

Walter Brueggemann. *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008. 180 pages. \$21

Brueggemann has produced the book I have been hoping for the last twenty-five years—a book on interpreting the Hebrew Bible brief enough not to intimidate students, broad enough to give readers a glimpse of the scope of available interpretive models and methods, and homiletically-inclined enough to be immediately useful to the busy pastor-preacher. Its brevity, of course, means that it does not cover the details of the history of critical studies or many of the other issues dear to the hearts of academics; but it contains plenty to make anybody think.

One endearing characteristic of the book is the personal style in which Brueggemann wrote it. In fact he begins with an extensive autobiographical sketch/preface (xi – xxiv). In it he describes the Evangelical and Reformed Church in which he was nurtured and from which he received permission to take seriously the biblical text for both scholarship and life. In this preface he lays before the reader the differences between orthodoxy and rationalism that punctuate the rest of the book, as he lays out a path between fundamentalistic literalism and critical scholarship.

In chapter one (“Introduction: That the World May Be Re-described”) Brueggemann investigates just what it is we are doing when we read the Bible in our churches. His suspicion is that we rarely think about this and so do not pay very close attention to the readings. He argues that we should grow to realize that the Bible describes the world we live in from a totally different standpoint from those we usually hear. Thus we need to become conscious enough of the worldview we bring to our hearing of the text that we can begin to recognize the text’s intent to re-describe or subvert the world’s self-understanding. This subversive word calls things by their right names, introduces a new frame of reference, and most important insists that YHWH is the “key character in the history of the world and the creator of heaven and earth to whom all creatures owe glad, doxological obedience” (5). He then shows how in both biblical times and today such reframing conflicts with the prevailing understanding of reality.

Chapter two deals with “The Church’s Task of Interpretation.” Here he argues that “if Scripture is normative, as the main body of the church attests, then it is likely that there is no more important work to do than serious, sustained Scripture interpretation”(15). Here he also critiques what he calls two tyrannies: confessionalism and reductionism; two temptations: privatization and politicization; and two tendencies: equilibrium and transformation (16-24). He insists that there is a way through these obstacles to what he calls “faithful interpretation” (24), which he describes as “post-foundational, spirit-led, artistic, imaginative interpretation that offers a ‘sub-version’ of reality....” (28). The rest of the book illustrates this approach by dealing with specific texts.

Chapter three describes Brueggemann’s interpretive process as illustrated by his work on Jeremiah 5:14-17. Here he delineates his own shift from concentration on what lies behind the text investigated by means of historical, form, source, and redaction criticism to focus on what is in the text through rhetorical studies. So his simplified process includes rhetorical analysis, key word analysis, and social analysis. He then applies these three steps to the Jeremiah text with the keen insight into the text and our contemporary context we expect from Brueggemann.

Chapters four through six continue this application of the three step process to a variety of texts: Genesis 50:15-21, 1 Samuel 1:63, Isaiah 43, Habakkuk 3, Psalm 44 (these last three all in chapter six); and chapter seven looks at several texts that deal with the absence of God. Chapter seven is, in my estimation, worth the price of the book. It is the longest chapter (91-

117) and should be required reading for courses in hermeneutics and theology. Brueggemann shows disarmingly how believers tend to ignore or explain away texts that refuse otherwise to fit our theological preconceptions. As he puts it, “My suggestion is that we take a ‘naïvely realistic’ view of the text as a ‘script’ of YHWH’s past” (115). This methodological shift relieves the interpreter of having to explain away texts of God’s absence, while attacking the theological categories of omnipresence and unchangeableness. This chapter will set most readers thinking for quite a while.

Chapter eight is a brief presentation of secondary resources for the interpretation process, and chapter nine is an important conclusion (much more than a summary). It reads like a sermon that should be heard by seminarians everywhere. The last few sentences will offer a taste:

Every interpreter faces the seduction of making things normal, routine, and business as usual. When we are alert to the risk of living speech, there is nothing normal or routine or business as usual about the task of interpretation. Every time we entertain the task of interpretation we find it to be a life-or-death matter, exactly what we would expect with a text that we have found to be thickly revelatory” (136).

The book ends with helpful classified reading lists, a bibliography, and a scripture index. This book should be must reading for seminary students and working pastors who need help in dealing with those troublesome texts in the Hebrew Bible. I am grateful that Brueggemann has given it to us.

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