring his sacramental sensibility to expression relatively infrequently, but it is central to his hermeneutics and visible in nuanced ways throughout much of what he has written. Consider this illuminating articulation of his position:

> Practically, our interpretation is to be done gathered around the Eucharistic table that is an anticipation of our gathering around the throne of mercy. . . . We never come [to the Communion table] without our interpretations. As we watch the bread broken and given to all, we are able to see that faithful interpretation does not speak the truth unless it is broken truth. As we watch the wine poured out, we know that where our lives are not poured out, our interpretation is a lie.[18]

For Brueggemann the witnesses within the Hebrew Scriptures contest every idolatrous gesture that we make toward a spiritually bankrupt autonomy, toward the illusion that we do not need God. These countercultural sacred texts invite us into "a new world of majesty, sovereignty, power, dominion, and splendor where an awful, undisciplined submitting is appropriate and gladly practiced."[19] At its heart, "the biblical tradition is not about control but about vulnerability, not about self-sufficiency but about risky reception of life as gift."[20] For Brueggemann we read Scripture most authentically at the foot of the cross.

## Brueggemann on the Church: Ecclesiology

In Brueggemann's ecclesiology obedience is the fundamental ground on which the identity of the church must be based. Brueggemann is patently uninterested in matters of church dogmatics and the fine points of most ecclesial disputes. His interpretive vision goes broader and deeper even than the clarion call to social justice that is so important to many biblical texts. Brueggemann hears Scripture as calling the church to a radical obedience that goes well beyond Christian platitudes or our comfortable weekly worship services. Heeding the Word of God is not a matter of choice or affinity; it is a matter of divine command. "The God who gives is the God who commands," Brueggemann insists; "Israel's traditioning process continues to exposit and interpret the singular command of Sinai in order to bring every phase of life, personal and public, under obedience to YHWH and to determine what particular form obedience may take amid the vagaries of life where matters of obedience are not clear."[21]

According to Brueggemann, covenantal obedience forcefully contests the obsessive and narcissistic consumerism of mainstream North American culture. Obedience places a non-negotiable claim on the Christian to live in the mode of countercultural witness. Brueggemann writes, "I understand covenant in our time and place to be a radical alternative to consumer autonomy, which is the

governing ideology of our society and which invades the life of the church in debilitating ways."[22] He is uncompromising in his indictment: "we live, all of us, in a promiscuous, self-indulgent society that prizes autonomy."[23] Because God declines to be complicit in our addictions and delusions, the grace the Holy One shows to us can be disruptive indeed. This holy disruption challenges ecclesiologies across the denominational spectrum, for those on the left and those on the right alike can fail to hear Scripture in ways that are fruitful for proclamation of the gospel. Brueggemann aims to engage all—even at the risk of offending some—when he writes, "The liberal Christian temptation is to accommodate dominant culture until faith despairs. The conservative Christian temptation is to fashion an absoluteness that stands disconnected from the dominant culture. Neither of these strategies, however, is likely to sustain the church in its mission."[24]

Rarely missing an opportunity to be provocative, Brueggemann seeks to catalyze renewed engagement with a lively and untamable Word that refuses all attempts to "manage" it for any particular ideological program. In our violent and aggressively acquisitive world, the church is called to live otherwise. Brueggemann urges us to embrace our identity as exiles in contemporary culture, to open our hearts and hands freely to those who are dispossessed, to remember our own redemption ("exodus") with a gratitude that issues in generosity toward others, and to practice a prayerful peace ("sabbath" or "shalom") that honors the purposes of God.[25] Looking to the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures as a sign for the church, Brueggemann avers that "the theological constancy of *miracle* and *gratitude* is implicit everywhere in the Torah . . . and is to be accented in church reading, teaching, and preaching."[26]

Because he is passionate about proclaiming God's newness not only in the classroom but also in the pulpit, Brueggemann has thought long and hard about the ministry of preaching. For him it is a radical act. "We preachers," he writes, "are summoned to get up and utter a *sub-version* of reality, an alternative vision of reality that says another way of life in the world is not only possible but is peculiarly mandated and peculiarly valid. . . . [This sub-version intends] to empower a community of *sub-versives* who are determined to practice their lives according to a different way of imagining."[27] This need not mean that we will all agree. Church should be a place of committed discussion and lively disagreement about ways in which the witnesses of various Scripture texts may be privileged as the Holy Spirit moves in the life of the community. Brueggemann wisely observes, "Because different interpretations in different contexts—driven by different hopes, fears, and hurts—ask different questions from the ground up, it is clear that there will be no widely accepted 'canon within the canon,' which is itself a function of hegemonic interpretation. . . . The ecclesial-academic enterprise of interpretation, like the testimonial process of Israel itself, is a pluralistic one of dispute and accommodation."[28]

Interpretation in community is risky. The church must be both humble and intrepid in its biblical interpretation. It must be humble in acknowledging that

even its favorite theological answers cannot suffice to describe our saving God. And it must be intrepid in venturing repeatedly into narrative and poetic texts that insistently deconstruct everything that does not serve the gospel. The risks of biblical theology are quite real, for the world and for the church. Providentially we have in Walter Brueggemann a seasoned and honest guide for the journey.

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In these addresses Brueggemann moves with fluidity across biblical books, so the pragmatic arrangement of essays in this volume—Torah, Prophets, Writings, Canon and Imagination—is meant to signal primary emphases rather than singular focus. This structure is intended to guide readers who are reflecting on one or another kind of text within the Old Testament. But readers may also find it instructive to read through all of the addresses here in order, roughly approximating the way in which the Hebrew Scriptures themselves unfold, since Brueggemann's mode of engagement touches gracefully on many biblical passages and kinds of Scriptural witness.

In these addresses Brueggemann urges us to be candid and courageous. The sacred stories and poems of Scripture demand that we face our terrible flaws—that we tell the whole truth about ourselves, our communities, and our histories. For Brueggemann, to be unsettled and disrupted by the grace of God's Word is a wonderful thing. Indeed, it is urgently necessary to catalyze repentance. Only then can we learn to live in wholehearted obedience to God, yielding lives transformed by praise of our Redeemer.